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## ABSTRACT

A study of the experiences of a literacy teacher in the prison classroom chronicled the daily routine events and experiences that make up the life world of a teacher in the prison classroom. The introduction of this study emerged through the technique called opportunistic surveillance. The researcher, a prison teacher, engaged in behavior-monitoring procedures to search the environment for opportunities not activated by a problem and examined why another teacher, Garnet, made the choice to enter the prison system as a teacher. The researcher determined Garnet was in middle adulthood and had reached the turning point in her career that propelled her to seek renewal rather than complacency. She exhibited satisfaction and flexibility with her work, yet sought creative ways to teach that would benefit her students. Garnet flourished as a teacher and her students made progress. To create a knowledgeable audience, the researcher tried to define the teacher's world through its chief components--teacher, organizational factors, instructional support factors, and students--and used them as themes as she engaged in the constant comparisons strategy. The process involved a complex, somewhat chaotic pattern of interviewing, reading the literature, writing, member checking, and peer review. (Contains 30 references.) (YLB)

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IN A PRISON CLASSROOM

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Behind the Fences: Case Study of a Literacy Teacher in a Prison Classroom

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## Behind the Fences: Case Study of a Literacy Teacher in a Prison Classroom

### Introduction

The prison system is a hostile environment. The fence is a visible sign of the separation of the prison inmates from society, better known in this realm as the free world. The fence defines the prison both in geographic parameters and in the state of consciousness for those who pass through the gates. Some individuals choose to pass through the fences each day and go about the tasks that make up their jobs.

In the early morning darkness, teachers arrive in the eerie pink glow of the prison security lights. Teachers get out of their cars, walk toward the low gray metal building, and pass through the security picket. There are three separate gates of entry. The first must clang shut before the second or third will open. The last gate closes and teachers trek across the concrete walkway to the education building. Turning to look over a shoulder, a teacher will see riveted to the fence a large red sign with bold white letters that states: No hostages beyond this point. This is a constant daily reminder never to forget the environment enclosed by these fences.

Once inside the education building, each teacher collects keys to the desk, file cabinet, and portable storage closet and goes to an individual classroom to prepare for the first class of the day. Cabinets are unlocked so that pencils, paper, and study materials are ready for student use. The classroom looks much like any other when it is empty. Desks and tables sit in readiness for students. Each classroom has bookcases to hold workbooks and textbooks, an overhead projector and screen, and a white board or chalkboard. The classroom is ready for students to arrive.

The education security officer comes down the hallway to the telephone to call each of the dormitories for education turn out. This communication is notification to security officers in the living quarters to send the students to the education building for classes. The students, all dressed in white, begin lining up to enter the building. As each student enters the building, he states his name and housing assignment for identification and moves on to his assigned classroom.

Teachers check roll and begin instruction that continues for three hours each weekday. Each student's attendance is carefully monitored and recorded as contact hours. If a student is absent from the class more than thirty minutes, there is a deduction of one contact hour on the attendance sheet. Teachers are responsible for maintaining accurate attendance records; a vital function and a grave concern for teachers because program funding is based upon the accuracy of these records. Inaccurate attendance accounting is deemed falsification of records related to Windham School District's activities and is listed in the Employee Handbook (February, 1998) as a reason for non-renewal or termination of a professional employee's contract.

Each day as the door opens to the prison classroom, inescapable truths also come into the room as students enter. According to Windham Fast Facts (1997), all these students dropped out of public school, most in the ninth or tenth grade. Many have problems related to and compounded by the use of illegal substances. Each is paying the consequences for actions that have been deemed unacceptable to society. For many, success at learning or appropriate behavior is neither the preferred nor the accepted choice of actions. Many offenders are anti-social or non-social. The majority of students

exhibit very limited problem solving abilities and tend to possess very low self-esteem, limited abilities to set goals, and a fear of the traditional classroom.

