Songs of the Caged Birds: Literacy and Learning with Incarcerated Youth

English teachers in every classroom face challenges regarding how to make curriculum relevant and engaging while also meeting particular content standards, and how to help students take ownership over their work when they lack much choice about it. Teaching students who are in the juvenile justice system poses some special challenges in these areas.

We are challenged, for example, to devise an English curriculum that can help students develop reading and writing skills while also becoming literate about the prison industrial complex and the ways that it governs their lives. Understanding that relevance can be measured, in part, by the degree to which our students can see themselves and their experiences reflected in the materials we study, we strive to strike a balance between providing students with meaningful if sometimes harsh examinations of the cultural and structural forces that shape the school-to-prison pipeline while at the same time helping them develop a sense of agency and hope about their own futures outside the system. Drawing on their lived experiences as central texts for our course, we want students to read and write about their knowledge of the system, or, as Geneva Gay has said, to honor “the need for and nature” (2) of their stories in learning, while developing critical understandings of how the prison industrial complex unequally impacts particular populations and communities.

Relevance can cut both ways, however. Though students may find that this work gives them a voice where they thought they had none and empowers them to understand how their communities and families fit into what we are reading, students can also experience this relevance as brow-beating and redundant. We struggle to find ways of making these topics new and powerful while also challenging students to see how learning about the system is an important form of literacy.

We also face structural constraints that make it difficult to create cohesive, intellectually rich units of instruction. Students at the juvenile justice center come and go, sometimes very quickly and sometimes not nearly quickly enough. Learning is constantly interrupted, and we struggle to make sure that all students can learn in this constantly changing setting. In addition to differentiating our instruction for a wide range of learners, many of whom are under-schooled, we must also develop lessons that can be meaningful even if students are only able to participate in small portions of the instruction.

—Angela Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?

Positing decarceration as our overarching strategy, we would try to envision a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment—demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance.

—Angela Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?
As teachers of English, we view our work as a unique opportunity to help students connect critical social inquiry to their own lives through self-examination and reflection in order to question their place in the criminal justice system.

Another challenge is that our students often view school as part of the institution that they must try to resist. Many students in the Juvenile Justice Center have experienced very little success in school, and they may even fault the school system for failing to help them keep their dreams from being deferred. Paradoxically, we must strive to create a safe and productive learning environment where students can invest in their own learning even while we must contend with the reality that we are, in fact, teaching in jail. We are keenly aware that the academic success that our students experience in our classroom may not transfer to their schooling on the outside, and that students might even come to view jail as the place where they finally feel competent and smart.

Our team—National Board Certified teachers in English Language Arts (Megan) and Exceptional Needs (Constance) in the San Francisco Juvenile Justice Center and a professor of curriculum and teacher education at the University of San Francisco (Peter)—collaborates to plan and reflect on teaching practices that can make a difference in the lives and literacy of incarcerated youth. In this article, we look at examples from our English curriculum to illustrate strategies for working with these special youth as well as explore some of the ongoing challenges of this work. Our goal is to provide examples of how we grapple with the frequently competing demands of teaching English in this setting, and to highlight ways that our students have inspired us to keep working toward the goal of their freedom.

The Prison Industrial Complex and the Study of English

Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking aspects of working in a juvenile justice center is watching an estimated 86% of our students recidivate and knowing that this pattern may lead to most of their lives being inextricably bound to the prison industrial complex (PIC). Describing the “closed circuit” system that is set up to serve our youth who are serving time, Michelle Alexander notes that many are released only “to find themselves in precisely the circumstances they occupied before” (95). The revolving door that is juvenile hall often instills a sense of hopelessness in the detainees as well as the teachers, guards, and other care providers with whom they work. One of our overarching instructional goals is to teach students how to engage in academic inquiry by reading and writing challenging expository texts related to race, class, and the criminal justice system. As teachers of English, we view our work as a unique opportunity to help students connect critical social inquiry to their own lives through self-examination and reflection in order to question their place in the criminal justice system. We believe that inviting students to connect their lives to the exploration of prison literature and language will help them to see that world through a more critical lens, and that this critical engagement is key to overcoming their own cycles of recidivism. As Gloria Ladson-Billings has argued, “These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right” (18).

