

## “The feeling of fear was not from my student, but from myself”: A pre-service teacher’s shift from traditional to problem-posing second language pedagogy in a Mexican youth prison

G. Sue Kasun  
*Georgia State University*, [skasun@gsu.edu](mailto:skasun@gsu.edu)

Abigail Santos  
*Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo*, [abi-0751@hotmail.com](mailto:abi-0751@hotmail.com)

Gyewon Jang  
*Georgia State University*, [gyewonj@gmail.com](mailto:gyewonj@gmail.com)

Zurisaray Espinosa  
*Georgia State University*, [zurisarayespinosa@gmail.com](mailto:zurisarayespinosa@gmail.com)

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**Cover Page Footnote**

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**“The Feeling of Fear Was Not from My Student, But from Myself”: A Pre-service Teacher’s Shift from Traditional to Problem-posing Second Language Pedagogy in a Mexican Youth Prison**

*G. Sue Kasun, Georgia State University*

*Abigail Santos, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo*

*Gyewon Jang, Georgia State University and*

*Zurisaray Espinosa, Georgia State University*

Mexico, like other countries that recognize a legal difference between adulthood and adolescence, has a system of detention centers for Mexican youth. Mexico determines paths toward meeting legal codes and establishing varying levels of justice among young people who commit crimes, often toward the end of social control more than social harmony (Frías Armenta & Gómez Martínez, 2014). In 2013, about 16,000 teenagers in the Mexican states of Hidalgo, Coahuila, Sinaloa, and Morelos were arrested for their participation in different types of crime (Azaola, 2014). Of those arrested, 35% committed violent robbery, 22% were convicted of homicide, 17% carried prohibited weapons, and the remaining arrests were related to auto theft, kidnapping, health, and organized crime. Most of the incarcerated youth reported mistreatment, abuse, domestic violence, lack of one or both parents, little or no support for education, or labor work before the age of 12 to support themselves and their family (Azaola, 2014; Prison Insider, 2018). These dire circumstances, alongside systemic oppression create “push factors” that make them want to leave a place or escape a particular situation, leading to the crimes committed by youth. As a result, some Mexican youth have become involved in crime from an early age, leading toward outcast status.

As incarcerated youth generally do not receive enough educational support before entering detention facilities, it makes sense that educational opportunities should be afforded in efforts to help support their being able to contribute to society upon release. Even if one of the primary goals of Mexican prison education is “to obtain positive inmate behavior by treating inmates fairly and through staff interaction using effective skills in decision making, problem-solving, communication, and motivation” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010, p. 2), yet most prison education programs in Mexico focus primarily on correcting behavior, maintaining low rates of recidivism, or providing basic functional knowledge and skills to prepare inmates to become *successful* in the workforce (Flores, 2012; McCarty, 2006; Tolbert, Klein, & Pedroso, 2014). Prison education in detention facilities should, thus, be guided toward reconstructing its programs to provide authentic curriculum and instruction relevant to real-world situations and to empower inmate students to become responsible agents for their behaviors and learning outcomes by developing critical thinking skills. Toward this aim, this study demonstrated the implementation of Freire’s (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy in teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL), specifically Mexican youth prison inmates, in a project established in 2018. Through the lenses of critical theory and border pedagogy, the authors analyzed the pedagogical shift of a pre-service teacher toward Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy during the 13-week teaching practices in a youth prison in Mexico. The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) To what extent does one pre-service teacher practice Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy?

2) How does one preservice teacher experience teaching inmates in a confinement facility?

Following, we provide background information behind the growth of prisons in Mexico, prison teaching research, the theoretical framework undergirding the project, an analysis of the data, and conclusions toward improving pedagogy.