The classrooms almost appear to shrink in size when 28 adults, the maximum number of students per class, are confined within the room. When all the student-sized desks are filled, teachers often find difficulty attempting to maneuver among the large bodies, long legs, and big feet that fill the aisles. Teachers are often reminded by security officers to maintain a personal space of three feet and never allow an inmate to walk behind them. In addition, it is never appropriate for an inmate to have personal contact with a teacher including handshakes or an accidental brush against the teacher in a crowded room. Therefore, many teachers prefer to have students approach the teacher's desk and sit in a folding chair at one end of the desk when the student has a question or needs assistance with class assignments. This procedure provides protection for both the inmate and the teacher. Teachers must be careful to prevent any hint of familiarity with students. Failure to maintain appropriate distance can result in disciplinary action against the student, the teacher, or both.

After about fifteen minutes, instruction is interrupted for a supervised restroom break for the inmates. The security officer comes to the doorway and calls away five inmates for a restroom break. Students go to the restroom facility which is equipped with a window in the outside door, stalls with no doors, and very little privacy. Teachers seldom walk down the hallway during the restroom break. Students who leave the classroom to go to the restroom at a time other than the supervised restroom break are subject to disciplinary action for being out of place, meaning the student is not in his assigned classroom and can be punished for this behavior. The teacher is subject to disciplinary action for failing to supervise all students at all times. Instruction usually stops until the break is over and students return to their assigned places.

About thirty minutes later, the officer returns and calls students away for pill window, the administration of a daily dose of a prescription medication. Periodically, students are called out for a variety of other medical or administrative purposes, such as doctor or dentist appointments, eye examinations, required visits from probation or parole officers, questioning by border patrol officials, or unit court appearances for disciplinary charges filed on the unit. From time to time, classes are interrupted to count inmates. Fights sometimes break out or abusive verbal or physical confrontations occur that require security officers to remove disruptive students in handcuffs and chains. Sometimes the classroom instruction continues peacefully uninterrupted.

Teachers present lessons in spelling, mathematics, reading, or language. They utilize a variety of instructional techniques such as board work or overhead transparencies for guided practice, individualized instruction using workbooks or practice sheets, small group collaborative learning sessions, peer tutoring, or direct instruction for individuals, small groups, or the whole group. Instruction is adjusted and based upon the needs of the students in the class. Beginning readers practice reading aloud in small groups. On some units, computers provide assistance with instruction to reinforce the skills students are learning. Sometimes it is almost possible to believe this classroom is no different from any other—almost, but not completely possible.

At the end of the three-hour session, all pencils are counted and returned to the teacher. Materials and books are returned to the appropriate places and student work folders are filed away. The education security officer dismisses the class for a pat search

to insure that students do not remove any unauthorized materials from any classroom. Teachers are responsible for keeping instructional materials and pencils secured. Pencils can sometimes be sharpened and used as a weapon by inmates. Blank sheets of paper or manila folders are considered contraband items. Students have no authorization for these items and are subject to disciplinary action for possessing these items without a commissary purchase receipt. Colored pencils are sometimes used to make ink for tattoos and the ball in the mouse or the mechanism of a tape player can be used to build a tattoo machine. Cables and connectors from computers or videocassette recorders can be used as weapons. Teachers must be alert to any shortages that could threaten their safety or the safety of others.

Teachers have an intermission between classes. The time varies from unit to unit. Sometimes the pause is short and the second class of the day begins quickly, leaving preparation time until the end of the day. Sometimes the interval can be as long as an hour and a half to include both lunch and preparation time. Regardless of the arrangement of time, teachers busily attend to their personal needs, eat a snack, prepare materials, and get ready for the next session or the next day of teaching. At the end of the second session, the role of the teacher changes. The teacher is no longer an educator; the teacher is a security risk. Teachers are encouraged to lock cabinets, desks, and file cabinets and leave the building as quickly as possible. Students are not encouraged to linger, seek extra help, or discuss questions with the teacher. The teacher must be ready to exit the building quickly which requires careful organization of the end of the day tasks. All pencils and books must be locked away; personal belongings such as identification cards and keys must be readily available; and the day ends abruptly and with finality. Attendance records are turned in, keys are left at the gate or in a locked box, and teachers do not return until the next teaching day begins.

