Complex Alliances: A Community- and Institution-Based Project for Educating Justice-Involved Women

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Abstract

In this article, we report on work to establish educational initiatives in the face of the unevenness of power in institutions of justice and education. We explore literacy and social co-operative training options for justice-involved women, caught in a vicious cycle leading back to prison. Despite responding to a variety of calls for decolonization and democratization, institutions of justice and education have been resistant to non-Eurocentric frameworks and to community engagement. As non-Aboriginal researchers and educators at the University of Winnipeg, we have observed the needs of a particularly vulnerable population. The rapidly growing numbers of incarcerated Aboriginal women are often victim-offenders yet society continues to deal with incarcerated women and those transitioning from prison as "risks" rather than attempting to consider their need for safety. Our paper presents work we have done in community and institutional settings to cultivate Indigenous/non-Indigenous partnerships and develop our role as interactive partners rather than more conventionally as teachers or advisors. We summarize some of our successes and challenges emphasizing wider trends in teaching multiple literacies and employing a more self-reflective approach in both research and education. We describe collaborative work at Eagle Women Lodge, a women's transition residence, and at the Women's Correctional Centre, Headingley, aimed at curbing the inequities that affect criminalized women (and their families) directly,

and all of us in the wider community indirectly. We offer this narrative as a model of a community-based approach to alliance-building and cross-cultural understanding.

Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Lives and Education/Justice Institutions

As university researchers and non-Aboriginal community members, we began a project in 2011 aimed at providing both literacy education and training in social co-operative development for women transitioning from prison, hoping to intervene in a vicious circle that has trapped many justice-involved Aboriginal women in inner-city street life, mixed with bouts of incarceration. Working at a university in inner-city Winnipeg – charged with teaching urban literacies and urban issues – we were in a position to observe need in our neighbourhood and in our increasingly diverse student body, particularly among Aboriginal students.

Consulting population statistics consolidated our sense of urgency. The urban Aboriginal population is growing nationwide according to an Environics Institute report:

> The urban Aboriginal Population in Canada now numbers over 600,000 and is at an all time high. There are now more Aboriginal people living in urban centres across Canada than there are living in Aboriginal territories and communities on reserves, in Métis settlements and in Inuit communities (Environics 2010a, p.8).

Nowhere is the Aboriginal population growing faster than in Winnipeg, propelled by factors that push people out of underserviced northern communities and pull people towards health facilities and urban opportunities. According to the 2006 City Census figures, the Aboriginal population numbers 63,740, up from 43,460 in 1996, an increase of 47% in just a decade (Statistics Canada, 2006 and 1996). This population is "young and growing, with about half the population under the age of 25" (Comack *et al*. 2013, p. 8). Unfortunately, poverty and unemployment rates in Winnipeg's

urban Aboriginal community are keeping pace with population growth, fueled by low education and training. It has also been documented that the incarceration rate of Aboriginal people is disproportionate to population, so that in Manitoba "16 percent of the population identify as Aboriginal compared to 71 percent of people admitted to prisons" (Crocker 2012, p. 31).

For criminalized Aboriginal women, the situation is critical. Research demonstrates that there is "a staggering increase in the numbers of incarcerated women" (Eljdupovic & Bromwich 2013, p.7). Aboriginal women are over-represented in the prisons, many having committed crimes of fraud and prostitution to meet their day-to-day needs and those of their families. Margaret Jackson has noted the strong link between crime and poverty, with over "80% of all incarcerated women in Canada . . . in prison for poverty related offences" (Jackson 1999, p. 201). Justice-involved women too often remain invisible and under-resourced – often disregarded, according to Balfour and Comack in their study *Criminalizing Women*, "by politicians, policy-makers and criminologists as 'too few to count' (Adelberg & Currie 1987) or 'more mad than bad' (Allen 1987)" (2006, p.17).

