

Teaching and Practice

Participatory Literacy Education behind Bars: AIDS Opens the Door

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In this article, Kathy Boudin recounts her story as an inmate and literacy educator at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for women. While the standard literacy education curriculum for the facility emphasized instrumental, workbook-based reading skills, Boudin sought to make the literacy program more relevant to the women's lives and experiences. By working with the women in the literacy program, Boudin incorporated critical literacy teaching practices into the skills-based curriculum, using the subject of AIDS in prison as a means of linking the women's experiences with their acquisition of literacy skills. Although the article focuses on prison education, the women in Bedford Hills are like other women in urban communities for whom literacy is only one of many problems. Thus, the pedagogical and social issues raised here have many implications that extend beyond the prison bars.

I started hanging out and not taking school seriously when I was a teenager. At seventeen I met my first baby's father, and he had a lot of control over me. After he went to jail, I started using drugs. I had a job for one or two years on and off in a grocery store, running a cash register. But I left that job to sell drugs, because I could earn more money that way. I always wanted to be a bookkeeper, but you have to know how to read, filing, math. Now I think about a porter job in a hospital. Nothing I have to use reading for. I would like to think of nice things: nice clothes, an investigator, a secretary, nice jobs. I see ladies all dressed up, legs crossed. I like things like that, bubble baths, but I can't be thinking too many dreams cause I got five kids. I hope I can make it when I go home.

— Anna, Adult Basic Education student
Bedford Hills Correctional Facility¹

¹This quote is a verbatim statement taken from an interview with an ABE student with whom I worked. Some of the quotes in the article come from similar interviews, while others come from my

Prison lies at the end of a road taken. Although women arrive for many reasons, we have one thing in common: we share a deep desire to leave prison and not return. Many of us are looking for alternatives to the actions that brought us here. We are working to imagine new choices, to widen options, and to figure out how to make these real.

When Anna spoke, she was in an Adult Basic Education (ABE) literacy class, hoping it would open doors for her. She was not alone with her literacy problem. In Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State's maximum security prison for 750 women, 63 percent of the incoming women do not have a high school diploma and almost 20 percent do not read at a fifth-grade level (Nuttall, 1988).

Although having limited literacy proficiency is a serious problem, it is only one of many that women in Bedford Hills face.² Prior to their imprisonment, most were confronting more pressing problems: poverty, drugs, domestic abuse, neighborhood violence, single-mother parenting, and immigration issues. Many, feeling permanently locked out of the economic mainstream, were trying to make fast money illegally, usually through involvement with drugs. Basic literacy education meant a time commitment, a slow, long-term investment in a life moving fast, so fast that it got out of control, and ended up with imprisonment. In prison, life slows down enough for these women to take time for such things as a literacy class, yet the women know that when they leave here, most will return to the same broad problems, problems that loom as permanent and intractable. Improved literacy will not be the miracle that will change their lives, especially since the average stay in prison is less than three years (Division of Program Services, 1992) and literacy growth is a slow process. It is rare for a woman to

own journal entries. Although this article was written when almost all of the women quoted had already left prison on parole, or had transferred to a different prison, I was able to get in touch with the majority of them to tell them that I was doing public writing and to get their permission to use material about or by them. Because some of the women consented to have their real names used and others preferred to remain anonymous, I used fictitious names throughout. The one exception is Juana Lopez, who previously had material written for the ABE class that was published using her real name.

² The prisoners in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility are overwhelmingly Black and Hispanic women, mothers, undereducated in a formal sense, frequently poor, and usually single heads of households. The ethnicity of the general prison population in New York State prisons is 50 percent Black, 31 percent Hispanic, and 19 percent White. (The United States population as a whole is 12 percent Black and 7 percent Hispanic.)

The ethnicity of those prisoners with serious reading problems, that is, those under the 5.0 reading level, is 54 percent Black, 37 percent Hispanic, 9 percent White, and 5 percent other. In terms of the education levels of the women who enter the New York State prison system, 18 percent read below a fifth-grade level; 16 percent have math skills below a fifth-grade level; 77 percent dropped out while in high school; and 63 percent do not possess a high school diploma (Nuttall, 1988).

Seventy-three percent of the women in Bedford Hills are mothers (Division of Program Services, 1992), and the majority were single heads of households (Humphrey, 1988). One study showed that over half the women in prisons have received welfare payments during their adult lives (Craig, 1981); in a National Institute of Corrections study of men and women, 80 percent of those who were employed before arrest made less than a poverty-level salary (Bellorado, 1986).

Forty-four percent of the women in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility were convicted of a drug offense; however, the warden at Riker's Island, which is the largest feeder jail to Bedford Hills, estimates that drugs underlie the incarceration of 95 percent of the female inmates there (Church, 1990). Lastly, in a study done at Bedford Hills in 1985, 60 percent of respondents said they had been victims of abuse (sexual, physical, or emotional) (Grossman, 1985).

leave Bedford with a goal of changing social conditions, even if she believes those very conditions contributed to her ending up in prison. “You can’t change the world” is a commonly held attitude. Trying to deal with immediate issues such as housing, jobs, and child raising are foremost in most women’s minds when they leave. The urgent need many of us from a diversity of backgrounds feel is to change the things inside ourselves that landed us here, to be more able to negotiate the system and to cope with the problems we will face when we leave. Improved literacy is part of something bigger, part of their whole struggle to grow. As one woman said, “The only way out . . . is in.”

What kind of literacy education would best meet the needs of the women in prison who face these issues? This is the question I grappled with some years ago, when I came to prison, as I became involved in studying and teaching adult literacy. I am an insider, a prisoner myself, a woman and a mother, serving a twenty-to-life sentence. I am also something of an outsider — White, from a middle-class background, college educated, and a participant in the social movements of the 1960s. I had not shared some of the most common realities of the women in the ABE class, realities including racism, drugs, family violence, immigration, or poverty. Nevertheless, twelve years of prison life has broken down barriers: living through the daily experiences such as lock-ins or cell searches, cooking or gossiping; deep friendships; working on AIDS, foster care, and literacy; and sharing the life events such as mothering, deaths, and graduations. All of this has created for me windows into the lives, past and present, of women from different backgrounds and has also led to a new commonality among us.

Early in my master’s degree work in adult education (which I undertook when I first entered prison), I learned about Paulo Freire’s problem-solving approach to literacy education, an approach that places literacy acquisition in the context of learners’ daily concerns and social reality (Freire, 1970, 1974). I hypothesized that it would be effective at Bedford because it could offer an education in which women could think and act around urgently felt needs while developing their literacy ability.

I, like many other prisoners, wanted to be productive and to do something meaningful with my time in prison, and I looked to teaching literacy as one way to do this. Yet prison administrators usually limit the amount of responsibility and independence a prisoner can have, and teachers who have inmate teacher aides usually use them only in very limited roles. Would I, a prisoner, as a teacher’s aide to a civilian teacher, be able to create the space to do meaningful work?

Would it be possible in a prison classroom to create conditions for self-awareness, a space where people felt safe to identify and address their own problems and then struggle toward solutions, to imagine the world as it could be otherwise? Prisons are founded on assumptions of control, obedience, and security. Thus, independent thinking and individual and collective initiative create sharp tensions around these assumptions.