#### Windham School District

As of August 31, 1998 (Annual Performance Report, 1997-98), Windham School District, the school system for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice employed 1,551 professional and paraprofessional staff members. Of these numbers, half (50%) are male and half (50%) are female. The professional staff was divided by ethnicity in the following breakdown: 82% white educators, 9% black educators, and 9% Hispanic educators. The turnover rate for the professional staff was 8.4% and the average length of service for teachers was six years.

The Texas State Legislature created Windham School District in 1969 to provide the opportunity for students to acquire academic and vocational skills necessary for any adult to function in society. The original legislation required all inmates who did not possess a high school diploma and who scored below the sixth grade literacy level to enroll in the education program. Windham School District, according to Windham Fast Facts (1997), offers academic and vocational instruction in the foundation skills and competencies identified by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). The literacy program emphasizes literacy training and General Educational Diploma (GED) preparation. The mission of the Windham School District (Annual Performance Report, 1997-98) is to provide appropriate educational programming and services to meet the needs of the offender population of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and reduce recidivism by assisting offenders in becoming responsible, productive members of their communities. Goals of the district include

reducing recidivism, reducing the cost of confinement or imprisonment, increasing the success of former offenders in obtaining and maintaining employment, and providing an incentive to offenders to behave in positive ways during confinement or imprisonment.

According to the Texas Legislative Council (1996), the likely effects of projected population patterns will increase the demands for state services, especially in the areas of education and criminal justice. "The number of adult prisoners in Texas State Jails and Prisons is projected to increase from 144,814 in 1995 to 242,938 in 2030, an increase of 67.8 percent with costs for prisons increasing from \$2.3 billion in 1990 to more than \$3.9 billion in 2030" (p. 54). Johnson (1993) reports an additional staggering number by counting offenders either on probation or on parole under correctional supervision in the communities of Texas. These figures include more than 488,000 probationers and 140,000 parolees. The United States Department of Justice (1999) reports 2.8% of all United States adult residents, 5.5 million people, were either on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole at the end of 1996.

#### Purpose of the Study

Flinders (1989) reports that teachers are either idealized as dedicated and caring or vilified as lazy and self-serving. Educators are both widely praised for the successes in education and widely blamed for its failures. Yet rarely is the full complexity of a teacher's professional experience recognized; in fact, the teacher's world is largely ignored. According to Schulz (1997), "The mystery of what really happens in the classroom, why and how it happens in the classroom, continues to challenge us" (p. 1).

Glasser (1990) speaks of public school educators, "From the superintendent down, all school managing is difficult, but teaching—the daily face-to-face managing of many resistant students—is not only the hardest job in the school, it is the hardest job there is" (p. 15). The job of teaching in the prison system is likely to be even harder. Yet, some legislators and administrators seem to believe that if they build prison schools, teachers will come to teach. Simply looking at the numbers of incarcerated adults and the continuing construction of new correctional facilities evidences the need for more educators to enter this forum.

Kersting (1998) tells us that research in corrections is "typically encapsulated in the specific correctional environment designed for specified populations." The available information is often difficult to locate because most studies generate from a specific correctional institution and the information is used within the institution. In a review of available literature, Coffey (1994) shares the findings and concludes the results are sparse due to budget cuts, time constraints, and practitioners who emphasize doing the job rather than doing research. Reagen and Stoughton (1976) concur with these findings and review the six doctoral dissertations that document the empirical studies of correctional education between 1940 and 1968. In addition, there is little research about the experiences of the teacher in the correctional facility. Edelson (1984) describes the scant textual resources for teachers new to corrections in this way, "It appears that practitioners are dealing with practical problems in the institutions each day, without the benefit of learning from one another" (p. 10). Coffey (1994), Kuster (1998), and Drennon (1993) ask correctional educators to be more reflective in their work, to study and document programs and practices that are effective, and to share findings with other practitioners through publication.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of a teacher in the prison system and chronicle the daily routine events of this experience. With the ever-increasing numbers of incarcerated adults, there is evidence of the need for greater numbers of teachers in the prison system. This case study will be aimed at developing a knowledge base of teaching in a prison setting.

