Educational Practice and Professional Identity Among Volunteer Correctional Educators: Becoming a Teacher Behind Bars

Jeffrey A. Ritchey, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

Abstract

This case study examines the experiences of eight volunteer educators working in a rural county jail in the northeastern United States of America (U.S.).   More specifically, it explores the challenge of developing a critical educational practice and nascent professional identity in a context otherwise alien to them and on the 'borderlands' of contemporary educational practice.

It is well-documented that while the U.S. is home to only five percent of the world's population, it houses some 25% of the planet's inmates (Ratigan, 2013). And while the challenges posed by the U.S. corrections system are vast and somewhat unique, the challenge of creating and sustaining rehabilitative programs in a largely punitive 'correctional' environment remains a global concern.

To that end, this case study, utilizes in-depth interviews, participant journals, and classroom observations to explore the experiences of eight volunteer teachers working in a rural county jail in southwestern Pennsylvania. County facilities provide a unique site for this work—facilities where relatively short lengths of incarceration and limited opportunities for support create complex educational challenges. These challenges (in the areas of second language instruction, basic literacy, high school equivalency preparation, and career planning) are often addressed by local volunteer educators who, while committed, typically struggle to negotiate their educative roles in a context offering little practical, theoretical, or collegial support.

Background

Over the past thirty years, the U.S. has developed a 'culture of incarceration' (Wilson, 2014, p. 1). From 1980 through 2008, the U.S. prison population grew from some 500,000 to 2.3 million (*NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet*, n.d., para. 1). Prisoners are housed in a system of both federal and state facilities (determined by the type of crime committed, i.e., a federal or state offense) which are typically divided according to level of security (minimum security to maximum security facilities) based on the likelihood of inmate violence and attempted escape (Thomas & Thomas, 2008, p. 12).

In addition to these typically large facilities housing inmates sentenced to significant periods of incarceration (greater than two years), there are also a multitude of county jails typically overseen by local government officials and housing inmates either 1) convicted of offenses carrying short-term sentences (less than two years) or 2) awaiting trial and subsequent sentencing. In large, urban areas, these facilities can appear similar in size and scope to state prisons; nevertheless, there are also numerous county jails in rural locations that house smaller populations and struggle with the resources to offer their inmates the educational and counselling services necessary to facilitate their successful transition back into the community.

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, there are 44 jails in rural counties (Zajac & Kowalski, 2012, p. 5). From 2004 to 2010, these facilities saw a four percent increase in their overall population, with an annual average total population for all rural jails of just over 7,500—a group that was overwhelmingly 'young, white and male' (p. 4).

During the same period, some 43% (19) of these rural jails engaged in some form of large capital improvement or restoration project (p. 4). This was not only to address the need for improvement in aging facilities, but also as a response to the increase in inmate populations noted earlier. As a result, since 2009, state prisons have transferred hundreds of inmates to rural county jails to relieve their own population strain, thereby providing additional funds to support county jail capital expenditures. Furthermore, many county facilities have met criteria to house inmates incarcerated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, many of whom have entered the U.S. illegally and are awaiting deportation.

The facility serving as the site for this study meets many of the general characteristics of rural county jails noted above, principally housing a mix of male and female inmates incarcerated for relatively short periods of time. Furthermore, the county recently engaged in a major capital investment, constructing a new facility on the outskirts of the county seat, allowing it to house inmates from a nearby state correctional facility. In key variables (such as staff-to-inmate and corrections officer-to-inmate ratios, budget, and inmate population), the site is typical of other rural county jails in the Commonwealth.

Education in Rural County Jails

At the state and federal level, where inmates are incarcerated for longer periods of time, both resources and oversight are more abundant and correctional education is typically well integrated into the fabric of the correctional facility (although its usefulness and capacity continue to be debated). Nevertheless, at the county level,

educators face specific challenges that typically marginalize their work in favour of more punitive measures.

Educational programming at rural county jails (GED preparation, adult basic education, special education, general education courses, or specific vocational training) is typically offered through local school districts and/or intermediate units (Zajac & Kowalski, 2012, p.17). While the facility may have full-time personnel responsible for educational program oversight, actual instruction is generally carried out by non-prison staff and various volunteers. Such is the case at the site or this study.