Once released from prison, most Aboriginal women face poverty, unemployment, and the dangers of inner-city street life (Elizabeth Fry Society, 2011; 2013). We witness the frequent disappearance of women from the downtown streets, trapped in a "discourse of sexual domination through violence … dependent upon creating borders, upon categorizing and excluding or destroying 'others'" (Anderson, Kuvbik & Hampton 2010, p. 7). Violent crime, poverty, and illiteracy provide evidence of intersectionality – that is, subordination rooted in multiple systems of oppression. According to Canada's Aboriginal Affairs Working Group (2011) "Low education levels, poverty and economic dependency are typical characteristics of Aboriginal women who experience violence."

The Gramscian concept of hegemony – particularly the aspect of cultural hegemony which refers to the imposition of the

dominant world view as the cultural norm – helps to explain the marginalization of Indigenous people in mainstream discourse and the normalization of colonial rule through a process of social complicity and often "passive consent" (Santucci 2010, p. 169). Relating the concept of hegemony to a Canadian context, Rick Wallace links it to Edward Said's notion of "positional superiority" to theorize the way in which "material practices, rationalities and discourses" are part of power relations that are "regulatory, complex and interwoven in our daily lives and institutions, in ways that both obscure their dynamics and normalize their patterns of domination" (2013, p.22). Referencing this theory provides a broad background to the work we do in this paper to analyze how patterns of power regulate both institutional structures and interpersonal assumptions, as well as how within these systems there is room for paradigm shifts and breakthrough opportunities.

In this article, we report some of our work to establish educational initiatives in the face of the unevenness of power in the institutions of justice and education that have been home to our project. Despite responding to a variety of calls for decolonization and democratization, institutions of justice and education remain resistant to non-Eurocentric frameworks. Because institutions tend to rely on a "power over" model of management and control, it's important when working within them to understand this model while attempting to enact alternative, collaborative "power with" strategies. Apart from considering institutional struggles, we are also interested in the play of power relations within our daily lives, affecting both justice-involved women and our attempts to share knowledge with them. This paper presents some of the work we have done in three settings – within the inner-city community, at Eagle Women Lodge, and at the Provincial Women's Correctional Centre – to cultivate Indigenous/non-Indigenous partnerships and develop a new shape for our role as interactive partners rather than more conventionally as teachers or advisors. When we identify these issues of partnership building in connection with our particular project, we are assuming they may have more global application, and

thus that our case study resonates in different institutional settings.

What we have learned about the difficult process of sharing cross-cultural values may contribute to the work of scholars and practitioners in the field of criminal justice who are also exploring ways to empower marginalized and criminalized populations. Further we invite readers to think about "literacy" as involving more than reading and writing skills – broadening it to refer to obtaining a critical understanding of the narrative practices that shape culture and power formations. The phrase "learning literacies" can cover the many co-learning opportunities that allow Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants to reflect on the meaning and value of cultural practices, both those that are dominant and those that for running counter have often been marginalized. We hope to interest our colleagues in criminal justice in our initiatives toward making the university more responsive to the community and learning more participatory.

Project Development Summary – Becoming Learning Partners and Allies

We want to trace some of the moves we have made over the last several years as non-Aboriginal researchers to develop a productive relationship with justice-involved Aboriginal women in Winnipeg's inner-city community where the University of Winnipeg campus is located. Our university has a strong service mandate and a number of successful initiatives welcome and support non-traditional programs. But there is still tremendous need. Our own partnership is an amalgamation of scholarly perspectives: McLeod Rogers has worked in writing and communications for about 25 years and Harris has worked in community planning and development for about the same. Working together, we recognized an opportunity to engage a cohort of women who seemed to have been overlooked – women transitioning from prison who are seeking training and educational opportunities to support their integration into the community.

We expected our partnership to be productive in two ways, one research-oriented and the other action-oriented. First, conforming to standard academic practice we wanted to research the literacy, justice and social economy environments in the community to identify options already in place as well as gaps that might be filled. We spent over a year liaising (and continue in discussion) with community educators and practitioners. We held several symposia in the university to draw together people with resources and experiences and build a network that is still under construction in the form of a community website (www.womentransitioningprisions). Our second aim was to provide some off-campus educational support for justice-involved women seeking upgrading and literacy training, an undertaking somewhat more risky for tenured academics with full teaching loads and no express mandate or funding from the institution to initiate off-campus services. As our research developed, we committed an increased number of volunteer hours to participate in and help facilitate cultural and literacy education sessions.