## Literature Review

### Prisons in Mexico

Prisons in Mexico have become populated with functioning and productive youth as a result of an alienating global economy that has taken hold of governing institutions privileging the ruling class (Miranda, 2014; Cortés, 2011). This has produced a series of local consequences, especially for youth without access to quality education, employment, and the social knowledge needed to maintain social standing and high paying jobs. Immigrants settle in marginal urban areas of a city when they find no place within the modern global workforce context, which requires them to have knowledge and skills they cannot access (Miranda, 2014). Many Mexican youths in these urban areas lack the basic resources necessary to adapt and become successful within an increasingly globalizing market. The lack of access to formal education alongside unemployed parents equals a struggling future for Mexican youth who are sometimes led to violence and robbery. Therefore,

Prison is the place chosen by States [within Mexico] to exclude those who have been left out of the global economy, the unemployed, migrants, young people without school and those who have not benefited from the

economic growth and that now become a threat to order. (Cortés, 2011, p. 102)

Consequently, Mexican youth who live under such circumstances may acquire negative and unhealthy life practices from family members who also struggle within the system. Because the state emphasizes a politics of crime rather than a politics of the social, those who do not comply with societal rules and standards are excluded, displaced, or sent to prisons that lack resources and proper rehabilitation procedures (Frías Armenta & Gómez Martínez, 2014). Furthermore, the negative socializing practices of Mexican youth are enhanced by local drug distribution and usage, prompted by modern socioeconomic conditions that only benefit those in power (Cortés, 2011). These factors generate individualism, loneliness, and a literal and metaphorical addiction to what youth perceive will grant a fulfilling life, oftentimes pursued through unlawful acts. If Mexico continues to exercise a criminal system rather than attend to the social needs of their impoverished youth, distrust towards the system will continue to grow. Crime will not cease, as the primal need to survive within a globalizing capitalistic framework will continue to lead youth into self-destructive paths within a system that purposely alienates them via social, educational, economic, or political structures (Cortés, 2011; Miranda, 2014).

### Teaching ESOL in Prison

In Mexico, demand is high for English skills, especially with its proximity to the English-dominant United States to the north (Petrón, 2009). Learning and obtaining a certain proficiency in English might prepare inmate students for better job or life opportunities, either inside Mexico as the economy further globalizes or in the U.S. if

the students eventually migrate after their release. Literature about teaching ESOL in prison has come almost exclusively from the US. Olinger et al. (2012) confirmed the positive effects of teaching and learning English in a U.S. confinement facility, where a significant number of Spanish-speaking Mexican male inmates had limited English proficiency. The researchers found that learning English meant more than acquiring another language. It also taught students a sense of responsibility, pride, and achievement, as well as provided them with greater hope for a job to provide for their family upon release.

Despite such advantages, approaches to teaching ESOL in Mexico, despite curricular and national policy shifts (Ramírez Romero, Sayer, & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2014), are still largely based on the memorization of grammar rules, translation activities from Spanish to English, and long lists of vocabulary served without meaningful contexts. Accordingly, the teaching approaches are generally unresponsive to students' interests, concerns, or realities. It is an unfortunate reality for students who live a life of isolation, without the language tools that would allow them to generate discussions about their concerns or problems, develop their critical thinking skills, and enhance reflection on their situations in life against the backdrop of the larger society.

Researchers highlight several advantages of teaching ESOL in prison (Hill, 2013; Novek, 2017; Olinger et al., 2012; Scott, 2013), which also could ameliorate ESOL teaching approaches out of prison classrooms. Despite the lack of a sense of connection to society in the isolated, unpredictable situations, prison classrooms can serve as an interactive space (Novek, 2017; Scott, 2013). Through learning experientially with each other, inmates can build creative dialogues and

discover the joy of communicating with peers, instructors, volunteers, staff, and administrators that make up the prison community. They may also experience a sense of respect and membership they might not have had in their lives outside of prison. Provided with learning opportunities, especially for language learning, inmates can survive and maintain their dignity and humanity, as well as feel a sense of purpose filled with future possibilities, under the grimmest conditions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Critical Theory, Problem-posing Pedagogy, and Border Pedagogy**

Critical theory seeks to develop an awareness of freedom for social transformation and democracy by calling into question existing social practices that cause oppression, unequal power relations, and patterns of dominance among people. A staple of critical theory, Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy is an alternative to the banking model of education in which students are treated as passive vessels waiting to be deposited with knowledge by teachers. Problem-posing pedagogy focuses on developing students' critical consciousness and dialogues that provide both teachers and students with a mutual, reciprocal learning environment in which they can recognize their socialized and contextualized position in the social world (Scott, 2017).