These goals play out in thematic units based on texts such as Angela Davis’s “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex,” Lois Ahrens and Craig Gilmore’s The Real Costs of Prison, Katherine Beckett and Theodore Sasson’s The Politics of Injustice: Crime and Punishment in America, and Prison Writings in 20th Century America by Howard Bruce Franklin. While many of our students are reading and writing below grade level, the relevance of these challenging texts, combined with intense differentiation, helps us to entice the students to connect and grapple with difficult issues because they quickly realize that they are experts on the subject matter. This differentiation included adapting some of the texts to help struggling readers access the content and participate in class discussions. Additionally, we varied the length of writing assignments for individual students and provided one-on-one assistance to struggling learners. We believe that their sense of expertise empowers them to push through even the most difficult texts.

Pedagogically, we strive to create a safe environment for students to be able to share aspects of their personal stories. Trust is in short supply, among students and staff alike, and many students tell us privately that they feel more comfortable sharing personal information in small-group discussions.
The small group can be a safe, unthreatening environment where positive interactions are encouraged. Prior to discussions, we ask students to respond to each of the discussion questions, which usually incorporate direct quotations from the text, so all students feel prepared to share during discussion.

For example, one discussion on the PIC started with the following question: “Angela Davis states, ‘Since 1984 more than 20 new prisons have opened in California, while only one new campus was added to the California State University system and none to the University of California system.’ Do you agree with our state’s decision to spend more money on building prisons than schools? Do you think new prisons make society safe? Why?” We ask students to face each other and provide them with sentence starters that help them listen and speak respectfully when they reference each other’s comments. For example, we ask them to preface their responses with phrases such as “I’d like to agree with the previous speaker’s point that . . .” or “I’d like to take issue with the previous speaker’s statement that . . .” We review the whole-group discussion format and the rubric that we create as a class, so students are reminded of the expectations. The rubric focuses on how they engage each other and the content. These pre-discussion steps allow students to feel comfortable discussing the intimate aspects of their lives that connect to the concepts in the articles. The academic subject matter serves as a vehicle for a deeper level of sharing and argumentation, and a jumping off point from which we can teach students how to write expository essays.

To combat the potentially depressing impact of the content, we ask students to develop possible solutions to the complex problems outlined in the texts we read; for two years we have collaborated with San Francisco State University professors Elizabeth Brown and Amy Smith to guide students through the process of participatory action research (PAR). Taking ownership over their own particular questions and concerns, students choose an issue that they want to change in their environment where positive interactions are encouraged. Larger-scale

While many students are empowered by gaining a deeper understanding of the PIC and how it relates to class, race, and their lives, we have also learned that there is a threshold that students reach with regard to these topics. As we delve deeply into issues such as street violence, drugs, and the lack of father figures, the students can become overtly depressed by the realities they encounter, and they start to resist. We have observed that when students reflect on their particular experiences in the criminal justice system and begin to understand how poverty, discrimination, and politics create the conditions that cause individuals, families, and communities to fall apart, they often feel a sense of hopelessness. For these reasons, we counterbalance this content by offering credible and tangible tools that students can use to effect change within themselves and their communities. The student-driven action projects through PAR were the result of this endeavor.

One such project centered on an analysis of why and how students in the system are placed in group homes and other temporary housing following their release from juvenile hall. The students passionately believed that these placements are destructive to their own progress and their families’ ability to maintain cohesiveness. After conducting extensive research and preparation, the students requested a meeting with the judge to share their research and concerns. The judge agreed, which elated our students, but then, unfortunately, she respectfully cancelled at the last minute. Though the judge explained it might be a conflict of interest because she would be seeing them in court, the cancellation damaged the enthusiasm and agency of the students.

A constant pedagogical consideration is that our population changes daily; sustaining the momentum of longer projects can be daunting. One group of students may be impassioned by an action idea, but within a few weeks the group has either subtly or completely changed and the impetus to fulfill the project has shifted. For these reasons, we have learned that smaller, self-contained projects are more successful because they give the students a sense of completion and accomplishment.
projects run a high risk of failure due to the time they take and the student turnover rate. If our students become invested in the projects and they do not succeed, they either seem to internalize that failure as an extension of themselves or they determine that the system is rigged and they don’t have any power to influence it.

The more quickly we can move the students toward their action plans, the more successful the outcome and impact of the PAR. However, one of our most important realizations came from our experience teaching the PIC. The prison theme forced us to confront the complexity and intensity of the topic for our students. We learned that we could not expect students to complete assignments relating to the PIC and their personal experiences every day because doing so could be counterproductive for them given that the topics were emotionally draining and seemed to cause some students to shut down. Respecting students’ feelings and needs, we adjusted our approach.