Prison is a metaphor for failure, the failure of those who end up there, while a sense of self-worth is a foundation for active learning, for being willing to take

risks. Would it be possible, in the prison atmosphere, to break through the prevailing ideology about prisoners as failures, an ideology that had been internalized to varying degrees by the women themselves, and to release their psychological energy for creative learning? These were among the questions I faced as I began to think about becoming a literacy educator in prison.

In this article, I tell the story of what happened between 1986 and 1990 at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility as I struggled to develop a literacy program that was meaning-based, problem-posing, and relevant to learners' lives. Written from my perspective and observations as both a teacher and a prisoner, with quotes drawn from my detailed journal entries over a five-year period, I start by examining the prison environment, and then relate my experience of teaching while evaluating which educational approach best met the needs of incarcerated women at Bedford. Finally, I discuss the possibilities and constraints that the prison context creates for establishing participatory education.

The Prison Context

The primary missions of prison — control, punishment, and deterrence through social isolation (Sullivan, 1990) — serve to intensify the powerlessness and dependency that many women prisoners have already experienced outside of prison. The loss of the ability to make decisions permeates every aspect of prison life cumulatively in the way it increases powerlessness. The authorities move women freely among the nine female prisons in New York State; thus, within a moment, a woman's entire world may shift. Lack of control over where one lives means lack of control over all the pieces of a life — friends, work, education, routine, possessions, environment, and, of central importance to women, contact with children and family. If a woman is in prison near her children, she can maintain an active relationship with them; when she is moved, the ties are ruptured.

Prison policies dictate what clothing to wear and what colors are permitted. When the telephone rings, a prisoner cannot pick it up. Only guards can open doors. Intimate relationships are illegal and must be hidden. This lack of control extends to life outside prison as well. For example, a woman may learn that her child is in the hospital, but cannot be present to comfort her or him. When a child runs away from home, the mother is helpless to work on the problem. We as prisoners must rely on people outside to help with the details of daily living — from buying clothes, food, and presents for children, to phoning lawyers who don't accept collect calls.

While women's prisons can be brutalizing, they are often infantilizing.³ The social conditioning in a women's prison encourages a childlike dependency (Burkhart, 1976). For example, at Bedford Hills we constantly have to ask permission to do some of the most basic things: when at work or at school we must

³ Recent examples of women's prisons in which repressive measures such as extreme isolation or sexual abuse have been documented include the underground prison in Lexington, Kentucky, and the Shawnee Unit in Maryanna, Florida.

ask an officer for toilet paper, and she or he will then tear off a few pieces and hand them to us; we must wait for an officer to turn the lights off or on in our cells, since cell lights are controlled by a key that the officer has; we may stand by a gate or a door for five minutes or more until an officer feels we are quiet enough, and only then will she or he open it. Women operate within the confines of power and control, reward and punishment; women typically express their overall sense of having no control when they refer to authorities and say, "This is *Their* jail."

Although prison intensifies powerlessness, for many women it paradoxically also offers a space for growth. There is a release from the pressures of everyday survival, abusive relationships, family responsibilities, and drug addiction; some women have their first drug-free pregnancy while in prison. Incarceration can be a time for women to reevaluate and reflect on their lives, to get an education and acquire skills they never had a chance or didn't want to get, and to think about issues they may never have thought about.

There are numerous educational and social programs that women can make use of in prison.⁴ These programs are shaped by the conflicting goals of security, control, and punishment on the one hand, and rehabilitation or self-development on the other (Bellorado, 1986; Sullivan, 1990). The various basic education programs at Bedford Hills — ABE, pre-GED, GED, ESL, Bilingual Literacy — can serve either as a means of control (primarily used to keep prisoners occupied and having limited educational goals) or as a fruitful context for deep growth. It was in this environment of constraints and possibilities that I set out to teach.

Entering the Classroom: Education for Control

I started to work as a teacher's aide in the ABE class in February 1986. I requested to work in this class because the teacher had expressed support for my teaching ideas and, from my observation, seemed to have a strong rapport with the students. By this time, I had spent a year-and-a-half in both graduate study and individual tutoring of ABE, GED, ESL, and college students. This range of experience led me to define three goals for my work in the ABE classroom: first, to teach reading and writing; second, to foster participants' intellectual and emotional strengths (e.g., analytical ability, imagination, and self-esteem); and third, to create a context for exploring and possibly acting on personal and social issues faced by women in the prison. When I entered the classroom, I was in for a rude awakening.

On an average day, the women in the ABE class ranged in age from seventeen to seventy, with the vast majority in their mid-twenties. They were primarily

⁴In addition to the basic education programs, some of these programs include: The Parenting and Foster Care Programs of the Children's Center, where women learn about issues related to being mothers; the Family Violence program, where women examine violence in their personal lives and some of the social values and roles that permit or even encourage such violence; the AIDS Counseling and Education (ACE) program, where women have struggled to build a community of support around AIDS-related issues and have trained themselves to become peer educators and counselors; and the four-year college program run by Mercy College, where women can earn bachelor degrees.

African-American or Hispanic, coming from a variety of cultures and places: New York City, the South, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. A few were working-class White women from upstate New York, and some came from other countries (Hong Kong, Yugoslavia, and Israel).

Typically, women arrived in class and took their individual folders and workbooks from a shelf. Their work consisted of reading paragraphs or short passages on various unrelated themes (e.g., popcorn, insects, and newspapers), and then answering multiple-choice questions that focused on skills (e.g., finding the main idea, understanding a particular word, or locating a detail). When a student finished a designated amount of work, the teacher or aide checked the answers against the answer key. The student then tried to correct her wrong responses.

The class was silent, except when the teacher spoke to individual students or when friends exchanged a few words. There was no instruction to the whole class by the teacher. What mattered most was whether the students answered workbook questions correctly. The answer key and the teacher were the only sources of knowledge. The learning process was entirely defined by the teacher, and it was narrowly confined to a limited body of information.

Occasionally, group discussion followed a movie; the teacher might encourage writing a few times a year, for example, during Black History month. Once in a while there was a lesson on a life skill relating to the state-mandated functional competency program or computer work, but these activities were not the norm. Day after day, year after year, women came to class and silently read workbooks in which they repeated discrete skills in preparation for periodic tests.

My first reaction to the classroom was physical. My eyes strained from trying to match up answer sheets with hundreds of tiny boxes, and my mind went dull. I found myself de-skilled and transformed into a clerk. I was neither expected nor able to use any intellectual or emotional aspects of myself. I found no room for choice, judgment, or authentic interaction. The experience of almost two years in this role contributed to passivity, conformity, and a feeling of uselessness, which, as a prisoner, I was constantly struggling against anyway.

For the women in the literacy class, reading paragraphs day after day and taking tests with similar paragraphs resulted in incremental improvement on test scores over time, and, therefore, in some sense of progress and satisfaction. Yet communication and meaning, the essential core of reading, were not the point of the classroom experience. There was no writing, no explicit development of strategies to enhance construction of meaning from texts, no exposure to various literary genres such as poetry, stories, or drama, and no building on interaction between the different language processes of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

I asked myself what we were telling women about the importance of literacy, when there was no link between literacy and self, no development of literacy as a powerful means to construct a world. What message were we giving the women about themselves and their lives in this classroom, where their thinking and all their experience were irrelevant? The women I taught brought into the class-

room a rich tapestry of knowledge, experience, and cultures. They knew firsthand about the social problems of crack, homelessness, the crisis of being mothers behind bars, the immigrant experience; they shared basic human conditions of love and friendship, betrayal, death, community, work. If learning materials did not portray a life that was familiar, did not reflect their reality, did not contain their voices or their languages, what did that tell them about their cultures? If the teacher and the workbooks were the only sources of knowledge and authority, what did that say about their capacity to know and to create?

