Behind Education: How Can You "Be the Book" Behind Bars?

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To teach reading to a transient population of incarcerated young men on Rikers Island, Dave Lasevoli utilized the students’ desire for knowledge and their talent for storytelling, humor, and acting to engage them. Students embodied the characters by reading aloud from the novel The Planet of Junior Brown, from which discussions about obesity, civil rights, and compassion emerged.

So, when was the last time you were in school, a regular school, on the outside?”

The young man pauses in the interview to smile, or think hard, or laugh outright; then he responds, perhaps ruefully, as a man my age might respond when he looks back on a much younger and wilder time, “Five years.” Or he says, “It was in 1999. Ninth grade.”

This educational background was terribly familiar where I taught—Horizon Academy, a public school for incarcerated young men, aged eighteen to twenty-two, on Rikers Island, which sits in Flushing Bay, between the Bronx and Queens. It was started in 1998 because of a lawsuit brought against New York City by a group of inmates who sued for the right to continue their public-school education and to earn high school diplomas. Horizon Academy serves adolescents who are not required to attend school any longer but who choose to attend classes to earn enough credits to graduate or to study for a GED. Horizon Academy saw some 1,500 students enter its classrooms during the 2003–04 academic year. They attended for an average of a little more than three weeks. Slightly more than 200 of them earned their high school or equivalency diplomas. Almost all of them were Black and Latino. Most claimed, and showed signs of, gang membership. And many, unfortunately, will return to jail or prison after their current bids.

When I ran orientation sessions, I met inmates whose last school experiences were buried in difficult pasts. Most of them had dropped out, or were kicked out, when they were in eighth or ninth grade. They recalled episodes of cutting classes, sex in the school stairwells, selling and using drugs, and fights—always violence.

When I asked them to recall what they last studied, most students chuckled. It was all a blur of meaningless information. A line from The Violence of Literacy, by J. Elspeth Stuckey, reverberates here. She writes, “By the ninth grade, the population of American schools is already an elite one” (109). That is, the schooling system, especially in our nation’s large cities, operates in an environment of social Darwinism: According to Stuckey, only the privileged survive to continue their schooling. In a sometimes deadly paradox, the students who most need education to move beyond the impoverished circumstances of their birth cannot—for a complex constellation of reasons—“make it” in academics.

Learning the Context

I recall a line from one of the first great plays I saw as an adolescent, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf: “I usedta live in the world / then I moved to HARLEM” (Shange 36). Yes, well: I used to teach in the world, but then I moved to Rikers Island. I left a deluxe teaching
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position in one of the best public schools in New York City to go back to basics, so to speak. After a year’s sabbatical, during which time I completed my dissertation at Columbia’s Teachers College, I wanted to put my studies to work—to see if great poetry was any good to students who had nothing. Also, I wanted to apply my political bias and return to work with underprivileged students, and I could think of no one with fewer privileges than the adolescents on Rikers Island. I left my AP English Literature classes, an extensive classroom library, and students who would attend Oberlin and Wesleyan on their graduation. In this article, I describe some of the unique situations in teaching reading and English literature to students who have failed by any standards in public educational institutions.

After my series of interviews and the demonstration lesson had concluded, the principal of Horizon Academy asserted, “If you can teach here, you can teach anywhere.” “Here” is a network of five sites, each named for the particular jail that holds older adolescents on Rikers. From 2003 to 2005, I worked in both the Anna M. Kross Correctional Center and the Otis Bantum Correctional Center. Horizon has classrooms located in three other jails of varying sizes. One of them is in the North Infirmary Center, which houses inmates with the highest “classifications” on Rikers Island—for example, suspected cop-killers. I was shocked to learn that several teachers taught inmates over the phone: they work with adolescents locked up in the Central Punitive and Segregation Unit, or “Bing,” where inmates serve solitary confinement terms for offenses committed on the Island.