Giroux and McLaren (1986) explained that teachers working with working class or minority students should be able to understand class, cultural, ideological, and gender dimensions that inform classroom life, leading to viewing cultural difference as a strength so that students may be able to define their own identities within the context of a larger world. In order to accomplish

this, teachers must enact a kind of border pedagogy—through the construct of metaphorical and literal borders, as well as through tapping social memory that challenges the linear version of history—in their teaching of incarcerated youth so that the youth may better understand “how power is inscribed differently on the body, culture, history, space, land, and psyche” (Giroux, 1991, p. 51). Unfortunately, “student teachers are [regularly] instructed to view schooling as a neutral terrain devoid of power and politics” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 227), leading teachers to ignore the very histories and experiences of the students they teach.

Giroux and McLaren (1986) explained that teacher preparation programs should prepare teachers to be critical agents in education, following a moral compass to help students become part of an ongoing struggle for democracy “where students are educated to become informed, active, and critical citizens” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 221); thus, critical theory is an important tool for questioning and challenging existing and contextualized worlds through ongoing reflections. It is understandable that teachers might find working with incarcerated youth challenging; however, Darder (2015) reminds educators that Freire emphasized a pedagogy of love and patience that transcends teaching practices, which can be detaching and isolating; hence, “in the process of teaching and learning, it is impossible to express love and respect for students without our willingness to engage them in ways that allow us to know them authentically” (Darder, 2015, p. 52). This approach requires teachers to critically reflect on their own identities as teachers and become aware of their own political power, as well as built upon the experiences and knowledges of their students to help create the possibility of transformation for both parties. Kincheloe (2008) explained

that “critical pedagogy believes that nothing is impossible when we work in solidarity and with love, respect, and justice as our guiding lights” (p. 9). In order to accomplish this, teachers need to have a critical understanding of their own poverty of knowledge of difference and come to value it as a motivator to learn how to lead their students towards owning a sense of voice and empowerment that extends beyond the classroom.

Critical theory, problem posing pedagogy, and border pedagogy within carceral environments should be practiced with an awareness of the paradox that emerges when attempting pedagogical practices inside prisons—an awareness to work against systematic violence while honoring the lived experiences and realities of incarcerated students (Castro & Brawn, 2017). This implies that teachers need to continually adopt a position which would allow students to think about and question notions of power in their society while reckoning with a system of near total power that limits the agency of those incarcerated. Critical pedagogy is often considered a synonym of empowerment for students; however, regarding education in prison, students are easily disempowered by the institutional, systemic power of surveillance (Kilgore, 2011). Giroux (1991) argued that pedagogical conditions should exist in which students are able to become border crossers in order to survive within and across contexts without having to assimilate, and in essence, lose their identity. Border pedagogy, along with problem posing pedagogy, can radically enhance the experience of incarcerated Mexican youth in that “border pedagogy points to the need for conditions that allow students to write, speak, and listen in a language in which meaning becomes multivalent, dispersed, and resists permanent closure” (Giroux, 1991, p. 52), regardless of context. In

essence, such students would reach an understanding of their identity through a dual frame of reference as they analyze their socialized local experiences against the backdrop of a much larger and globalized society. This dual frame of reference would allow incarcerated students to learn English language, as well as use it for their own benefit by not conforming to institutionalized practices and rules that aim to control people's futures. For example, students can be offered "the opportunity to develop a counter discourse to the established boundaries of knowledge" (Giroux, 1991, p. 53) as they become involved in the learning and production of knowledge by rewriting their own histories, identities, and learning possibilities. This means, for example, that students can learn how to identify racist, sexist, or class specific ideologies within text produced by institutional power.

## Methodology

### Participatory Action Research and Critical Autoethnography

Educators in carceral facilities need to take critical approaches to their teaching that entail thoughtful considerations and situated practices of lived realities—both their own and those of their students (Castro & Brawn, 2017). As a subset of action research, participatory action research (PAR) focuses on a researcher's actions and life changes through collaborative work with research participants as a community of inquiry (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Diversity of perspectives brought by researcher and participants on certain social issues is essential in PAR to improving comprehension and transforming the world of injustice, inequality, oppression, and imbalanced power systems and privilege

that alienate the have-nots from the haves (Raygoza, 2016).