In this case study, volunteers worked with male and female inmates, teaching in both gender-segregated and gender-mixed classes. Classes focused primarily on basic skills in reading and mathematics, with some volunteers incorporating this work into a career planning curriculum and others explicitly preparing their students for the General Educational Development (GED) test.

Classes were offered for two hours, twice per week, over a three month period using a traditional classroom arrangement with rowed seats and a white board at the front of the class. Students were not permitted to use electronic devices of any kind, including computers or calculators, and items such as pencils and paper were closely monitored and accounted for.

Teacher Identity and Communities of Practice

Smit, Fitz, and Mabalane (2010) define identity as 'lived experience in the context of educational change' (p. 1). As such, identity is constructed within the various contexts that make up both professional and personal life. As noted by Smit, Fitz, and Mabalane (2010), 'identity is negotiated, shifting and ambiguous, the result of culturally available meaning and the open-ended power-laden enactment of those meanings in everyday situations' (p. 95).

While recent work has addressed professional identity development among teachers in traditional settings (Gee, 2001; Sachs, 2001; Evans, 2002; Marsh, 2003; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Smit, Fritz, & Mabalane, 2010) there have been few explicit examinations of teacher professional identity in correctional settings (Zaro, 2007; Geraci, 2008). Various studies have documented the reflections of new correctional educators (Cole, 2001; Olcott, 2004; Muth, 2008) or discussed identity from the framework of professional development programming (McGee & Wolford, 1998; Matthew, Clark, & Schoenfeld, 2009), but little has been said regarding the more nuanced interactions of teachers working in jails and prisons. Communities of practice social learning theory provides a useful framework for better understanding the complex nature of learning and identity development inherent in the interactions of those teaching and learning behind bars.

Communities of Practice

As noted above, social learning theory provides a helpful lens through which we might better understand the 'socially embedded nature of learning—insights that, in

turn, can be systematically utilized to enhance adult learning in various social contexts' (Merriam, Courtenay & Baumgarter, 2003, p. 171).

One such social learning framework, the notion of communities of practice, was first presented by Lave and Wenger (1991) and popularized in the areas of business and industry. 'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, n.d., p. 1). In such groupings, learning is often not the intent, but results as an incidental part of the groups' interactions.

In addition, such socially imbedded learning serves as the basis of identity construction. This appears very much the case in the teaching and learning process where practices are profoundly embedded within specific contextual and historical settings.

Three aspects of Wenger's social learning framework can shed light on the process of identity development as an outcome of social learning.

The first is participation. Wenger notes that learning 'takes place through our engagement in culture and history. Through these local actions and interactions, learning reproduces and transforms the social structure in which it takes place' (Wenger, 1998, p. 13). Such a process includes engagement in the practices of communities and 'constructing identities in relation to these communities' (p. 151).

The second is meaning-making. Participation in communities requires the possibility of mutual recognition among members—the ability 'to recognize something of themselves in each other' (p. 56)—and mutual meaning-making—the social negotiation of meaning that 'is at once historical and dynamic, contextual and unique' (p. 54) and that makes our individual and collective lives meaningful. It is in this mutuality that participation becomes a source for identity development.

And last is reification, or 'the process of giving form to our experiences' (p. 58) through the development of 'tools, symbols, stories, terms and concepts' (p. 59). Like participation, reification is both product and process—a thing that shapes and is shaped by the social interactions inherent in communities.

According to Wenger, communities of practice share:

A Domain - Communities of practice are not simple affiliations—clubs or networks of friends—but require a shared domain of interest to which members specifically identify. As a result, this interest 'implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people' (p. 2).

A Community - As members are pursuing competence within their domain, they engage with one another, sharing information, collaborating and discussing their mutual pursuit. These relationships enable and encourage learning.

A Practice - Communities of practice are not simply 'communities of interest'. Members are engaged in developing 'a shared repertoire of resources: experiences,

stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice' (p. 2).

