

# **Imagining Education: An Arendtian Response to an Inmate's Question**

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## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the women who invited us into their narratives and taught us what good education looks like and how we might reimagine our own engagement in this life-long project we call education.

## **Abstract**

This article responds to a “what-if” question regarding education, raised by a woman inmate. Emerging in the midst of a research project with women in prison, the unexpected question haunts the two authors, both educational researchers, who in turn reconsider education’s role in difficult circumstances. For guidance, the authors turn to Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality as the capacity to renew, and Natasha Levinson’s claim that the preservation of natality is critical to education. The authors examine the gap between

past and future as a potential space to imagine education otherwise, within both the project and the larger perspective of education.

*Keywords:* Hannah Arendt, natality, participatory action research, adult education, women and education in prison

### **Précis**

Cet article répond à la question « Et si? » soulevée par une détenue et portant sur l'éducation. Émergeant d'un projet de recherche avec des femmes incarcérées, cette question inattendue hante les deux auteurs, tous deux chercheurs en sciences de l'éducation qui, à leur tour, réévaluent le rôle de l'éducation dans des circonstances difficiles. Les auteurs guident leurs recherches en examinant la notion de la natalité de Hannah Arendt comme étant la capacité à se renouveler et en étudiant la revendication de Natasha Livinson selon laquelle la préservation de cette notion de natalité est essentielle à l'éducation. Les auteurs examinent l'écart entre le passé et l'avenir comme un espace potentiel pour imaginer l'éducation autrement, tant à l'intérieur du projet que dans une perspective plus large de l'éducation.

This article is our response, though not in the moment, to a thoughtful question offered by a participant during a participatory action research (PAR) project on women's health in prison. She asked, "Can you imagine . . . What if, instead of going to prison, women were sentenced to education?" Concurrently, another participant described her sentence and experience in prison as being put on "the shelf." We were two educators on the project's interdisciplinary team. This unexpected question and comment turned our research gaze toward education between the past and future in these women's lives—what education could do for them now. Moreover, we were forced to think about the primary roles of education, even as tempting as it was to regard these women's particular circumstances as isolated phenomena and crises unconnected to larger perspectives and critiques of education. Thus, our position from the gap between *no longer* and *not yet* considers Hannah Arendt's concept of natality as the capacity to renew, and Natasha Levinson's wager that the primary role of education is to preserve natality and ensure that the gap between past and future "remains a space of freedom and possibility" (2001, p. 30).

### An Act of Interruption

*We sit in a cement block room in the correctional centre's recreation building with a number of women, our heads bent over interview transcripts. They are volunteer participants on a peer research team sanctioned by the warden and other authorities, including our university's research ethics committee. The collaborative project investigates the health of incarcerated women. We are reading and discussing women's narratives that the peer research team has transcribed. We are intent on teaching the peer researchers how to decode and tease out themes from the transcripts. Each room has chart paper taped to the wall and rows of yellow, blue, and pink highlighters. I am typing on my laptop, diligently recording the women's words as they respond to their assigned transcript.*

*"Wait," I interrupt, "what does 'cracking the gate' mean?" The women look at me, amused. Already they have educated me on the meaning of "blue-shirt" and sitting on "the shelf." In adjacent rooms, other groups of co-researchers from the university and peer researchers from the prison are similarly engaged.*

*In each room, attempts at decoding become sidetracked as the peer researchers spontaneously speak, from their own experience, to stories revealed and concealed*

between transcript lines. We become engaged in a different kind of decoding.<sup>1</sup> The discussion turns to what matters: the women's concerns about survival on "the outs" and their frustration with being put on "the shelf." One woman says, "I'm doing time, I need positive things in here to do on the outs." Others pick up her theme. One complains about "negative talk, shit like that." Another chimes in, "You're stuck in the same place. Back where you started."

And then one woman sings out, "Can you imagine... What if, instead of going to prison, women were sentenced to education?"

Everyone laughs. But there is an unwavering challenge embedded in the woman's question. I stop typing. We are interrupted. The women, all inmates at this minimum-security facility, look to me, their faces now serious as they contemplate the question. I'm not sure how to respond. It's complicated. If education is truly a gateway to economic independence and social well-being, their experiences of education are likely those of failure. I look around the table, wondering about their school experiences.

