Journal of Applied Juvenile Justice Services (2017)

Journal of Applied Juvenile Justice Services

BOOK REVIEW
Demystifying Literacy Education Behind Bars: Effective Strategies for Increasing Human Capital

Sarah C. Staples-Farmer, Ph.D.
Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, NE

Styelinger, M.E., Gavigan, K., & Albright, K. (2017). *Literacy Behind Bars: Successful reading and writing strategies for use with incarcerated youth and adults.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. pp. 93. ISBN: 978-1-4422-6925-5. $45.

INTRODUCTION

Presenting eleven chapters covering a diversity of strategies to increase the literacy of incarcerated individuals, *Literacy Behind Bars* is an integral text for professionals on both sides of the barbed wire fence. As an veteran secondary English of 25 years with experience in juvenile justice education and research, I stand in both excitement and awe to review this resource for multiple reasons. First, it is a valuable resource for educators demystifying literacy instruction for arguably the most vulnerable population in education. Second, the authors and contributors are well versed in education within confined settings and/or literacy curriculum development and instruction. And last, themes of reverence, hospitality, empathy, and acknowledgment of youth as unique individuals with both human and cultural capital to share with the world permeate each chapter. During my own research, I have witnessed teachers' struggle to put lessons together or create cohesive units for a highly mobile population of students, for the broad spectrum learners--in both age and ability--that make up their classrooms. For these teachers, and for all teachers of at-risk and resistant learners, this text presents specific, research and theory based lessons that will, through the development of reading, writing, creative and communication skills, empower students, giving voice to the voiceless and helping youth understand their own potential contributions to the greater conversations of the world.

The argument for the value and importance of literacy programs in secured facilities is long standing and wide. Improved literacy can reduce recidivism, has been proven to be more effective than shock-incarceration tactics, and even short term literacy instruction and reading remediation can have a powerful impact (Read & O'Cummings, 2011; Coulter, 2010; Guerra 2010). The need for *Literacy Behind Bars* is obvious considering "More than 60 percent of

America's inmates are illiterate, and 85 percent of all juvenile offenders have reading problems" (Cohen, 2010). Thus, every facility should have in place a solid literacy program/curriculum with professionals trained to handle the specific student needs and circumstances of this environment. Due to the revolving door of recidivism, instructional time can be limited and lessons diminished to workbooks and worksheets. Thematically, *Literacy Behind Bars* reflects the value in human interaction, mentoring, coaching, and facilitation suggesting the importance of avoiding workbook curricula, despite its easier insertion into the daily functioning of a secured facility. Reading this text inspires a shift in thinking and in approach; Styslinger, Gavigan, and Albright's collection offers a "responsive literacy curriculum" (p. vii) shared by knowledgeable educators and researchers whose experiences and personal narratives within the chapters give authenticity and powerful ethos to their recommendations on how to increase literacy for students in unique classrooms. Organized in three parts—"Supporting Writers," "Encouraging Readers", " and "Inspiring Partnerships"--the ideas are diverse and thought-provoking. Taking what would be found in a typical high school classroom--poetry, writing workshops, personal narrative essays, street literature, graphic novels, even book clubs/groups--the contributors illustrate how each component can be approached with success in the bland, cold environment often associated with incarceration.

"Part 1: Supporting Writers"

In Chapter 1, "Word by Word: Teaching Poetic Economy behind Bars" Deborah Appleman presents creative writing assignments emphasizing word economy and choice. Appleman recognized that her students in a high security prison for men needed to learn how to compact their ideas, thus her assigning of the most powerfully concise word forms: the haiku, the sestina, and the six-word memoir. For Appleman's students, "writing often represents the only thing that offers them any kind of freedom or liberation" (p. 1). In addition, her focus on bringing more structured forms of writing into the classroom was a means to help them "develop their craft" (p.8) and learn how to not just write, but write well.

