

Reaching Out to At-Risk Teens: Building Literacy with Incarcerated Youth

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Introduction

This session is designed to help librarians establish outreach programs to juvenile correctional facilities and other facilities that serve at-risk youth, such as residential treatment programs, boot camps, behavior modification facilities, etc.

Goals:

- The audience will understand the demographics of at-risk teens.
- The audience will be familiar with the young adult street literature genre and equipped to develop selection policies for the books most likely to engage at-risk teens.
- The audience will feel prepared to work effectively with penal institutions, particularly in terms of dealing with potential conflict around literature selection policies.

Literacy as a Protective Factor for At-Risk Teens

Research consistently points to literacy as a major protective factor for at-risk youth (Archwamety & Katsiyannis, 2000; Brunner, 1993). For incarcerated teens, literacy skills are strongly correlated to a lower chance of recidivism (Christle & Yell, 2008). In fact, reading instruction has been more effective than shock incarceration or boot camps at reducing recidivism (Center on Crime, Communities and Culture, 1997). As literacy professionals with a wide knowledge of contemporary literature, librarians are in a unique position to serve this population. In particular, they can point incarcerated teens toward books they'll connect with and enjoy, and help build their identities as readers.

One of the most important ways that librarians can serve incarcerated teens is by establishing outreach programs to local juvenile correctional facilities or similar institutions. Very few juvenile correctional facilities have libraries; most rely on public or school librarians and charitable organizations for outreach. Depending on the interests and abilities of the librarians involved, outreach may include literacy instruction in addition to check-out services. Such literacy instruction may be of critical importance to incarcerated teens, since for many of them, their education in custody is the last they will receive. Less than 12 percent of incarcerated teens go on post-release to graduate high school or earn any other kind of degree (Chung, Little, Steinberg, & Altschuler, 2005. See also Habermann & Quinn, 1986; and LeBlanc, Pfannenstiel, & Tashjian, 1991). In other words, correctional education is a last chance for teachers and librarians to help many at-risk teens build literacy skills.

Demographics of Incarcerated Teens

In order to best serve a population, an understanding of the group's trends and demographics is helpful. The following statistics are drawn from the last Department of Justice (DOJ) census report published in 2006, using data from 2004. Unfortunately, the DOJ only publishes a major census approximately every five years, so this is the most recent data available (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006):

- On any given day, more than 100,000 teens are incarcerated in the United States.
- In addition to the 100,000 in juvenile correctional facilities, on a typical day in 2004 about 7,000 persons younger than 18 were inmates in adult jails.
- The Department of Justice projects that the juvenile prison population will be 36 percent higher in 2020 than it was in 2000.
- The US has a higher juvenile crime rate than any other industrialized nation in the world.
- The inmate population racial breakdown is 38% Black, 19% Hispanic, and 39% White (the remaining few percent are primarily Native American and Asian). Between now and 2020, the Hispanic population in custody is predicted to grow at a much faster rate than the other groups.
- 85% of teens in custody are male.

Lifestyle factors common to many at-risk and incarcerated teens include:

- Poverty
- Abuse
- High rates of drop-out and expulsion
- Grade retention
- Gang involvement
- Substance abuse or addiction
- Incarcerated sibling or parent
- Homelessness
- Teen pregnancy/parenthood
- Unemployed/underemployed
- Involved with transitioning from the child welfare or juvenile justice systems

In addition to the above common disruptive lifestyle factors, an estimated 45% - 70% of teens in custody suffer from learning disabilities and emotional behavioral disorders (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher & Poirier, 2005). The majority of them also have trouble reading. On average, incarcerated youth are reading at a fourth grade level and more than one third of incarcerated youth are illiterate (Brunner, 1993).

It is no coincidence that so many incarcerated teens have extremely poor literacy skills; in studies of juvenile offenders, reading difficulty is documented as one of the leading risk factors for delinquency (Brunner, [1993](#); Drakeford, [2002](#); Gellert & Elbro, [1999](#); Leone et al., [2005](#); Malmgren & Leone, [2000](#)). But there is a positive flip-side to that discouraging relationship: reading remediation is a powerful deterrent to recidivism. Moreover, literacy instruction does not need to be long term to make a difference; gains in literacy skills may be made with instruction that lasts for as little as 10 weeks (Drakeford, 2002. See also Malmgren & Leone, 2000 and Hodges, Giuliotti, and Porpotage, 1994).

Considering the benefits of even short term instruction, there can be little doubt about the advantages of helping incarcerated students build a long-term leisure reading habit. Here librarians can contribute by introducing incarcerated teens to literature they will love and connect with. But how to accomplish this proposition? Many incarcerated teens have never finished a book of their own volition before; their entertainment is almost exclusively audio and visual. What kinds of books can make an impression and leave them wanting to come back for more?