I believe that this approach, with its excessive emphasis on obedience and limited possibility for initiative or constructive learning, with its lack of attention to self and its undervaluing of affect in learning, was detrimental to basic mental health. This kind of instruction could not foster self-esteem or self-confidence. And, in denying the possibility of making choices, solving problems, looking at different options, or figuring out one's own opinion, it thwarted the possibility of helping women to change their lives.

Educational policy and curriculum for all New York State prisons is set by the Department of Education of the New York State Department of Correctional Services (Nuttall, 1988). The approach used in the prison literacy classes, like that used in many adult literacy programs throughout the country (Fingeret, 1984; Hunter & Harman, 1979), is a decontextualized, subskill model of reading in which content, real life issues, creativity, and imagination are all irrelevant. It is individualized and programmed, precluding interaction or social action (Nuttall, 1983). The reading process is conceptualized as a bottom-up process in which comprehension of the message of the text is slowly built up by accumulating small pieces, sound by sound, word by word, moving from lower to higher levels of complexity (LaBerge & Samuels, 1985). An adult who has failed to learn to read adequately is presumed to be lacking in particular subskills. Initial testing identifies those particular weaknesses, remediates for them and then retests in this diagnostic prescriptive model (Nuttall, 1983). The concept of literacy that guides the curriculum in the ABE class is based on grade level: a literate inmate is defined as one who scores at or above the 5.0 reading level on the standardized achievement tests used throughout the system (Nuttall, 1983).⁵

As in any other teaching context, the rationale for the choice of approach to prison literacy education is informed, in part, by assumptions about learners. A report from the Education Department of the New York State Department of Correctional Services states:

The most serious obstacle to a successful program and "habilitation" or "rehabilitation" is the make-up of the population itself. For the most part, commit-

⁵ The Department of Education of the New York State Department of Correctional Services defines literacy by using a combination of grade level and functional competency definitions. The functional competency definition was crystallized into a Life Skills curriculum (Nuttall, 1983). However, in the three-and-a-half years during which I was involved in the ABE class, the Life Skills curriculum was not put into practice except in an occasional lesson.

ments to the Department represent individuals who have little education, who have no viable occupational skill, who have a history of substance abuse, and who often have a long history of criminal activity (Nuttall, 1988, p. 2)

This policy statement characterizes prisoners themselves as the main obstacle to their own rehabilitation. Although it identifies objective problems, it fails to recognize strengths that prisoners bring to the learning process. From my observation, viewing prisoners primarily as a problem meant that correctional services' education personnel were unlikely to involve prisoners in their own education, let alone to think they might make a contribution to society. I knew from my years in prison that this perception of women exclusively as "problems" was inaccurate, and that this prevailing view would never lead to a process of meaningful educational growth.

Women who have committed serious crimes may well have survived serious pressures. Many women have not just survived, but have actively refused to accept a passive or victimized role. While women may have acted in a destructive and/or self-destructive way, assertiveness can be a lever that opens options for new action. The ability to survive and fight back may be a strength on which to build. It is crucial to discover and work with this and other strengths because, however deeply hidden, they are, in the end, women's greatest allies. And so a question began to form and to follow me: Could I create a process whereby the potential and strengths of the women could be expressed and developed, becoming part of the literacy process and fueling it with energy?

An Alternative Vision

I developed an alternative vision through a combination of my past history as a community organizer, my experience in the individual tutoring and ABE class, and the theory and methods that I learned through my graduate studies. In the 1960s, I had been involved in teaching about welfare rights, housing, and health issues. I had worked with women who had little formal education and who were regarded by society as inadequate, or as "victims" to be helped by those who were more educated by formal academic standards. Yet these women and people like them throughout the United States were learning together, acting on their own problems, and, at the same time, providing social insights that affected the entire society. I brought to my classes a certain optimism from my experience as an educator outside the classroom. I believed that, even in the controlled prison environment and in a different historical period, it might be possible to create a participatory learning process in which people felt a relative sense of empowerment.

My studies confirmed that, when literacy was taught as a collection of skills outside of any meaningful context and divorced from any importance in the learners' lives, the work would not fully tap their intellectual capacity. Neither would it draw on their prior knowledge, which, as schema theory had taught me, is so critical in the development of reading proficiency (Anderson, 1985; Bransford, 1985). Taken together, my community organizing experiences, my

graduate studies, and my observations of prison classrooms led me to hypothesize that a meaning-driven, whole-language orientation might be more effective in the prison context (Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987; Goodman, 1973, 1985; Smith, 1973).

I believed that such an approach would be stronger not only cognitively, but affectively as well. The women whom I taught were once the children who had failed in school or, more accurately for many of them, whose schools had failed them. From my interaction with the women in and out of class, I learned that they brought with them negative feelings about education and about themselves as learners. Attitudes about race, class, and gender undermined their confidence to learn academically, compounding the insecurities about school. I knew from conversations that many were only in the ABE class because it would look good for the parole board or because they had been assigned to be there. It was critical to use an approach that built on the women's intelligence, experience, and culture in order to counter these forces.

The existing classroom process, depending as it did on passivity and the rote learning of isolated skills, did not link literacy learning with the daily needs of the women, nor did it equip them to take an active role in their own education. As such, it ran counter to what we know about adult learning in general: a) the complexity of adult social roles and related responsibilities (spouse, worker, parent, community member) means that adults want learning to be applicable to their needs; b) the broad knowledge and life experience that adults have acquired mean that they have a great deal of prior knowledge that can be used as a strength in developing literacy ability; and c) the independence and self-direction that characterize adults mean that learning — both in content and in process — should be participatory (Ellowitch, 1983; Knowles, 1984).

For the women with whom I worked, the general needs of all adult learners were magnified by the multitude of urgent issues they faced; thus, the need to overcome powerlessness and to create new choices was essential. Freire's approach to literacy education was particularly relevant, as it is rooted in work with marginalized and oppressed groups. His ideas influenced my work in several ways. First, his approach begins with students developing the ability to analyze their experiences and their social reality, as they explore the meanings of this reality in the words and the sentences they are learning to read and write. The literacy class can, at times, become a place where students may even act on issues, using and further developing their literacy ability. Second, his work raises issues about teachers, their methods, and their relationships with their students. I had been frustrated with the one-way street of teaching that left the ABE students in a passive situation. Freire argues that this passivity comes, in part, from the tendency of many middle-class teachers to feel superior to their students from poorer backgrounds. He proposes a "dialogic" method, in which students and teachers together explore a shared set of issues. This dialogue, while not removing the teacher's responsibility to teach a body of knowledge, can unleash an active role for the learners, enhancing not only their present learning, but also their lives beyond the classroom (Freire, 1970, 1974).

These views resonated with my community work with African-American and poor White women, largely from Appalachia, prior to my incarceration. As I had come to know these women and their life stories, I became acutely aware that my formal education represented only one kind of knowledge; in fact, my own background, while having given me certain advantages, also had left me with certain blinders. My work with these women had been a two-way street — we learned from and taught one another. I wanted now to build on both the reality we shared as women prisoners and the differences in our backgrounds and experiences.