Our inability to reply to the question in the moment was an uncomfortable experience, bringing us face to face with a curious sense of culpability as educators. Perhaps the question's open-endedness quelled an immediate response. In any case, the context gave us pause, making us think about education and its possibilities regarding issues these women face. Throughout our time on the project, we realized we were not the "experts" on the lived experience or challenges of these women in the correctional centre. We continually asked for clarification, for meaning, for permission to engage in their struggles to bridge the gap between a weighted past and an apparently foreclosed future. Moreover, we became acutely aware of the hierarchical authority that dwells within penitentiary institutions—"an entire structured system that governs women" (peer researcher) and men alike, but also not alike, given the injustices and barriers that so often weigh heavily on female shoulders.

*Most women in here are women who have gone through traumatic experiences. We're being punished for being abused. Killing the pain with drugs—the only way we know how to deal with pain. It's a Band-Aid.* (peer researcher)

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1 See Meyer and Fels (2009) for a discussion of participatory action research and a rethinking of the practice of decoding transcripts.

Educational programs offered in prisons and upon release typically seek to help inmates address addiction issues, manage anger, upgrade literacy skills, complete high school, and so on (Ellis, McFadden, & Colaric, 2008; Higgins, 2004; Monster & Micucci, 2005). But as one peer researcher explained, there is a void between what is decidedly offered as necessary and what the women themselves identify as relevant and are passionate to learn more about as they prepare for re-entry into their communities.

*People go through N.A. [Narcotics Anonymous] treatment centres on their release, and counselling that still doesn't address the fact that after that, there is still a void in education, in the sense that a person should be able to find out what their passion is so you have the facilities to educate a person in their chosen field with a back-up of educators and counsellors taken right to the point of job placement or apprenticeship—of course, with follow-up counselling to make sure that their concerns are addressed. (peer researcher)*

On our part, we wondered about the possibilities for renewal in an institution that mitigates against it, where the inability to move forward cripples the promise of *no going back*. Arendt argues that without taking into account the real possibility of a new beginning and seeing oneself as a beginner, “the chances that tomorrow will be like yesterday are always overwhelming” (1977, p. 169). Possibilities become shelved.

While in separate rooms but engaged in similar discussion with women about this tangible gap between past and future, we were given pause, witnesses to the unforgiving conditions of “the shelf.” Yet, inside that pause, a single “what-if” question, which imagined the gap differently, interrupted a lived paralysis for a moment and *visited* a possibility—“sentenced to education.” From the gap, we have stopped and considered: What “has been laid bare” (Arendt, 1977, p. 174) or disclosed of the essence of education? Within this question is an unspoken challenge to educators by those seated around the PAR research table inside the correctional centre, which this essay seeks to address: *Who are you? And what can education do for me now?*

## Project Context

We were latecomers to this federally funded project<sup>2</sup> primarily conducted by medical and health researchers alongside the peer researchers. Membership in the peer research team was voluntary; turnover was continual, with some women recycling through sporadically. A number maintained long-term participation with the team, and a few, upon their release, continued their association with the project outside the prison gates. In all, close to 200 women participated as peer researchers during the 18 months of the project. Under the guidance of a medical researcher, who was also the prison medical doctor, and of the correctional centre's recreational director, the peer researchers sought to identify the health needs of incarcerated women. It was not long before the peer researchers drew attention to the institutional, economic, and social barriers that impact their re-entry into society and result in the discouraging recidivism rates women experience in today's prisons.<sup>3</sup> The peer researchers identified some emergent issues related to education, which prompted an invitation for us to join the research team.

The peer research team met five days a week. They recorded their sessions, transcribed forum meetings, and designed survey questionnaires on issues such as prison diet and the relationships of incarcerated women. The peer research team decided that upon joining, each member would identify a passion—what issue or concern she would most like to investigate—and write a paragraph about that.<sup>4</sup> Topics included cocaine abuse, babies in prison, housing, co-dependency, and indigenous spirituality.

The peer researchers created PowerPoint presentations from their research on issues that mattered to them.<sup>5</sup> They taught each other how to research on the Internet (under supervision), create their presentations digitally, and edit each other's work. They

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2 The title of this research project was *Community-Based Participatory Action Research: Collaborating With Women in Prison to Improve Their Health*. This project was funded by the BC Medical Services Foundation, the Vancouver Foundation, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Ottawa, Canada.

