# You Were Hired to Teach! Ideological Struggle,Education, and Teacher Burnout at the New Prison for Women

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## Abstract

Critical theorists consider schools as sites of ideological struggle. The following is an account of Suzettes (pseudonym) attempts to define the educational practices in a women's prison according to the democratic principles suggested in the Task Force Report on Federally Sentenced Women: Creating Choices, (Correctional Service of Canada, 1990). This report led to the construction of five new prisons for women across Canada. Suzettes case illustrates how ideological struggles are experienced personally, and how they contribute to her burnout disillusionment and resignation. Habermass critical research program and his concept of system and lifeworld undergirds this interpretation of this teachers resistance to the correctional ethos at the New Prison for Women (NPW).

## Keywords

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*Critical theorists consider schools as sites of ideological struggle. The following is an account of Suzette's (pseudonym) attempts to define the educational practices in a women's prison according to the democratic principles suggested in the Task Force Report on Federally Sentenced Women: Creating Choices, (Correctional Service of Canada, 1990). This report led to the construction of five new prisons for women across Canada. Suzette's case illustrates how ideological struggles are experienced personally, and how they contribute to her burnout– disillusionment and resignation. Habermas's critical research program and his concept of system and lifeworld undergirds this interpretation of this teacher's resistance to the correctional ethos at the New Prison for Women (NPW). Key Words: Agency and structure, System, Lifeworld, Voice, Ideology, Rationalization, Image, Teacher practical knowledge, Determinism, and Mediation*

### Background: Schooling at the New Prison for Women—Change was the Attraction

"Critical theorists ask the following crucial questions. Who controls the schools? Who makes policies that govern schools? Who determines the ethical, social, and economic goals of education? Who sets the curriculum? (Orstein & Levine, 2003, p. 118).

It was early spring when I first made my way through the mud of the unfinished parking lot and into the New Prison for Women. There was no fence, there were no gates; this federal prison for women was going to be different. I was intrigued and hopeful as I toured the institution with many others that day, pleasantly surprised at the homey, almost cozy carpeted "rooms" for the federally sentenced women who were about to arrive. Each room was decorated with oak coffee tables and armoires (which some visitors believed excessive). There were beige curtains on the large windows that let light play on the pale painted walls. Some of the rooms were quite spacious; designed so the women, typically the sole care givers in the family, could raise their children on the inside. Eventually we found ourselves in the gymnasium, to celebrate with other guests and dignitaries, the coming of a new age of corrections for incarcerated women.

As the senior administrator for a private Canadian company providing education programs to the federal penitentiaries, I had discussed the educational requirements for the New Prison for Women (NPW) with the Warden earlier that year. Yes, we agreed, the literacy program would be democratic, dialogic, women-centered, empowering, holistic, and adult-centered. The program would respect women's experience, respond to their needs, and mesh literacy with prison programs. These principles of women-centered

programs were underscored in the *Task Force Report on Federally-Sentenced Women: Creating Choices* (Correctional Service of Canada, 1990), commonly and hereafter referred to as Creating Choices. This document, produced by the Correctional Service of Canada, recognized that the Canadian prison system (which has been designed around the characteristics of male offenders), did not meet the needs of federally incarcerated women.

To ensure our success as the contracting agency responsible for the prison education program at the school, I transferred an experienced prison literacy teacher from another prison in the region to the New Prison for Women. Suzette was bilingual (a Francophone by origin), had lived on a reserve and was highly qualified. She held two teaching degrees; one in adult education, the other in intercultural and international education. She was an experienced outspoken innovator and seemed the ideal candidate for the job.

Suzette also attended the literacy planning meeting with the new Warden. She subsequently read, and was inspired by the Creating Choices document. In a retrospective paper on her experiences at NPW which she presented at an annual conference of prison teachers in 1997, Suzette described her enthusiasm for the new approach:

> When NPW was publicized, Change was the attraction; change of conditions, layout, structure, and approach. Rehabilitation was on the mandate, but the approach was to be holistic, women-centered, and empowering in a cooperative system, where the client was involved in planning and decision-making. I saw a new opportunity to implement the practices of Friere: A community in the making; a sense of sisterhood where women could do for women, according to their needs, providing mentoring for one another. What potential, what empowering promises held, both for clients and staff, and finally, a sense of freedom to facilitate new development in learning and healing. What a dream for all the women involved!

Suzette firmly believed in the five principles for women-centered prisons articulated in Creating Choices: empowerment; meaningful and responsible choices; respect and dignity; a supportive environment and a shared responsibility for offender care. These principles were supported by feminist concepts of voice, women's ways of knowing, and an ethic of care (Correctional Service of Canada, 1990). The New Prison for Women would not be bureaucratic, dehumanizing, patriarchal, or Eurocentric; it would be a community of and for women.

In this penal discourse women were positioned (Davies & Harre, 1990) as subjects rather, than objects. The women were invited to "seek out and obtain the required resources" (Correctional Service of Canada, 1990, p.85) in the prison to respond to their self-identified needs instead of being fed a diet of institutionally imposed, pre-packaged programs. The women were not to be treated in a reductionist or essentialist way as a category (prisoners) rather they were to be respected for the complex human beings they were. Prison programs were to "respond to the multi-faceted, inter-related nature of a woman's experience" (Correctional Service of Canada, 1990, p.85). Staff was supposed to recognize the troubled, damaging experiences of the imprisoned women and

appreciate their fragility; for they were victims of physical abuse, substance abuse, racism, sexism, and poor health. The literacy program would also respond to the women's experiences
". . . there must be an understanding that psychic trauma, (such as trauma caused by sexual abuse) can affect an individual's every action, including the learning of basic literacy skills" (Correctional Service of Canada, 1990, p. 86).