The Struggle for Change

For almost two years as a teacher's aide, I struggled to implement this alternative vision. Sometimes I worked with small groups of women, reading a particular text of interest, striving always to keep meaning in front of us. We read plays, did interviews, and read stories. Although each project engaged women and taught them a wider range of literacy skills, nothing altered the overall routine. The women frequently did not want to work with other women, feeling either embarrassed and ashamed of themselves or contemptuous of the others.

In many cases, they did not want to attempt any writing, which was rarely required by the teacher. The classroom context was still set by the teacher and the sub-skill approach; the approach I was using was simply not considered "real work." Moreover, I found myself experiencing the same frustration as other teachers with the "call-out" system (in which students could be pulled from class at any time for appointments). This system, along with transfers to other prisons, pushed the curriculum toward individualized work and away from a content focus, since it was difficult to develop a cohesive unit of study with a constantly changing group of people.

Slowly, the sub-skill model began to seduce me. Although I never lost my aversion to this limited sense of education, I began to become preoccupied with how women were doing in their workbooks and on the tests, measuring my worth as a teacher in these terms. I lost a strong sense of initiative. The structure and machinery of school were undermining my vision of education. I was turning into the teacher I did not want to be. I understood what had happened to other teachers, many of whom encouraged me and seemed to identify with my vision, but didn't have the energy to implement it.

The existing curriculum materials, testing apparatus, and overall conception of literacy set terms for success and failure that brought all of us — teachers and students alike — into its orbit. From my observations in class, and from conversations with the students, it appeared that the students had internalized years of failure in school, and without the confidence in themselves as thinkers they were very open to the safe routine of workbooks. In addition, prison, with its system of rewards and punishments (the ultimate of which was meted out by the parole board), contributed to students' willingness to accept a rote method of learning. By the fall of 1987, after almost two years of trying, I wanted to quit.

While I was wrestling with whether or not to leave teaching, the ABE teacher resigned; the Educational Supervisor then asked me to teach the class for four months until a new teacher could be hired. This offer was unexpected and unprecedented, since prisoners are permitted only to be aides to civilian teachers. I saw the opportunity to try to implement my vision of education, and I took it, as I felt it would allow me to define the approach to literacy education for the class as a whole, rather than as a side project.

The Education Supervisor, as an educator, was supportive of a problem-posing approach. He knew of my graduate work and was willing to take a risk with me. In allowing me to teach the class, the prison authorities had to balance their personal interest in my ideas about education with the system's policy of limiting an inmate's level of responsibility and influence over other inmates, along with concern not to threaten the civilian teachers' job security and status.⁶ According to prison authorities, the decision was possible because it was limited in time, and I would officially remain in the position of teacher's aide to the other ABE teacher who worked with students at a tested reading level of K-3.⁷

The Issue of AIDS Enters the Classroom

The most important challenge facing me was to create a reading class in which concerns that had meaning to the women would "drive" the learning process. The issue of AIDS opened this possibility. In September 1987, the ABE reading class watched a television show on the National AIDS Awareness Test. At that time, AIDS was still largely an issue prisoners did not discuss, although it was deeply affecting their lives. Close to 20 percent of incoming women inmates tested positive for the HIV virus (New York State Commission on Correction, 1988). Women lived in a state of anxiety over whether they might be HIV positive and whether to take the test. Many women had used intravenous (IV) drugs, and many had lovers or spouses who still did. Women were sisters, mothers, daughters, and homemakers for people with AIDS. Here, women shared cooking areas, showers and toilets, and a life together. People were scared — scared of each other, scared for their lives. The stigma that AIDS carried reenforced a sense of guilt and shame that the women already felt as prisoners pronounced "guilty" by the courts and society. There was a fear of just being associated with AIDS. This fear created both a collective silence and a desperate need to talk.

During the television show, I noticed that the women were riveted to the screen, trying to write down information, their voices sounding out rapidly stac-

⁶A recent policy statement of the New York State Department of Correctional Services states, "Although the Department has been reluctant to place inmates in positions where they might possibly acquire influence or authority over other inmates, we have used inmates as teacher's aides and vocational aides and in recent years have begun to employ them as pre-release peer counselors and ASAT aides (Division of Program Services, 1991, p. 3). This statement is comparable with the long-standing practice of not permitting inmates to teach academic classes, but of encouraging them to do one-on-one tutoring, either as a teacher's aide or volunteer tutor.

⁷In the summer of 1987, the ABE class was divided into two classes defined by level K-3 and level 3-6. I was working with the 3-6 level, and it was this class that I was offered to teach. Beginning with the winter of 1991-1992, the K-3 teacher was laid off, and once again there is one ABE class, level K-6.

cato, one after another: "How do you spell 'pneumonia'?" "How about 'disease'?" "And 'infection'?" "What's an antibody?" "What do they mean, 'immune system'?" "Spell 'protection,' 'hemophiliac'." While they tried to hold on to the meaning of new terms, I went to the blackboard to write down all the words they were calling out. AIDS was a powerfully emotional issue; a new sense of urgency entered the classroom.

That night I focused on everything I had learned but, until then, been unable to implement. I prepared a vocabulary worksheet, an activity that was familiar to the women. While the words were typically drawn from a textbook list for children at different grade levels, the words on this list came from the AIDS show. The women studied avidly, learning words far above their difficulty level in their workbook lists. Some words were conceptually familiar but difficult to spell, such as *transmit*, *doctor*, *disease*, *patient*, and *pneumonia*; some led to learning new concepts, such as *immune system*, *antibody*, and *hemophiliac*.

In addition to the vocabulary, I asked three questions that were on all of our minds: *What are the pros and cons of taking the AIDS test and how do you feel about it? If you tested positive would/should you tell somebody and who would you tell? What do you think would be a good program for AIDS here at Bedford Hills?* These questions created an environment in which the students related to real life emotional and social issues; they began addressing problems that they faced both individually and communally. I asked the women what they thought.

"I don't want to take the test. I'm scared to find out. I used needles."

"You have to tell your lover, otherwise you might hurt her."

"I don't even know what the test tells you, do you?"

"I'm not worried now, but what about when I go home? My man, he's been with women while I'm here. Even though he says he hasn't, he's like any other man. I know the real deal."

"I shot up with some people and now they're dead. I don't want to know and then again I do."

Everyone participated. The women speaking to one another turned their orderly rows into an informal circle. I also talked, feeling my commonality with the women because I too had feelings about testing, safe sex, and fears of rejection. I also felt our differences as women spoke about IV drugs in their lives and decided to speak to these differences, making explicit the fact that I didn't know about IV drugs and wanted to know more. This was the first of many times that I would try to make the differences in our backgrounds a point for exchange. In that first discussion, I began to change my role as teacher: I was a prisoner, exploring shared problems; a facilitator, guiding learning and discussion; and a person with specific information I wanted to learn and impart.

Soon, women began to write about personal experiences with AIDS, and even brought unsolicited writings to class. For example, Lucia wrote:

My friend died from AIDS last year. . . . Since then I've been scared. This is a disease that they haven't found the medicine for. I would like to be one of those persons from the big laboratory to help find the medicine for those people who have AIDS. I'm trying not to think about the disease, but I have a

brother and a sister and they are into drugs. They say they don't use anybody's syringe, but still I'm afraid.