The researcher is the subject of critical autoethnography as well. Marx, Pennington, & Chang (2017) explained that critical autoethnography, the approach used here by Santos, connects one's personal experiences, related to race/ethnicity, sex/gender, language, culture, or other aspects, to the broader context of education in society. Critical autoethnography allows its researcher to analyze and critique injustice and inequity in the settings of his or her own life and education (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013). The researcher is centered in a study as the subject of inquiry, analysis, and critique in order to question and examine his or her identity, power, privileged, roles, or penalties within one or more personal, cultural, and social contexts (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012; Kasun, 2015; Marx et al., 2017). Thus, the researcher of a study based on critical autoethnography is asked to take a critical, reflective approach to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge as a vital participant and examiner of self and the research in relation to his or her community of inquiry (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Hughes et al., 2012). Researchers in the field of education should be able to reflect on how their pedagogy and practices of teaching and learning are influenced in this type of study.

When critical autoethnography is used as a method, one of the key features to consider is problematizing existing concerns in the community of inquiry (Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970/2000; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Freire considered problematization as not only a pedagogic work to disrupt knowledge that is poured upon students, but also a strategy to develop their critical awareness of social power and oppressive systems that dominates their life. For Foucault (1977), problematization is a

method of questioning and analyzing issues for critical inquiry. Through the process of problematization, critical autoethnography research focuses on its ultimate goal—initiating and leading action that changes the society in which people are objectified under the intersecting issues of privilege and oppression, such as gender/sex, race/ethnicity, language, culture, religion, or (dis)ability.

As participatory action research and critical autoethnography are methods that value the act of research as part of a researcher's learning process, we focused this study on Santos, a pre-service teacher, who practiced Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a Mexican youth prison. We explore how she, as a researcher and aspiring teacher candidate, critically reflected on her social position, power, and privilege and gained knowledge and insights from teaching experiences through mutual, interactive dialogues in the unique classroom environment.

### **Research Background**

The current study began as part of an undergraduate research methods course in an English teacher preparation program at a large, public university in central Mexico. Kasun, a bilingual and multicultural U.S. visiting scholar to that institution on a Fulbright award from 2017 to 2018, taught the course in which 17 pre-service student teachers enrolled. She designed and piloted the research project with the students, focusing on their practices of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy. The reason she decided to adopt the pedagogy for them arose organically. The university invited her to teach the second semester of the two-semester sequence, and she asked the administrators if they would approve an engaged action research project, as she had already focused on critical theory and

applied action research the first semester and was eager to link theory into practice in order to help the students understand this critical connection as well as to lend the students' research efforts to providing a social good. The administration readily agreed, and she continued in haste after dialoging with the methods class about their interest in pursuing this applied, self-reflective research in community.

Based on this pedagogy, pre-service teachers prepared a one-hour lesson plan for each week of the 15-week semester, and Kasun previewed each lesson, providing suggestions and guidance on each plan. At the end of each week of teaching, the pre-service teachers composed a critical reflection paper of three to four pages on their new teaching experiences that was guided by the following three questions: a) How would I evaluate my instruction? b) How did I feel about my experience? and c) What did I learn from the teaching experience? The questions were suggested by Kasun in order to help preservice teachers think critically—not just of their own teaching practices, but also of their situation as a teacher, student, and individual who share different perspectives on critical issues and lived experiences with their inmate students, such as gender, class, language, or education. One of the pre-service teachers in the class, Santos, submitted an original draft of this paper as her final reflection for the course and agreed to revise it for submission to this journal with the help of the supporting authors.

### **Research Setting**

With the approval of the confinement facility near the university, Kasun and her students were allowed to conduct prison teaching in one-on-one or one-on-two settings. Because the research was autoethnography, it did not require an ethics



board approval. At the time of the research, the facility housed the 31 juveniles who were taught in the program. The majority of them were young men in their teens and 20s; incarcerated for various offenses, including rape, homicide, and kidnapping. Some inmate students left the facility without warning, either released or sent to other facilities. Other students arrived after the program started, which meant teaching plans often had to be adjusted without notice.