In the list of programs to be provided at NPW, education topped the list; it appeared to be important in the new prison. Suzette was convinced that there "were definitely some very good ideas" in Creating Choices.

> After I read it, and after we met [with the Warden] the very first time. . . I was so excited. That's why I wanted to go there because I thought of empowerment–we can do all these things and everything. . . .

But soon, she said, "the conflict started occurring . . . when these beautiful ideas had to fit within the agenda and the schedule of the institution" (Interview, June 10, 1998).

This paper examines the conflict that occurred as one teacher (the only teacher at the new prison for women) tried to "fit" humanistic and potentially transformative education into the "agenda and schedule of the institution". I argue that her story is best understood as an ideological struggle regarding the definition of schooling in prisons. Ideologies are patterns of meanings, or webs of significance conveyed through a system of interacting symbols. They are the outcomes of a quest for meaning and order (Geertz, 1973). For critical theorists, ideologies articulate the interests of dominant classes through state apparatuses such as prisons (Edgar & Sedwick, 1999). In this case, the prison education program is inflected with managerialism; the prison managers' desire to control inmates at the new prison for women.

This work is significant because it demonstrates how ideal-type institutions such as the prison, shaped by the narrow purpose of social control (Sykes, 1970), enable us to trace ideological lines of power or patterns of meaning from organizational context to educational theory and practice. It thus raises questions regarding agency and social structure; the extent to which persons, practices, and ideas are shaped by macrostructures over which they seem to have little control. In this essay, the agency of the teacher and the meaning of education at NPW are slowly saturated by a correctional logic (an ideology of power and control) so that both lose their transformative potential.

This work privileges the critical concept of mediation and the methodological approach to data it presupposes. "Using the dialectical category of mediation, critical theory attempts to describe how concrete particulars are constituted by more general and abstract forces, undertaking an analysis of particulars to illuminate these broader social forces" (Best & Kellner, 1991). In this paper I examine how ideological struggles have both social and personal outcomes. In the losing battle to define education according to the needs of women prisoners, Suzette becomes professionally lost; not knowing who she is and what she is supposed to do. She experiences role conflict, finds she has no professional voice, and feels that she is not respected as a person–she has been hired to teach! Politically, potentially empowering programs at NPW are eventually diluted and colonized by the correctional ethos.

## Research Strategies

This paper is part of a more extensive qualitative case study of the tacit, practical knowledge of 22 prison teachers located at minimum, medium, and maximum security prisons across Western Canada (Wright, 2002). Gaining entry to the prison was not an easy task because children and prisoners are vulnerable groups (they have in common a lack of power). Despite the fact that I had worked in numerous prisons over many years, I waited approximately three months for ethical approval to conduct the research. The Correctional Service of Canada would grant me permission to do the research only if the university ethical review board would approve my proposal, and vice-versa. Finally, the Correctional Service of Canada relented because the authorities knew me well (professionally) and believed that I would act in good faith inside the prison walls.

This study of the personal, practical knowledge of teachers consisted of focus-group interviews that were audio taped and transcribed. The data was chunked and coded for salient themes. Suzette's one-on-one interview (she was the only teacher at NPW) took a slightly different course. Despite my plan to use an interview guide consisting of semi-structured questions so as to elicit information about curricula, student characteristics, teacher experience, and the prison setting, I found myself being navigated through a different landscape by Suzette who wanted to talk about her experience at the NPW. My questions simply facilitated the telling of her story (that clearly had a beginning, middle and end). I frequently asked: "and so what happened then?" and "so how did you feel?" or "what did you say?"

Suzette consented to two interviews because we worked together in the contracting company for two years and had established a professional relationship of respect and trust. Two interviews at Suzette's home (June, 1998 and October, 1998) totalling150 minutes, a paper prepared by Suzette for an annual conference of professional correctional educators (personal documents), and innumerable informal conversations over the span of two years as Suzette and I developed the educational program at NPW constituted the data for this paper. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by a professional associated with the university. (She had an excellent reputation in the academic community, for accuracy and experience with qualitative work.)

The numerous crises at the NPW described by Suzette were confirmed—triangulated by articles in the local press. Reporters were having a field day as week after week, they criticized the soft, feminine stand on crime, harshly describing NPW as a "pink prison" that was coddling prisoners and not paying sufficient attention to security (and punishment). They pointed out the poor security protocols at the prison, seemed gleeful about the escapes and righteous when one of the women was murdered. They chastised the Warden because she could not seem to manage the new prison. (I have not cited these articles for the same reason that I changed the name of the teacher and the institution to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee. For this reason, Suzette's paper also is not referenced in the bibliography.) My position as a senior administrator who was called upon by Suzette to problem-solve and crisis manage at the NPW corroborated many of the details of her story.

I read the transcripts numerous times until I discerned topics which I further examined, chunked and codified into categories and themes (Merriam, 1988). Prominent themes were determined in part, by the frequency in the conversation. (My own extensive experience as a prison educator and administrator helped me to sift through the information and to exercise connoisseurship [Eisner, 1991] in this regard.) Once I had determined the prominent themes, I reviewed an unmarked transcript, to see if any new themes emerged, and also to see if the themes I had identified made sense within the general context of the interview. I worked hermeneutically, developing meaning by altering between understanding and data.

