

Teaching literacy at a Juvenile Detention Center

Imagine coming to teach in a Juvenile Detention Center where youth ages 11-17 are held until they are released back to the community or sent for long term incarceration. The turmoil and anxiety in their lives at the JDC (although the overall living conditions and staff are relatively okay) make it almost impossible to learn anything that is not relevant to their immediate condition and survival. Everything is seen through the fences that confine them.



This is a collage made in response to the Icarus and Daedalus myth we discussed.

The following texts are self-portraits in the form of Bio-Poems written by some of the young men at the JDC. Their lives are crying out for different kinds of teaching and learning than what we teach them in our schools and in the school they attend daily at JDC.

Maybe an ability approach and beginning with their strengths and passions is in order.

Maybe teaching problem solving, life and social skills, dealing with adverse circumstances- would strengthen them as human beings first.

Maybe if we saw a willing and able learner in every student and took upon ourselves the responsibility of reaching and teaching them all... then, possibly, our youth wouldn't get to these situations in such large numbers.

Bio poems

Juvenile Detention Center, 2008

I am Santana. I am locked up in JDC.
I wonder if I can go home.
I hear I am going upstate.
I see me home.
I want to go home.
I am Santana. I am locked up in JDC.

I pretend I am home.
I am sad because I am locked up.
I think what I am going to do when I go home.
I worry if I am going to be killed.
I am Santana. I am locked up in JDC.

I understand I did bad.
I say it's going to be ok.
I try to do good.
I dream about life.
I hope I can go home
I am Santana. I am locked up in JDC.

I am Kalil da god
I wonder when I will go home.
I hear that it will be soon.
I see no changes: I wake up in the morning and I ask myself: is life worth living or should I blast myself. Even worse, I'm black, my stomach hurts so I'm looking for a purse to snatch.
I want to become a music and tattoo artist.
I am Kalil da god.

I pretend I'm fine.
I feel like bugging out. I think I'm talented.
I worry I'll go crazy.
I am Kalil da god

I understand I am locked up.
I say I don't deserve to be here.
I try to stay out of trouble.
I dream I can change my ways.
I hope I can stay on the right path.
I am Kalil da god

I am Rogers. I am good at basketball.
I wonder how long my life will last.
I hear people saying I won't see 18.
I see good influences and bad influences around me all the time.
I want to pass 18.
I am gonna do my best to make it to my last day.

I pretend I'm 19 when I'm home so if I don't make it, in my eyes I'd be past that age.
I feel that my death is coming soon.
I think I will do good when I go home.
I worry about getting locked back up when I go home.
I am Rogers and I am 15 years old.

I understand that I have to do good when I get home.
I say that I will get a job when I will go home.
I try to think on positive things to accomplish when I get home.
I dream that I will grow old and get to see grandkids grow.
I hope I don't get back locked up.
I am Rogers and I am locked up in JDC.

I am Griffin the Great
I wonder how long I will survive.
I hear that I could make it.
I see myself in progress.
I want myself to make it.
I am going to make it.

I pretend as if there is no problem.
I feel the pain
I think I will go away soon.
I'm worried for myself and my wellbeing
I am Griffin the Great

I understand my people's pain and that we'd done bad.
I say that I will change.
I try to change my path and course.
I dream to be successful in life.
I hope to make it past 150th birthday.
I am Griffin the Great

I am Gumercindo Banilla, a proud Latino.
I wonder if I'ma see my family and my girl again.
I hear about a lot of things happening in da street.
I see that the street is wild.
I want to change for the better.
I am gonna change.

I pretend that everything is gonna be ok.
I think that everyone deserves a second chance.
I think that the judge would not believe me that I changed.
I worry if I will go home.
I am gonna make it through this.

I understand that people think I won't succeed and that they think I'm bad.
I said that they are wrong.
I try to prepare myself for the outside world.
I dream about my future
I hope that I become successful and famous.
I am Gumercindo Banilla, a proud Latino

I am Malik Harris and I plan to make a difference in my life.
I wonder if I will be successful in the future.
I hear that people say I won't make it.
I see that I can do anything that I put my mind to.
I want to be something in life.
I am Malik Harris and I plan to make a difference in my life.

I pretend that nothing is wrong, but there is.
I feel like I could do much better.
I think of ways to help me in life.
I worry about things I did in the past.
I am Malik Harris and I plan to make a difference in my life.

I understand that it takes a lot of work to change different ways.
I say that I could do it.
I try to think positive and do positive things.
I dream that I will be something in the future.
I hope I make it in life.
I am Malik Harris and I plan to make a difference in my life.

I am Yvenel Fede the little Haitian dude.
I wonder if I could represent all the Haitians.
I hear people saying bad things about Haitians.
I see people trying to hurt Haitians.
I want to make my parents proud.
I am Yvenel Fede the little Haitian dude

I pretend that I am the only Haitian that is represented.
I feel that I am the only Haitian that is represented.
I think I will finish this.
I worry I'ma fail this task.
I am Yvenel Fede the little Haitian dude.

I understand that my family has given up on me.
I say that I'm gonna change.
I try to keep my word.
I dream that I will make my pops proud.
I hope that I do that.
I am Yvenel Fede the little Haitian dude.

It is up to us teachers to provide possibilities of success and hope rather than judgment and exclusion in order to allow only the 'good' kids (who decides upon this label?) to survive the system.