Street Literature

Street literature, also called urban literature, gangsta lit, hip-hop lit, Black pulp-fiction, and ghetto fiction (see Hill, Pérez, and Irby, 2008; Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009) is fiction about the harsh realities of living in the ghetto or barrio with all of its crime, poverty, hustling, dealing, gangs, prostitution, incarceration, drugs and other troubling elements (see Hill et al., 2008; Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006). In other words, street literature captures worlds familiar to many at-risk and incarcerated teens. It is typically written in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Chicano English, dialects spoken by many incarcerated teens.

The young adult street literature genre is slightly gentler than its adult counterpart, but still contains significant language, violence, sex, drugs, crime, and other elements that characterize inner city living. The teen genre includes mainstream books by authors like Walter Dean Myers, Sharon Flake, Paul Volponi and the writers of the Bluford series as well as edgier works by authors like Coe Booth, Sister Souljah and Omar Tyree.

Both young adult and adult street literature generates controversy among educators, the general public and especially among African American literary critics and writers. There are many in the black community who feel that the books both glorify problems that are destroying urban neighborhoods and promote negative stereotypes about people of color. Author Nick Chiles (2006) writes:

As a black author, I had certainly become familiar with the sexualization and degradation of black fiction. Over the last several years, I had watched the shelves of black bookstores around the country and the tables of street vendors, particularly in New York City, become overrun with novels that seemed to appeal exclusively to our most prurient natures -- as if these nasty books were pairing off back in the stockrooms like little paperback rabbits and churning out even more graphic offspring that make Ralph Ellison books cringe into a dusty corner. (p. 15)

Many critics also feel that street literature is sexist, featuring flat female characters that depend on their sexuality and powerful criminal men for their livelihoods and identities. Too, there is controversy around the issue of language and the possibility that AAVE and Chicano English set a poor model for literacy (see Ratner, p. 2, 2010).

Although there are many who take issue with street literature, supporters argue that street literature has accomplished major victories for literacy. Simply put, street literature is creating huge numbers of new readers. J. Rosen, a writer for *Newsweek*, notes, "Urban literature is capturing that most elusive and desirable demographic group: young black men" (2004, para. 6). Many fans also contend that street literature represents a real facet of life and should be accessible to the young readers for whom these stories are most relevant. As Josh Westbrook famously put it, "Kids are living stories every day that we wouldn't let them read" (as cited in Hamilton, 2009, para. 48).

Given the range of issues around street literature, it can be controversial to make these books available in a school library, let alone bring them into a juvenile correctional facility housing a vulnerable population of students who are in custody for some of the very issues the books address.

So why recommend street literature for incarcerated teens?

On a number of different measures, street literature is likely to be engaging for incarcerated teens and encourage them to form the leisure reading habit (Guerra, 2010). Because of the dearth of research on best practices in literacy instruction for juvenile correctional populations and because of the disproportionate number of minorities, males, and challenged readers in the system, it is also helpful to consider the research on literacy instruction for these populations. The literature is remarkably consistent, showing that in order to engage these types of readers, we need:

- Free choice in reading materials (Brozo, 2002; Guthrie, Alao, & Rinehart, 1997; Oldfather, 1995; Turner, 1995): While there is no data on the literature preferences of incarcerated teens, a genre analysis of several juvenile correctional facility Amazon.com wish lists shows that of the books requested by incarcerated teens, over 50 percent are from the street literature genre (Guerra, 2010).
- Reading material that corresponds to readers' interests (Alexander, Kulikowich, & Hetton, 1994; Glasgow, 1996; Guthrie et al., 1997; Osmont, 1987). While there is little to no data on the interests of incarcerated teens, it is possible to draw some conclusions about their interests based on their reasons for incarceration and statistics about their common lifestyle factors (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Unfortunately, many of these teens are likely interested in gangs, drugs, and crime, all of which feature prominently in street literature (Guerra, 2010).
- Reading material in which readers can "see" themselves (Bishop 1992; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Mason & Au 1991; Norton, 1992, as cited in Gay, 2000). Research (cited above) shows that there are significant personal, academic and social benefits when students have access to books in which the characters are similar to themselves in terms of race, culture, socioeconomic status, and lived experience. For many incarcerated teens, street literature is one of the few genres that feature protagonists with whom they can identify.

Culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994) – or "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). In content, street literature reflects the home cultures of many incarcerated teens. In form, it is an academic medium (literature). Thus it has potential to act in the service of culturally responsive teaching as a bridge between students' home culture and academic skills.