Timothy R. Bunch in Chapter 2, "Teaching to the Heart: Fostering Empathy through Writing Workshop," teaches his young students that literacy is about connection--that literature mirrors life--that writing can change the world--even if it's their own. Bunch recognizes that, as a young white male, his "normal" and his students' "normal" is "set against a different canvas" (p. 11). Therefore, the key emphasis in his writing workshops is on establishing connections, listening to students, and validating their experiences as valuable content for writing, or in his words, "teach[ing] to the heart" (p. 12). Bunch shares his own anecdotal reflections working with his students, offering powerful and real moments of learning and discovery within the writing workshop where students' words and perspectives are "considered, valued, and celebrated" (p. 12).

Chapter 3 by Kristine E. Pytash, "Composing Public Service Announcements: Using Digital Mentor Texts to Support Student Writers in a Juvenile Detention Facility," explains that "the goal...was to provide youth opportunities to write about topics grounded in their lives so that they might be invested in their writing and also so they could experience how writing an be a powerful way to articulate beliefs, opinions, and lived experiences" (p. 20). Pytash presents her experiences with two students who composed Public Service Announcements (PSA's) after

researching their selected topics, peer pressure and the value of music in the community. Such research and argument writing provided an outlet for the processing of their experiences and in a non-traditional format--one they did not have an opportunity to experience in their traditional school setting.

In Chapter 4, "Writing about the Secrets of Gang Life," Kendra S. Albright helps young men--with the aid of graphic novels--uncover and explore gang culture with the goal to create a tool for preventing younger men and boys from entering into that arena. Working together on this class project, students researched statistics, created a glossary of terms, and even a "Did you know?" section on gang life and all associated with the culture. Their lived experiences would transform into a published graphic text with characters, scenes, and dialogue--a powerful product to influence lives of a younger generation.

"Part 2: Encouraging Readers"

In Chapter 5, "Call-and-Responsive Reading: Street Literature as Agency for Incarcerated Readers" author Vanessa Irvin presents the use of street literature as a means by which students can enter "a reflective space in which self-rehabilitation, in resistance to the dehumanizing nature of prison life, emerges" (p. 37). Irwin describes street literature as "hip-hop era novels...raw, gritty stories about love, life, crime, and coming-of-age in the hood" that "lit a fire for youth and adult inner city readers and inspired a new reading generation of people who had never read before (p. 37). Irwin stresses the value in the expansion of prison libraries to include reading that speaks to the lived experiences of the inmates and to their culture. Further, Irwin urges educators, themselves, to read books that interest their students, but most importantly, juvenile detention facilities should ultimately respect the "reading lives of incarcerated readers" by providing "what they want to read and write, when and however they can" (p. 39).

Building on ideas in Chapter 5, school librarian Susan McNair in Chapter 6, "Books behind the Fence," further argues for the development of libraries within juvenile institutions so that they are student centered, accessible and inviting spaces for personal reading, and places where student can "take ownership of the library and materials and see them as belonging to the school and its students" (p. 43). McNair's narrative-like chapter describes her personal philosophy, circulation procedures, how she organized, restructured, and developed the library to promote student choice, which is important to young people who must "'stay where they are' yet desperately need 'somewhere to go'" (p. 47). McNair's personal story speaks to the power of creating human connections with youth, focusing on the "we" and the "our" and teaching students how to care for and value their library.

Chapter 7, "Creating a Community of Writers Using Graphic Novels" by Karen Gavigan presents the omnipresent dilemma of writing education with incarcerated youth. Quality writing programs in correctional facilities pose a challenge due to the intermittent and transient nature of the juvenile justice system. Gavigan notes increased challenge given the gaps in education consistency that are normative for court-affiliated youth. Therefore, Gavigan's goal is to share "powerful literacy tools" such as graphic novels and texts that speak to their lived experiences to engage youth in "a variety of authentic writing activities" (p. 49).

