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Bullies, Gangs, and Books for Young Adults

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Abstract

This action research project describes the impact a love for reading and access to books had on incarcerated youth and the adults directly working with them. Through adults working inside a juvenile detention center a library was established, young adult books were made available, and literature discussion groups were conducted. The positive results dispels the myth of high illiteracy rates associated with people serving time for criminal offenses. The act of establishing a library in one detention center evolved into academic course work that brought educators, social workers and criminal justice students and professionals together for the first time. This action research had ramifications in the surrounding communities and other state agencies working with youth at risk. Suggestions for preventing problems associated with juveniles in schools and communities are part of the outcomes in this paper. A list of YA books around the theme of youth at risk is included.

“Dad, they don’t even have a library!” my son exclaimed. Ben had just graduated with a degree in criminal justice and this was his first week on the job at a juvenile detention center. As a professor of children’s and young adult literature, I was just as perplexed by Ben’s observation. When Ben was growing up he was surrounded by books. We think all kids deserve the same advantages.

“What do these kids do all day if they don’t read?” I asked Ben.

“Watch some television, listen to music, go to classes and do some homework. Nothing exciting. This place [detention center] is like a prison for adults,” he replied in a matter of fact manner.

“Don’t they do some reading with their homework,” I inferred.

“Yeah, but there are no novels or interesting books to read. I have yet to see a magazine.” It bothered Ben that these kids had no access to reading materials. I suggested that he ask his supervisor why there were no books. Ben was told that no one had proposed the idea before, but there was no budget for books anyway. When Ben learned this information he decided to start a library. I donated the first few boxes of books to help Ben out.

The next day, the boxes were back on my kitchen table. Ben explained that no hard cover books were allowed. Potentially, they could be used as weapons. So we repacked the boxes with paperbacks. The books were placed on a table in a general gathering room of the detention center. Ben returned to work the day after bringing in the books. The boxes on the tables were empty! There were no books lying around. After nosing around a bit, he discovered that the books had disappeared with the juvies to their cell blocks. This was a new phenomenon. None of the kids had been observed reading outside their individual cell blocks before. As an educator interested in behavior associated with reading, I assumed these kids did not want to be seen reading by their peers. Even students in a typical junior/senior high school on the outside go from one subject class to another with little time for leisure reading during the school day. One study found adolescents who engage in leisure reading do it in the privacy of their own bedrooms (Steiner, Shin & Boothe, 2006). Ben noticed, however, it did not take the juvies long before they let their guard down and began to read in the commons area. Ironically, the detention center may have provided a safe space for pleasure reading free from the social pressures of athletics, jobs, music, web surfing, computer gaming and fitting into social groups kids experience on the outside. Of course we do not recommend detention centers as a cure for adolescent reading, but we do agree with findings on adolescent reading associated with access, choice and engaged time discussing literature (Brozo, 2002; Lewis & Moorman, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sprague & Keeling, 2007).

Reading in the commons area of the juvenile detention center provided a healthy escape from the stark surroundings of their individual holding cells. The commons area is furnished with tables, chairs, and a television (with restricted programming and viewing hours) although there are no windows to tell day from night. This room has a high ceiling and is completely open to cell blocks on two levels. Individual cell blocks are bleak. Each includes a stainless steel toilet stool with no lid, a sink, a raised platform with a thin vinyl covered mattress about two inches thick, a blanket and pillow. Light inside the cell blocks come from a single bulb overhead and two windows, one in the door disallowing any privacy and another small window constructed of two glass bricks. From the commons area, hallways accessed through secure doors lead to classrooms, lock down rooms, the kitchen and dining room. To enter and leave the commons area, a person must pass through a series of locked checkpoints with guards much like airport security. The classrooms are off limits to students unless there is a teacher present and the detainees are attending classes. At all other times, the rooms are locked. The juvenile detention center is like a prison. Teenaged juvies are under the age of 18 and some are as young as 11 years old. Most are serving 1 to 9 month sentences, but never more than a year. Some are repeat offenders. Infractions include breaking state cigarette smoking laws for persons under eighteen, truancy, running away from home, auto theft, aggravated assault, and breaking and entering. These kids were once attending public schools and will likely return when they get out.