Suzette validated the themes I identified in the conversation, sometimes giving some themes such as the prison as a dysfunctional family more emphasis once she read the preliminary draft of this paper. We had a long (approximately 100 minute) telephone conversation (January, 4, 1999) regarding the paper, and some minor changes were made. She agreed that I had accurately represented her perceptions and experience of the events at the NPW. A second long, approximately two-hour conversation (January 14, 1999) occurred, when we discussed and confirmed how her identity as a teacher and her belief in herself as an agent of change had been severely eroded by her experience at the NPW. In this same conversation she agreed that Habermas' critical framework (which I had added by then), provided valuable insights into her experience and the events at NPW.

Despite her validation of my interpretation, my attempts to triangulate the data, and my connoisseurship, readers should proceed with caution as they read this story. Qualitative researchers are the instruments for gathering data, and as human beings, they bring with them their own constructions of the world. (In the attempt to understand my research self, I previously had completed an extensive 80 page self-reflective paper for a course in qualitative research, trying to understand my "signature" as a researcher, and to come to terms with some of my biases.)

Furthermore, first-order narratives such as these are not a guarantee of truth (Elbaz, 1991), for truths are always partial (Clifford, 1986), and knowledge "situated" (Haraway, 1988). We also cannot ignore how interviewer and interviewee negotiate face or manage impressions (Goffman, 1959) in interviews. And, there will always be slippage in a conversation, between language and thought, and between the narrative offered and the researcher's unconscious and intentional interpretation of it (Grumet, 1987). An interview is but a snapshot in time. Much is left unsaid about events and persons despite the intention of the interviewer to provide a holistic account. Narrative structures, such as the one below, inevitably smooth over the rough terrain of experience (Britzman, 1991; Elbaz, 1991; Grumet, 1987); the ideological conflict I am trying to describe. Of course, more interviews and stories would deepen our understanding of this exploratory study. Still, I am confident that this story of ideological struggle represents one important story line of a larger narrative at the NPW.

## Foreshadowed Problems: Ideological Struggles

A central problem in social theory is the relationship between apparently autonomous actions of individuals and an overarching and stable social order. . . the tension between agency and structure may be seen in

Habermas's (1987) analysis of system and lifeworld. . . .(Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999, pp. 16-17)

My sensitivity to Suzette's story was shaped by my theoretic knowledge of bureaucracies described by Max Weber, coupled with Habermas'(1987) concepts of system and lifeworld, theories of education and ideological struggle, and my understanding of the ideological conflicts between prisons and prison education programs.

For Max Weber (Gerth & Mills, 1958), bureaucracies represented positive Enlightenment values; they liberated humanity from the heavy yoke of irrational forms of knowledge, authority and social organization such as feudalism. They became oppressive as they proliferated and as they promoted narrow definitions of reason and function that stifled creativity, effaced individuality, and denigrated values other than those related to efficiency and instrumentality (linking means to ends). The rigid adherence to rules disciplined the members of the organization. The social spaces opened up in modernity that gave freedom to individuals were enclosed and delimited by social structures such the bureaucracy.

Habermas (1981, 1987) builds on Weber's dark vision of administrative and bureaucratic social forms which he argued, were ideological because they privileged technocratic or instrumental modes of thought and action, excluding goals pertaining to the good life such as happiness, peace, or justice, and non-technical forms of reasoning and interaction. Habermas (1987) describes the forms of reasoning and behaviors associated with administratively-driven, bureaucratic forms of social organization as the "system."

He contrasts the system with the lifeworld (which he believes is under constant threat of colonization by the system). Lifeworld interactions are characterized by forms of communicative action; interactions where persons, governed by norms of reciprocity, are oriented towards understanding, the clarification of values, and ideally, consensus through dialogue, in situations relatively free from distortions of power (Habermas, 1989b). Communicative action differs from strategic action embedded in the social structures of bureaucracies. In these situations, speakers often interact to serve the goals of the organization or their own interests (within the parameters of the organization) with minimal consideration for others; they intentionally manipulate others to meet their own ends (Habermas, 1979). They are intent on getting their way (see Berger, 1996 for an extensive literature review of strategic interaction). They do not appreciate, respect, or empathize with others and little attempt is made to understand the world of others except for the purpose of gaining useful information from them. Others are treated as objects—a means to an end.

The lifeworlds of schools where individuals are engaged as agents in negotiation with others can be colonized by system orientations and institutional practices. Schools can be privatized and become accountable to "the bottom line." Teacher-student relationships can be interrupted by legal machinery that usurps the social and civic values in the classroom and displaces "naïve" communicative interactions between them as encounters are (re)defined in terms of risk and liability. Education can be colonized too, by the economic system as schools retool to meet the needs of the economy, intent on preparing laborers (managing human resources) to suit the marketplace.

Questions regarding schooling and ideological reproduction surface frequently (Britzman, 1986, 1989, 1991; Giroux, 1999; Wilinsky, 1989; Wright, 2000). Here too, there is a debate between agency theorists who see the world as the creation of the epistemic, autonomous, empowered teacher-as-social actor, while structure theorists focus on the social, political, and economic forces that determine human consciousness and action (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1981; Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Grioux, 1999). Structure theorists underscore how schooling produces and reproduces knowledge that legitimates and perpetuates class inequalities and serve particular interests (Anyon, 1981; Gibson, 1986; Kickbusch & Everard, 1985). Kanpol (1991) however, reminds us that there is no easy, one-to-one correspondence between institutional contexts and educational practice.