In the introduction to Chapter 8, "The Places We Can Go: Book Clubs for Social Justice" co-authors Jennifer L. Doyle, Elizabeth M. Bemiss, and Mary E. Styslinger share that "What had so easily begun as a six-week study of book clubs with incarcerated student forever changed us" (p. 55). One high school English teacher, one elementary teacher, and a university professor came together in commitment to youth literacy and social justice. Using "collaborative talk" to "inquire, interrogate, and challenge inequities and injustices through text" (p. 55) the authors' goal for students--through building trust and community--was to deepen their understanding of the world through a social justice lens, combatting stereotypes and oppression in their lives within and beyond the system.

Part 3: "Inspiring Partnerships"

Peter Williamson, Megan Mercurio, and Constance Walker in Chapter 9, "Theme for English B: Teaching and Learning with Incarcerated Youth," describe the challenge of teaching and learning within a juvenile detention facility where security is primary, where "classroom community and collaborative learning environments...are structurally at odds with the norms and purposes of a detention center" (p. 64). Nevertheless, the authors point out the opportunity such an environment holds for observation of teaching practice. First, the authors reveal the culture of teaching under the ever present gaze and presence of security; second, they share the "promises and pitfalls" (p. 64) for new teachers in this setting; and third, they speak to the teachers of the teachers, the professors of education, and what they can do to better equip future educators with the tool kit they need to work with incarcerated youth.

Chapter 10: "Reading Buddies: A School-University Partnership" by Mary E. Styslinger and Timothy R. Bunch. Again, we have a collaboration of high school English teacher, Bunch, and professor of education, Styslinger, joining on the same philosophy and advocacy for students in confinement, for "culturally and socially relevant curriculum and instruction (p. 71). Their long-standing partnership extends to that of their students--on both sides of the fence--by partnering student teachers and juvenile offenders as "book buddies" during a summer program. Such interaction offers pre-service teachers the invaluable opportunity to learn from a diverse population of young people who are often very different from themselves while simultaneously translating theory into practice.

Literacy Behind Bars closes with Chapter 11: "Building Bridges across the Disciplines" Professional Development behind the Fence" by Vitoria A. Oglan and Janie R. Goodman. These veteran educators currently teach graduate/undergraduate courses in literacy instruction. Often called upon to to provide continuing education for teachers, Oglan and Goodman found themselves working with "the dedicated teachers who devote themselves daily to educating adjudicated juveniles" (p. 79). In this chapter, the authors describe the professional development model they used, share their own personal learning working alongside teachers in the youth facility, and finally, make recommendations for the advancement of continuing professional development.

CONCLUSION

Aside from the described literacy instructional approaches professionals can use directly or adapt for their particular needs, educators will be moved by the most critical position and take away: the validation of these young people and their personal histories. Every chapter echoes this sentiment and argues that for literacy work to succeed, the human and potential comes first, not the crime, not the punishment, and definitely not the label. Somewhere along the line, education did not serve these individuals, the community failed them as well--therefore--creativity in literacy instruction is critical. As William G. Brozo notes in the foreword, "our instructional approaches and innovations are only as good as their responsiveness to the neediest adolescents and adults among us" (p.vii). Multiple contributors recognize the struggle incarcerated youth most likely experienced in traditional schooling; for example, Williamson, Mercurio, and Walker note that: "youth...have had fewer opportunities to really engage with teachers about their work. They don't really see themselves as students; school has not served them so far" (p. 63). Thus, helping students find the personal benefits and joy in reading, writing, and other types of literacy is paramount--so they *feel* like students, like learners, like *scholars.*