3 Rates of recidivism for women in Canadian prisons are difficult to pinpoint, as researchers identify it in different ways. One study measured recidivism for all Canadian women released in a two-year period as 37% in the first year and 38% the second year; see Gobeil and Barrett (2007).

4 An article investigating these paragraphs of passion is currently in process by the research team.

5 For a complete listing and viewing of these PowerPoint presentations, see the Women in2 Healing webpage: [www.womenin2healing.org](http://www.womenin2healing.org). For more information about the research project, see Martin et al. (2008), Martin, Murphy, Chan et al. (2009), and Martin, Murphy, Hanson, et al. (2009).

presented PowerPoint presentations during in-house information forums attended by over 60 inmates at any given time, as well as the warden and invited guests from related community agencies. These forums included discussions and a drumming circle led by a First Nations elder.

A small number of participants received permission from the warden to present at academic conferences and twice to local high school students. (Needless to say, the high school students listened intently as a former cocaine-addicted inmate shared her PowerPoint presentation and personal narrative of the hazards of drug abuse.) The peer researchers became educators for each other and outsiders. Often, women spoke of their desire to “give back” to their community through these activities.

## Hannah Arendt and Natality

*The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. (Arendt, 1958, p. 247)*

According to Arendt, natality is the human capacity to begin and continue to begin. While it lacks the same existential certainty as mortality (i.e., we are subject to death), natality ensures the potentiality of newness introduced into the world by human births, each of which is an “unprecedented presence” (Bowen-Moore, 1989, p. 22). Arendt asserts that we are not born in order to one day die but in order to begin. Birth means someone uniquely new arrives and possesses the capacity to initiate something new by acting, by continually inserting herself into the world. Thus, the meaning and distinction of each birth hinges on the newcomer’s capacity to begin (Bowen-Moore, 1989), while simultaneously creating for those within whose presence a newcomer arrives the opportunity to also begin anew. The constant flux of newcomers is the actualization of natality, infusing the existing world with beginnings and, we argue, hope.

Action, and therefore natality, is inherent in all human activity. The fact that we are capable of action means we can expect the unexpected; new things happen in the world in time and in the guise of a “miracle,” appearing against the odds, against what we have come to think of as certain and determined. That is not to say that what Arendt

reconceptualizes as *new* is strictly original and momentous, as the word “miracle” implies (Levinson, 2001). Rather, given that action is rooted in natality, *new* means the surprising events that we initiate in our everyday lives; and, as Levinson points out, “there is something miraculous about even the effort to unsettle, interrupt, or deflect social processes that seem inevitable and inescapable” (p. 17).

Levinson also speaks to both the promise and the pathos of natality, which she describes as paradoxical. With the continual influx of newcomers and the promise of beginnings, chances are that an individual’s attempt to initiate something new will go off course. That is, possibility is “tempered” by two features of natality: our “belated” arrival into an existing world, and the condition of plurality.

First is the fact of belatedness: any one of us is born into a world built and rebuilt long before our appearance—and, because of its durability and relative permanence, the world as we know it will survive our eventual departure. At the same time, each one of us is born into a culture, family, and body, heir to a particular way of life but also apprentice to it. As newcomers, we experience ourselves as “belated,” treated as if we have always already been here. Hence, we stand in need of becoming conditioned to the world by absorbing ourselves in everyday practices, including our thoughts, feelings, possessions, memories, and so on, which will provide a sense of identification, permanence, and stability in this world. Levinson argues further that the world we are born into doesn’t merely precede us but “effectively constitutes us as particular kinds of people” (2001, p. 13) positioned in relation to the past and among others in the present. Belatedness is problematic when we feel weighted down by our social positioning. We feel “fated to a self and a world of other selves and objects about which one cannot choose not to be concerned” (Muhall, 2005, p. 113).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, our uniqueness becomes a “genus: a woman, a Jew, an African American” (Levinson, 2001, p. 22). How do we inscribe a distinctive identity in our reality?

The second related feature Levinson attributes to the tempering of possibility is the human condition of plurality, following Arendt’s arguments around action. Our efforts at initiating something new occur in the thick of other acting beings. Says Arendt, “It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions that action almost never achieves its purpose” (1958, p.