Ben and I took the book usage inside the detention center as a good thing. One social stigma imposed on juvenile delinquents is the generalization that they have reading difficulties (Franzak, 2006). Reading level didn't seem to be a hindrance at this detention center. Ben was able to round up a few more books and circulation remained constant. There was no formal check out system inside the detention center, but books passed between juvies and since this was their temporary residence the books stayed within the center. A few months later, Ben left the detention center and took a job as a juvenile probation officer in the next county, but we continued to hear about the book project. By coincidence, the father of one of my college students worked at the same detention center. Tiffany was taking my young adult literature class. She asked if Ben was my son. Her father had told her about Ben bringing books to start a library. Tiffany reported that the paperback books were getting pretty tattered from use and wanted to know if I had more to donate. We talked about the detention center and Tiffany decided to adopt the library as her class project. She worked with her father to get bookshelves and find approved locations for them in the detention center. She filled them with more donated books. Ben's seedling idea had taken root and was growing.

A year passed and our work demands carried us farther away from the detention center library project. I was busy with my university workload and Ben was pursuing a masters degree in criminal justice. One afternoon, however, a student came by my office to ask for help on a project she was undertaking for a children's literature class. Stephanie told me she worked part time at the juvenile detention center and wanted to know how to start literature groups. She found my name while thumbing through the books at the center. She said several had my name inside the cover. I explained that Ben had worked at the detention center, too, and had started the library. I also mentioned Tiffany and her father's helpful contributions. Stephanie shared that she had been working at the center on a part time basis for about 4 months and had really enjoyed working with the kids and the director, Al. This began an ongoing weekly dialogue with Stephanie over the course of a semester. She said Al's classroom setting focused on coping skills, anger management and positive attitudes. "He even has them read some books," Stephanie reported. Al also noticed the impact the library was having on these kids. I learned through Stephanie that Al and other co-workers at the detention center reported that most of the juvies were spending their free time reading instead of watching television or just sleeping in their cell blocks. With all the interest in reading Stephanie wanted to try literature groups with the juvies, but there were few multiple copies of books and she was not sure Al would go for the idea. Stephanie was experiencing a modified version of literature groups in her children's literature class at the university. Al already told her there was no budget to buy more books. We talked some more and between the two of us, decided we would find a way to cover the book costs if Al approved of the literature groups. I recommended two books on literature circles to Stephanie to provide some background information before she approached Al on the idea, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student Centered Classroom* by Daniels (1994) and *Getting Started With Literature Circles* by Schlick-Noe & Johnson (1999). My first title suggestion was *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson. I encouraged her to read it first to become familiar with the content and decide how she might use the book with the kids at the detention center. Stephanie went on to share *Touching Spirit Bear* with the director. Al loved the book, too, and approved of the literature groups. Now there would be solid proof that these kids were reading as they whittled away the hours of their jail sentence. Ben's seedling idea was flourishing.

The first title was a hit and the literature discussion groups were off to a good start. I suggested to Stephanie that she read some of the book to them as she introduced the story. I also suggested she tape it or get a copy from the library in case there were struggling or nonreaders who still wanted to participate. Al had a tape recorder in his classroom. Our framework for the literature group tasks was loosely based on Daniels (1994) model for literature groups. We talked about groups of 5 students each with designated roles to play from discussion leader to illustrator. As she experimented, Stephanie tailored the literature groups to the unique setting. In the detention center there is always a turnover of residents to contend with making the literature group dynamics ever changing. We discovered small groups became a challenge because of attrition. Of course I was curious about the students' ability to write so I asked Stephanie if she could get them to record some of their reactions or draw pictures as they read or listened to the story. Some sample student comments were clear indications of their personal connections to the book. The subject material provided a way for them to talk about their own struggles with the law:

This is fun, were just chillin listenin to a story havin a good time. Story is tight I like it.
I can relate to it because the kid Cole is careless about breaking the law just like I do
but you always get the worst end of it.

Troy

The story's pretty good, and we're having fun drawing pics of what's going on in the
book tape. I can relate because Cole likes to be in control of where his life is going,
and isn't thinking about the repercussions of his actions.

Matt

Stephanie had the groups going and Al was amazed at how easily the kids joined in. Al and Stephanie invited me to observe what was taking place at the detention center. I had hoped for this day, since my curiosity was peaked. The staff greeted me with warmth and ease. They all knew and remembered my son Ben. The kids were equally comfortable with my presence. I discovered that the "literature groups" were really one large group that varied in size depending on the number of students who wanted to participate and how many were residents at the time. As mentioned student turnover was commonplace. Stephanie learned over the course of the semester that the flexibility of personal choice from the books in the detention center library was the best working arrangement. She learned students showed variation in reading interests, books were passed among students based on personal recommendations and the juvies enjoyed talking about their books. On the day I participated, there were 13 students and three staff members including Al. We sat in a large circle around two tables and chatted as we ate lunch, but the book discussion began in earnest when most had eaten. Each student took a turn talking about the book they were reading or had just finished. I received no indication that this was rehearsed or that they were putting on a show for me. They seemed comfortable saying what they had on their minds. Some students made comments if they had read the same book. Al often probed with a guiding question to get them to talk more. The setting was subdued and respectful without the usual interruptions that often occur in a regular classroom, but there was an excitement with several students who clearly loved the book they were reading.