#### Research Question

Faced with the aforementioned characteristics of the prison system, the compelling statistics of the Department of Criminal Justice, and the mystery shrouding the prison classroom, the following research question emerges: What is the experience of a classroom teacher in the prison system? Finding the answer to this question can deepen the understanding about the workplace of correction educators and contribute information for those new to the practice of correctional education.

#### Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical framework for this study is phenomenology. Patton (1990) describes phenomenology as the structure and essences of experience of this phenomenon for these people. Van Manen (1990) noted, "From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings" (p. 5). Strauss and Corbin (1998) define the qualitative approach as research about person's lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, and cultural phenomena. The work is interpretive and "carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme" (p.11). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) describe the phenomenological approach as an "attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (p. 23). In the phenomenological approach, the researcher attempts to gain entry into the world of the participant and understand how meaning is constructed about daily life. The goal is to understand the participant's point of view. Strauss and Corbin (1998) say, "It is not the researcher's perception or perspectives that matters but rather how research participants see events or happenings" (p. 47).

In this study, I will attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to an ordinary person in a particular situation, specifically the events and experiences of a literacy classroom teacher in a regular prison classroom. Further, I will attempt to gain entry into the lifeworld of the teacher to understand how and what meaning the teacher constructs around daily life in the classroom. Hence, the goal is to report the findings of this study from the perspective of a teacher in the prison system.

Schutz (1967) further illuminates these principles by defining phenomenology as obtaining organized knowledge of the common-sense thinking of participants living their daily lives. The explanation of mutual understanding of human beings and identification of experiences by sensory observation is used to explain the behavior of the participant who is observed in a small sector of the social world. Phenomenology attempts to explicate the meaning as the participant lives an everyday existence.

#### Assumptions

I will hold specific assumptions as I carry out this study. First, I will assume that the participant with whom I am involved will share experiences truthfully. I will also assume these experiences are actual lifeworld events of this participant. The events

reported in the study will represent a retrospective viewpoint because reflection on lived experiences is always recollective; that is, the event has already passed or has been lived through (van Manen, 1990).

Implicit in the description of phenomenology is also a group of specific assumptions that guide the framework (van Manen, 1990). First is the construct of intentionality: the act of purposeful attachment to the world under study to question or theorize. Second is identification of research as a caring act, a ministering of thoughtfulness. Further is specification that phenomenology is a search of the unique, a lifeworld defined by parameters and time frames that make the study essentially irreplaceable. Phenomenology is also characterized by the assumption of always beginning from silence in the lifeworld of the participant and progressing to writing, which is considered an inseparable aspect of the research process.

### Context for the Study: Garnet's Story

This phenomenological study of the experiences of a literacy teacher in the prison classroom will chronicle the events and experiences that make up the lifeworld of a teacher in the prison classroom. For the purposes of this study the participant will be named Garnet. Garnet is a teacher with more than six years of experience with the Windham School District and more than twelve years total teaching experience. Garnet was raised in a small West Texas town and attended a state supported university to earn a bachelor's degree and elementary teaching certificate. Upon completion of her degree, she married and began her teaching experience in elementary education. When she had her children, she stopped full-time teaching, but continued to substitute for several years.

Later, she continued her teaching experience at a Native American Indian school in a neighboring state.

Garnet: I can remember that first week I started teaching, and this was about the third or fourth day, and I was standing by my door, watching the kids come in, and it dawned on me at that time. I am the only blonde-headed white person here. I am in the minority; they are the majority. Everybody else had that chocolate brown hair and olive skin, and I thought: What am I doing here? It did prepare me. The Navaho culture was so different from any culture I had been raised with or any culture I had lived around up to this point. It really gave me a new perspective on how to look at things. It taught me patience, tolerance, and that you shouldn't be close-minded about things.