The aforementioned findings appear intuitive: connect students with books that resonate with their lives; connect them with books in which they can see themselves; connect them with books that match their interests – and they may engage with reading. And for these at-risk and incarcerated students, street literature is a genre that can often accomplish that end. But there is a great deal of controversy about bringing these titles into correctional facilities or other facilities serving at-risk youth.

Working with Penal Institutions

Most juvenile correctional facilities have lists of prohibited literacy materials. Here is an example:

Staff will not distribute any publication or materials determined to be detrimental to the security, good order, or discipline of the inmates. Publications which may not be distributed include but are not limited to those which meet one of the following criteria:

(a) they depict or describe procedures for the construction or use of weapons, ammunition, bombs or incendiary devices;

(b) they depict, encourage, or describe methods of escape from correctional facilities, or contains blueprints, drawings or similar descriptions of the same;

(c) they depict or describe procedures for the brewing of alcoholic beverages, or the manufacture of drugs;

(d) they are written in code;

(e) they depict, describe or encourage activities which may lead to the use of physical violence or group disruption;

(f) they encourage or instruct in the commission of criminal activity;

(g) they contain sexually explicit material which by its nature or content pose a threat to the security, good order, or discipline of the XXX

(h) homophobic, pornographic, obscene, or sexually explicit material or other visual depictions that are harmful to students;

(i) materials that use obscene, abusive, profane, lewd, vulgar, rude, inflammatory, threatening, disrespectful, or sexually explicit language;

(j) materials that use language or images that are inappropriate in the education setting or disruptive to the educational process;

(k) information or materials that could cause damage or danger of disruption to the educational process;

(l) materials that use language or images that advocate violence or discrimination toward other people (hate literature) or that may constitute harassment or discrimination or create a serious danger of violence in the facility;

(m) materials depicting martial arts; and

(n) materials depicting tattooing (yalsalockdown@ala.org, accessed 9/17/2009).

Most of these restrictions appear reasonable, considering the population in question. However, several of them, such as *e*, *f*, *i*, and *j*, are worded in a way that leaves a good

deal open to the interpretation of correctional personnel (an umbrella term for correctional officers, administrators, and mental health professionals). This is where the conflict begins. Most librarians are committed to intellectual freedom and the rights of individuals to access whatever reading material they choose. Correctional personnel, on the other hand, have different foci: rehabilitating youth and facility security. Frequently rehabilitative and security concerns conflict with intellectual freedom and freedom of access, creating tense or even hostile relationships between librarians and correctional personnel.

Correctional security concerns are straightforward and involve physical features of reading materials like staples in the binding of magazines, hard covers on books, and the possibility of using books to hide contraband. The levels of security restrictions depend on the facility and whether the teens in question are classified as minimum, medium, or maximum security. Usually these restrictions are inflexible.

Rehabilitative concerns can be more fluid, and this is where lists of prohibited content become relevant. In brief, administrators and mental health professionals are concerned about literature that romanticizes the behaviors that landed teens in custody in the first place. They fear that street literature may trigger backsliding. Their concerns are based on well-documented research:

- Literature has the power to shape, change, or reinforce beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000; Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997; Slater, 1990; Strange & Leung, 1999; Wheeler, Green & Brock, 1999).
- People accept new ideas more easily when their minds are primed for stories rather than analysis (Escalas, 2007; Green, 2004).

Moreover, these effects are most likely to occur when a reader can make connections between the narrative and their own experiences:

- Readers who make connections between the narrative and their own experiences are more likely to report changes in beliefs and shifts in self-perception. (Kuiken et al., 2004)
- Readers' prior knowledge and social experiences similar to story content is correlated to higher levels of absorption in the story and a greater likelihood of demonstrating story-consistent beliefs (Green, 2004; see also Busselle & Greenberg, 2000 and Potter, 1988).

In other words, literature that reflects teens' lived experiences has a better chance of changing – or confirming – the way they think about or do things. And for many teens, street literature is the genre that most closely reflects their lived experiences. Therefore, correctional personnel are justified when they argue that for certain individuals, certain street literature titles may trigger backsliding into substance abuse, gang involvement, and other problem behaviors. They actually have a basis in research, and they're acting "in loco parentis" for some very troubled teens.

Unfortunately, many correctional personnel take an "all or nothing" approach. The urban settings, strong language, non-standard dialects, and gritty themes of street literature act for them as a red flag signaling the kinds of books that might act counterproductively to their clients' rehabilitation. In response they rule out the whole street literature genre, facilitated by flexible interpretations of lists of prohibited literature content.

This is a serious oversight that may deprive many incarcerated youth of a chance to connect with literature. As a society, we cannot afford to do that. As William Brozo (2002) writes, "...to presume that reading itself will transform conditions that plague young men such as poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, crime, and irresponsible fathering is recklessly naïve; however, to ignore the potential of active literacy for ensuring that fewer adolescent males become nowhere kids is equally naïve" (p. 156).