Another strength of this text is its translation to the mainstream classroom. The overall philosophy and approach to educating this population of young people or any at-risk youth should be encouraging to teachers on the outside who suddenly find a formerly incarcerated-now-transitioning student seated in their classroom. The information generates the appropriate mindset educators need, the lessons offer multiple ways to engage interest, not the standard or cliche read-write-quiz/test manners of "doing English." Mainstream teachers need to read about these young people "doing school"--finally--when they may not have "done school" before. They need to see that these youth can learn and want to learn when their basic needs are met. Within a facility school--at least in these chapters--students are supported, student/teacher ratios are small, environments are calm and teachers are patient and invested in their students' educational, personal, and social rehabilitation. Contributor Timothy Bunch shares that "I set out to know my students, to live life with them, to expose them to other viewpoints through reading and writing in response to carefully chosen texts that spoke to the heart of issues that they could relate to, and to inspire hope in their often fragmented lives" (p. 18). Bunch's words are sound advice for teachers "on the outs" who must now take up the responsibility of continuing the education of these youth and mentoring their reintegration into the school community.

Lynette Tannis (2014) of the Harvard Graduate School of Education stresses that "we must fully equip our juvenile-justice educators with the proper training and support to be successful in these unique alternative educational settings" (p. 28). *Literacy Behind Bars* is a solid resource that can serve as the start or the complement to what already exists. Essentially, the goal is to engage and involve students in their own learning, to inspire young people to write about their lives, to read and connect to others' lives, to open themselves up to discussions about the world, and guide them towards an understanding that literacy can actually set them free. Mike Rose (1989), author of *Lives on the Boundaries,* states that "Students will float to the mark you set" (Styslinger, Gavigan, & Albright, 2017, p.69). All the authors within this text believe that incarcerated youth can learn, want to learn, and want to contribute to the learning of others. If we, as *Literacy Behind Bars* asserts, follow the guidance and recurring theme of creating lessons and assignments that empower students to produce authentic work, pertinent and relevant to their lives, we can improve their literacy, and subsequently, their own capacity for reverence, hospitality, and empathy. In the words of Tannis (2014): "We must seize the opportunity to capture the hearts and minds of our nation's incarcerated youth while many of their distractions from the outside have been

removed...education is the key. If this is the case, we must use this important tool to free the minds and lives of our nation's most disenfranchised and educationally neglected youth" (28).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Staples-Farmer, *a 25 year veteran of the secondary English classroom, started her career at the Milton Hershey School, a private boarding school for economically disadvantaged youth in Hershey, Pennsylvania, then moved home to Nebraska to teach a Norris, a rural school district south of Lincoln. Currently, Dr. Staples-Farmer teaches at Lincoln East High school where her focus is on helping youth transition from detainment or alternative placement back to the culture of the mainstream classroom and designing professional development for district educators to improve understanding and instruction of court-affiliated youth. Dr. Staples-Farmer earned her Ph.D. in Education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2014, focusing her research on the culture of teaching and learning in the juvenile justice system.*

REFERENCES

Cohen, D. (2010). A $5 children's book vx. A $47,000 jail cell: Choose one. *Forbes*. Retrieved from www.forbes.com/sites/stevecohen/2010/12/25/1-5-chilrens-book-vs-a-4700-jail-cell-choose-one #75f435ee76bf.

Coulter, G. (2004). Using one-to one tutoring and proven reading strategies to improve reading performance with adjudicated youth. *The Journal of Correctional Education*. *55*(4).

Guerra, St. (2010). Reaching Out to At-Risk Teens: Building Literacy with Incarcerated Youth. *PNLA Quarterly*, *75*(1). Pacific Northwest Library Association.

Read, N. W. & O'Cummings, M. (2011). Factsheet: Juvenile Justice Education. Washington, DC: National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk. (NDTAC).

Styslinger, M.E., Gavigan, K., & Albright, K. (2017). *Literacy Behind Bars: Successful Reading and Writing Strategies for Use with Incarcerated Youth and Adults.* Rowman and Littlefield, New York.

Tannis, L. (2014). Twice Punished: Education's 'Invisible' Incarcerated Youth. *Education Week*. online, *33(*19) p. 28. Retrieved from www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/01/29/19tannis_ep.h33.html.