We worked with a transient population. Rikers is a temporary holding facility—as are all jails—and a majority of first-time offenders there are innocent of their purported crimes because they have not yet gone to trial. Nevertheless, Rikers Island stands as the largest penal colony in the United States and epitomizes what can go wrong in urban education. The students at Horizon Academy miss classes because of court dates, visits from family and friends, and appointments with various representatives from a gamut of social agencies. They miss classes because they must go to the barbershop. I met inmates who showed up for orientation; we admitted them and they attended a full afternoon of classes. Then they were gone. They made bail, or the Rikers administration transferred them to another building on the Island or, if they had already been sentenced, they moved Upstate.

One such transient student was Raul, a pleasant young man who enjoyed writing. He asked me to guess the amount of his bail. “I don’t know. A hundred dollars?” I guessed low because he looked new to the system of corrections. He held up three fingers. “Three hundred?” I guessed again. Now he waved his three fingers in a spiral. “Oh. Three thousand?” I was not impressed; I had met a student earlier that week whose bail stood at a quarter-million dollars. “No! Three! Three dollars!” This young man could not get in touch with anyone who could take the trip to Rikers—with the cost of a thin magazine—to get him out of jail. Fortunately, someone came through for Raul the next day. And I never saw him again.

As soon as students begin to regularly attend our classes, they exhibit a multitude of learning deficiencies; many have experienced deep trauma, including addictions to crack cocaine in utero; they have been totally institutionalized and live in fifty-bed dormitories with older, convicted felons; some are further brutalized by corrections officers. Their classes take place in cinderblock classrooms with officers outside the door, and they receive only golf pencils to write with. Loose-leaf paper is doled out a few sheets at a time. Hardcover books are “contraband”—and cannot leave the school area—because razor blades have been found hidden inside book bindings. And I wished to examine how books and writing could transform lives here.

Another student taught me a lesson that still pains. Keith was a superb mimic. He ridiculed everyone—especially teachers and “Mental Observation” (“MO”) students—in a nonstop rap. Even though he mocked me incessantly, we shared background in and fondness for Brooklyn, so Keith called me “BK.” I learned that I could slow down this routine when he dictated his rhymes to me so that I could type up his poems. Once, when we were looking at a map of New York State, because most
students I met showed a near-total illiteracy of basic geographic concepts, Keith started to name some of the major prisons way up north, near the Adirondacks. He stopped at a town farther west on the map: “That’s Auburn, just for females. I used to visit my mother there.” Most of the time he disrupted classes, and once his taunting drove an MO to the bathroom, where he reopened one of the gashes on his arm. But the most shocking comment I heard from Keith was, “I love jail! It’s just like life on the outside.” He elaborated—not just for my benefit, but for his classmates: here on the Island, and in prisons Upstate, an inmate could enjoy sex, drugs, hustling, dealing, fights. He omitted “school” from his list. In a way, Keith’s education was complete, and completed long ago, when he was a little kid visiting his mother in prison. What possible use could he have for academic experiences?

Urban Education in Extremis

Many students in Horizon Academy illustrate a variety of Gardner’s multiple intelligences: They are articulate, social, athletic, musical, funny, analytical, extremely kinesthetic—and spiritual. Some play chess for hours each day. One young man, called “Fiddy” by all because of his remarkable resemblance to 50 Cent, created intricate pencil drawings, some of which he converted into tattoos. Every student expressed a literacy about guns. Many bore scars from bullies. One Friday afternoon we watched Martin Scorsese’s Gange of New York. Daniel Day-Lewis’s character, the Butcher, impales the hand of an opponent in a card game. At this point, Izzy, an eighteen-year-old from Mexico who was sitting in front of me, held up his right hand to reveal a neat scar in the area between thumb and pointer that ran through both the palm and the back of his hand. I thanked him for sharing this illustration.