These two goals continue to be in tension. From the first time we called people from the community together to talk about options for supporting vulnerable justice-involved women (to do group research) participants put us on the spot. The meeting ended with one of the women telling us that she was happy to contribute her valuable hours to a think tank environment but reminding us that she was going back to Eagle Women Lodge (a transition house) with women who wanted options, not ideas. So as academics we were being asked to step out of the comfort of the "research zone" and become immersed and active participants: to materialize ideas so that there would be educational and enterprise opportunities. The possibility of active involvement arose in the form of developing a partnership with the staff and residents of Eagle Women Lodge (EWL), a newly built twenty-unit residence a few blocks from the University.

Supported by small grants from our institution as well as major funding from the federal Urban Aboriginal Strategy,

the Homelessness Partnership Strategy, and the provincial Cooperative Community Strategy, we have been working with the Director of the Lodge, Bernice Cyr, to help open an education centre and establish a cooperative enterprise. The Lodge is equipped with a commercial-sized kitchen, and with Cyr we envisioned a catering co-op that is currently taking shape. We participated in a weekly sewing circle that has developed sewing skills among the women as well as providing us with an opportunity to become acquainted with the residents and the challenges they face. Here there is potential for establishing a second co-op – one involved in tailoring or recycling clothing. The basement of the Lodge has been retrofitted as a classroom and sewing workshop and the kitchen has been fully equipped. One of the conditions of our going forward with this work has been constant re-evaluation of how most productively to position ourselves in relation to the mostly Aboriginal staff and residents. The education and co-op projects we envisioned materialized with unexpected speed, yet the process has never been free of obstacles or unexpected opportunities.

Apart from liaising with EWL about the catering and sewing co-ops and about the Violet Nelson Education Centre, we have also pursued as a related piece post-secondary educational opportunities within the Women's Correctional Centre (WCC), offering a course called "Community Development and Co-operative Alternatives". This June 2014 marked the graduation date of a cohort of twelve students – six incarcerated and six campus-enrolled, who had studied together behind the prison walls. This course was affiliated with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (www. Insideoutcenter.org), a North-America-wide network for prison education intended to transform both our teaching and enrich our understanding of crime, justice, freedom, inequality and other issues of social concern. The organizational template for Inside-Out course delivery is that campus-enrolled students and incarcerated students study together to explore course content in relationship to their various life experiences. The inside women were federally sentenced and hence

had benefitted from a number of programs offered by Corrections Canada. Although gender was not a criterion, the outside student applicants were all women who had selected the course – having studied in Criminal Justice, International Development and Urban and Inner-City Studies. All twelve students were interviewed prior to acceptance into the course, to identify any extreme attitudes that might pose an obstacle to learning. We also had rejection criteria for those on the outside with a mission to reform or help those inside. We also had rejection criteria for those on the outside with a mission to reform or help those on the inside. It is essential that the students are equals in all ways in the course, meaning that inside and outside students have access to the same resources and that they see themselves as co-learners who contribute to each other's understanding in equal measure. If the outside students believe they are in the course as helpers a hierarchy is created and this becomes a barrier that can silence the inside students. Similarly if the inside students see their fellows as generally ill-informed about content related to the broad area of "justice" and respond as experts, there is a danger that the outside students are silenced. We screened students in advance and as instructors were sensitive to the development of these attitudes among the participants as the class progressed.

In our broader vision, teaching this course about community development alternatives inside the prison was one step in a laddering program strategy. The next step we are exploring is to engage women in education and co-op training at one of the women's centres in the city, drawing women from the community together with University students – to widen the circle of safety and understanding by placing women with different life experiences in connection with each other. Ultimately we intend these education initiatives to result in self-supporting co-ops, connecting women transitioning from and in prison with on-going wage-earning opportunities. This strategy for employment opportunities has recently been promoted by the John Howard Society (2013) and has been successful, most notably in Italy (Restakis 2010; and Harris

& McLeod Rogers, forthcoming). We have found the work of encouraging institutions to make education more accessible and respectful of human experience requires persistence and patience. Similar to justice initiatives that push against opposition in attempting to make justice "something that we do together" rather than "what the state does to us", community– and institution-based educational initiatives require patience and constant re-evaluation (Crocker 2012, p. 31).