The literature regarding prison education programs underscores the ideological conflicts between being an educator and being correctional (Wright, 2002).

> Nestled within the heart of every prison facility is an education department made up of . . . professionals trained to be part of a helping profession . . . charged with the duties of educating prison inmates–within a system designed for punishment. People from opposing ideological backgrounds must somehow work together in order to accomplish a very difficult mission. (Mathews, 2000, p. 179)

There is a constant "tension between the instructor's autonomy and the exigencies of the Department of Corrections" (Gunn, 1999, p. 79). In the ebb and flow of institutional practice, teachers try to find a place to avoid the open warfare between the bullies–the guards, and the bullied–the prisoners (Gehring, Tremper, & Eggleston, 1991). Despite their intentions to remain neutral, guards betray their anti-educational biases by outright hostility to teachers (Eggleston & Gehring, 1986; Gunn, 1999). "Many (prison) employees see the provision of educational opportunities as 'coddling' offenders" (Eggleston & Gehring, 1986, p. 87). Schooling for prisoners is challenged by prison officials, by the public, and even by other teachers (Wright, 2002).

In their relationships with students, teachers must often choose between the opposing positions of the prisoner as subject/student or object/inmate (Duguid, 1999). Teachers are cautious about getting too close to students in front of others, for fear of being labelled a bleeding heart liberal by other prison staff (Gunn, 1999).

The pervasive, anti-educational bias in correctional institutions is sometimes a manifestation of the contest for inmates from other programs or workplaces in the prison (Eggleston & Gehring, 1986; Gunn, 1999). So students are "yanked out of school at a moment's notice to participate in other programs. Given organizational imperatives, 'feeding' offenders, housing them, and keeping the institution clean, school often becomes secondary" (Wright, 1997, p. 79). This fact is not missed by teachers.

Frequently the disrespect shown for education is reflected by the fact that prison schools are physically, symbolically, and operationally separate from the rest of the institution. Classrooms and teachers' offices are small, if they exist at all, and many lack proper ventilation and lighting (Werner, 1990; Wright, 2002).

In some prisons, education is closely aligned with rehabilitation programs. This integration is justified because theorists argue, prisoners are egotistical, lack self-control,

the ability to empathize, and exhibit delayed moral and cognitive development (Montross & Montross, 1997). This deficit discourse justifies the interventions into the captive's lives by "experts" such as psychologists, case workers, and teachers.

Prisons naturally, are marked by an intense interest in the control, surveillance, and discipline of inmate populations (Collins, 1995; Davidson, 1995; Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1984). For this reason Davidson (1999) is not hopeful about the transformative role of education there. He writes that the "possibilities for participatory education do not exist within the constraints of officially sanctioned prison schools," in "contexts where people are labelled deficient and delinquent, and staff have an official mandate to rehabilitate (i.e., to normalize) them" (Davidson, 1999, p. 3). Because there are "asymmetrical power relations operating within and upon the setting," (Davidson, 1999, p. 3), only teachers outside the prison system have a chance to resist its goals. Privately contracted teachers do not qualify though, because contracting agencies are overly compliant to prison authorities because they want contract renewals. Contracted teachers thus perpetuate the correctional ethos by identifying, classifying, and managing inmates "according to their risks of recidivism" (Davidson, 1999, p. 12).

Duguid (1992) is more optimistic, believing that prison education programs can contribute to the "movement, growth, maturation and improvement" of students rather than simply discipline and punish them. Similarly, Collins, (1998) believes prison schools provide social spaces of hope and possibility for prisoners. Some even argue that prison schools provide students with opportunities to experience democracy and the just community within the prison walls (Arbuthnot 1984; Kohlberg, 1986; Wright, 1997).

Gathright (1999) has described the tensions experienced between teachers, prison authorities, and the public that believes that educational programs interfere with the true purpose of prisons; incapacitation and punishment. Yet, perhaps for appearances sake, or to establish their legitimacy, prisons claim to rehabilitate and not simply warehouse prisoners, and so teachers are invited inside. Somehow they must find their personal and professional place within this power-ful social and physical space where they are treated with suspicion.

This review suggests then, that teachers occupy a social and physical borderland between being correctional (acting as guards and strategic agents of (re)socialization), and being educational. The rest of this paper extends our understanding of what it is like to be caught between competing ideological systems.

## Themes

### Education or Training?

Shortly after her arrival, Suzette found herself embroiled in an ideological battle over the role of education at the NPW. Before the incarcerated women arrived, Suzette starting working on the first draft of the school's Mission Statement and standing orders. She took them to the Program Advisory Committee and:

> . . . it was not what they wanted, well yeah, they could see some of it, but they wanted that certain word–training–in there, even at that time the school could not do as such. The training should have been a separate

section, but they wanted the word training applied to the school in there and right there I thought if they're that focused on training, how much education do they really want because the two are not . . . necessarily the same thing? So that was the first inkling there that there was definitely a different perception of what education was going to be.