Garnet began her teaching experience in the prison system on a medium security unit that houses approximately 1,500 inmates. These students sometimes serve a lengthy sentence which can influence both behavior and motivation to complete the educational process.

Garnet: When I started out, I spent the first three years on the XYZ unit. That is a medium security unit. I would have students there that were serving 60 years, and their whole attitude was: Why should I learn, I have got 60 years, so what difference does it make?

Garnet transferred to a small 500-bed minimum-security unit and continues to teach in that setting at the present time. Garnet believes teaching in the prison system is where she belongs.

Garnet: I have found my niche. I am elementary certified. If I teach in the free world, I teach little children, and that is how you gear your whole world, from



thinking to writing. By teaching in the prison, I am able to have adult conversation which is important, yet I can teach on a lower level. I can converse with them as adults and teach on their level. It is the best of both worlds. It is my niche. It is not for everybody. It is where God wants me to be.

The small minimum-security unit will be identified for purposes of this study as ABC Unit. This unit employs four teachers who work at a single shift, in contrast to larger units where several shifts of teachers share facilities and classrooms to teach in the prison system. The campus profile includes 47% Hispanic, 15% black, 37% white, and 1% other. The average functional level of students is at a 6.6 grade level, with an average I. Q. of 94. The average student age is thirty-one years. The classes are all listed as academic, with no vocational classes available at the present time. Like any job, there are both good and bad qualities that characterize the work.

Garnet: I can tell you all the things I like about Windham. I like the fact that I don't have any gradebook. You don't take any grades because you don't have to make out report cards every six weeks. I love the fact that there is no duty like bus duty, playground duty, or lunchroom duty. I love the fact that I don't have to deal with any parents, there are no parents. What I don't like is we don't have any teacher rights. Your rights get violated all the time with Windham, all the time. And they don't think anything about it. They don't follow TEA rules and regulations that all the public schools are supposed to follow. It's not right. We are not inmates and I am tired of being treated like the inmates. I think the inmates have more rights than we have. That Ruiz thing gave them a lot more rights than we have right now.

A glimpse into the lifeworld of Garnet's classroom is a reminder of any classroom where learning is taking place.

Garnet: I get pencils, paper, and folders ready. When the students come in, I greet each one individually. Then I try to share something with them. It might be like changes in rules or something. Or it might be just something silly. Then I start instruction. I explain about the language, the spelling, and the math. I answer questions. It's just like free world school, like I did before. I start them on seatwork; then, I start my reading groups. A good day is when my students feel good about themselves. We had fun and we are learning. Humor is a big part of it—when we can laugh.

Garnet attributes the success she has experienced with her classes to one primary factor.

Garnet: My success rate comes because they [the students] don't want to do anything that is going to make them look bad in my eyes.

Her bubbly personality, honesty, and mutual respect also contribute to an environment where learning is effective and enjoyable.

When asked to offer advice to those who would dare to enter the world of the prison system to become an educator, Garnet thought carefully before answering. She had three specific recommendations for those who would venture behind the fences:

1. Observe carefully and find your own niche. Be extremely cautious, not just with inmates, but with fellow employees, too.
2. Join a teacher organization for legal representation. Sooner or later you will need it.

3. Find a colleague to be a friend you can trust. It is extremely rare to find a colleague like that. It is a blessing that God gives you. The chances of this happening rank from slim to none. Finding a trustworthy friend is very rare. Otherwise be cautious.

Garnet travels the road to the prison system and passes through the gates in the fences to begin each new teaching day. Her choice is to continue to teach in this hostile environment. She teaches those who are illiterate to read, those with no manners to be polite, those with no skills to work math problems, and those with no self-esteem to put the past behind them and begin anew. The job she does is more than teaching--it is more like a ministry of healing. She reaches out to those members of society that are often forgotten, often those who no one else has been able to reach. Those whose lives touch hers are better for the encounter.

