

Really Cool: We Go to School

George Rodriguez

Despite its brevity and simplicity, Gwendolyn Brooks's poem, "We Real Cool," presents a clear and powerful message to its readers. Written in 1960, this poem paints the picture of a group of teenage males enjoying their time at a pool hall. The teenagers see themselves as being "cool" because they have dropped out of school, drink alcohol and listen to jazz until late at night. Brooks uses the word "We" at the end of just about every line of the poem to imply that they collectively feel a sense of power and invincibility. Although Brooks provides a cheerful tone to the poem, we, as readers translate the teenagers' behavior as that of troubled young men who lack any regard for education or a meaningful future. The teenagers surprisingly acknowledge the likely outcome of their lifestyle by admitting, "We/ Die soon," in what may be the most powerful line of the poem. Brooks does a fine job of getting her point across by describing the teenagers' "cool" fun, and then abruptly ending the poem on a somber note. She clearly wishes to have her readers envision the lives of some of the youths of her era.

Unfortunately, our society today continues to struggle with this type of teenage mentality. Much like Brooks, we think about why young men such as those in "We Real Cool" make the decisions they do, or behave the way they do. Because the majority of us see life through a different lens than these teenagers, an effort must be made to alter this type of thinking and behavior so that young men can lead normal, productive lives. Three sources provide evidence of the need for education in prison as one means of altering self-destructive behavior. The sources show how education programs in prisons decrease rates of recidivism. "Studies of Correctional Education Programs" by Barbara Wade appeared in *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal* in 2007. Dennis Zaro's "Teaching Strategies of the Self-Actualized Correctional Educator: The Inside Person vs. the Outside Person" and James S. Vacca's "Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison," both appeared in the *Journal of Correctional Education* in 2007 and 2004 respectively. I also had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Urban Education at the CUNY Graduate Center, to discuss her research on prison inmates and education.

There is great concern in the United States about the increasing rates of imprisonment as well as recidivism. As noted in Barbara Wade's article, this problem is believed to be the result of the disparity between the economic and academic levels among individuals in the correctional populations in contrast to our general population. Wade reported on a series of studies conducted to determine the effectiveness of college education programs implemented in prisons. Wade says, "Since a lack of education may lead to poverty and crime, prison

education programs should be rehabilitative, and should enable inmates to secure employment upon release, thereby reducing poverty and giving them an opportunity to become contributing members of society” (27). With this objective in mind, Wade reported on studies to determine the development of the basic educational skills of inmates. According to Wade, “Results indicated that inmates who participated in ABE [Adult Basic Education] programs made significant learning gains in reading, math and language” (29).

Although Dennis Zaro agrees with the need for basic educational skills, he also emphasizes the need for improvement in other skills: responsibility, anger management, control of impulses, and empathy. Zaro notes, if inmates can change “the thinking patterns that brought them to prison, the recidivism rates can be substantially lowered” (29). Zaro bases his approach on data from sixteen studies conducted by criminologist Dr. Robert Ross. Advocating a focus on these skills, Zaro introduces a teaching strategy, “The Inside Person vs. the Outside Person,” based on the construct “that meaningful change must come from within and not be superimposed from outside” (28). The concept involves written exercises on each essential skill; inmates are given a series of descriptors and are expected to assign them to one of two “Circles of Influence,” one for the inside person they have control over, and the other for the outside person they have no control over. The inmates’ choices are then analyzed to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their skills. This teaching strategy has been proven effective.

The article written by James S. Vacca directly addresses the issue of recidivism. Vacca notes that prison education systems have produced “lower recidivism rates, lower parole revocation rates, better release employment patterns and better institutional disciplinary records” (299). The project that informs his work included sixty studies that focused not only on prison academic programs, but also cognitive and vocational education. As a result of the vocational education, for example, inmates developed the skills necessary to succeed in employment upon their release. In fact, “ex-prisoners who participated in employment and vocational programs in prison had a better chance of maintaining employment” (300).

I interviewed Dr. Michelle Fine to learn about her research, to determine what she has learned about the impact of educational programs on recidivism, and get a sense of her personal experiences with inmates. The first participatory action research (PAR) Dr. Fine conducted was in a New York State women’s prison in 1996-2000, when the federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act had placed a hold on federal funding for prison programs. Dr. Fine’s research collective of scholars and inmates met every few weeks over a four-year period to learn not only inmates’ stories of crime and the prison environment, but also about their responsibilities and experiences after their release. Dr. Fine states, “Our primary goal was to write convincingly about the data we had collected; that it made political, economic, and social policy sense for the New York State legislature to restore funds for college programs.” The women in the study were deeply and positively affected by prison college programs. The women demonstrated leadership within the prison environment and many even launched educational

projects of their own dealing with the alternatives to prison life. A second PAR Dr. Fine mentioned involved twenty-five male and female former inmates of varying race, age, type of crime committed, and length of sentence. The research group asked questions regarding the former inmates' prison experience, changes they had experienced, turning points while incarcerated and preparation for parole. Closing questions addressed their future goals. The study showed that all inmates attributed their imprisonment to similar factors such as poverty, troubled family life, lack of education, and hanging around with the wrong crowd. However, Dr. Fine said, "College education was the single most cited reason for enabling change, transformation, and responsibility."

In order to get a sense of Dr. Fine's experience on a personal level, I asked her to describe a memorable conversation with one inmate from each of the studies that we had discussed. In one project, she recalls a female inmate enthusiastically describing how college education filled the entire prison, how she could hear typewriter keys until late into the night and fellow inmates knocking on her wall asking how to spell. In the other project, a male inmate described his life and identity after incarceration had disrupted them. The analogy that he used was that of taking a dresser drawer and throwing its contents on the ground. His subsequent goal was to figure out how to place the contents back in the drawer. Dr. Fine was impressed that yet another inmate was thinking through the process of rehabilitation.

The effectiveness of prison education systems paves the way for a more promising future for inmates, as well as for their relatives in the general population. What is surprising about the programs, in my opinion, is the intensity and the actual success rate of education provided. Will these programs be allowed to continue and evolve, or will they simply be extinguished in the coming years out of budget constraints that fail to consider both the long-term budget savings and the saving of lives that programs of these kinds provide? Were Gwendolyn Brooks alive to witness these programs today, I feel she would be much in favor of maintaining and expanding them. They represent an opportunity for individuals to learn, evolve, mend the past and re-imagine the future.

References

- Brooks, Gwendolyn. "We Real Cool." 1960. *Literature for Composition*. 8th ed. Ed. Sylvan Barnett et al. New York: Longman, 2008. 295.
- Fine, Michelle [Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Urban Education, The Graduate Center, City University of New York]. E-mail interview. New York, NY. 18 Nov. 2008.
- Vacca, James S. "Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison." *Journal of Correctional Education* 55 (Dec. 2004): 297-305.
- Wade, Barbara. "Studies of Correctional Education Programs." *Adult Basic Education & Literacy Journal* 1 (2007): 27-31.

Zaro, Dennis. "Teaching Strategies for the Self-Actualized Correctional Educator: The Inside Person vs. the Outside Person." *Journal of Correctional Education* 58 (Mar. 2007): 27-41.

Nominating faculty: Professor Jane Mushabac, English 1121, Department of English, School of Arts & Sciences, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

Cite as: Rodriguez, G. (2009). *Really cool: We go to school*. *City Tech Writer*, 4, 100-102. Online at <https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/city-tech-writer-sampler/>