Suzette believed education was an opportunity for "people to work as a team." She resisted the narrower definition of schooling for employment, where students are understood as human resources, which she felt was what the prison staff had in mind. Her methods for a women centered education differed too. Learning, she argued, "occurs with adults, by adults helping adults and sharing. And that's the type of school I wanted to build." Instead, it appears the school they had in mind, was "a place to keep people busy," where learning was ". . . reduced to units and filling the blanks and you do not have the chance to engage in education for meaning."

## Access

Despite the profile of education in Creating Choices, Suzette found that, in practice it ". . . took forever before I got access to be able to talk to the people that were in there and even be involved in certain meetings. . . ." She expected to be invited to meetings concerning the institutional programs, but was not. In some meetings she "was told not to bother coming back. So there was exclusion in certain areas . . . ." She continued to draft versions of the school mission statement and standing orders. Before the women arrived, she sent memos to the prison administrators seeking clarification of school policy in regard to the principles in Creating Choices, and failed to get replies. Finally after approximately three months, she received a reply, which by then ". . . was completely outdated and irrelevant as the school had opened already." Suzette was already frustrated, only three months into the year.

## Credibility

The private contracting company providing the service at the NPW did not have the authority to accredit the program so Suzette approached the provincial Ministry of Education for accreditation. Suzette was promoting accreditation because it was a recommendation in Creating Choices. But she also believed accreditation would give credibility to her as a teacher and "validate" the women's education for them and the prison staff. It would indicate to everyone that schooling was "going to be a serious endeavor." Students would have the chance "to use adult education principles to build on their goals" and their efforts would "be recognized." Accredited programs would offer students recognized program of studies. In many institutions she worked ". . . the records had not been kept." The students she said, ". . . would get a few sheets to keep busy and nothing was ever recorded." In other women's institutions, the women were simply "given sheets . . . that had been photocopied and photocopied over. They were given that busywork, they never knew where it fit into a program of studies, so they had nothing."

For Suzette, accreditation also meant access to "other professional development," to "teachers' conferences," and to notices of changes of government policy, all necessary

"if we were going to be serious about education." However, the Deputy Warden apparently "didn't see the relevance" of accreditation, so the application was withdrawn. Even if the application had been submitted, Suzette said that she was in a catch 22 situation. Because she lacked credibility and hence authority in the prison, she could not "apply the rules of attendance" necessary to meet mandatory attendance requirements of the Ministry of Education for accreditation; she could not compete for students who were needed for institutional duties (maintenance, food services, etc.) elsewhere. With accreditation, she would have been able to attract and keep students in her classroom.

### Keeping the Women Busy

Suzette wanted to create choices by ensuring that students got "as much information as possible about the reality of getting an education" and by defining education as a "place where they could explore and then they could get what they needed." However, soon after the women arrived, offender management, the good order of the institution, became the priority. The school became another place to employ and supervise inmates. The women, transferred from other higher level security prisons in the country, were enrolled in the school immediately, ready or not, because the "administrative goal was to keep them busy."

> These administrative practices were undermining the education process and so I asked myself, is the education process really valued? My answer to that is "no," because what became important was–we need to know where these women are–and they have to be occupied, so we'll put them in school.

Suzette realized she was losing the battle as education became slowly defined, she said, as a "technology" by the prison administration. According to Creating Choices, the prison was to design and offer programs to the women when they needed them. Suzette felt that the authorities ignored the cumulative effects of these programs on women who were processed through the prison system. Programs, she stated, "take a tremendous amount of energy" because the women had:

> . . . to deal with the emotional aspects of whatever they're dealing with. Sometimes the body will react in physical ways. They need time to reflect on the program and the process on their own and you [prison staff] want them to still jump and do recreation and visits and programs and school and . . . even school needs time to be reflected upon. . . [students] need time to reflect on what they're learning. So the processes seem to be. . . . we've got a broken toy, we put it on the assembly line and we send them down and in X number of program hours they will be fixed. Well, I'm sorry, when you deal with people, you deal with trauma in a person's life. It doesn't go that way. . . .

### Blurred Boundaries/Confused Identities

According to Suzette, the new inmates arriving ". . . didn't know where to stop talking with people because they didn't know . . . what people would do with the information. Would it show up on the reports somewhere . . . ?" Suzette adds:

> To go from one system to another, it was just like . . . there was no real time to adjust. It was hard on the staff, it was hard on me as a teacher, it was hard on the women. . . . I [think] that in a way the dream is wonderful, but how does it work and how do we translate that in [to] something that is real? And some of these bridges were not built.

The conflict between the ideal of community and the reality of prison life confused her sense of identity and the role she was to play at the NPW. Suzette describes how:

> . . . it was very disorienting for everybody because the lines were so blurred. . . . for the primary worker their role is now a combination of guard, counselor, case manager. The designation combines the first three levels of the male correctional counterpart into one position . . . .I asked the question [about my role] in the school, when do I stop being the administrator to become the teacher, to become the counselor, to become the librarian, to become the CSC person giving assessment or providing reports or when do I become the person that supervises the break with my radio? I mean all of the roles become so blurred that I got caught . . . .

There was, Suzette recognized, a "conflict of interest" between the security dynamics of the institution and the principles put forth in Creating Choices. The "role conflict" she says, occurred as "we were trying to work these ideas and bring them in" but "we kept clashing with security, against the boundary of the demand of the system for its own functioning."

The operational demands of the prison contributed to her confusion. The senior prison management staff believed the women should work during the day, and go to school at night. And Suzette said:

> . . . hold on here, you're going to put them to work all day and then they have to go to school?' And they replied, 'Well, I have to go to school at night if I want courses, so why should it be different for them?'