Lucia had never written anything in class and had difficulty writing in her native Spanish, as well as in English. When she presented her piece, she was sharing a hidden secret about her family, her fears and her dreams, as well as asking for help in English and writing. The drive to express her intense feelings had led her to take real risks in her writing and use of English.

With reading centered on AIDS-related materials, the women contributed to the curriculum, something that had not happened previously. They brought in newspaper articles and pamphlets to share with the class, which I developed into reading lessons. One day Juana, who was about to transfer to the GED class, came to me holding pages of paper tightly in her hand. She said, "I've written something; it's a story, maybe the class would like it." She had a look of triumph on her face, and a triumph it was! Juana's story, called "Chocolate and Me," was about a relationship between two women in jail, one of whom had AIDS.⁸ When she read it, the women listened intently as they felt their own lives being described by one of their class members, and clapped enthusiastically when it was over. Juana worked on it, learning the concept of paragraphs, struggling with sentence structure and spelling. Then I typed it, made copies, and developed a reading lesson from it. The class felt proud that one of their members had written something that they were studying. This was the first of many times that the women's own writings became the reading materials for our class.

Writing a Play: Building on the Strengths of an Oral Tradition

During this time, I proposed to the class that we write our own play.⁹ I had several goals: to develop literacy through the process of creating a play in which women would be communicating important thoughts and feelings; to broaden literacy ability through studying the genre of a play and integrating the language forms of reading, writing, talking, and listening; and to develop the strengths of working in cooperation with others.

We began by talking about what a play is, learning about the elements of plot, character, conflict, dialogue, and setting. I gave out vocabulary worksheets with words related to theater. We read plays from a literacy program facing issues similar to those in our own community.¹⁰ This encouraged us: if another basic

⁸ Juana's story, "Chocolate and Me," was published by the PWA Coalition in *Surviving and Thriving with AIDS: Collective Wisdom*, vol. I (1988).

⁹ The sources of the suggestion and the guidance in using theater with literacy instruction were Dr. Ruth Meyers, my graduate study mentor, who worked with the Creative Arts Team (CAT), a professional educational theater company in residence at New York University, and Klaudia Rivera, who at the time was Director of the Community Language Services Project of the Adult Learning Center at LaGuardia Community College, where literacy and theater work was developed.

¹⁰ The plays were written by different classes of the Community Language Services project (CLS) of the Adult Learning Center at LaGuardia Community College in 1986, under the coordination of Klaudia Rivera, coordinator of the program.

literacy class could write a play about issues of housing, health, and drugs, then we, too, could write such a play. When one woman asked, "What should the play be about?", another responded, "It should be something about us, our lives." This was one more step by participants in gaining confidence that their own life experiences were significant. When it came time to decide on a focus, the women chose AIDS, because we were increasingly involved with it in class.

During the next weeks, the conflicts around which to base the plot emerged from our real questions and anxieties about AIDS: Should a person take the HIV test or not? If she tests positive, should she tell her parents? Her lover? The work on the play allowed women to reflect on their day-to-day experiences, and the play changed along with their reflections. One day Elena said, "A friend of mine told me last night that she just tested positive. She's supposed to go home in four months. She had so many dreams — traveling, having kids — now those dreams have all gone down the drain. Maybe I shouldn't push so hard for testing."

Jackie added, "Yeah, I agree, here I am in the play, pushing Anna to take the test, but I'm scared. I'm not ready to deal with it; I know I'm not, and I bet I'm not the only one." From this discussion, the group decided to make the dialogue in the play less pressured toward taking the test.

As we improvised dialogue around each conflict, plot and characters slowly developed. When it was time to create a script, two or three people followed each person's spoken words and wrote down whatever they could. We then pieced the entire dialogue into a whole. Finally we put all the scenarios on the blackboard and made choices as to the sequence of action.

The theater framework allowed participants to try out different resolutions to conflict, to experience the emotions they most feared, and to learn from the process. During one rehearsal, we focused on the woman who was the counselor in the play. "Try to get into it more, try to really put yourself into it," the women coached and pushed. Suddenly Teresa burst into tears. "I think I'm afraid," she said, "afraid to put myself in it completely because then it makes it real, and I guess no matter how calm I seem to all of you, really I'm afraid to think about AIDS." Women went to her and hugged her. After that moment, she did put herself more into the acting and was more open about her experiences and fears.

Work on the play further molded my changing role as teacher. The women urged me to take a part in the play. For a moment I hesitated, wondering if it was appropriate for a teacher to do that. Then I laughed at myself, realizing I was feeling afraid I might lose my authority. Taking the part strengthened my teaching, as I identified with the women in working on a shared problem.

Theater gave the Hispanic and African-American women an opportunity to build on a strong oral tradition. They were able to use their own language, dialects, informal speech, and body language. Some of the women who had the greatest problems developing their reading and writing were outstanding in the development of dialogues and acting. The theater process accentuated the strengths of some women, while valuing the strengths of each as language, communication, reading, and writing all developed.

A Community Develops in the Classroom

The students' growing consciousness of themselves as part of a community, first in the classroom and then in the prison, became a positive factor in literacy development. The classroom had been a place in which each person individually felt locked into her own sense of failure. "I hate being in this class, people think it's for dummies. Maybe it is," Anna had said. No one wanted to be identified with being in the ABE class, "the lowest spot on the totem pole," just as no one wanted to feel like they were part of the prison.

But as people began to talk about their fears and questions concerning AIDS, something changed in the classroom. A sense of community, an awareness of common experiences, and a feeling of support began to grow. The most emotional moment reflecting this came when Lucia shared with the class that she had just found out that her brother was hospitalized with AIDS. I wrote in my journal:

When Lucia came back into the classroom, people said they were sorry and wanted to be there for her. Elena suggested that Lucia write about her feelings. So Lucia spent the rest of the class writing about what is happening with her brother.

When people arrived at class in the morning, they now spoke with each other differently, with an openness, a sense of identification, and growing trust. As one woman wrote, "In our class we talk about a lot of things and learn a lot of reading. Sometimes we talk about real things that make our tears come out. . . ."

The support for one another expressed itself in the classroom in many ways. For example, when a woman got sick, everyone made a card for her; when a woman made parole, people had a celebration for her. The class organized a Christmas party, something that had never before happened in an ABE class. The most significant articulation of community occurred when we were picking a title for the play. When someone said, "Let's call it *Our Play* because it is about us," there was enthusiastic agreement. That sense of there being an "us" had never existed before, and the title expressed a pride in the "us" that had emerged.

ABE class members carried this ethos of support beyond the class and into the prison population. Word began to get out that the ABE class was talking about AIDS in a supportive way; other prisoners now sought out women in the ABE class as confidantes on their living units. One day Ching came to class and said to me, "A woman on my floor found out she has AIDS and tried to kill herself. I'm the one person she told. I know why she tried. She came to me, I'm the person she talks to." Ching's eyes filled with tears. I saw then that the knowledge that the ABE class was accumulating was also bringing with it awesome responsibilities.