The inmates’ academic needs are profound—indeed, they seem overwhelming. Some enter jail school with merely a rudimentary grasp of alphabet sounds; some have never added up more than single-digit sums. (For contrast, they may have stood on street corners with $30,000 in cash—or crack—in their pockets.) Most read haltingly, or breezed blithely through texts as they reinvented words. These students laughed when their turns at reading aloud ended, and proclaimed, “I have no [expletive] idea what I just read.” We worked hard on constructing five-paragraph essays, and most students who lasted longer than two weeks showed significant progress. Yet exams continued to intimidate them; they had some fifteen years of perceived failure and negative labels to overcome.

We talked a good deal about incentives at Horizon. We propositioned the inmates with incentives to restart their academic lives. But losing hope on Rikers comes easily. There were students whose only hope, they insisted, lay in divine intervention. They believed in Higher Authorities to undo the power that mundane authority held over them. Other students came into classes depressed—about their cases, their Legal Aid representatives, their girlfriends, their newborn children. School provides a distraction for these students. They come to classes for knowledge of an Other World—one that has next to no bearing on their lives.

Higher Learning

One of the Other Worlds that interested every inmate I met on Rikers was the world of higher learning—the genuine Academe. Horizon students questioned me daily about the graduate classes—and the students—I taught at Columbia. I told them about some of the pedagogical texts we read together, about some of the successes and failures. Most students in my current and past research and methods classes appreciate Jeffrey D. Wilhelm’s “You Gotta BE the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents” as a friendly guidebook into their teaching of reading and their new research. As a high school English teacher in an elite public school, where I taught twelfth graders for six years, I had always found Wilhelm’s methods altogether adaptable to the needs and abilities of the students. But at Rikers I worked with students who were not merely “less engaged readers” (88); the inmate students’ experiences seemed to rail against reading itself. I wondered if dramatic and visual engagements would meet with any kind of enthusiasm in jail. Wilhelm noted that the students in his class “began to learn from each other, evaluating and trying on each other’s response moves” (143). I liked the notion of these incarcerated students “trying on each other’s moves”—in
an academic, literary setting, for a change. Now I needed a suitable work for them to read together.

The principal at Horizon had charged me with teaching a remedial reading program to a group of students at Rikers. This program moves teachers and students through a series of lock-stepped processes, activities, and genres. I wished to alter such a program and try to provide a very shifting (and shifty) group of students with several common readings that took advantage of their skills as storytellers, comics, and actors. In lieu of the favored novel Monster (Myers), I convinced our principal to let me teach a Virginia Hamilton classic, The Planet of Junior Brown. Fortunately, she knew the book: her son had had to read it a few years earlier. I spun the book as a prime example of historical fiction—one of the program’s required genres—even though no real-life figures appear in it. Yet the novel’s setting, the Manhattan of the late 1960s, speaks deeply of a more optimistic time in the nation’s life. It tells the tale of a friendship between two very different young, Black adolescents. Junior Brown is immensely obese, a gifted pianist, a mama’s boy, and a burgeoning hebephrenic. He is losing his mind, rapidly, as he grows increasingly despondent over his father’s absence, his mother’s illness, and the truly insane actions of his piano teacher. His only friend, Buddy Clark, is a homeless kid, a gifted but truant student, and a “Tomorrow Billy”—a leader who takes care of younger homeless kids in abandoned NYC buildings, named “planets.” He teaches abandoned kids, such as Franklin and Nightman, that “We are together only to survive. Each one of us must live, not for the other . . . . The highest law is to learn to live for yourself. I’m the one to teach you how to do that and I’ll take care of you just as long as you need me to” (74). All of the main and secondary characters are Black, and the novel’s tone gently but urgently pushes readers toward an acknowledgment of Black unity. Buddy’s epiphany, on the final page, forces the realization that he had memorized the wrong lines, and that “We are together . . . because we have to learn to live for each other” (217; italics added). This, I knew, is not a popular sentiment in punitive institutions.

