

Chapter 19. Where the Pipeline Ends: Teaching High School Equivalency in a Medium-Security Prison

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Both Jason Porath, a special education educator at a medium-security state prison in North Carolina, and Andrea Verschaeve, a writing teacher at the same prison, saw the paths of their careers headed toward what doctorate degrees promised them: roles focused on academic leadership, scholarship, and research. Both had their professional dreams deferred, but they have found a real sense of purpose and fulfillment in educating students who are serving time for felony convictions.

In what follows, Porath focuses his story on the beginning of his journey down a path that led to education as a career in general, and prison education in particular. Verschaeve starts her narrative at the beginning of her teaching career and follows it through her current position, which, like Porath, is as a prison educator. After working together for some time and sharing their stories one day over lunch in the break room, both Verschaeve and Porath were surprised to discover that they had come to similar conclusions after leaving their doctorates unfinished: even though it feels like it at the time, it's not the end of the world. Really.

Mission, Passion, and Frustration: Jason Porath's Story

Education has been both my mission and passion for as long as I can remember. Since my first day of kindergarten, I have always had a desire for and a love of learning. During my second-grade year, I had my first experience “teaching” a student. This lit a fire within me that still burns brightly and intensely to this day. Becoming a teacher was now my life goal; an educational journey had begun.

When I entered junior high, I was approached by my aunt, a special education teacher, to become a peer tutor. Having accepted this position, I was now an official employee of a school district. My dream of becoming a teacher was beginning to come true.

The first students I worked with were a couple of first graders who struggled in both mathematics and reading. Although I did not know it at the time, these students were receiving special education services at their school in addition to the peer tutoring I was providing. Working with these students was both challenging and rewarding. Learning had always come easily to me. I thought everyone was able to learn if they just put in the effort and paid attention to the people who were teaching.

Working with those first graders opened my eyes to the world of special education. I began learning from my aunt as much as I could about learning disabilities, accommodations, and strategies for helping learners with special education diagnoses reach their full potential and achieve academic success. As time passed, the students I was tutoring began to understand the concepts we were working on during our sessions. Both their confidence and academic scores increased.

By the year's end, my students had increased their standardized test scores in both mathematics and reading. Most importantly, however, their confidence and love for school had increased. These students now came to sessions eager to learn, asked questions, and discussed how their school day had gone. Their final report cards indicated how much they had improved throughout the year.

I went on to be a peer tutor throughout my high school years. It was during this time that my career focus took yet another change. As a peer tutor, I had come to the decision that I wanted to become a special education teacher for elementary students with a focus on students with learning disabilities. When I began high school, my mother took a job as an educational aid in a self-contained classroom for emotionally impaired students. On a daily basis, we discussed her interactions with the students. Their behaviors and academic performance fascinated me. Then, one day, an event occurred that forever changed my focus.

School had just ended, and I headed home, eager for my daily conversation with Mom. However, this day was not going to be like any other day. When I arrived home, no one was there. This was quite unusual. Shortly after I arrived, the phone call came. Mom was in the hospital. While on a bus headed to a field trip, one of her students began threatening other students with a pencil. My mom instructed the student to hand her the pencil, to which he replied, "Go ahead and take it from me!" As she went to take the pencil, he grabbed her arm and wrenched it over the seat, causing an injury that required surgery and resulted in permanent nerve damage. Due to the severity of the injury, my mom was unable to return to work for the rest of that year and was never able to do that job again.

Immediately upon hearing of my mom's injury, my brother and I became furious and were ready to "destroy" this kid. We demanded she tell us this kid's name, as we already knew what school he attended. The answer she gave us was a complete shock. Not only did she not tell us his name, but she told us that she was not angry with this student and did not wish for anything to happen to him. She sat with us and calmly explained how this student had a number of behavioral, academic, social, and emotional issues that were most likely the reason that he attacked her in the manner that he did. Initially, I was not buying any of that. Then, I began to think and wonder about what she said. I needed to know more. That is when I decided that I wanted to become a teacher of students with emotional impairments.