The feeling of community influenced literacy ability, as well as intellectual and emotional growth. People took risks in reading and writing because they were no longer afraid. They felt less ashamed of themselves and were willing to express their thoughts more freely. As they brought increasingly complex read-

ing materials to class and began to teach one another, recognizing that each one could teach as well as learn, a tentative grouping of learners and teachers emerged. One of many examples of this occurred when the women were preparing for a spelling test. "I'll help Jamie," said Ms. Edna, who was seventy years old. They worked for a while, and then Ms. Edna brought the test over to me. They had gotten 100 percent on it. They were beaming at their mutual success.

A growing social awareness laid the basis for the next critical leap: the desire to change the conditions that were causing problems. "What can we do with everything we're learning?" Jackie asked. "People are coming to me, asking me things," Alicia added. Instead of seeing AIDS as an individual problem, people began to see it as a common one, and one they could work on together. First the women worked on an article for the school journal, hoping to share what they had learned. I took the class through the process of writing a composition, focusing on what they wanted to say about AIDS. After five hard-working sessions, the article, *Alert to Aids*, was done, and was published not long after with all the class members' names on it. Although the feeling of community had first grown inside the class, it now extended beyond the class into the prison as a whole. The women continued to use their developing literacy skills to make a difference. *Our Play* became the means of accomplishing this.

Are We Really Learning to Read and Write?

The transformation that was taking place in the classroom challenged participants' notions about what counts as education. In place of filling out multiple choice questions from workbooks, the women were learning from their own experiences and reading materials that did not have "yes" or "no" answers. The range of literacy activities was far beyond those normally carried out in the ABE class. Yet, it was not an easy transformation, and not everyone was comfortable with the process. The students had questions, and so did I. Randy said, "I feel I've learned a lot about AIDS, I'm learning to write a composition, I'm reading lots of articles, and I'm actually writing a play, but I'm just not sure I'm really learning." Many women wanted a clear sense of right and wrong answers. The workbooks had provided this, as well as a sense of progress because of the movement through the book and from one level to the next. Some women did not like working in groups. Others wanted to know whether their progress would show up on the test scores.

During the work on the play, one woman playing a major role did not do as well on the quarterly TABE test as she had hoped. She announced that she was quitting the play to go back to the workbooks. Everyone wanted her to come back to the play and eventually she did, with renewed commitment. However, I knew that I had to take her concerns seriously, and that they were shared by others. I, too, was worried about whether this work would give them the needed test preparation.

During this period, when I encountered both a variety of student resistance and my own insecurities as a relatively new teacher of literacy, I asked myself

whether I was imposing on the women an educational approach that I thought was best for them, but that they didn't want. Perhaps my views were linked to the differences in my background. Would it give them adequate test preparation? With time, the range of reading materials, the explosion of writing, and the students' engagement and personal growth all made me more confident about my approach. And now, having established a meaning-driven context within the classroom, I was able to begin focusing on problem areas. I took readings and developed lessons similar to those in the workbooks. This, I felt, would allow the women to feel a relationship between the past and the new learning experiences. I tried to develop a better balance between group and individual work, spending time with each person on specific areas of need. Many of the women needed work on both the sound symbol relations and the basic structure of English language. Finally, I developed lessons on test-taking skills.

Performing the Play: Empowerment within a Prison

By mid-December of 1987, we were ready to put on the play. We were all nervous. AIDS was still a subject associated with fear and stigma. Those who were taking the risk to open up a hidden subject were not seen by either themselves or other inmates as potential educators, because they were in the lowest level academic class.

The play was performed six times, and each time the audience reacted beyond all dreams. It brought into the open fears, questions, and issues in a safe social setting, breaking the silence so that people could together begin to deal with the epidemic. Women cried as a father rejected his daughter, moving his chair away from her after she told him she had tested positive. Yet the tears were mixed with embarrassed laughter, because they knew that they, too, might move away from someone whom they thought to have AIDS. When a woman told her lover she had tested positive, there was a dead silence as people waited for the lover's reaction. Everyone was able to identify with one of the women or the other; they were living through what they themselves might face. When the support group in the play came together for the last scene and told each other of the good and of the difficult reactions they had gotten from family and friends, the audience stood up and cheered, feeling the strength that came from people supporting each other.

After several performances, we held discussions with the audiences about what could be done to deal with the crisis of AIDS here at Bedford Hills. The audience asked for support groups and a program to be built like the one depicted in the play. Members of the prison administration came to watch one of the performances. The superintendent requested that the class put on the play for the civilian counselors in the prison, and the class made a video of it.

Several months later, a group of women separate from the ABE class, including myself, formed an organization for peer education and counseling called AIDS Counseling and Education (ACE). The ACE Program has created a major difference in attitudes, medical care, mental health, knowledge, and support in

the prison around AIDS-related issues¹¹. It uses the video of *Our Play* to help women deal with the emotional issues that AIDS raises.

After the play, the ABE class did its first evaluation of their learning experience, another step in the women's self-consciously helping to mold their own education. The Education Supervisor, who facilitated the evaluation, asked, "What did the work in the AIDS unit accomplish for you?" The answers included, "Writing skills, vocabulary, recognizing words, spelling, how to write a play, learning about conflicts and resolutions."

"Learning about AIDS."

"How to put on a play and how to act."

"How to respect people's feelings, how to speak louder, and how to express our feelings."

"I liked the counseling group because it involved counseling each other."

"We gave people a message, we helped people."

"The play brought a level of emotions, awareness to help learn."

"I feel wise, learning how other people feel."

"The play gave me a mirror to look at my own life."

I believe that these quotes reflect how the women in the ABE class felt empowered in different ways, both as individuals and as a group. The classroom experience allowed individuals to understand their own lives more clearly. Their self-concept changed from being poor learners to people who could teach others. Although the process had begun with one peer educator, myself, the participatory problem-posing approach generated many others, as women taught one another in the classroom, and as the ABE class educated the population through informal discussions and writing the play. A sense of efficacy and agency developed for all of us — myself as teacher, the women in the class as students, and all of us as prisoners. As a group, the class knew that they had made a major contribution to the entire prison population by breaking the silence about AIDS, using their growing literacy ability to do so. The play had helped to create conditions whereby an ongoing program developed. Three years later, I asked one of the ABE class participants in *Our Play*, who is presently a member of ACE teaching others about AIDS, how she felt about her experience in the ABE class and the play. She said to me:

The play made people more aware. Some people didn't want to face it, some people went around judging people that have AIDS. The play helped change that. I felt good about myself. I didn't know what AIDS was before I came to Bedford. It made me feel good that I'm educated and how I can help educate others. I grew in the process, that was a step, and a step makes for progress.

¹¹ For more information about the ACE Program see J. Clark and K. Boudin (1990), "A Community of Women Organize Themselves to Cope With the AIDS Crisis: A Case Study From Bedford Hills Correctional Facility," and K. Boudin and J. Clark (1991), "A Community of Women Organize Themselves to Cope with the AIDS Crisis: A Case Study from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility."

The Model Repeats: A Multicultural Community Expresses Itself

Was the intense student involvement during the unit on AIDS tied only to the issue of AIDS, or was it linked to the new way of teaching? Clearly AIDS was an issue of great emotional urgency, and it did provide the initial energy to transform the educational approach. Once the ABE class openly embraced the issue of AIDS and owned it as a shared human problem instead of as a badge of guilt, then, paradoxically, the very issue that led to oppressing and denying people their humanity became a vehicle of transformation and hope. As women freed themselves from the dehumanization of stigma and prejudice, proclaiming their own self-worth and humanity, an energy was created that drove the learning process, the desire for knowledge, the confidence to create.