I was surprised by my observation of the literature groups because I had assumed they were all reading the same book. Stephanie and Al said this still occurred, but mostly the literature group experience had morphed into free choice reading. With more books available, Al and Stephanie had developed a book evaluation system which asked students a series of questions such as: title, author, number of pages, genre, characters, summary, how they related to the story, adventure scale 1-10, favorite part or character, recommendation, vocabulary words, did they like the ending and what would you write differently if you wrote the book. These written responses became useful guides for students sharing their book. Stephanie, Al and the staff got the evidence they wanted to prove the students had read the books. There were some other interesting developments and discoveries resulting from their move toward free choice. Staff members were prompted to read some of the same books and they began to engage the students in dialogue about characters or book content.

Student book choices and the authors surprised me. More titles had been added to my original donation. These included books by John Grisham, V. C. Andrews, Christopher Paul Curtis, Robert R. McCammon, Stephen R. Covey, Will Hobbs, Anthony Horowitz, Tamora Pierce, and Chris Crutcher. It was clear that these kids were readers. They had a lot of time on their hands on the inside; through their teachers' encouragement, reading provided an escape as well as a social activity. This evidence of reading among juvenile delinquents also is in contrast to the high percentage of adult inmates who are functionally illiterate or the predictors associated with reading success in

the early grades used in at least one state to determine prison cells. (Hollifield, 1988, "Mark of Cain," 1990: McPartland & Slavin, 1990). Is reading among these juvies an anecdote to further trouble with the law? Perhaps this is another scenario of leisure reading that needs further study as suggested by Tim Shanahan's (2006) editorial piece in *Reading Today*. Knowing the life outcomes of the juvies we worked with once they returned to their neighborhood schools and life on the outside was beyond the scope of this paper. We did learn from our work that access, choice and discussion around literature did have a rewarding affect in the juvies while inside the detention center. Much of their down time was used for reading and we looked at that as a positive use of time with potential positive benefits later.

I was elated that Ben's initial book idea had evolved into a regular part of the educational program at the detention center. I was pleased that Ben and I had found a way to share our common love of reading. Also, the two of us had many discussions about youth in public schools, incarcerated youth, juvenile probation officers, and school personnel. Another idea emerged. At this time, Ben was near completion of his master's degree in criminal justice. His thesis chair was also the department chair at my university. I proposed an idea to Ben about co-teaching a university class cross listed with education, criminal justice, and sociology. The department chairs mutually agreed. These departments represented three groups of professionals who work with kids and families but all too often run parallel tracks with each other which do not intersect. We envisioned the class as a good way to begin more dialogue amongst the professional groups. We combined my expertise about schools and adolescent literature with Ben's knowledge of the juvenile justice system and called the class, Bullies, Gangs and Books for Young Adults. The combination was a fresh idea which turned out to be popular among students across the different fields. Enrollment numbers were high.

Ben and I made plans and the content of the class began to take shape. I suggested a list of young adult novels (see bibliography) in which students would select any two as part of the reading for class. I wanted to model literature discussion groups as part of the class. Ben suggested several films to set the tone of the class. We also decided to bring in guest speakers relevant to our overall theme which included: a school resource officer (SRO), law enforcement experts on gang activity, a colleague from the Department of Criminal Justice who specialized in school violence, active school social workers, and community members who directed activities or worked with youth. Our class plans had the right combination of lecture, media presentations, speakers, group activities and discussion. I was excited about the class and the chance to teach with my son. This was a first for both of us.