Developing an "Indigenist" Understanding of Education

Over the fall of 2012, we scanned the literacy environment, and visited with representatives of education programs at Elizabeth Fry, John Howard, Murdo Scribe Aboriginal Education Directorate and various local centres that support educational up-grading of Aboriginal adults, many aimed at catering to students with justice-involved pasts. We encountered several problem areas. First it became evident that none of the literacy specialists – whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – felt they had a fully effective approach, and several expressed interest in working together to develop or strengthen curricular materials to support written literacy. Yet in any discussion, the word "literacy" itself caused some trouble, for it can refer narrowly to language skills but is increasingly used more broadly to refer to life and work place skills and social discourse. As Parks and Goldblatt have noted (2000), " 'teaching literacy' is a term under which a considerable range of educational efforts – from graduate school to adult job training to daycare – could be united"(p. 587).

We held a December 2012 symposium at the University of Winnipeg organized around the three areas of justice, social enterprise, and literacy and the academics and practitioners in attendance joined one of three groups. Each group began their discussion by reflecting on the accuracy and connotations of the umbrella term used to form their group—considering the meanings associated with justice, social enterprise and literacy. The terminology was problematic for the justice group because for many the word has been appropriated by

the legal system and applied to institutions that fall short of delivering justice. For the social enterprise group, the dilemma was determining a 'realistic' balance between social and entrepreneurial values and goals. The complexity of the term "literacy" quickly emerged as participants in the third group discussed the origins and relevance of educational standards and normativity practices that the common definition of literacy implies. There was widespread support for working with a concept of "literacies," the pluralized form being preferred as a way of acknowledging that there are multiple learning domains – visual and verbal, for example – and that there is no single standard for educators to invoke or impose. Without referencing a deficit model – one that assumes that Aboriginal learners need to be brought up to a normative standard – experienced educators instead evoked the glaring evidence of social and economic exclusion that leaves many adult Aboriginal learners struggling to do such things as read bus schedules, count change and do banking, to get a Social Insurance Number and a driver's license. Defining these life skills as literacies, these participants refused to place different values on high culture and popular or lived culture. They pointed out that those of us familiar with currencies, government forms, and social routines overlook the extent to which these practices are culturally inscribed literacy events that involve performative, interpretative, and reading acts. In short, the discussion that unfolded mirrored the findings of literacy scholar Marcia Farr who points out that literacy is no longer understood as "a uniform cognitive ability and set of skills" but instead as an ideologically-based set of "complex practices that differ across contexts and cultures" (2010, p. 1).

There is further support for a view of literacy as culturally contingent when we turn to cultural critic Raymond Williams who reminds us that language standards are political and implicated in power; if as he says "a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (Williams, cited in Woolard 1998, p. 3), then the act of defining what counts as literacy organizes social relations and places people in particular social positions.

In a recent paper, literacy researchers Parks and Pollard pick up this notion in their reference to the need to change the verbal and physical economy which preferences capitalist discourse and mainstream structures (2010, p. 483).

Expanding this conception of "literacies" does not simply mean abandoning the notion that it is necessary to impose standardized curriculum to propose a reformed goal of initiating Aboriginal students into mainstream society. Beyond this, it brings to light the opportunity for non-Aboriginal people to begin engaging with Aboriginal culture and knowledge. Our observation is that Aboriginal education takes account of the violations of colonization and the process of rebuilding identity and culture, as events that have affected all Canadians. Responding to this current, the Manitoba Teachers Society recently aired a public awareness campaign asking all residents to think about the social justice implications of recognizing that "we are all treaty people." We might also think of the grassroots "Idle No More" movement as one drawing Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together in rights-based activism. Perhaps the Aboriginal scholar who has made this point most strongly for us is Shawn Wilson, who describes research as Ceremony and invites both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to consider and adopt what he refers to as an "Indigenist" world view – one that foregrounds relationships and the world view that comes with this prioritization (2008; 2014).