Every week, Kasun and the pre-service teachers walked through a metal detector to prove that they were not carrying prohibited items; only papers, pencils, one laptop with no Internet connection, and two speakers for listening and speaking practices were permitted as teaching and learning materials. Classrooms were equipped with a whiteboard and a just enough chairs, mostly worn. The limited educational resources made teaching less efficient and effective. Inmate students attending ESOL classes were accompanied by security guards. Extending the level of interaction with student inmates beyond classroom time was prohibited, so it took a great deal of effort for teachers to build good rapport in 60 minutes of a short weekly class.

The facility was equipped with a well-maintained soccer field and basketball court that the inmates were allowed to use on weekends. During the 15 weeks of the visits, however, inmates seemed to spend most of their time mopping, sweeping, or doing other chores prior to the teachers' arrival. Most female inmates did origami; males learned to make woven bracelets, which were for sale for visitors. Even under the strict surveillance atmosphere inside the facility, the inmate students were kind and polite once they walked into the classroom, giving handshakes and showing their willingness to learn.

## Participants

This study's participant was Santos, who at the time of the study was a 21-year-old teacher candidate in the ESOL teaching program. Santos is a first generation college graduate who hailed from the same city where she studied, considering herself somewhat sheltered from the social realities which had created the conditions which led to mass incarceration. Growing up within the Mexican education system, which heavily relied on the concept of knowledge deposit through mechanical repetition and memorization, she felt overwhelmed to move away from the traditional teaching methods so prevalent in her previous teaching and learning experiences. Among the various teaching approaches and content knowledge of English language that she had learned at the university, Freire's problem-posing pedagogy and its practices inside the prison strongly inspired her to remain with and continue this project. At the same time of the study, she was and remains a deeply curious and thoughtful educator committed to making the world better.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data were the 13 critical reflection papers by Santos, focusing on her prior teaching and learning experiences and written weekly during her time as a teacher in the youth prison. Kasun went each week to the facility, observing and often engaging in conversation with Santos and her students (among the other participants). Kasun and the entire class of students, including Santos, had weekly discussions analyzing their experiences and self-evaluations as well which contributed to later analysis of the data. Santos also presented her findings during a colloquium about the class at the conclusion of the project. Because of the typical regulations of the confinement

facility, Santos was not able to collect data, such as audio/video recordings of her teaching practices, interview files of her inmate students, or further information about them, other than her own papers. At first, the collected papers were read and analyzed by Santos. Then, the other co-authors read, re-read, and analyzed the data and Santos's analysis for data triangulation through their unique perspectives and life experiences (Saldaña, 2015). As the lead of the study and Santos's professor, Kasun provided her advocacy-oriented lenses from work conducted on both sides of the border (e.g. Hidalgo Aviles & Kasun, 2019; Saavedra & Kasun, 2016) to the study. Jang is a Korean marriage immigrant doctoral student studying language and culture education and identity of transnational youths. Espinosa is a Cuban immigrant doctoral student who experienced great socioeconomic struggle in her native country and upon arrival to the U.S. She has been shaped by her experiences learning English in a country that continually deprives her of her own culture and language.

During the process of the data analysis, the authors focused on the moments of Santos's critical reflection on various experiences, such as previous and current education, privilege, the system of oppression in prison, and other issues of race/ethnicity, gender, or language. In addition, we looked carefully at how she changed herself as a critical, aspiring pre-service teacher who can effectively conceptualize and practice Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in the classroom over the time of the research. After the analysis, the authors pulled out several themes in common and finalized them into three main themes: a) Becoming a loving, border-crossing teacher, b) recognizing we are all human, and c) shifting from traditional to problem-posing pedagogy. The first theme, 'Becoming a loving, border-crossing

teacher,' describes how Santos emerged as an aspiring teacher candidate with sincere care and love for her inmate students while practicing the problem-posing pedagogy. Along with the theme, 'We are all human,' it illustrates how she perceived her new teaching environment, the confinement facility, and inmate students that she might not have experienced without the research. In the unfamiliar environment, she examined the enclosed reality of her students and made a human connection with them. The last theme presents her process of trial and error in implementing the pedagogy and to what extent she processed it in the classroom. In the next section, we present findings through the voice of Santos's reflections; we then contextualize the findings together.