In 2001, I graduated from Northern Michigan University with a degree in education certified to teach special education in grades K-12 and endorsed in emotional impairments for grades K-8. Upon graduation, my intention was to teach in an elementary self-contained classroom for special needs students. After

a few unsuccessful interviews, I was informed of an opening for a special education teacher at a detention/treatment center. Although the student population was youth aged 11-18, not the elementary age students I was hoping to work with, I was intrigued by the position. After consulting with my then fiancée and my mother, I decided to apply for the position.

Despite my educational background and my completion of a teacher preparation program, I was nervous about this position due to the age group of the students I would be teaching. Also, these students were one step away from jail and/or prison. Many people I discussed my new position with could not believe I would want to work with “those” kids. This was extremely frustrating to me, and I had a difficult time listening to people discuss my students as though they were barely even people due to being in what many called “kiddie jail.”

Not long after I began teaching at the facility, I knew I had made the right decision. The students I worked with were, in fact, worthy of having people believe in them and help them better their lives. Many of my students came from backgrounds that included broken homes and exposure to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Victims themselves, they had become victimizers. During my time as a teacher there, I was able to play a part in aiding over 78 students obtain their high school diplomas, several students earned GEDs, a few went on to earn college scholarships, and most all were able to realize at least three grade-level gains in both mathematics and reading. Most importantly, however, many students realized and vocalized that there are people who truly care and that because of this, they realized they were able change and become healthy, productive members of their home communities.

After ten years of teaching at the facility, shifts in politics and leadership caused the mission to change and the focus of the facility to be lost. Youth were not achieving the successes that once had occurred, staff was leaving, and the program was falling apart. At this time, I decided that I needed to take action. I could not watch our program and my kids suffer. So, I enrolled in a doctor of educational leadership program at Central Michigan University with the intention of becoming the director of the facility and bringing success back to our program.

Coursework went smoothly, and I made it to the dissertation phase of the program. This is when the problems began. There was a three-year delay for approval to use data from the facility in my dissertation. Once I finally received approval, I had lost both momentum and desire to complete the paper. Then, after several promises that I would be made program manager and ultimately director of the facility were broken, I was discouraged and ready to give up.

At this time, my wife and I decided it was time for a move. I began searching for positions in North Carolina. Having worked with juveniles for the previous 14 years, I began looking for positions at youth centers, and then I saw a few openings at prisons. Remembering what my mentor teacher once told me, I decided to apply to the prisons. A few weeks later, I was hired at a medium-security men's prison to teach special education classes.

This change of scenery was what I needed to bring my focus back to my dissertation. With renewed enthusiasm, I began working on my paper, only to be derailed once again: my mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). The MS was fast and furious, and within a year, my mom had lost her battle. Prior to her passing, I was on alert to head back to Michigan at a moment's notice. As a result, I once again lost focus on my dissertation. Unfortunately, the university-imposed clock on time to degree completion had expired. I could re-take classes that had expired, but I came to realize that my place is "in the trenches," working with students where I can have a direct impact on academic, emotional, and social growth.

Finding Professional Freedom: Andrea Verschaeve's Story

I knew this job would be different when I was on the phone to set up an interview and the human resources representative on the other end of the line said, "Make sure not to wear an underwire bra." I had thought about working in a prison before when I was applying for teaching jobs after I graduated from college without a teaching license, but at that time, I ended up accepting a teaching assistantship and getting my master's degree instead. I didn't consider prison education again for more than 20 years.

When I began full-time teaching, first for a year in a rural Virginia high school, then for nine years in two different rural Virginia middle schools, I loved teaching, and I also wanted to continue my own education. During this time, I was accepted into Indiana University of Pennsylvania's doctoral program in composition and TESOL. I completed the rigorous coursework and had begun working on dissertation research when the local university hired me as a full-time lecturer.

The lectureship had an expiration date. I could stay in the position for a maximum of six years. It paid \$40,000 a year when I began in 2008, which was less than I had been making as a middle school teacher, and when I left six years later, I still made \$40,000 a year. I thought in that position it would be a little easier for me to work on my dissertation because I would be gaining experience teaching the level of students I would be qualified to teach when I finished my doctorate, so I thought accepting the position, even with a pay cut, would be a win-win.