#### Methods

Because I serve in the position of teacher in the prison system, I have entry into the prison classroom and opportunities to observe colleagues. I have come to the realization that research in the prison system, individual classroom, or teacher workroom is less likely to occur unless educators inside the system take the time to write about personal experiences. I am in a situation that presents a rare opportunity. Yin (1994) might call this situation a chance to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity, saying "a person must be adaptive and flexible, so that newly encountered situations can be seen as opportunities, not threats" (p. 56). Because I have already built rapport with these men and their teachers, they know I am concerned about the education of inmates. The teachers are willing to talk to me. I have opportunities to confer with colleagues during conference times, training sessions, and staff development conferences that are unavailable to others. This opportunity heightens what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call having theoretical sensitivity, the ability to have insight into and give meaning to the events and happenings in the data. At this time, I am one of the few with the option to work among two marginalized groups, the inmate students and their teachers, and provide for their story to be told. I am already a part of their everyday routine, so it will be possible for me to interact in a natural, unobtrusive manner so that daily activities will not differ significantly from normal classroom behaviors.

I hope to engage in what Eisner (1991) calls using an enlightened eye and the ability to see what counts. Kindig (1997) calls storytelling "the heart and soul of our culture (p. 164). They [stories] give us hope and help us set goals for ourselves." Gersie (in Kindig, p. 166) writes about storytelling by calling each person a "story bag that contains the memories, experiences, and stories of a lifetime." There is a story that needs to be told about teachers, their experiences, and their adventures in correctional education.

The introduction of this study emerged through the technique called opportunistic surveillance (Hoy & Miskel, 1996), "the organizational counterpart of curiosity in the individual" (p. 275). I wanted to understand the world of a teacher with dedication and loyalty to the men she teaches. So I engaged in "behavior-monitoring procedures to search the environment for opportunities that are not activated by a problem" (p. 275). There was no problem to investigate, just my inquisitive nature that started this whole project. I knew why I entered the prison system as a teacher, but I wanted to know why other teachers made the same choice.

My curiosity led me to carefully determine Garnet's season of life. In order to understand her world, I needed to know where she was in her life journey. Glatthorn (1990) provides phases of adult development that help me describe Garnet more fully. She is in middle adulthood and has reached the turning point of her career that propels her to seek renewal rather than complacency. To determine what is right, she examines her conscience in accordance with her ethical principles. She exhibits satisfaction and flexibility with her work, yet seeks creative ways to teach that will benefit her students. In a culture described by Hoy and Miskel (1996) as a little shop of horrors, Garnet flourishes as a teacher and her students make progress, even if "the school is unpredictable and a nightmare reminiscent of the French Revolution and the principal is a self-cleaning statue or a Jekyll and Hyde" (p. 138). It is also important to note that Garnet has exceeded the average length of service for Windham teachers, clear evidence of her strength as a survivor. Her clear choice in the organization is to stay, try to change the system, and be a voice for improvement (Hoy & Miskel, 1996, p. 190). This description is gleaned from a combination of surveillance observations and thoughtful reading from the literature with the intention of providing a more complete picture of Garnet, the teacher.

Later I was to realize my task was greater. I needed to engage in creating a knowledgeable audience. For my context, there is no shared knowledge because of the fences and locked gates. I followed the lead of Wright (1986) who suggests writing "stories depending in part on shared knowledge, so that, in the telling alone, the proper audience can grasp the references and fill in the landscape" (p. 26). I endeavor to use thick description in such a way that I give the reader the eyes to see what is locked away from them. There is no other way because the reader cannot be permitted to enter the world of the prison system.

Glatthorn (1990) provides a definition of the teacher's world. The chief components are: the teacher, organizational factors, instructional support factors, and students. I used these components as themes as I engaged in the strategy defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as constant comparisons. The process involved a complex, somewhat chaotic pattern of interviewing, reading the literature, writing, member checking, and peer review. These elements were in no particular order, nor was the work neat and organized; rather it was emergent and driven by the data. From this process, I discovered an intertwining of teacher and student themes, connections among teacher, student, and instructional support themes, and organizational factors that were more likely to be disconnected from the other themes. Together, Garnet and I sifted and resifted the data until we were both satisfied with the story. Carefully we selected the words to include in the telling.