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6 Muhall makes the case that each of us has to deal with our worldliness as a condition of our existence, becoming attuned to our individual self in the world as “a being for whom its own Being is an issue” (p. 111).



184) This does not mean that action is futile; rather, we are not able to control or predict its consequences with certainty. Nor are we able to see the end of any action, given that a single deed can have an enduring life through the ripples of unintended effects. Arendt explains that our incapacity to undo what has been done is matched by our incapacity to predict the extensible consequences or know entirely the motives behind the action (p. 233). The burden action carries—irreversibility and unpredictability—is, she claims, where the process of action “draws its very strength.”<sup>7</sup> We are not abandoned to action’s inherent predicaments without certain potentialities. In fact, we realize such potentialities inside the faculties of forgiving and of making and keeping promises. Arendt explains:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; . . . Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; . . . Both faculties, therefore, depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself . . . (1958, p. 237)

Finally, in understanding that natality proposes an opportunity to begin anew, we take into account our own response and our responsibility for action in relationship to those we encounter. Just as we recognize that our actions impact others, so we might stop to assess how and why we engage as we do. Luce Irigaray (2002) proposes a clearing within encounters. “Silencing what we already know is often more useful in order to let the other appear, and light ourselves up through this entry into presence irreducible to our knowledge” (p. 165). Thus, each encounter is an invitation for us to renew ourselves, to reconsider our actions, to recognize that we might, in the presence of a newcomer, become other than what we currently are.

Considering now our response to the woman’s what-if question about being sentenced to education, we ask ourselves, *Does (or can) education nurture the capacity for action and beginning anew, for initiating new social realities in everyday life, for unsettling the world and setting it right?* Given the potential roles of education embedded

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7 Critical to this argument regarding action, Arendt makes the distinction between freedom and sovereignty. As acting beings, we have freedom to act, but because of the conditions of plurality, we do not have sovereignty over our actions.

inside these questions, we agree with Arendt that the essence of education is the promise of natality. What entails keeping such a promise?

### The Shelf—A Possibility Visited

As we began to inquire into what was “laid bare” in this particular context and PAR project, we were able to distinguish the gap between past and future as a critical place for action. In this case, the gap is clearly apparent, physically and psychologically, more so than in most contexts, where past, present, and future tend to appear seamless. For these women, recidivist statistics in fact corroborated a particular narrative for the inmate returning to prison, “stuck in the same place.” As such, “doing time” in the gap between past and future meant a temporary “time-being” away from their everyday lives and communities, or what the women called “the shelf.” Being “put on the shelf” is a common expression that refers to people or things being treated as no longer useful or desirable, in a state of disuse, out of circulation. It has connotations of being dismissed or abandoned. A weighted past means a foreclosed future, back on “the shelf.” Hence, the question directed at the gap (*What if, instead of going to prison, women were sentenced to education?*) was highly significant, interrupting the entrenched narrative the women knew and lived—being “shelved.”

Throughout the duration of the PAR project, instead of a place of static detention, “the shelf” became a platform for ongoing project activities and appeared as a space of action and learning inside and, in some events, outside the prison. Through the lens of natality, we offer four explanations for the women’s motivation toward involvement and action: the participatory nature of the research project; the power of women speaking and sharing their narratives; the common, non-public space created for beginning activity; and the women taking responsibility for choosing inquiry topics that mattered to them. We see these examples as educational experiments that provide a context for understanding the relationship between natality and education.

First and foremost, the research project itself was a call to action that centred upon the women’s understanding of their own lived experiences, in all aspects of the research (proposal writing, transcription, data analysis, and writing). Participatory action research (PAR) is premised on change through action in context. As the women pointed

out, correctional institutions seek to “reform” incarcerated women but rarely engage them or consult them as co-agents of change. Although a significant number of research studies are conducted in prison settings, to our knowledge this project is one of the few in Canada to engage PAR. Thus, the women’s actions and initiations during the project were interruptions to the institutional context. According to Fine and Torre (2008), PAR is a strategic tool whereby research participants, particularly those without agency, can “interrupt the drip feed, engage critical questions, produce new knowledge, provoke expanded audiences . . . ” (p. 417), and speak back to policy makers. In this case, the momentum of the project was forward, advocating the women’s critical reflection upon and judgment of their social positioning, as a restorative approach to action. Likewise, researchers Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) state that PAR is about recovery and release from the constraints of “the irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination” (p. 567–568). As educators, we saw the possibilities of the women (and ourselves) learning how to reconfigure the meaning of social positioning, and, as Levinson argues, “forging unexpected social relations and unsettling deeply entrenched social forces in the process . . . offering the possibility of hope” (2001, p. 27). *How might education in other contexts be a call to action?*