Researching the Process of Alliance and Partnership

Even if there is wider recognition of the need for improved Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations, the process of building such partnerships requires care and commitment. Davis and Shpuniarsky begin an article on cross-cultural relationship building by quoting a First Nations leader as saying "If you're going to do anything, then talk to us," (2010, p. 334) and in our work we have both heard many variations of this same instruction. The authors emphasize that articulation is required at every turn of Indigenous/non-Indigenous partnerships:

Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who seek to build coalitions together must learn to establish a way of communicating across cultural differences. The way we choose to communicate with each other cannot be taken for granted and must be explored within the context of each relationship (p. 342).

The broader findings of the Alliances Project to research Indigenous/non-Indigenous are recorded in a collection edited by Lynne Davis, who points out that "literature in this area is small but beginning to grow" (2010, p. 4).

For non-Aboriginal educators seeking to enter a partnership and to explore Indigenous knowledge as a way of knowing, Marie Battiste emphasizes the necessity of exploring unexamined Eurocentric biases, symptomatic of which is talking rather than listening. She points out that correcting the imposition of colonized learning habits and materials requires a conscious attitude of paying attention: "To affect reform, educators' need to make a conscious decision to nurture Indigenous knowledge, dignity, identity, and integrity" and "carve out time and space to connect with the wisdom and traditions of Indigenous knowledge" (2002, p. 30).

As non-Aboriginal scholars and teachers responding to Battiste's advice we have learned that the process of transferring concepts and curriculum from our institution, to outside communities and neighbourhoods is one requiring negotiation. It is not enough simply to adapt materials to some generic notion of "cultural" relevance when instead we need to learn together with Aboriginal partners what to do and value by way of educational programming. To participate in starting a co-op enterprise or in learning literacies, our goal is to rely on negotiation and collaboration in the process of opening a wider channel between the Lodge and the university. The quality of interaction between our communities and literacies depends on the integrity of our alliances.

In working with the women at EWL, we have observed some day-to-day realities that are contradictory to the information conveyed to us by many community advisors: some residents

had been children themselves when they had their children taken away and rather than being desperate to recover their children, they wanted to experience living an adult life; many of them who had addiction problems before incarceration still had them; the residents of EWL were not craving structured programs; and given the choice to attend structured classes, many chose free time instead. A biweekly sewing circle led by a knowledgeable M**é**tis cultural educator did not attract many participants. Explaining the low enrolment, the Director shared her perspective which was that the women had been "programmed to death" in prison institutions and weren't really keen to sign up for more organized programming. Week after week for several months we would have one or two residents glide in and glide out, which seemed at the time to mark our failure. Now looking back we can be a bit more generous in assessing project progress. We crafted a number of star pillows through this collaborative process – as well as other items. Perhaps more important, we had laid the foundations for trust and relationship building. While we may have gone in thinking we were providing cultural educational opportunities for the residents, in truth we needed this time to learn more about the lives of these women: to learn first-hand what colonization and institutionalization could do.

We both had years of experience working with non-traditional students, but still had much to learn about what it means to work in partnership with justice-involved Aboriginal women. As Davis and Shpuniarsky point out:

> Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who seek to build coalitions together must learn to establish a way of communicating across cultural differences. The way we choose to communicate with each other cannot be taken for granted and must be explored within the context of each relationship (2010, p. 342).

There are some in the Aboriginal community who do not support cultivating this partnership option – who see it as an unwelcome extension of colonization efforts. But it seems to

us that this resistance is decreasing, and there is more openness to cross-cultural partnership building. At a recent public presentation, for example, Cree educator and psychologist Shawn Wilson urged us to think about Aboriginal ways of knowing as Indigenist knowing – not Indigenous knowing – suggesting that the values and philosophies are good for all and can be shared among people (2014). This spirit of sharing is still in the process of being worked out, and so relationships and the project of becoming allies needs to be a reflective rather than a taken-for-granted commitment.

Teaching Social Co-operative Literacy to Women at EWL and WCC

In these final sections of our paper we begin to present our observations on recognizing and attempting to level positional superiority and hegemony in the education and justice systems – the power relations that are "regulatory, complex and interwoven" (Wallace 2013, p.22) in the daily lives of the women and the researchers involved in this work. The opportunity for a more encompassing educational experience that includes the mental, the physical, the emotional and the spiritual for students and instructor is one that many educators struggle with, reject or come to embrace as a gift to ourselves and to our profession at the university.