Wenger makes clear that practice involves 'doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (1998, p. 47). As such, it is emergent, involving the whole person and not limited to 'traditional dichotomies that divide acting from knowing, manual from mental, concrete from abstract' (p. 47).

Methods

As noted earlier, this case study utilizes in-depth interviews, participant journals, and classroom observations to explore the experiences of eight volunteer teachers working in a rural county jail in southwestern Pennsylvania. These volunteers were all participants in a program coordinated by a local school district during one of the last three years (2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014). Of the eight, 63% were white females, 25% were black males, with a single black female volunteer. Ages ranged from 23-35 and all had completed their bachelor's degree (although none were in education).

As noted earlier, data were collected through volunteer journals, participant observations, and debriefing sessions, with follow-up interviews held with each of the participants in fall 2013 and spring 2014. Where possible, interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Participant journals (as transcripts of their reflections) and observation data were assessed in much the same way, weaving the three data sources into a thematic examination of participants' experiences teaching in a correctional setting.

Findings

The process noted above resulted in the emergence of four themes relevant to teacher educational practice and professional identity formation among the study's volunteers.

Experience and Expectation

None of the eight participants had experience working or teaching in a correctional facility. Nevertheless, all had engaged in some form of non-formal educational practice, ranging from pastoral work to corporate training and development.

From the outset, however, several of the participants perceived that these past experiences were 'not relevant' to their correctional work. All indicated a feeling of unpreparedness that they perceived was affirmed by conversations with supervisory staff from the public schools and prison personnel. Said one volunteer educator, 'I felt like teaching in the jail was something completely new, and it was. But the message was that I needed to keep my guard up; that my students were unlike anything I'd ever experienced and that I couldn't understand it. That my prior teaching just wasn't going to be anything like this'.

Moreover, their expectations were profoundly shaped by the current crop of reality television shows that depict prisons as highly violent, extremely dangerous contexts

for teachers and rehabilitative staff. And while county facilities do, indeed, house violent and dangerous inmates, the majority are incarcerated for non-violent offences with all of those participating in educational programs earning their inclusion through good behavior over a period of time. Participants noted that they rarely interacted with prison rehabilitative staff or the administrators responsible for this work. Their primary point of contact was security personnel who only reinforced the perception of looming danger and distrust. Said one participant, 'I admit that I love shows like Lock-up and Jail. And that was really what I thought the jail was going to be like. And I think the CO's [corrections officers] must like those shows too since they seem to act a lot like the guards I see on TV. It's really contagious…that feeling of danger. But after a while, you see that the students aren't much different than anyone else— they just got caught. But the sense of danger is hard to leave behind…even in class'.

Mixed Messages

There was also a sense of confusion among participants concerning where their focus should be while working in the facility. Some of this came as a result of the orientation process and the mixed messages sent during what was a brief but powerful process of orientation.

Both the school district and the jail conducted their own orientations—each lasting approximately one hour. As would be expected, school personnel focused more on pedagogical and interpersonal issues (keeping lessons focused, maintaining professional distance with students, utilizing the white board to provide clear examples). Jail personnel, on the other hand, focused almost exclusively on the facility and its processes (procedures for entering and exiting the facility, how to call for assistance in the case of an emergency, proper attire and maintaining safe/appropriate distances with students).

The result was that many volunteers left with a strong perception that they needed to be extremely careful in their work—careful of their physical safety, careful to not alienate or 'set off' their students, careful not to expect too much given their students' short sentences and limited abilities. Said one participant, 'I went into this because I really felt like I could help someone see their own abilities and possibilities. What I heard was that I couldn't trust anyone and they were only killing time. The messages were really mixed—these people need a chance…but they'll likely be back here anyway'.

Goals and Objectives

As a result, the two broad goals mentioned by all participants as their primary reasons for engaging in correctional education—to help change students' perceptions of themselves as learners, and to stretch their own skills and abilities as teachers—were left unchallenged and exchanged for modest programmatic objectives and the important but unsatisfying outcome that everyone went home safe and prison processes were undisturbed. The result was that many of the participants found the experience powerful, but not profoundly so.