Second, the narratives that came forward as raw realities acknowledging the women’s complex lives impacted all of us. Beyond acknowledgement, the stories disclosed a distinctness and depth regarding *who* the narrator was as a unique individual (implicit in what she said and did), in contradistinction to the flatness of *what* she appeared to be—in this case, an inmate among other inmates. The point is, we knew *who* the storyteller was by knowing her story, albeit an unfinished one. No doubt the unsaid and the unspeakable were held in silences inside stories and between lines of transcript from interviews, conversations, and forums. It was the peer researchers, however, who recognized such omissions and spoke to them from their own living realities, moving backward and forward between what was said and what was not said. They identified familiar plots in the narratives and responded to them, never losing themselves or their authority as both protagonists and interpreters. According to Levinson, “Who we are is as much a matter of how we appear to others as it is a matter of our own self-perception” (2001, p. 21). How we perceive ourselves is bound to how others “name and position” us (as *what*), individually or at institutional and social levels. True, we are conditioned by such positioning, but what ultimately matters is knowing that we are not determined by it.

Hence, the distinction between *who* we are and *what* we are becomes critical to our individual freedom and capacity to act anew, which, Arendt argues, is meaningless without a name, a “who” attached (1958, p. 180). Moreover, inspiring stories can motivate others to commence actions (“miracles”) of their own making.

The telling of personal stories offered distinctions to their individual narratives (as who) but also to the narratives of their reality and of themselves as a community of women who had been incarcerated for apparent reasons, ones they recognized in each other’s stories. Telling stories in the presence of others who recognize what we see and hear assures us of the reality of our world and ourselves (Arendt, 1958, p. 50). Moreover, we argue, the act of sharing these narratives tempered the risk of forgetting the past and losing a “guide to understanding the present” (Levinson, 2001, p. 30). According to Levinson, “the past conditions but does not determine the future, while the present looks at the past not only in terms of what is or has been, but also in terms of what might have been” (p. 29). Along these lines, the sharing of narratives is an act of inquiry and a possible guide to setting things right. *How can the who-ness of our stories open spaces of possibilities in education to resist the belief that we are fated to a foreclosed future?*

Third, “the shelf” became a common space for the peer researchers to work on initiatives and get beyond the overwhelming experience of starting something new, by acting together and seeing each other as beginners “whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all” (Arendt, 1958, p. 244). The women acting in concert and keeping the project space going, even with turnover, constituted the force of promise. The space was valid, binding, and also a reprieve, becoming a more forgiving place than what they were used to, a place out of the public sphere, where everything that appeared could be seen and heard by everybody. One woman told us about her experience and stigma within a public place where she lived; being received anew is difficult.

*As soon as I walk in the mall, they call, they know my face, they know I’m a crackhead; makes me feel, like, small and I’m not going to sit there and wait for the cops to come. I’m not going to argue there. “You better not be selling drugs here.” She presumed I did meth. I was just there. I didn’t know what to say to her. That’s just labelling me by the way I look.*

An environment where forgiveness can be felt is critical to beginners. In relation to natality, Arendt argues that forgiving is more than a reaction, because it acts anew,

unexpectedly, and unconditioned by the act that provoked it, “therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven” (1958, p. 241). Arendt sees forgiveness as an alternative (but not opposite) to punishment, given both attempt to put an end to something that could go on endlessly without some form of interference: “*what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it” (p. 241, emphasis in original). *How can education become a forgiving environment that nurtures beginnings?*

Fourth, each peer researcher was responsible for her own choices of what topics to explore, articulate, and share with others, learning more about what impacts her life, and the consequences of actions in a difficult past and uncertain future. The diversity of shared topics created an *existential* curriculum, related to the women’s realities, struggles, and aspirations—investigating *what is* and *what matters* in their lives, as well as imagining *what-if* possibilities. With regard to natality, the freedom to begin such an in-depth investigation (as action) means taking responsibility for oneself in relation to others and for initiating an “active relation with the world” (Levinson, 2001, p. 21), perhaps within a “miracle” that unsettles, interrupts, and reimagines the common world. Thus, *who* one is in relation to others and to the world is not lost.