Slowly, the shades of the prison house (Collins, 1995) closed upon the school, eroding Suzette's identity as a teacher. Security became more important with the transfer of women from other higher security prisons into her classroom. (NPW was a minimum security prison.) These women were not ready to work in school. They disturbed the class and they also represented a high risk of escape (in the first months of prison operations, many did). When she complained to management about the situation, she was told not to

let them escape, and when she continued to press, was given a radio ". . . to wear at all times. So that every time somebody moved even to go to the bathroom or something, I would have to call in." The radio was "appended" to her side. It became "part of the classroom. It was a bit ridiculous at that point. As a teacher, I just became a security function."

Later, to her surprise and shock, she realized the alarms on the windows in the school had never been working; she felt very vulnerable. "What would have happened if somebody would have escaped from the classroom? What would have been the responsibility there?" Her sense of vulnerability, her definition of the school, her sense of agency, is raised within the broader context of her employment by a private company contracted to the prison:

> I was very aware that in terms of the status of a private or contracted employee, the standards of protection for these people are very different than for a correctional employee.

She noted how there was nothing in place for the contract staff, but for the public servants employed in the prison:

> . . . if they're involved in an incident or something [they] can have special days for stress leave and pay. They can have access to different, other services and the union is there to protect them and all that stuff. There is nothing for contractors. You're in no man's land. . . .

She concluded with a telling statement: "But you see how the whole philosophy of the holistic, of teamwork, ended up becoming that I had no boundaries. So that's when empowerment becomes one's prison." Finally, she started to rewrite the standing orders to include objectives related to employment and training and came to realize how educational had become dysfunctional: "I was trapping the women into something where I was serving the Correctional Service first, as opposed to being women-centered. That's when I lost a lot of illusion as to where we were going with this." The cloak had become an iron cage.

## The Dysfunctional Family

Despite all the good intentions, the NPW started having problems within the first year. "Offender management" clearly had become an issue. Almost two-thirds of the inmates were on the run. Some women attempted suicide while others slashed up. One woman was killed. The local press, skeptical and indignant about the therapeutic, "soft" stand on crime, was having a field day. Suzette described the situation inside NPW:

> Pretty soon the tension grew. Administrators made arbitrary decisions over processes that they did not fully understand. Authority to finalize was not delegated. Verbal agreements never concretized. Energy was misdirected and everything had to be done "yesterday!" I kept seeing the deadlines approaching yet so much still needed doing. We opened on schedule and

everyone knows the results that followed. Violence occurred more frequently and escalated both physically and psychologically. Unpredictable and erratic flare-ups were daily occurrences after a while. . . The whole system became more rigid and defensive in management, procedures, policies, and practices in order to survive public uproar and the scrutiny of the investigations.

Staff absenteeism is well documented in the Region. The rates for the New Prison for Women could be seen as over and above any other institution. Stress levels disabled some staff. Fear crippled some others as incidents kept repeating themselves. Still others put on a cynical mask and just wrote off the incidents as natural to the environment.

The whole environment presented for me, similar characteristics of a dysfunctional and abusive family. We had secrets, violence, isolation, denial, paranoia, division, broken promises and scape-goating. . . . And all the time the cameras kept rolling (Suzette, 1997, paper).

When Suzette wrote her paper for presentation at a conference of prison educators, she had already lived through the transformation of the NPW from an enlightened women's prison to a traditional prison founded on security principles. Suzette's vision of education as a meaningful, collaborative, and reflective process clashed with the prison authorities' carceral vision. Suzette was told to draft a mission statement and standing orders for the school to highlight education as training. Suzette resisted. Eventually, in one of the many heated conflicts between her and the Warden over the issue of education as training rather than empowerment, the Warden simply called upon her authority within the institution to end the discussion. In one of the last of these discussions, Suzette's was not given choices. She would write the standing orders to meet the needs of the institution. When she protested, the Warden threw the orders across the table, saying: "you've been hired to teach!" At that moment, Suzette's dream of education as empowerment came to an untimely end.

## Discussion and Implications

### Education and Training

In the United States schools are being colonized by the Federal Government and by private corporations under the No Child Left Behind legislation. Teachers, administrators, and students have shifted from communicative to strategic forms of interaction so as to "make the grade." Schooling is freed up from its communicative ethic and recast as a technical problem. The orientation towards mutual understanding and to "moral aesthetic, educational and political issues" is reduced "to technical problems; why and what are reduced to how" (Bullough & Goldstein, quoted in Ewert, 1991, p. 348). From the:

. . . instrumental perspective, teaching becomes the management of standardized ends and means; learning becomes the consumption of prepackaged bits of information and parts of skills; and success becomes teachers and students doing as directed. With student achievement as the objective, the instrumental approach focuses on tools, resources, environments, techniques, teachers, and students as the means to that given end. Education systems are viewed as input-output systems, where resources and raw materials enter at one end and the finished product, achieving "educated" student, issues from the other. Within this delivery system, educational problems are viewed as blockages, caused by inappropriate teacher behaviors, student inadequacies, or inefficient resource uses. (Ewert, 1991, p. 350)

When education is grounded in strategic behaviors it is reduced to the application of techniques for the purposes of the prediction and control of others. Education becomes repressive as it reproduces the objectives of industry, economy, and hierarchy in effect by "training" the student in a manner consistent with these desired outcomes. (Britzman, 1991; Ewert, 1991). In the training model:

[w]hat is privileged is an image of knowledge as 'received' and an identity of the neophyte as an empty receptacle. But whereas, in this depiction, knowledge may change the knower, the knower is perceived as incapable of changing or producing knowledge. This monological process constitutes training, not education, and lacks any theory about our creative capacity to interpret reality and bestow this experience with multiple meanings. (Britzman, 1991, p. 31)

At the heart of Suzette's struggle is her attempt to define education as a meaningful activity where a community of women could exist with dignity. In this definition we find embedded a web of meaning regarding ideal relationships between teachers and students, definitions of curricula, the role and authority of the teacher, and the desired outcomes of the educational process (insight and healing). For prison authorities, education is part of an assembly line, a place for keeping the women busy, a training exercise. Their needs, their experiences, and emotional states, only appear as blockages in the efficient operation of the system.

According to Habermas, the ways of knowing embodied in the economy and state are subsystems whose values and practices have ". . . made their way into the lifeworld from the outside, like colonial masters coming into a tribal society" to "force a process of assimilation upon it" (Habermas, 1987, p. 355). The colonization of situations where understanding is the priority by strategic actors seeking compliance behaviors has profound consequences. There results a ". . . loss of meaning, withdrawal of legitimation, confusion of orientations, anomie, destabilization of collective identities, alienation , psychopathologies, breakdowns in tradition, withdrawal of motivation" (McCarthy,1984, p. xxvii). There is a crisis of meaning and legitimation in society as these normative structures break down (Habermas, 1989a).

## Burnout

In more practical terms, as the system colonizes the lifeworld orientations, we hear Suzette's narrative of despair. It provides us with a first hand account of these distortions, especially in the theme "blurred boundaries." Much of what she has to say about her experience can be read as a case study of burnout. According to Schwab, Jackson, and Schuler (1986), burnout is caused by emotional exhaustion, the experience of depersonalization and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. Contributing factors of emotional exhaustion include role conflict or ambiguity, and weak collegial support. The theme of blurred boundaries fits nicely here. Contributors to depersonalization include role conflict again, participation in decision-making, and social support. The theme of exclusion speaks to issues of participation and social support. Suzette also felt the lack of support from the prison because she was an outsider; a contract teacher. Autonomy is one of the contributing factors to a sense of personal accomplishment. In many ways, the lack of autonomy, social support, inclusion, and the depersonalization of Suzette's position was summed up in the warden's comment: "You've been hired to teach."

Under the gradual colonization of the lifeworld orientations by the system, Suzette's struggle for voice was apparent. The battle over the responsibility and control of the school's mission statement and standing orders continued, until finally, Suzette is reduced to an abstraction, to the labor power she is able to provide–she has, after all, been hired to teach. In this exchange between her and the warden the norms of reciprocity between speakers engaged in dialogue disappear to be replaced by the rationality of administrative power and human interactions mediated by money: ". . .when labor is rendered abstract and indifferent, we have a special case of the transference of communicatively structured domains of action over to media-steered interaction" (Habermas, 1989b, p. 102). Suzette is simply an employee, without a voice.

Teachers seem to suffer from identity crises because of the dual demands of being an educator and being correctional. There is no identity crisis when "everybody knows who everybody is and who he is himself" (Wallace & Wolf, 1995, p. 266), when there is degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality and identity. The lack of symmetry is signaled by a perception of one's difference, "through and through" from the objective reality (Wallace & Wolf, 1995, p. 266).

This is also a story about teacher's voices. Suzette's "resisting voice" speaks to ". . . deep convictions, investments and desires" (Britzman, 1991) that are drowned out by the authoritative discourse of the penitentiary. Voice ". . . suggests the individual's struggle to create and fashion meaning, assert standpoints, and negotiate with others. Voice permits participation in the social world" (Britzman, 1991, p. 12). Suzette lacks credibility and is not able to negotiate the right to speak on educational matters. She experiences the fault line between what she knows and what is official knowledge, between the kind of knowledge found in the Creating Choices document and in the everyday practices of the penitentiary.

These non-discursive approaches to problem-solving are ideological because they mute the voices of others with limited access to capital, power and "expert" knowledge. The critical concept of voice calls attention to ideological and epistemological struggles regarding the nature of knowledge produced by those with power and influence while

others are silenced (Elbaz, 1991). The term reminds us too, that personal problems are social and political issues. (Mills, 1959).

**The Prison as Dysfunctional Family**

In Suzette's account, we find evidence for Habermas's claim that the "symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld cannot be transposed onto the base of systemic integration without pathological consequences" (Habermas, 1987, p. 357). The encroachment on the lifeworld by the system contributes to the "deformation of communicatively structured life contexts" (p. 333) and provokes the "deformation of interaction relations" (p. 357), as the contents of the lifeworld are subjected to "violent abstraction" to meet the functional requirement of system. In Suzette's words:

> The whole system had the "characteristics of a dysfunctional and abusive family. We had secrets, violence, isolation, denial, paranoia, division, broken promises and scape-goating. . . . Violence occurred more frequently and escalated both physically and psychologically. . . ."