**The Garden Project: An Antidote for the Prison Industrial Complex**

As teachers in the Juvenile Justice Center, we strive to find ways to help our students uplift and empower themselves during their incarceration. While the PIC projects were rich and insightful, our class discussions and their participatory action research started to feel depressing. For example, the young women in the program focused their projects on analyzing the systems that cause families to separate, a topic that was painful for many of them. One day, two outspoken young women declared that being around nature and living things provided some needed solace from the pain in their lives and from the gray fortress of bricks that is juvenile hall. They argued that bringing life into the classroom by providing each of them with a living thing to nourish and nurture could bring comfort; they wanted to shift the focus of the research project to focus on their immediate need to see life.

The next day we brought many types of seeds into class and invited the students to pick the type of plant each would nurture: sunzillas, tomatoes, broccoli, and more. As the students carefully placed their seeds into the soil, they became visibly relaxed and the atmosphere in the classroom calmed in a way that we had not previously experienced. As their tiny seedlings began to emerge from the soil, we actually heard laughter from some of the students; seeds of change took root. We asked each student to write a poem to her seedling. One read hers aloud, confidently expressing, “Some nights may be long, and some days may be rough, but do not fret, you are built from strong stuff.”

One year later, our school includes a small outdoor garden where each Wednesday the students cultivate lettuce, chard, strawberries, cilantro, mustard greens, and fava beans. Outside, students are able to breathe in the fresh air, feel the sun, and relax. The garden project, inspired by the girls’ PAR, is a pilot program, and if successful it will be expanded to include the male students incarcerated at the Juvenile Justice Center.

Writing is an integral part of the garden program. Each week the students produce different genres of writing that invite them to practice using devices such as figurative language and sensory detail to describe what they are seeing and experiencing through the plants they are nurturing. Using seeds and tender shoots as metaphors for relationships and growth, they often illustrate their writing with drawings of the plants that they observe. Thematically linked lessons focus on nutrition, the politics of food, and environmental justice. These activities have led to engaging discussions about how our students can create positive change for themselves. While we integrate reading and writ-
In our next unit, we worked to marry these goals and enact a project that addressed both the content of the PIC and the authentic, personal activity of the Garden Project.

The Alcatraz Project

The lessons from the Garden Project and the participatory action research on the prison industrial complex led us to create a project that would allow students to engage with thoughtful writing, reflect on their own position within the justice system, and simultaneously express their individuality in a positive, public, and colorful way.

Since many of our students spend a good portion of their middle school and high school years incarcerated, and our entire school has only one general education teacher per subject, we place high value on collaborating with outside organizations and nonprofits. We do this to expand the opportunities we can offer students and to expose them to many diverse voices, programs, and perspectives that can enrich our school. When we were offered the opportunity to collaborate with We Players, a local theater company that was in residency on Alcatraz Island, we jumped at the chance. We collaborated with We Players to design a project exploring the prison-related themes of isolation, justice, and redemption. We saw this as an opportunity for our students to educate the public that the youth living within the cells of San Francisco’s modern-day Alcatraz also have stories that need to be heard.

To create a series of activities where students could participate successfully, the project consisted of smaller, self-contained yet connected projects that ultimately were displayed for an entire summer in the Alcatraz Cell House Gallery; 5,000 tourists a day would be exposed to our students’ work. The projects included letters to unknown ancestors that were written on mirror paper; paper-mache masks and photos of students posing in their masks; and an audio loop of students reading their personal narratives, their letters to ancestors, and their commentaries on participating in the project. The workshops, facilitated by Lauren Dietrich Chavez and Ava Roy, centered on mindfulness, movement, and creative writing; they invited students to connect with their feelings and authentic selves.

To help the students improve academically, we realize that the curriculum must be relevant and that their experiences, opinions, and backgrounds must be respected.
Throughout this project we stressed the difference between the students’ authentic selves and the various masks they wear in different parts of their lives, reinforcing the idea that they could not be defined by a single criminal act or mask.

In the personal narrative assignment students wrote stories that had particular meaning in their lives. Prior to this assignment many students had never written a complete essay, yet they delved into the project passionately because of the relevance of the story they wanted to tell.