It [natality] signifies those moments in our lives (and there are many) in which we attempt to answer the question that Arendt argues is at the basis of all action and that is posed to every newcomer to the world: ‘Who are you?’ (Levinson, p. 21)

*How can education initiate inquiry that imagines the world otherwise?*

Recognizing the PAR research experience as a critical place for action and attention—interrupting the “drip feed” that fed a particular fated future—we were able to see project activities as an interruption to the women’s “doing [prison] time” and being “shelved” within what we’ve described as the gap between past and future. We witnessed a transformation of “the shelf,” across months, that was anything but a static stopgap for “doing time.” As mentioned, we posit that the PAR project activities, which involved the women directly, became that critical and promising space of participation and motivation toward a new perspective on the gap as a vital present with implications for the future. As it turned out, when women joined the project as co-researchers, they “sentenced” themselves to a commitment of action and learning, filling the “time-being” with new activity reflected in a relationship with both the past and the future. While we do not know exactly what education meant to the woman who asked about being “sentenced to education,”

we argue that the commitments to action and learning are core to education. As Arendt claims, “For education belongs among the most elementary and necessary activities of human society, which never remains as it is but continuously renews itself through birth, through the arrival of new human beings” (Arendt, 1977, p. 182).

## Keeping a Promise

After 18 months into the five-year research project, it was discontinued and a new warden was installed. The PAR project was one of the many initiatives of the former warden, who had reimagined possibilities of engagement within the correctional centre—including the introduction of babies into the prison program, which was also cancelled. We lamented the decision. The mood in the correctional centre shifted, as did authority.

The project, however, continues outside the gates. Funding for peer researchers was found so that an alumni group, “Women in2 Healing,” could be established. This group has since: (i) set up a website, (ii) established a Facebook page, with a membership of over 250 women, (iii) published a newsletter distributed within the correctional centre and elsewhere, (iv) created contacts and information links in a variety of communities, and (v) become involved in a government-funded research project that tracks the experiences of women released from the correctional centre over a 12-month period.<sup>8</sup> Currently, a co-edited book about the innovations in the correctional centre that occurred during the PAR project is underway.<sup>9</sup> A number of women who were involved in the PAR project continue to meet with the principal investigator to oversee research activities, provide communication and support links for women recently released into the community, and advocate on behalf of women in prison and those soon to be released.

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8 *Doing Time: A Time for Incarcerated Women to Develop an Action Health Strategy* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research).

9 The book includes writings, interviews, and narratives of incarcerated women and prison personnel, including the medical doctor and warden. See R. E. Martin, M. Korchinski, L. Fels, and C. Leggo. (2014). *Arresting Hope: Women Taking Action in Prison Inside Out*.

## Living and Learning in the Gap (Between Past and Future)

*Can you imagine coming here, finding out what your passion is, being sentenced directly into an educational institution, counselled, and put right into a job?*

(peer researcher)

And so we turn again to the questions underlying the original insight: Who are you? And what can education do for us now? In so turning, we consider once more the words that Levinson (2001) brings to us: “Here we come to the central role of the teacher whose task it is to preserve natality, therefore ensuring that the gap between past and future remains a space of freedom and possibility” (p. 30). If it is our role as educators to preserve natality, then we need to understand what natality means within the institutions that hold us fast to the conditions of our engagement. Arendt herself defines natality as the essence of education and outlines two dimensions—or, we argue, responsibilities—of education. One is to introduce students to the world “as it is,” with all its flaws, yet not dictating what we might want it to be. Levinson interprets this introduction to mean preparing our students “not simply to make their way in the world, but to remake the world” (2001, pp. 18–19). Her perspective considers the second dimension, related to action and nurturing the capacity for action, creating “the conditions for what Arendt calls the ‘setting-right’ of the world” (Levinson, p. 18). The challenge Levinson outlines for educators is to create pedagogical spaces in which students can understand and “confront” their sense of belatedness (and social positioning) without feeling paralyzed or determined by it.