The hook for my small group of inmates to get into this book was the sad fat boy, the eponymous Junior Brown. I always took his part to read aloud. They liked pointing out a variety of inmates in their dorms who were hugely fat, but they uncharacteristically did not badger the two large students in my classroom. Casting Buddy presented some problems. He was clearly the toughest character in the book, but he practiced tough love, and no one in jail wanted to ever show a soft side. An inmate who cares is perceived as weak. So Buddy’s role became a revolving one, and another teacher came on board for several read-aloud sessions to play his part. A favorite student, Craig, who had recently passed his GED exam, exclaimed, “This dude is [expletive] corn-nay!” but he also nodded his head at “To be afraid of the dark is to be afraid of Buddy Clark” (69).

Students came and went: some were released on bail, some were sentenced to prison terms Upstate, some were transferred to other buildings on the Island. But a core of readers established itself. A new student, Don L., showed promise his first class, but then a corrections officer stopped him from leaving the school because he had stolen a roll of masking tape from my cabinet. The following day his classmates joked incessantly about his botched attempt to steal (“He boofed a roll of tape!”), and when the time came to cast the role of Franklin—a ten-year-old hustler and thief—all eyes turned to Don L. He smiled and agreed to read Franklin.

Franklin enters Buddy’s Planet with a scared seven-year-old boy who struggles, at first, to relinquish his former identity. He rechristens himself “Nightman Black.” This little kid is irresistible with his naiveté and guts and respect for his teacher, Buddy. A student named Shamik jumped at the opportunity to become Nightman. His peers cheered this decision. Shamik said that he liked his own name but that he needed a nickname, a tag, and he tried out a number of names daily: Cadillac, Red, Beans, Habichuelas. “Naw, that’s it, I’m Nightman Black” now. It’s official.”

We read aloud the entire book. We discussed obesity and the Black Panthers and abandoned buildings and compassion. Some students who refused to read followed along, and three of them drew illustrations. Character sketches decorated the cinderblock walls, with students’ names tagged at
the bottom of the drawings, for example, "Fiddy aka BUDDY CLARK" and "Don BX aka FRANKLIN THE THIEF." Near the novel’s climax, the two main characters get caught for cutting school, and they hide in the school’s basement with Mr. Pool, a custodian-teacher, who brings them a carton of supplies: "There were hard-boiled eggs, a half gallon of milk and lots of sweet rolls wrapped in plastic wrap to keep them fresh . . . egg salad sandwiches, ham sandwiches and cheese sandwiches . . . even a jar of pickles" (173). I delivered these items from the grocery list (except for the glass jar, which is contraband in jail) for the book’s ending, when we celebrated our reading and playacting. Our classroom-in-jail had shrunk even further and resembled the scene in the young adult novel. As they drank hot chocolate, the inmates had shrunk, also, but without diminishing: They embodied the novel’s characters, created by Hamilton after the climax of the civil rights era and in a period of great expectations. The incarcerated students returned, however briefly, to a past when they could be younger, freer children.

Unequal Rights

These students have been Left Behind. They know this and, at times, they speak eloquently about it. They knew what I was talking about when I told them the graduate students at Teachers College were troubled by their readings of Jonathan Kozol’s The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America. Kozol cites Education Week to note that “New York City and Chicago . . . which enroll 10 percent of the country’s African-American male students, fail to graduate more than 70 percent of those students with their entering class-
mates” (282). “So we’re the statistics again,” mumbled Craig. These Black and Latino males lost out in their early school years.

Despite the injunctions of Brown v. Board of Education, in my time as a teacher, education has appeared to grow more segregated in New York City. There are public schools where you can teach elite groups about classic literature and calculus, and there are public schools where you can watch some poor kids prepare for a different kind of education—in our jails and prisons. In a strange way, the students at Horizon, on Rikers Island, constitute another kind of elite group. They survived a level of violence in their earliest environments that may be comparable to that of a land torn apart by civil war. They are still alive, whereas many of their comrades and relatives are not. They live to fight another day, even if they fight in jail. A few students I met in my two years there claimed to live for knowledge. Yes, they are behind, and their test scores may rise and fall, but what matters more is that they can express some deep care about where our culture is going—and insist on their right to be a part of it.

Works Cited