'I'd volunteer again,' said one participant, 'but not at this jail. Maybe it's the same everywhere but here everyone seemed most concerned with things completely

unrelated to the learning…things like what we wore, how we stood, the stories we told. I understand the need for control, but for me, teaching is about having a connection to the students as well, and what that was supposed to look like was hard to understand'.

Power and Control

Furthermore, all of these themes were experienced under the ever-present specter of issues related to power and control—over curriculum, classroom management, physical appearance and behavior, and expectation. Participants universally expressed that they believed their teaching abilities remained constricted by both spoken and unspoken forms of control. Said one, 'just coming in the place lets you know you're not in a normal situation…I get that. But you have to put a great deal of effort into making it feel normal—relaxed, collegial, friendly even. Even the inmates can't believe that there's not something in it for me other than the experience. Everyone seems unwilling to take a flier and really commit. Past failures…past mistakes…not sure what it is but everyone's kind of holding back…or being held back'.

This sense of power and control is clearly related to other themes identified in this work; nevertheless, it seems significant enough to explicitly note. While the very nature of jails is control, the correctional classroom seems a place where a conscious effort should be made to minimize displays of power and their subsequent impact. Furthermore, this effort is essential to the development of a critical teaching practice—a process that appears to be impeded by the priorities expressed in most (if not all) correctional settings.

Discussion and Recommendations

As was mentioned earlier, the complexity of county jails creates some unique challenges for correctional educators—short periods of incarceration mean that students come and go relatively quickly; the economics of corrections makes the housing of state inmates (generally convicted of more serious crimes and facing longer sentences) and federal prisoners (typically illegal aliens awaiting deportation) something many county facilities have embraced.

In addition, rural county jail administrators and educators have shared with me their sense that the rural residents they serve do not see the rehabilitation of inmates as the facilities' primary role. Rather, the focus remains punitive, with incarceration a form of retribution for criminal behavior.

Lastly, the site for this research does not include any professional staff exclusively responsible for inmate education—basic or otherwise. While explained-away as being economically infeasible, it also speaks to a larger challenge faced by correctional educators worldwide—the challenge of developing correctional education into a viable profession, valued by the system's myriad constituents and the public at large.

When examining the themes expressed in participant interviews, journals, and actions through the lens of communities of practice, a recognizable 'practice' seems evident;

nevertheless the field's domain and community are difficult to identify. Participants expressed little connection to a broader group of like-minded educators who could foster the type of connection inherent in a domain and necessary for the development of a strong professional identity. This is not to say that correctional educators have not and cannot create communities of practice, but that rural county jails present specific educational challenges that make their creation difficult—particularly for those serving in volunteer capacities. These challenges include the part-time nature of educational work in county facilities, the geographic remoteness of rural county jails, and the transience of the prison population.

To facilitate the development of a more robust domain and vibrant educational community in such a context, groups providing educational services must better utilize existing professional organizations, exploit aspects of social media, and integrate themselves more intimately into local non-profit and governmental networks to develop sites for shared information, creative collaborations, advocacy initiatives, and the development of a unique and recognizable competence.

Such work will require that participants negotiate both subject competency and a critical educational practice that recognizes and challenges repressive attitudes, policies, and practices restricting educational opportunities and limiting teacher creativity in correctional settings.

Professional educators working in correctional settings (i.e., full-time correctional educators or volunteers who work as professional educators in non-correctional settings) often find the punitive, controlling environment of prison a challenge to their identity as a caring teacher whose practice is intimately linked to creating and sustaining close relationships with their students (Geraci, 2008). In these instances, the challenges noted above arise in the face of established collegial relationships, involvement with education-related social networks, affiliations with professional organizations, and a strong sense of what it means to be a teacher and mentor. But in rural county facilities, where well-intentioned volunteers often serve as a primary resource as classroom instructors, these supports typically do not exist and must be cultivated and supported by jail administrators and educational program coordinators alike—support that will ultimately result in greater commitment among volunteer educators and more creative, productive, successful educational programs.

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