So how can librarians best communicate with correctional personnel? How can they avoid polemics? And how can they build relationships of trust with correctional personnel so that without dishonesty, they can bring in books – often street literature – that the juvenile inmates will love and connect with?

There are two messages important for librarians to convey to correctional personnel:

- Librarians must make it clear that they understand rehabilitative concerns and do not want to introduce material that may trigger teens' backsliding into addictions, gang involvement, or other problem behaviors. While acknowledging that correctional personnel are acting in loco parentis and have the legal right to restrict materials, librarians should remind correctional personnel that they are united in the aim of helping inmates avoid recidivism, drawing attention to the research showing that building literacy is a significant part of achieving that aim.
- Librarians need to show correctional personnel that *distinctions are possible within the street literature genre*. They need to demonstrate that there is street literature of excellent literary quality that deals with the profound themes of humanity set in contexts, peopled with characters and written in dialects that will be familiar to teens in custody. Librarians need to be clear that they are not just offering the teens books with gangs, sex, language and violence because "that's what they know." That logic won't hold up in a correctional facility. Librarians should be ready with examples to prove that there is street literature that has the gritty elements of street life, the strong language and content that teens can relate to, *and* positive messages of hope and transformation. The best of this literature may have sexual content, but it does not demean women. It may have violent content, but it does not glorify violence. It may address gangs and drug use, but it does not romanticize either. It may be about people of color in difficult situations, but it is not racist. It is captivating, well-told literature about teens struggling with and often overcoming the incredible challenges they face in the ghetto, barrio, or correctional facility. In other words, *in order to bring in the literature that is likely to engage incarcerated teens, librarians need to show correctional personnel that they can make discriminating choices based on the needs of the population they are serving.*

Crafting Selection Policies

How to make these choices? In order to craft an effective selection policy, it is important to take into consideration the characteristics of the population being served. Are they older male incarcerated teens classified as maximum security? Are they young teenage girls in a foster care setting? Are they at-risk teens coming to a library of their own volition for literature circles? Are they drug-addicted young mothers in a rehabilitation clinic? Are they repeat offenders in a boot-camp setting? Each sub-group of at-risk teens will have slightly different needs, and it is necessary to do preliminary research about the group in question in order to identify those needs.

After doing some preliminary research, it can be helpful to devise a question (or questions) to guide literature selection. For example, when developing selection policies for teens incarcerated in a traditional correctional setting, librarians might take into account the fact that the large majority of juvenile offenses are personal crimes or property crimes (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006) – in other words, offenses against an individual or a piece of property that belongs to someone else. It seems clear that *acting in the best interests of others* is a skill lacking for many juvenile offenders. Therefore, a useful evaluative question might be: “Is one of the main character(s) ultimately successful in doing what is right for the people around them?”

In other situations, exclusive selection policies may be appropriate. For instance, when librarians do outreach to former or current gang members, it may be wise to exclude literature that is closely affiliated with any single gang. For example, although *War of the Bloods in My Veins* (Morris, 2009) is an excellent memoir, it celebrates Bloods and denigrates Crips to level that could be inflammatory for a mixed group of gang members. On the other hand, books like *Retaliation* (Shiraz, 2008) or *Homeboyz* (Sitomer, 2008) explore the implications of gang membership without promoting or insulting any one group.

Just as exclusive policies can be appropriate in some situations, others call for inclusive selection. For example, when doing outreach to pregnant teens, it may be helpful to seek out literature that specifically addresses teen pregnancy such as *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2010), *Like Sisters on the Home Front* (Garcia, 1998) and *Baby Girl* (Adams, 2007). Literature selections for teens with a history of drug dealing might include titles about young drug dealers finding motivation and strategies to quit dealing like *Street Pharm* (Diepen, 2006) and *Dope Sick* (Myers, 2009). Book choices for teens in foster care could include stories set in group or foster homes, like *Last Chance Texaco* (Harting, 2004), *Ball Don't Lie* (De la Pena, 2007), and *America* (Frank, 2002).

These are just a few examples of ways to craft deliberate selection policies based on the needs of specific populations. Regardless of the subgroup of at-risk teens being served, if librarians can demonstrate to correctional personnel (or other administrators) that thought and care has gone into selection policies, the personnel will be more likely to relax regulations and allow titles that might otherwise be prohibited. Ultimately, mutual respect and cooperation between librarians and correctional personnel can only benefit the teens being served. It is important to remember that both groups are working toward the same goal: helping teens build productive lives with no recidivism. Literacy is an important aspect of reaching that goal, and in this area librarians have a great deal to offer this population in need.

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