Once the women had experienced a literacy education that focused on issues of importance, they wanted it to continue. Fundamentally, it was the educational approach that had provided the glue to overcome the fragmented reality that is debilitating to prisoners and teachers alike. Fragmentation was overcome when the learning process tapped into the whole person, and when a sense of community was created so that people felt committed to each other, as well as to broader goals.

An indication of the power of such an educational approach occurred when the new teacher was hired and reestablished the individualized, basic skills model, sending all of us — students and myself — back to the workbooks and multiple-choice questions. I felt a sadness, almost as if there had been a death of a fragile new life. The students evidently felt the same way and, as the weeks went by, many of them complained to the teacher and to administrators, asking for a return to teaching in which their ideas and issues mattered. This active role of ABE students requesting a certain type of education was unprecedented at Bedford Hills.

The AIDS unit had generated enough support for a participatory approach that not only the education supervisor, but also higher prison authorities were interested in seeing it continue in some form. The new teacher, who was troubled by declining attendance, and was also open to the problem-posing approach, agreed to let me teach the class two out of five days, during which time he would be present in the classroom. This arrangement left him in authority, yet gave credence to my work.

The model repeated itself as the ABE class explored other thematic units over the next year. In one called “Mothers and Daughters,” we explored our mothers’ lives, our relationship to them as daughters, and our own role as mothers. In another, we explored issues of personal experiences and values with money. Finally, for a six-month period, we took on a major project — writing a handbook for incoming inmates, entitled *Experiences of Life: Surviving at Bedford Hills*.

For two days a week, the class became a writers’ workshop. It began with the women, myself included, sharing what was on our minds the first night we arrived in prison. Then we brainstormed about what we had known, feared, and wondered about prison life in Bedford Hills before arriving here. I found writings

by other prisoners about these concerns and used them as the basis for structured reading lessons. They triggered intense writing, from several sentences to several pages, until enough material was created for the book. The chapters included, "Advice for How to Survive in Prison," "Coming from Another Country," "Being Pregnant in Bedford Hills," and "Mothers and Children."

The exploration of each new issue deepened participants' sense of themselves and of shared realities. Out of the cumulative experience of feeling our commonality as prisoners and women, a trust developed that made it possible for us to explore our cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences. Literacy acquisition interacted with the exploration of cultural identity. One among many examples of this occurred when it came time to edit the handbook. We looked at the different forms of language that were found in the writings of the women in the handbook: Standard American English, informal speech, Black English, and slang. For the first time, many women heard that the Black English, which always had been corrected as "wrong," was a dialect reflecting a culture.

The class had a long discussion about what style of language to use for the handbook. Some wanted it to be in Standard American English because they felt that new women coming in should see that the ABE students knew the standards of accepted grammar. Other women wanted to leave some of the informal language or slang and Black English dialect in order to facilitate communication with the new women. A Chinese woman proposed a solution: to leave it in the style that the particular woman had written if she wanted, but to explain in the beginning of the book that the decisions about language had been a conscious, educated choice. Thus, the readers would know that the ABE students knew enough to distinguish between and to choose different types of language. This was how it was done.

Prisoners as Educators

As a prisoner teaching, I experienced a shifting of roles and identities. I was an inmate, reminded of that reality by a twenty-to-life sentence and the day-to-day experiences of being strip-searched after a visit, separated from my son, and locked down; yet, at times I felt myself to be a teacher in training, headed for an identity as an educator, occasionally asked by another inmate, "Are you a teacher or a prisoner?", until they noticed my green pants and gave me a knowing nod. In my role as educator, teachers would sometimes speak to me with respect, almost as a peer; some were genuinely excited about the work and supported my educational growth. Yet there was an ambivalence about me as an educator. One example can be seen in the words of a teacher who was familiar with the quality of the AIDS work, yet who introduced me as her "inmate clerk." At times I would be a translator, negotiating between two worlds. Then the reality of control and limits would bring everything back into focus. Although there was a shifting of roles, I found that the primary tendency of the system was to define me as prisoner. It was always a struggle to transcend the limitations of that role.

To what extent was the participatory approach tied to a prisoner being the one teaching? In the class evaluation, the women addressed this issue, responding to the Education Supervisor's question, "How was Kathy's teaching like past teachers or different from them?" The women responded, "In the past a teacher was always just a teacher, but she (Kathy) was both part of it and also a teacher."

"She was learning also. She was also like a counselor."

"Teachers never participated in learning, past teachers taught 'what to do,' not 'how to'." The Education Supervisor asked, "Could a civilian do it, not just a prisoner?" One woman said, "Yes, but they would have to be sympathetic to the group and have to pick up on the vibes. It wouldn't happen as fast, have to build rapport, that takes time." To the question, "How do you build rapport?", someone responded, "Show care, speak what you're about, you open up to us, we'll open up to you, forget that you're a civilian."

There was a strength in the peer education process, of a prisoner teaching prisoners. It allowed for a shared exploration of issues that became the basis of literacy curriculum development. Additionally, as a prisoner I shared the powerlessness felt by the students and had a deep stake in creating a participatory learning process, in which we as prisoners were ourselves making decisions, taking on problem-posing and problem-solving.

Yet the very strength of the peer education process was also its weakness in the prison context. Although most of the prison administrators with whom I dealt expressed personal enthusiasm toward the educational approach I was using, they also expressed a dilemma when the question of whether I could actually teach arose: how could they permit me real responsibility as an educator without giving me too much responsibility as a prisoner? How could such an empowering group process be initiated by prisoners without it becoming a threat to security?

Future Prospects

The paradox of education is precisely this — that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which one is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for oneself, to make one's own decisions, to say to oneself this is black or is white, to decide for oneself whether there is a God in heaven, or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then to learn to live with those questions, is the way one achieves one's own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really ideally want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. (Baldwin, 1988, p. 4)

If creating a liberating education is difficult and paradoxical within the society at large, as James Baldwin writes, then it is all the more so within a prison, an institution of authoritarian control. Yet, after a year-and-a-half of utilizing a problem-posing approach in the classroom, there was change. The experience was so positive that it moved not just inmates, but also some teachers, educational

administrators, and some prison officials towards supporting more of this kind of teaching.¹² This support led me to ask: could a problem-posing approach to literacy become an ongoing part of the educational programs in the prison? Was the experience simply a chance occurrence, or was it consonant enough with the prison goal of rehabilitation to imagine extending it to involve more classes and more inmates as peer educators?

Three education supervisors agreed to work with me on a proposal to implement a problem-posing curriculum more widely. We addressed the question: Who were the most appropriate people to do the teaching? We agreed that inmates would bring particular strengths to the process, namely that of identification with the learners. Moreover, a program using peer educators meant extending the rehabilitative process beyond the students in the literacy classes to those women with higher educational backgrounds. In this prison alone, more than one hundred women are either in college or have bachelor degrees; therefore the potential number of literacy peer educators was large, and developing teaching skills, carrying out work that required self-reliance, and contributing to the broader community was clearly within the concept of penal rehabilitation.