## Findings

### Becoming a Loving, Border-crossing Teacher

Before and during my very first teaching in the confinement facility, I was nervous and afraid to meet my inmate students. Assuming that *prisoners* are bad people and would look and behave in a different, unusual way, I felt intimidated and scared of getting to know them in my heart. In my second visit, however, I realized that the feeling of fear was not from my student, but from myself—zero experiences in the prison in which constant control and surveillance exist, in the name of safety. All the pre-services teachers were required to walk through metal detector each visit. It was something I never got used to. My feeling of oppression and surveillance was worsened by the security guards, who often interrupted the daily schedule of instruction and made me feel inhibited by surveillance. Despite this *security* border, I was able to engage love in my own pedagogy.

I organized the first and second lessons to get to know my students and create a comfortable, relaxing, and respectful learning space. My first student, Miguel (all names are pseudonyms) was a new arrival trying to get attuned to confined living. I tried to communicate with my enthusiasm for teaching, presenting a relaxed and comfortable face. I asked questions about student inmates' interests and needs, hoping I would be able to make a strong connection to their life experiences through relevant learning objectives and activities. Based on their answers to my questions, I prepared the remaining lessons on topics relevant to their lives in and out of prison, such as family, sports, personal characteristics, and senses and feelings. From the beginning, I believed that I was becoming not only more confident but also more eager to teach. It was a totally new experience for me. After the third class, I recognized that I was not afraid and was more conscious about what I was doing. I was happy because I was helping to make someone's life better through education. I was becoming cognizant of my role and responsibility as an aspiring teacher candidate.

As I continued my teaching and built rapport, I started considering myself an effective and hopeful teacher because of my sincere care and love for my students. During weeks 11 and 12, I taught Mario about adjectives that could represent his feelings. I felt happy and confident with the work that I was doing because I was helping him to recognize that he was not a bad student and to believe in what he was able to do. Like many of the incarcerated youth, Mario had been wary of formal learning experiences due to past experiences with schooling. I wanted to show my understanding and, more importantly, that I did not judge him; on the contrary, I was to teach him and motivate him to enjoy studying. I eventually developed rapport and

reached him by teaching about his hometown and engaging him about life problems that interested him. I noticed through the language instruction that I conducted with him that he developed deeper analysis of some of his own social problems. At the end of my prison teaching experience, I realized that I had been working from Mario's necessities, teaching respectfully with colorful visuals and, more importantly, with love because I had sincerely considered things he might like.

Although I hesitated and felt afraid of inmate students at the beginning of the semester, I broke the feeling and opened myself to them without stereotypical, discriminating thoughts. I showed my sincere care and love for the students and became a teacher in every class while evaluating and reflecting on educative moments of me and my students. I changed to become a teacher candidate who has strong confidence with a commitment to teaching with care and love.

### **We Are All Human**

Following problem-posing pedagogy, which puts great importance on meaningful dialogue between teacher and students, I tried to connect my teaching with the students' realities as well as to make a human connection with them in every class. During conversation with two students in week 2, I discovered that prisoners are normal people with dreams and desires to improve themselves. I believed that they made mistakes, and that was why they were incarcerated; however, that did not mean that they were without personal ambition. When I realized that two of my inmate students were good students, the reasons for their incarceration and the causes of their crimes were no longer questions for me to ponder. I thought they could have had a better life had they remained simply good

students. A week later, when I realized that one of them would be released, I was pleased that he would have another chance. Unlike at the beginning of teaching, when my discourse was about how incarcerated youth were different, now I was able to develop a sense of hope, one quietly colored by hoping I had helped improve his life in some small measure by my care for him—a care I could not have felt toward imprisoned people, I knew, until this experience.

In week 8, Kasun and all the pre-service teachers, including me, prepared a get-together with the inmate students. There were sandwiches, drinks, soccer games, and smiles on everyone's faces. For a brief time, there was no border that distinguished who was an inmate or teacher, and the imprisoned students seemed to forget their situation of being oppressed. However, different realities appeared between us. When I wanted to talk with one of my students, I approached him carefully, aware of the potential for misunderstanding if I got too close or touched him. After the gathering, I wrote on my reflection paper:

Today was different. I felt very confident and free to meet and talk to the rest of the inmates. I remembered for a moment I looked around, and I realized we were there standing on the same field, breathing the same air, sharing the same food and noticed we all were part of a community, we are humans that make mistakes, but no one is better than the other. Sometimes I feel kind of melancholic for them because whenever I have the opportunity to talk to them, I can't imagine why they could have done to be there, and even more, when I look at the [young incarcerated] women who are just like me I can't understand the reasons that brought them to be in prison.

