

Is there a need for prisoner education?

In *The Journal of Correctional Education*, James Vacca cites the following statistics:

More than half of the adults incarcerated in American federal and state prisons can neither read nor write, and they have less than an eight-grade education. According to a report to the New York State Senate, a majority of state prisoners have no high school diploma and a majority of them cannot read (Paul, 1991).

This poses the question.....



Malcolm X, Tookie Williams and Self-Education in Prison



• In jail for 7 years

- Malcolm grew up in Michigan. His father was murdered in 1931, when Malcolm was 6. His mother, left to raise 8 children, had a nervous breakdown. Malcolm was moved to the homes of various relatives and foster homes. He was told by his favorite junior high school teacher that his plan to be a lawyer wasn't a "realistic" goal for a black man. Malcolm moved to Boston and turned to a life "hustling" and trafficking in stolen goods.
- He was arrested and imprisoned from 1946-1952.

Norfolk Prison, Massachusetts

- Malcolm had access to a huge library of books and participated in a debate club.
- He started by copying the dictionary and then wrote letters to various people-the Mayor of Boston, Governor of Massachusetts, and Harry S. Truman.
- He would often read in his cell until three or four in the morning.

Awakening

- Malcolm X said reading opened "new vistas" for him: "I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life....[T]he ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive" (Haley 182).

Revising his narrative of history

- In prison, Malcolm read W.E.B. Du Bois' "Souls of Black Folk," Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," abolitionist literature about Nat Turner's rebellion, Gandhi, and philosophers like Kant, Nietzsche, and Spinoza.
- In debates, he would talk to his fellow inmates about black history and how the contributions of African-Americans had been ignored.

Study about inmates and narrative

- Laura Tahir did a study of prison inmates in a 26-week Life Review Group. In the group, inmates construct a meaningful life story, from childhood to the present. She found that many prison inmates "experience little, if any awareness that part of their struggle is due to identity confusion, and missed opportunities to explore who they are and what they are doing in life" (91).

Enterprise

- Tahir's study had inmates rewrite their lives in terms of an "enterprise," or purpose that had driven their lives so far. She writes, "Before incarceration, [inmates] had [not] attained a sense of self-identity, an [essential] prerequisite to creating something beyond themselves" (98).
- At the beginning of the group, inmates appeared "trapped in narratives of hopeless struggle and unmet needs. Crime often seem[ed] to be all they [knew]" (Tahir 91).

creative work/enterprise (Tahir)

- KNOWLEDGE
- PURPOSE
- AFFECT

Formal operations

- Tahir had the inmates organize the events of their lives into a more coherent whole and examine old beliefs about their sense of self--
- Rigid concepts about criminality or ways of survival
- Rigid concepts of masculinity
- This helped them enter the formal operations stage, a cognitive shift when adolescents and young adults select an identity and purpose from an array of multiple possibilities.

Creating a Life Narrative

- Tahir writes that "[i]ncarceration for some is the life incident that triggers the need to create a life story, or search for meaning" (99). She also says that religious conversion is another way many prisoners, including Malcolm X, create a sense of meaning and identity. Malcolm X also created an identity as a black activist/leader.

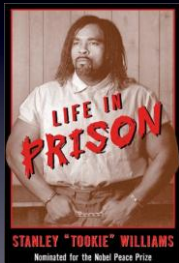
Malcolm and the nation of Islam

- Malcolm X converted to Islam in prison and his identity became inseparable with the black nation of Islam. This group was part of the Black Power movement during the Civil Rights era and beyond. Malcolm felt the black nation of Islam gave African-Americans an identity separate from white European Christianity. Many prisoners have also converted to fundamental Christianity.

Black activist

- Malcolm X went on to be a prominent and world-famous black activist, leading protests and giving speeches during the Civil Rights Movement. He was assassinated in 1965 when giving a speech in New York City.

Stanley Tookie Williams



Death Row Self-Education

- In 1981, a jury in Torrance convicted Williams, landing him on death row. Initially his conduct was disruptive: "I gave this place hell," he acknowledged in an interview. While in solitary confinement, however, he began a transformation, Williams said. At first he read voraciously—the Bible, the dictionary, philosophy, black history—and struggled to understand his past.
- During that period he began reading widely and reflecting on his life, and resolved to prevent gang violence.
- Williams taped a message from prison in April 1993 that was broadcast to Los Angeles gang members at a "peace summit."
- With the help of Barbara Becnel, a writer he met in prison who became his champion, he started work on eight books for children that were published in 1996 as a series called, "Tookie Speaks Out Against Gang Violence."
- He followed with "Life in Prison" in 1998 and a memoir, "Blue Rage, Black Redemption," in 2004 and was working on two more books before his execution. He spoke regularly from prison to youths and educators, and posted a model "peace protocol" for gangs, which supporters say was widely used, on his Web site in 2000.

Williams' interview

- **TW:** For me, there was never an individual there that I could empathize with when I was growing up. If there had been an individual like myself who had actually experienced the madness and then came back and said, "Hey, look, this is not what you want to do, I know I would have done better."
- **[In prison]** I unchained my mind, and I did so through prayers and extensive study. I had to seriously question whether I was a human or a beast. In choosing not to be a beast, I discovered my humanity. I became autodidactic, self-educated -- a critical thinker.
- We all know this place is potentially volatile and hopeless... I mean, this place -- looking in it or being in it -- is a place of doom. All right? This is where one's past continues to hunt you. This place can either make you go mad or convince you to become a better person.

Identity and purpose outside the self

- There is no one elixir that can resolve the madness that's going on out there. But I believe that what I'm doing and what I've done has helped individuals. It has more effect on the youngsters, because they have a better chance of growing up into responsible adults. (Tookie Williams)
- Malcolm X felt that his life purpose was to "wake up" African-Americans to the huge contribution they had made to America's growth.

1 in every 150 US residents incarcerated

- In conclusion, the United States incarcerates more people than any other industrialized country in the world.
- By 1998, one in every 150 U.S. residents was incarcerated. In 2000, the number of incarcerated men and women reached 2 million. Inmates need education programs that not only teach them how to read effectively but also provide the necessary reinforcement that helps promote a positive transition to society when they are released.



Percentage of released prisoners rearrested within 3 years, by offense, 1983 and 1994