Garnet wanted to tell her story. She entrusted me to use her words to illuminate the lifeworld of the prison educator. She provided me with endless hours of interviews, fieldnotes, and discussions because she wanted her story to emerge. She was willing to provide me with her weekly journal of events and willingly answered questions in informal settings such as teacher conference periods, lunch hours, and staff meetings. Her willingness to share so openly and participate in member checking so often greatly facilitated the study. I purposely selected Garnet because of these qualities.

I also engaged in analysis of a variety of artifacts during this study. Because I am a teacher in the Windham School District, I have access to documents that are not readily

available to other researchers. Specifically I studied Annual Performance Reports, the Windham School District Employee Handbook, memos, email messages, the Windham Policy Manual, and other correspondence. These documents are for in-house use within the Windham School District and it would be unlikely for an outside researcher to obtain copies for study.

My next step involved a great deal of reflection. I borrowed heavily from the ethnographic strategies of Wolcott (1975). By careful and thoughtful examination, I visited his criteria for research in schools:

Criterion I: Appropriateness of the Problem. “I would hold that ethnography is best served when the researcher feels free to muddle about in the field setting and to pursue hunches or to address himself to problems that he deems interesting and worthy of sustained attention” (p. 257).

Criterion II: Appropriateness of the Ethnographer. “The fieldworker’s essential research instrument has always been himself” (p. 259). It is required that an ethnographer must know what is needed to be a member of a particular social system.

Criterion III: Appropriateness of the Research Climate. The researcher should conduct a substantial amount of the fieldwork personally and allow time in daily life to conduct fieldwork and write. The researcher must also exercise “professional autonomy” (p. 265) in making decisions regarding strategies, ethics, and personal involvement.

Criterion IV: Appropriateness of Expectations for the Completed Study. The researcher should engage in using a multiplicity of techniques and appropriate tools for research. “The researcher must make his own feelings and attitudes clear so that the reader is able to take that perspective into account” (p. 272). The researcher must “present sufficient primary data so that his readers have an adequate basis for rendering their own judgments concerning the analysis” (p. 273).

These criteria guided my writing and reflection. I attempted to remain faithful to these criteria as I worked through this study.

### Discussion

My purpose was to chronicle the experiences of a literacy teacher in the prison classroom. I was seeking understanding for myself while at the same time providing an opportunity for enlightenment for those who might be tempted to go behind the fences. The prison education system is not the job for everyone. For some this study will be sufficient.

The mystery of the prison classroom is no longer so mysterious. This story is my first attempt at developing a knowledge base of teaching in the prison setting. This hostile environment is not welcoming to anyone. Sometimes the teacher feels as though she has fewer rights than the inmates, yet she continues to teach. Her choice is very clear and her intention is set: She will continue to teach in the prison system. It does not matter that the system is fraught with conflict and barriers to progress in education. She perseveres. Day by day she is making a difference. She believes in the power of the work she is doing.

She attends graduation ceremonies for students who achieve a GED. These students are as proud as newly graduated seniors in public schools across the land are. She shakes the hand of proud parents who weep because their sons have reached their goal. She hears their words of gratitude because she cared enough to try to help their

sons. Sometimes she is the only one in attendance because the students have hurt their families so much that they don't attend the ceremony.

The most significant characteristic of this study was my observation of the grace and dignity of the professional educator behind the fences. Earlier in the study, I sought to understand the meaning of events and interactions to an ordinary person in a particular situation, specifically the events and experiences of a literacy classroom teacher in a regular prison classroom. What I found was an extraordinary person intent on carrying out the professional duties and responsibilities of her vocation with humor, quiet dignity, and a profound respect for human nature, even the somewhat flawed version she greets each day in her classroom.

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