Unfortunately, teaching at the college level was not as rewarding for me as teaching eighth graders had been. For one thing, I didn't connect as easily with college students. They didn't spend as much time in my class as middle school students had, who I taught for a full year rather than just one semester, and they were busy and preoccupied in a way the middle school students were not. In short, college students weren't interested in forging relationships with me, and because this was an important way I developed a sense of community to foster learning in my classroom, I didn't enjoy teaching at the college level as much.

In addition to the lack of connection, I didn't feel creative or inspiring as a university lecturer, whereas I felt that most of my eighth-grade students looked

forward to my class and probably characterized me positively to their friends or parents as “fair” and “nice” and “funny” and “smart.” I doubted my students at the university were talking about me at all, but if they were, I felt characterizations of the time they spent with me might include words like “boring” and “uninspired.”

Although I thought it would be easier to research and write my dissertation in the university setting, even though the lectureship had a 5/5 teaching load, I didn’t really know what I was doing. I didn’t know the questions to ask to navigate dissertation research, so I fell further and further behind until I saw no way to move forward. In addition to feeling like I was drowning in inability, I also realized I was no longer invested in the degree because the door that degree would open—a tenure-track position at a university—no longer appealed to me.

When I emailed my dissertation advisor with my intent to drop out of the program, I felt fear and shame but also relief. I was fearful that I wouldn’t find fulfillment in education anymore, that I would have to start all over in a different field. I didn’t have any ideas about how to do so. I was ashamed that I was quitting, that I was letting down my advisor who believed in me, and that I was letting down the people who had invested in my journey with me—friends, family, and colleagues. I dreaded telling people about my decision, and I ended up having to tell it over and over again, in the grocery store, in the hallway at work, in the writing center where I was working as part of my lectureship, through email conversations.

Sharing my decision to drop out of the Ph.D. program stopped being dreadful only when I stopped equating it with failure. It was the best decision for me, and I often had to reassure others of that fact. When people reacted with disappointment and distress, I felt like I was letting them down, but I was careful not to internalize their disappointment. When I left the university, it was to teach high school, first at a public school in Virginia, and then at a charter school in North Carolina. When I needed a new challenge, I applied to teach at a medium-security correctional institution, one of four in North Carolina that has a dedicated school for the offenders it houses.

Now, I teach writing with an eye towards preparing my students to pass the writing portion of ETS’ HiSET (High School Equivalency Test). To get to my classroom each morning, I enter a gatehouse through one side of a sally port, scan my work badge, and pass through a metal detector before proceeding through the other side of the sally port. In the main building, I pass through a second metal detector and a cell phone detector. A correctional officer peruses my clear bag of belongings—the day’s lunch, a book, and a file of papers—and I am patted down before proceeding through a second sally port.

Now inside the prison complex proper, I pass the visitation area on my left and the chow hall on my right before heading upstairs where the school, chapel, medical and dental facilities, and diagnostic testing area are all housed. From the four slivers of window in my classroom, I can see the gym and outdoor basketball court, the dormitory housing units, the single cell housing units, and the high security housing unit.

My classroom has no internet connection, neither my students nor I have access to cell phones during the school day, and the only things I am able to give my students—ever—are the pencils and lined paper provided by the state. The irony of it is not lost on me: that my job at a medium-security North Carolina state prison is the first one I've held as an educator that has a significant amount of professional freedom.

Conclusion

Both of us agree the time we spent pursuing a doctorate wasn't wasted. Although we became part of the number of students who enter doctoral programs without completing the degree, we recognize that an important part of our professional identities stems from the knowledge and insight we gained in those programs through taking part in a variety of deep classroom discussions, completing rigorous coursework, and growing close with a cohort of fellow doctoral students.

Neither of us would be picked first for a team you'd bet on being successful and resilient prison educators, but we have experienced success in classrooms populated by men and women dressed in identical tan pants and grey t-shirts, serving anywhere from a few more months to more years than they want to count. We do exactly what others in classrooms at every level across the country do every day: we encourage, entertain, cajole, and discipline. We tell stories and jokes and make connections. Sometimes we argue. We hope we are inspiring our students. We participate on committees and attend faculty and department meetings. We grade papers, and we make plans for tomorrow.