Awareness of this opportunity and challenge was brought home when Harris enrolled in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program that functions in 25 states and has recently been adapted to Canadian prison environments. This initiative trains faculty and establishes think tanks in prisons as a resource of inmate mentor/instructors who practice a dialogic method of interactive facilitation. The five-day Inside-Out faculty training presents a challenge that has the potential to reveal critical truths about wider society and about the self. Participating in Inside-Out teaching offers a valuable gift of understanding for those who come to recognize that people are marginalized in many ways, by social, political, and economic systems of power. Inside-Out work, examined

in a recent book by Davis and Roswell (2013), is intended to serve as an engine of social change (www.insideoutcenter.org).

A central educational theorist that the Inside-Out Program references is Parker Palmer, who claims that self-reflective teaching holds a mirror to our soul (1998). Many committed educators are fearful of such reflection and of the process of revealing an authentic self to students. We often look for tools to mediate the encounter and to blur or mask our image, fearing what students might see in us. Palmer writes about the fear that separates us from the other and from our authentic self. He points out that the best educators are often those who reveal their authentic selves and offer opportunities for students to reflect on needs and interests that have been buried and to pursue innate abilities and knowledge.

Our work at EWL and in the WCC bears out many of Palmer's observations. We have learned that it is only the authentic self who the women ultimately will accept, even though they are cautious in revealing themselves to us. Our most important contribution to those who have been programmed and whose life goals are replaced with the justice system's conditions of release is to reinforce their belief in intuitive knowing – what Palmer might call inner truth. A central task for university-based instructors is to challenge the mainstream view of teaching as a transfer of essentialised knowledge in favour of the view that the power to access knowledge resides within each of us. Within Indigenous imagery, the eagle feather often signifies our life's path and early teachings (the base of the feather's shaft) continue to provide guidance in later life (Morrison, D. & Morrison, R. 2011). In our location, as non-Aboriginal academics working with justice-involved aboriginal women, it is important to acknowledge the potential link between spirituality and learning when working with women who may be guided by these traditions.

Included in the curriculum for the women at EWL is an introduction to cooperatives in two modules, which Harris teaches at this time and which is part of the first-year course "Community Development and Cooperative Alternatives"

which Harris and Larry Morrissette taught in spring 2014 at the WCC. The two modules being taught are "Cooperatives … a better idea than for-profit businesses?" and "A year in the life of the co-op". These modules have revealed the writing and reading challenges that the women face as well as the entrepreneurial and cooperating skills they possess.

Findings from our Collaboration at EWL and WCC

We anticipate continuing in partnership with Eagle Women Lodge, with those who are in prison and those transitioning from prison as well as former residents who have left the Lodge but return as mentors. From our work with women at the intersection of justice and education we have drawn these six points:

- The practical skill of starting a catering co-op or a sewing co-op provides a framework for improving literacies, providing a relaxed conversational setting – where traditional classroom approaches have been less effective.
- The women need to learn multiple literacies, including how to find an apartment, get a bank account, manage money, care for children, and provide for their health.
- The women who are transitioning have had their personal goals replaced with Corrections conditions of release and need to reassert their own vision of their future.
- Women who have moved on from the Lodge and who return as peer mentors have quickly developed a collective spirit and are enthusiastic about setting up a new enterprise, especially one for catering since many have cooking skills.
- Education is a strategy that is part of a "safety" rather than a "risk management" approach because it aims at making the women more active agents in determining their present and future situation – discussed in broader terms by Caslor and Cyr as a "strength-based approach" (2011). Educational credentials can be used as evidence that can counter criminal record checks.

- There are a number of terms and practices that are part of the discourse that supports the exclusion of women released from corrections such as the term "ex-offender". Being aware of the power of these terms and generating counter terms is part of our educational project.