Images "capture some essential aspect of [the teacher's] perception of herself, her teaching, her situation in the classroom or her subject matter and serve[s] to organize her knowledge in the relevant area" (Elbaz as cited in Johnson, 1984, p. 467). The image of the prison as dysfunctional family evokes the dual and contradictory sentiments of familiarity and function. In her paper, Suzette also speaks of the prison school in terms of "sisterhood" and as a "community in the making" where "women could do for women." These are images of mutual respect, closeness, similarity. Instead, the school is redefined in terms of enforcing compliance, and the family becomes dysfunctional. It is a place to keep the women busy rather than help them reflect and grow. It is another place to exercise surveillance and control.

For Suzette, the images of family and community seem to provide her with effective counter-images to an overly administered correctional system (and society). As Sennett (1978) has noted, the desire for intimacy in society is often mounted as a defense against the impartial administrative complexes of modern society and the social displacements caused by modernization and capitalism. Closeness (in the form of community) is perceived as a "moral good."

Maybe the feminist desire for community, closeness and community in a prison is simply unrealistic given the imperatives of an institution oriented to control, discipline, surveillance and punishment. Hannah-Moffat (1994, 1995) critiques The Creating Choices document because it does not grapple with the harsh materiality of imprisonment. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that caring teachers in prison do resist institutional norms (Wright, 2004), so that teaching offers hope and possibility.

**Limitations**

This study is limited because there was only one research subject to interview; we only have one story about teaching at the new prison for women. It is limited by constraints of time and resources. It would have been enriching to engage in participant

observation and to triangulate through other means the story that unfolds here. It would be helpful (and still might be possible) to interview the Warden of the New Prison for Women, to get her perspective on events as they were unfolding. It would have been useful, as a means of providing supporting evidence, to quote from the numerous press releases regarding the security problems at the prison, and read about the contradictions experienced by staff and inmates as they tried to put into practice the enlightened philosophy articulated in the Creating Choices document. I would have liked to conduct a few life-history interviews to get a better understanding of Suzette's sense of self.

## Implications for Further Research

I have speculated how images of web and hierarchy provide a useful entry point into contrasting views of prison relationships based on power, control, and those grounded in more equal and mutual relations of care (Wright, 2004). Suzette evokes images of care in her discussion of sisterhood, community, and family. She also resists the distortions of strategic relations with others based on hierarchy, control and compliance. Understanding the role of images provides insights into social interactions oriented to understanding or manipulation and compliance (and the continuum of behaviors in between.) These concepts help us to clarify and provide examples of the enlightened or repressive center of gravity of prisons and enable us to appreciate the dynamics of institutional resistance and change. Central to the struggle between being correctional and being education is the definition of education.

This is not a simple matter of semantics, for definitions are part of the larger web of meanings that constitute the ideology of prisons and schools. Ideologies are not simply symbolic systems; they define realities and give or deny permission for behaviors, values, interactions and outcomes. Teacher burnout can be understood more clearly as the result of ideological battles; we should take up a cultural approach to this phenomenon to better understand teacher emotional and spiritual causalities–burnout. More research into important concepts that hold the cultural systems together would help both prison authorities and teachers to understand each others' worlds. More research into the features of each cultural system is necessary, especially research that is more nuanced than the one conducted here, which simply described the polarities of prison life. There are, after all, ambivalent points of contact between these cultural systems–borderlands– where most teachers settle, often uncomfortably. The conceptual frameworks offered by post-colonial theory and cultural studies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998; Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999) help us here, to navigate through matters of cultural contact (issues of assimilation, acculturation, hybridity), to examine the identity or subject positions of the teacher (as stranger, settler, tourist, exile and so on), and issues regarding prisons and schools as ideological state apparatuses where ways of seeing the world are limited and/or challenged.

## Conclusion

This study explores the often contradictory values, practices and struggles over the definition of the schooling. This cursory account provides some documentary evidence of the ways these process are experienced personally, locally, institutionally, in

the struggles to define education, knowledge and self. These issues can be explored theoretically using Habermas' (1979, 1987) distinctions between lifeworld and system, or communicative and strategic interactions, respectively. This framework provides us with interpretations of the often cited tensions between school personnel and prison staff. The Task Force for Federally Sentenced Women had a vision of new institutions for women which, at its core, signaled a moment of positive rationalization, an opportunity to rethink the correctional service, and a sincere attempt to hear the voices of federally incarcerated women. At this institution the normative and potentially challenging lifeworld orientations embedded in Creating Choices conflicted with, and were colonized by the rationality of the system, in a gradual, but nevertheless, successful erosion of lifeworld values.

Suzette eventually recognized how the prison as an organization whose authority and power was to be worn lightly–like a cloak–had become an iron cage oriented to getting the job done. With the increasing levels of stress at the institution, the death of her sister, and tired of being she said, in a "no man's land" (note the irony here), she becomes increasing demotivated. "Less convinced" that "they were really concerned about education. . . . of valuing learning," she said, she resigned.

In the struggle between system and lifeworld orientations, with regard to internal colonization, Habermas (1987) says that it is important:

>  . . . to protect areas of life that are functionally dependent on social integration through values, norms, and consensus formation, to preserve them from falling prey to the systemic imperatives of economic and administrative subsystems growing with dynamics of their own, and to defend them from becoming converted over, through the steering medium of the law, to a principle of sociation that is, for them, dysfunctional." (pp. 372-373)

In Suzette's words:

> . . .we had two very separate systems working and I don't think . . . when they said: Embrace this document [Creating Choices] as your bible . . . your working bible, they were really committed to doing it. Or maybe they didn't even realize the implications. . .

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