In my conversations with the inmates, I believed they felt free to speak and were able to learn words to describe their own feelings, emotions, and thoughts.

My idea and position about the inmate students are not changed—they are just the same human beings but in prison for mistakes—mistakes I realize that even I could have made in similar circumstances.

### **From Traditional to Problem-posing Pedagogy**

One day, student Miguel told me that he was not keen on English language learning since his previous learning experiences were based on exercises in his grammar book without real practice. For me, practicing Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy was a similar obstacle because I had been trained to teach English based on grammar functions. As an emerging teacher candidate, however, I recognized that I had to work harder to make a real and meaningful change in my teaching practices. I tried the problem-posing pedagogy, starting from the third week with the understanding that this teaching method attempts to develop the critical thinking of students, rather than just depositing information to them. A week later I felt successful in making my students think beyond grammar structures and practice English in context. However, on the other hand, I got confused and unconfident with my implementing lesson plans based on the pedagogy because I doubted its effectiveness in teaching English.

After my fourth week, I asked for suggestions and guidance in a lengthy meeting with Dr. Kasun. She confirmed my knowledge of problem-posing pedagogy teaching, and I realized that its actual implementation was necessary to provide contextualized teaching. Since my newest student was both young and seemingly

deeply immature, I doubted if he could learn and if I could teach him. She and I decided that attempting dialogic teaching was worthwhile, as the hope of reaching each student is embedded in creating the safety of genuine dialog (Freire, 1970/2000). I was still learning Freire's methodology, and even when it became clearer, I had to find effective activities and strategies to create dialogues with my students. With a little more confidence, I decided that my student would have opportunities to acquire English language knowledge through topics that really interested him. In week 8, for instance, I taught Mario the alphabet using pictures of his hometown retrieved on the internet and printed in color. I observed him being motivated while remembering what he liked about his hometown. About the lesson, I reflected that teachers should be aware of the importance of problem-posing pedagogy because it lets students see their reality and, more importantly, makes the learning process meaningful. I was also able to confirm the effect of the pedagogy after teaching adjectives describing one's feelings. Teaching English using the student's realities resulted in a positive response from the student; he easily remembered words related to his life.

Although I initially struggled to adapt teaching practices of problem-posing pedagogy, as the weeks progressed it made more sense. This affected my teaching philosophy, as described from my self-reflection:

I learnt that there are not bad students, rather students who need to feel very motivated and complimented when they are doing the right things. Also, through real dialog and showing understanding, we as teachers can really connect with our students.

Ultimately, my experience changed both my life and my entire approach to teaching,

from one that I described as more traditional to one that was more dialogic and problem-posing.

## Discussion

This work shows the changed perspectives and attitudes of Santos. Similar to her students, she presented the idea that traditional schools transmit education through less-relevant knowledge that does not align to interests and real-life experiences of students (Illich, 1970). For her, as a student who experienced the conventional school system of Mexico, Freire's problem-posing pedagogy was something she had not been exposed to in her previous learning or teaching. She felt unsure of her own ability to practice problem-posing pedagogy and its effects in teaching and learning at the beginning of the study. She shifted into in the process of knowing, practicing, and internalizing the pedagogy through interactions with students in a small cell of the detention facility in which critical reflection on her teaching was possible. She endeavored to apply the pedagogy to her actual teaching by creating positive rapport and generating solid connections between the students' lived experiences and her teaching. In doing so, she confirmed that the students participated more actively in learning and the effectiveness of her practicing the pedagogy as an essential means for developing student motivation, precisely what theorists of critical pedagogy recognize as good teaching.