To help the students find their story, we walked them through a series of guided brainstorms to create a list of possible topics. We asked students to list first times, last times, times they were scared, happy, surprised, and so on. From this list, the students ultimately decided on a topic for a story they felt compelled to tell. After assisting them through several drafting stages, we used a group feedback model to make the writers aware of readers’ needs. This process included presenting the piece to a small group, then asking the readers two questions: “What stood out about the piece?” and “What do you wonder?” The writer listened and took notes on this feedback. Many students delved into deeply personal stories regarding how their lives had become entangled in the prison industrial complex. The students finally created audio versions of these stories, and these narratives read in the voices of the students were broadcast into the Cell House Gallery where the prison tours begin and end. Their stories played in a loop from a sound projection cone under which tourists stood and became an addition to the antiquated audio tour tourists traditionally take on the island.

In the Letter to an Ancestor assignment, we asked students to think about a known or unknown ancestor with whom they could share facets of their lives or pose questions. Many students’ writing revealed shame, confusion, and anxiety with regard to their status within the criminal justice system and the violence plaguing their communities. For example, one 16-year-old student wrote a letter to an ancestor who he saw as having suffered enslavement. The student asked for advice about how to survive his own struggle to navigate the system that was confining him. He wrote:

[L]iving in troubled times, how would you handle an enemy or the penal system? The only option we have now is to run from the law and to shoot it out with our own people. . . . What life lessons can you share with me? Would you be the problem or the solution? Would you hurt one of your own people if you figured they were out to get you? . . . We can’t work at any programs, stores, shops, malls and schools in the same neighborhood because we are out to kill one another . . . I’m caught up in the penal system trying to find my way out . . . . So many people are heartless where I come from. I wonder if it was the same when you were growing up. I need answers. —Kishawn

The Alcatraz Project, which spanned several months, seemed highly relevant and accessible to students given that it was thematically related to their daily experience and because it built upon a local historical narrative that is both legendary and immediate. It gave students a chance to bask in the feeling of success, since so many of them completed the individual mini-components of the project. The students felt incredibly motivated to produce high-quality work because they knew that their
audience was authentic. They even hoped that the public might start to make links between Alcatraz and today’s prison industrial complex, and make further connections between slavery and the prison industry. For many of our students, these links have become obvious and a source of their drive to overcome their own status in the system.

These letters, coupled with their personal narratives, gave the audience a raw and often heart-breaking insight into the creativity and untapped potential of San Francisco’s detained youth. We learned from the Garden Project that our students need activities that revitalize and recharge the soul. The Alcatraz Project promoted the same caliber of critical thinking, writing, and analysis as the prison industrial complex and provided students with an artistic means to express their most profound thoughts and ideas. This balanced approach appears to us as the most successful at engaging our students.

Realizing Potential in Confinement

As these examples illustrate, working with students on the fringe teaches us that children crave opportunities to learn and share their stories even in unlikely places like jails. Though the discourse around incarceration frequently panders to some vision of remediation, we have only fleeting glimpses of the kinds of meaningful, high-level learning that can spring from the teaching in these castaway schools. By working to balance the need for curricular relevance with the social and emotional needs of our students, we strive to allow the English curriculum to be a site for “reparation and reconciliation” (Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete! 107) even while it is a site for literacy learning and growth. As John Dewey reminds us, “the teacher should not be occupied with subject matter in itself but in its interaction with the pupils’ present needs and capabilities” (183). In the juvenile justice system, this highlights the need for a curriculum that is primarily oriented toward human development, with teachers bearing witness to the potential that springs from within the cellblock walls.

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Works Cited


Peter Williamson is assistant professor of teacher education at the University of San Francisco. Having spent much of his career working with underserved youth in the Bay Area, he now collaborates with the teachers at the Woodside Learning Center in the San Francisco Juvenile Justice Center around curriculum and teaching for social justice. Email him at peterw@usfca.edu.

Megan Mercurio is an adolescent to young adult English language arts teacher who is National Board Certified and teaches English full-time at the Woodside Learning Center in the San Francisco Juvenile Justice Center. She has been working with this population for seven years. She may be reached at meganmercurio@gmail.com.

Constance Walker is an exceptional needs specialist who is a National Board Certified Teacher specializing in inclusive instruction at the Woodside Learning Center in the San Francisco Juvenile Justice Center. She has been working with this population for 15 years. Email her at WalkerC3@sfusd.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Interviewing family members or friends can be a valuable way for teens and preteens to learn about themselves and their families. This video from RWT can help students prepare to write excellent interviews. http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/helping-teen-plan-conduct-30113.html