In the educational context of the PAR project, to embrace and preserve natality meant acknowledging the failure that is education (in this instance, our preconceptions of how we would engage together with the transcripts), welcoming the women who had been abused and incarcerated, and collaboratively seeking new ways to re-engage, so as to invite them into the world’s renewal—not as we imagined it, but as they created it through their actions and being-in-the-world. *For students who seek restoration and acknowledgement of their offerings, the project of education has to be reciprocal and respectful.*

Educator Elizabeth Lange argues further that

[t]he dialectic of transformative and restorative learning is vital, for it affirms that transformation is not just an epistemological process involving a change in world view and habits of thinking; it is also an ontological process where participants experience a change in their being in the world including their forms of relatedness. (2004, p. 137)

When students in our presence turn to us in their need and hope, we in turn may respond, “We will open spaces of possibility. We acknowledge that you have unique offerings to share, and together we will reimagine and enact that which has not yet been imagined.” Education is a gift of recognition and welcome; as educators, we have the responsibility to understand that our role is not to resolve an individual’s difficulties, solve his or her problems, or improve his or her academic standing, but to create pedagogical spaces that invite stories and nurture action, beginnings, and imagination with attention to what matters to that individual and what might become possible in his or her presence.

If, as Levinson proposes, to preserve natality is to “ensure the gap between past and future remains a space of freedom and possibility,” then educators are called to mind the gap, take care of the gap, and acknowledge that the present exists within a space of fluidity and change. We need to concede that the past does not dictate the future but informs our present. When we understand that our task is not merely to repeat the past but to conserve what is good, as well as to invite new ways of engagement, we will have kept a promise to those who seek to reimagine a new future.

*We are the voices because we are living it.* (peer researcher)

Our experience with the women peer researchers has brought our attention close to home: education. What becomes immediately apparent to us is the need to engage anew in the educational crisis by setting aside certainty and the expected so that the seemingly impossible becomes possible. Our surprise during the *Women in Prison Project* was that the peer researchers themselves *articulated and lived* how education can be an endeavour of individual and communal authorship, restoration, renewal, and opportunity.

We need to help ourselves; we need to find new ways.

We need to learn how to step out.

We have no control. We need to have power in order to succeed.

Finding a safe place so we aren’t on the shelf. (peer researchers)



The women involved in the PAR research team, and those who have since joined its new configurations, have turned the notion of sentencing upside down. Through their shared experiences, they came to recognize that their prison sentence had no punctuation: it was a run-on sentence that recycled again and again to the place where they had begun. And yet, through the project, they interrupted that worn sentence to write and live new paragraphs of passion. As they continue to write their narratives, they challenge us to rewrite our own notions of what it means to be engaged in educational projects of acceptance, restoration, and renewal. We suggest that their own questions prompted their responses. What we witnessed in action is education.

From the gap between *no longer* and *not yet*, we propose to look upon education as a call to action, a space of possibility that resists foreclosure, a forgiving environment that nurtures beginnings, and an inquiry that imagines the world otherwise. How might we create such a *practice* of natality? How are these capacities articulated in all aspects of our teaching (course design, assessment, assignments, etc.)?

Once inside the correctional centre and now locked outside its gates, we are reconsidering our positions as educators. We are rethinking education as a gateway, an interstice, an interplay, a hinge that is situated in the gap between past and future. We are, as philosopher David Appelbaum (1995) would say, momentarily stopped and yet in action within *a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity*.

*Who are you?* is the question that continues to haunt us. As we write these words, we continually ask ourselves, “For what purpose do we share this writing? To whom are we responsible?” We have, in our haste and desire to become good teachers, good researchers, good academics, failed and continue to fail to ask this question of ourselves. And in that failure, we simply become an embodied answer to the instrumental question, *What do you do?*

*Who are you?* demands a different response, one that cannot be imprisoned between the pages of an academic journal but lives daily in our practices, in our thinking as invitations and explorations, and in our efforts to remain open to the educational project that is, above all, a life sentence. What does it mean—“setting it right,” minding the gap, stepping into action, agency, renewal? Our response was belated. It came to us after we recognized the action of education as articulated by the peer researchers who live in the gap between a difficult past and uncertain future. And so, humbly, we conclude with Arendt’s words in her preface to *Between Past and Future*: “the problem of truth is kept in abeyance; the concern is solely with how to move in this gap—the only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear” (1977, p. 14).

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