The final proposal involved training peer educators from among prisoners to work four hours per week in every basic education class, using a problem-posing curriculum developed in cooperation with the students. The Superintendent approved the program and productive meetings began with education administrators, teachers, and interested peer educators. Then, midway through the planning period, the prison Administration disapproved it.

Both the support and the withdrawal of support for the peer education program can only be understood as aspects of the broad contradictions among the primary prison goals of control, punishment, and deterrence, and that of rehabilitation. These conflicting goals manifest themselves in many ways, including what type of behaviors are rewarded or sanctioned, the perspective towards inmates, and different education models. How this contradiction is resolved at any moment in time depends on specific conditions. In this case, a number of conditions as diverse as personnel and social climate changed between the time of approval and disapproval: 1) The key education supervisor, who was the critical link between the teachers and our group of inmate peer educators and who supported the program, left the prison for another job; 2) The New York State financial crisis led to education cutbacks, and teachers were laid off. I knew from conversations with teachers and administrators that this increased anxiety

¹² In December 1987, Educational Supervisor Rob Hinz wrote about my teaching after the completion of the AIDS unit: "Her use of Dr. Freire's theoretical work on praxis combining thought and action in a dialectical approach to the teaching of reading to adults has had remarkable results. The women with whom she was working are technically classified as technically illiterate, yet she was able in three months time to provide classroom instruction on AIDS . . . and to, using the vehicle of a play, have these women writing and reading while at the same time boosting their self-image and confidence."

In the spring of 1988, the prison authorities gave permission for the ABE class video to be shown at an ABE conference of educators in New York City, with a presentation of the teaching methods done by Klaudia Rivera.

In the winter of 1988–1989, the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Education Department sent a copy of the ABE class handbook to Albany as an example of an education product.

among remaining teachers about their jobs made them more resistant to, and threatened by, inmates teaching or even inmates playing an active role in their own learning; 3) There was an increasing tendency towards law and order policies and attitudes within the society with concomitant social-service cutbacks. The general political climate was more antagonistic towards prisoners, inmate initiative, and program innovation. The prison administration reacted to all these factors by canceling a program involving inmates' critical thinking and initiative.

The current education crisis facing most prisons illustrates the impact of these conflicting goals. Prison populations are swelling due to drug-related crimes — in New York State, they have grown from 35,000 to 55,000 since 1985, when crack became a driving force in crime, and prison officials estimate that 75 percent of the inmates are incarcerated for drug-related offenses (Browne, 1991). The need for basic education programs has grown with the population increase.

Conversely, the budget cutbacks in education mean elimination of classes taught by civilian teachers. The first layoffs at Bedford Hills, in January 1991, led to the elimination of the ABE class for those inmates reading at the K-3 level and also of the ESL class; the GED class has also suffered significant cutbacks. Between 1989 and 1993 the number of academic and vocational teachers was cut from 25 to 9. The crying need for educational services could be alleviated by allowing inmates to be peer educators and by using participatory methods in which learners actively work on problems they face. Yet prison authorities are reluctant to allow such a problem-posing curriculum to develop or to allow inmates to teach classes. In short, while prison administrators may talk about providing an education for rehabilitation, they rarely do what is necessary to make it happen.

These contradictory needs and goals are integral to the structure of the prison system and, as such, cannot be transcended. At the same time, however, they frame the conditions under which struggle can occur; the very existence of these contradictions offers possibilities for change.¹³

Prisons, like other societal institutions, contain cracks and openings for change — conflicting goals and policies, a diversity of people, changing historical directions. At Bedford Hills, due to a particular combination of these variables, it became possible to create a liberating form of education that lasted for several years. This experience is now an immutable part of the educational history at Bedford Hills, a basis upon which to build.

¹³ An example of how the contradictory needs and goals present opportunities for change is reflected in a recent development in the New York State Department of Correctional Services. The enormous increase in the prison population has created the need for a greatly increased work force inside the prison. Looking toward inmates to partially meet this need has led to a reformulation of a philosophy about inmates: "In keeping with our new emphasis on training inmates to meet the needs of the Department and encouraging and recognizing individual inmate responsibility, it is now our intention to make even greater use of properly trained and qualified inmates. We plan to establish new job titles of 'Inmate Program Associates.' The Program Associates will work in such areas as classrooms, orientation, pre-release, libraries, and counseling" (Division of Program Services, 1991, p. 3). It is too soon to know how this new philosophy will actually manifest itself.

The enormous expansion of prison populations suggests that prisons mirror and are part of a larger social crisis. This connection is reflected in the words of one New York State Department of Corrections spokesperson who said that prisons “probably give out more high school equivalency diplomas than ninety percent of the high schools in the state. Why do people have to come to prison to learn to read and write and get drug treatment?” (Browne, 1991). Human potential, which will be wasted or encouraged, is crowding into prisons. The challenge that problem-posing education raises in prison is part of a larger challenge facing the entire society: will social problems be dealt with by measures of control from above or through mobilization and education from below?

Conclusion

One never knows what improved literacy ability in itself will do for women in prison. One person may gain in self-esteem, while another will make practical improvements in letter writing, filling out forms, or reading to her child. For some, the ability to compete in the job market may increase, but indications are that for most it will not. For the adults with whom I work, the kinds of improvements necessary to increase job opportunities involve great effort over an extended period of time.

What if one embeds literacy acquisition in a broader education that has at its heart problem-posing, critical thinking and acting on shared problems? How might that affect people’s personal growth, family relationships, jobs, and their ability to create the lives they want? Although the answer to this clearly depends on many unknowns, these are questions I have asked myself as I have thought about the struggle to build a problem-posing approach and about the women with whom I work and live.

One story in particular illustrates the complexity of this issue. When Anna was here, she participated fully in the AIDS unit, in the play, and in every successive unit during the year-and-a-half that the educational program existed. She, as much as anyone, felt empowered by the entire experience. When Anna went home, she started by getting a job in a flower shop. When the father of her children came out of prison, she made a decision to go back to him in spite of their problems with drugs, because he offered economic and emotional security. Soon afterward she became pregnant and, during her pregnancy, her husband began seeing another woman. Anna went back to drugs. She was rearrested on a parole violation and came back to Bedford Hills for eight months before going home again.

When Anna was in the play and learning to read and write, while also learning about AIDS, this approach to education seemed like the answer. There were moments when I felt that the human potential and creativity that were emerging in the classroom would allow the women to take on the world, or at least in their own lives, and remake them to fit their dreams. Then, when Anna came back and told me her story, I felt the crushing limitations of even the most positive educational experience in light of what Anna and other women face, including personal scars and the need for social and economic changes.

As educators, we are often forced to accept more limited results than we envision in our hopes and dreams. The success of a short-term literacy program, one that meets our best vision, cannot be measured by one set of tangible standards; the social forces are too complex. Thus, despite Anna's return to prison, I believe that her learning experience and that of the others in the ABE class affirms an approach to teaching literacy based on the lives and experiences of the women themselves. Anna and the others so often have spoken with great pride of what they read and wrote, of the things they learned and taught to others. The participatory approach encouraged a feeling of their own worth and capacity. Although it contains no guarantees, it does offer a powerful hope, because it involves the full potential of participants. Lucia, who is among the many who have not returned to prison, said before she left, "I never thought I would be doing this. I never even did it on the street. I never thought I would act in a play and here I am reading everything. I can go home to my kids and say, 'I've done something!'"

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