From the perspective of Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy, what she did is not something to be considered *exceptional* but should be the *rule*. She treated her students as individuals with the potential to learn by developing their thinking, not just as mere passive receivers of information. She also

acknowledged that she was not the only one who had the power of the knowledge in the classroom; instead, using critical pedagogy, she shared the content knowledge, thoughts, and life stories with students and learned what a teacher should be. As a passionate teacher candidate, she realized that teaching with sincere care and love was key to stronger and more potent teaching practices. She demonstrated a profound commitment to the students in efforts to be connected to them by building mutual understanding and relationships.

Considering to what extent she critically practiced the pedagogy, it was surprising to see how Santos transformed language teaching practices into an opportunity for critical self-reflection about the students, which is a crucial part of practicing problem-posing pedagogy. For students under the grimmest surveillance and oppressive circumstances, achieving a sense of who they are, and expressing their own thoughts and subjectivities are not what they are used to doing while imprisoned. Santos helped inmate students talk about and reflect on their identities with the use of adjectives and pictures, a practice other English language teachers might consider using in their own classrooms. At the same time, she did not overtly address critical issues that might raise consciousness and transcend the social status and reality in which her students were oppressed and surveilled. We recognized the constraints of incarceration and avoided issues that might put inmate students at risk.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrated the enhanced understandings and practices of Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy by the teacher candidate, Santos, in teaching English to incarcerated students in a Mexican youth prison for 13 weeks. Her

teaching showed the transformation of Santos as an emerging teacher who strived to provide inmate students with opportunities for voice and freedom in their learning, through care and love that crossed borders. The findings indicate that teachers should embrace a humanistic approach to education in which students are not expected to be passive and unthinking followers. This work is especially relevant for teachers of incarcerated students, who should be perceived as valuable human beings with the potential to contribute to society in the future (Novek, 2017). Educators should be able to offer incarcerated students opportunities to develop a sense of purpose through new possibilities.

Moreover, love, care, and courage are truly necessary to support inmate students, as reflected in Santos's successful teaching experiences in this study: a learning community behind prison walls can be evoked by a sense of human connection among the students and teachers. The lack of teaching resources in confinement facilities may be overcome by creating social spaces where inmate students can freely interact with one another, visitors, and even staff members, based on a trusting, respectful relationship. In that environment, educators would also be able to discover the joy of communicating and developing critical reflections about their lives while teaching.

In addition, as inmate students so often have disrupted learning histories and experiences, prison educators should realize and adapt teaching approaches responsive to interests, lived experiences, languages, class, or cultural orientations with the belief each student can learn (Hill, 2013; Novek, 2017). We recognize that while teaching in prisons may provide a service to the incarcerated individuals, it provides an equal if not greater service to those trained in critical pedagogy to shift their own hearts and consciousness. We suspect this kind of

experience could be life changing for all teachers should they have an extensive teaching internship designed to provide meaningful dialog between teachers and students, one explicitly grounded in reciprocity, without charity or patronizing. We also caution that many, if not most prisons, might not allow for such close dialog, as it provides access to the very kinds of critical thinking considered a threat to the “effective” functioning of the institutions.

The prison teaching project allowed Santos, a pre-service teacher, to engage students from a very “othered” (Brown, 2005, p. 290) context, incarcerated youth. We argue that if pre-service teachers can become competent in engaging critical pedagogy with such a distinct population, all teachers can find points of connection with their students. Indeed, Santos was forced to reckon with preconceived notions of the other and to amend them toward seeing the humanity in each student, despite the depths of their errors. Surely this compassion and humanizing can be brought into spaces where the distance between the teacher and her students is far less than what Santos experienced in this prison teaching program.

Education in this current mass incarceration era can be transformed through Freirean pedagogies when educators and teachers lead their students to question their oppressed, disempowered identities and thoughts and to act together to change their realities in order to construct a better, more democratic society. Indeed, public education institutions in many parts of the world increasingly resemble prisons in aspect and practice—from metal detectors and lockdown drills to the youngest of children being taught to walk single-file with hands behind their backs in silence through all hallways. To transform oppressive educations, teachers, educators, and other stakeholders need to educate next

generations within a curriculum in which they become co-constructors of their own knowledge, as well as develop critical and reflective thinking abilities that contribute to the transformation and recovery of their voices, lives, and society. Then mass education can be shifted toward improving the lives of all people so we no longer have a need for institutions to provide access to mass incarceration.

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