Teaching at the Women's Correctional Centre has generated the following six observations that will inform our ongoing work with the institutions, their staff and the residents:

- There are strict limits on the types of material that can be brought into the facilities. We are challenged by the need to maintain equality of access to materials for inside and outside students.
- Positional superiority is evident in prison classes and instructors must ensure that outside students do not revert to "helper mode."
- Providing writing supports for the insiders is essential – the WCC has a library and librarians who hold workshops that might provide an opportunity for mentoring insiders.
- Staff at the WCC have been supportive of this new contribution to programming. They have commented on the positive impact the course has had on the inside students who have experienced a noticeable increase in self-esteem.
- Staff at University of Winnipeg have been supportive and there are several networks promoting community-involved education that have provided funding.
- Ensuring that inside students have some continuity in their schooling and/or work is a priority. Schooling at Violet Nelson Education Centre and further opportunities for university and college education point to the need for formalizing the partnerships among the three institutions.

Conclusion

Our collaboration and efforts to build challenging alliances – across cultures and between and within institutions where "power over" is more prevalent than "power with" has engaged us in navigating the "complex and interwoven" structures and relationships that reflect positional superiority in institutions and in our daily lives. Within institutions of education and correction, we adopt an Indigenist, relational approach. This is effective at EWL and with staff and incarcerated students at the WCC although there are limits to the development of relationships in both spaces. (For example, only first names are used in Inside-Out classes). In the case of staff at the WCC, we have invited them to meetings on the Inside-Out Program and they have shared in a celebration of the graduates of our initial course. At a time when funds for provincial programming are scarce, both staff and the incarcerated women welcome these new opportunities for education.

The "Eagle Women" are on both sides of the prison wall. Despite the growth of the prison industry in the past decade – and the Harper Conservatives' politically expedient tough on crime policies that support prison growth (Crocker 2012, p.100) – both university and corrections are moving to support initiatives to break down walls and provide avenues for promoting greater understanding and opportunities to "see each other" (Sister Helen Prejean cited at www.insideoutcenter.org). This is not to say that financial constraints are easily overcome. Moreover both education and justice system institutions are concerned about optics. Representatives of both have mentioned the need for caution in inviting the media to report on education initiatives in the prison and in community settings. The concern is that media attention might invite public resentment and criticism that "offenders are getting a free ride", when middle-class students are going into debt. The potential savings to society as a whole when those facing multiple forms of oppression are given a break is not immediately evident to many struggling low and middle income earners, and perhaps more troubling is that this lack of public understanding is often exploited for political gain.

With regard to creating Indigenous/non-Indigenous alliances that can improve communication and open new possibilities for expanding our community, we have found that Davis and Shpuniarsky have identified three key understandings that have portable applicability:

1. they are a microcosm of colonial relationships and therefore require attention to respect and trust, control of the agenda, and the voice of authority;
2. they are a site of learning and transformation for non-Indigenous people with Indigenous partners taking on the role of mentors; and
3. they are a site of pain that arises from ignorance and arrogance, from anger and resentment, and from mistakes that can ultimately present opportunities for learning (2010, pp. 336-345).

While each of the above understandings resonated with us as non-Aboriginal women working with Aboriginal women, an underlying point is that nothing happens without first establishing respect and trust. To establish this trust, making a long-term commitment is helpful. Yet there is no formula for operating successfully in this affective and ethical domain. For us to follow the widely recommended practice for securing a lasting relationship of stepping back – of waiting for the development of collaboratively-based options or observable outcomes – sometimes seemed like an abandonment of purpose and responsibility. In general, with this work there are setbacks and practical challenges so that it is not for academics who are impatient to establish their accomplishments or credentials and move on.

In another useful recent book about inter-cultural alliance building, *Merging Fires,* Rick Wallace points to the importance of recognizing the power of community-based practices and local spaces to challenge dominant relations of power. He quotes Hickey and Mohan to make the case for reflective practice that examines "Spaces as situated practices, spaces as sites of resistance and space as dynamic political field (2013,

p.31). He emphasizes that while there are resonances among specific case studies, there are always site-specific and situated details. With the limits of portability duly noted, we offer this narrative as a model of a community-based approach to alliance-building and cross-cultural understanding. We present our work as a preliminary piece of what we hope will become a broader project whose conduct is responsive to the current impetus to improve Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships across sectors and institutions.

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