Ben had decided we should show a film, *Kids* (1995), on the very first day that would bring awareness of today's adolescents. Although I hadn't viewed the film, I trusted Ben's judgment. After we gave the usual introductions and Ben queued the film, I gazed over the audience. The class was a mix of students from different fields of study, work experience and diverse ranges of age and ethnicity. Some students I recognized from prior classes within the College of Education, but others were new to me. Ben knew some from the Criminal Justice Department, while others were actively working with adolescents in some other capacity. As the film rolled on I became more and more nervous about the content. Though our university is nestled in a liberal pocket of a large urban city, our state is predominantly conservative in its political and religious views. The teenaged main character of the film was obsessed with sex. He was always trying to hit on girls. One line in the film he says often, "Fucking is what I love, take that from me and I have nothing." The same character also contracted aids, but was unaware of it because his health was still intact. The film also depicted the lives of several other youth in a city setting. Scenes included drinking, smoking, socializing, partying, experimenting with drugs, involvement with group related violence, sexual activity, athletic feats and life in varied family structures. Parental and adult interactions ranged from tension to laughter. In many ways these kids looked quite normal on the outside, feeling immortal, unclear about facts related to sex, influenced by older siblings, maturing physically faster than mentally, submitting to peer pressure, searching for guidance but wanting to be independent, and being adventurous. The date rape scene was probably the segment of the film that bothered me the most. I surveyed the class nervously, knowing some of their religious backgrounds. At last, the film ended. I broke the silence by saying, "not exactly academy award winning material," which got a laugh. Then we asked for comments. The first person to speak was an elderly lady who had mentioned in the introductions that she was retired and taking the class purely for enrichment and curiosity. She said, "I am surprised how the lines [pick up lines from males i.e. "I love you so much," "trust me," "I just want to make you happy," "do you care about me?"] have not changed in all these years." We could not have asked for a better response had we staged the whole thing. The ensuing discussion was lively and nobody left the room, nor dropped the class. From that moment, the class took shape in amazing ways.

We learned many things from our diverse students. The characteristics and behaviors of the teenagers we discussed were mirrored in the young adult books we suggested for reading. The books were the centerpiece of our discussions and opened the door for many discoveries about adolescents, so unique and different from elementary aged students. Below are a few book connections to the adolescent behaviors discussed with a complete young adult list from the class in the bibliography:

Adolescents on the edge lack strong social ties and are often antisocial - *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson; *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick.

Computer gaming is often an escape world for them - *Crusader* by Edward Bloor.

Most offenders begin with non serious delinquent acts, have poor school attitudes and performance, and often suffer from some psychological disorders (i.e. depression, anorexia, self destructive behaviors, anxiety, etc.) *Staying Fat For Sarah Byrnes*, *Whale Talk* and *Ironman* all by Chris Crutcher; *A Hole in My Life* by Jack Gantos.

Outside school factors also play a role such as the community in which these kids live *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Myers.

Is their neighborhood poverty stricken? Are drugs readily available? How do local laws view sex offenders, firearm possession, or family physical abuse? *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers; *Hero* by S. L. Rottman; *We're Not Monsters: Teens Speak Out About Teens in Trouble* by Sabina Solin Weill; *When She Hollers* by Cynthia Voigt.

Is there an accepted expectation for adults and adolescents in the community to spend time in prisons or detention centers? - *Somewhere in the Darkness* by Walter Dean Myers; *Life in Prison* by Stanley "Tookie" Wilson.

Another characteristic is the media's portrayal of these communities. Do they use stereotypes? Do they generalize the families as transient, single parent families, and unemployed? *Hermanas/Sisters* by Gary Paulsen; *Always Running La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L. A.* by Luis Rodriguez; *Buried Onions* by Gary Soto.

Additional factors that contribute to delinquency include a history of family problems such as psychological and emotional abuse and physical abuse; emotional trauma is more devastating to the children. *Forged by Fire* by Sharon Draper; *Cages* by Peg Kehret

Another factor is parents who deny that their child could do anything wrong - *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor; *Split Image* by Mel Glenn.

Schools also exhibited a host of risk factors for youth such as students who committed crimes early, showed persistent antisocial behavior, experienced academic failure particularly in reading and math, had been retained, felt isolated, and lacked commitment to school.

Ben and I had hoped from the outset that class discussions around young adult books and presentations would foster dialogue among these students from many walks of life. Our class of varied professionals exceeded our hopes, creating a host of recommendations and considerations for school and community settings found as an appendix to this article. An overriding theme through all the discussions and suggestions was to have a presence with our youth. Don't sit back and assume others will be their mentors. Of course our goal as professionals, parents and community members who interact with youth is to keep them out of trouble and out of detention centers.

This article grew out of real life experience, but it all began with a love for reading and the desire to share this passion with kids who had made big mistakes. Since the idea first took root, the adult participants have grown in various ways. Tim, the director of the juvenile detention center, still runs literature discussion groups and the library keeps growing as others in the community hear about our story and feel compelled to donate books. According to Al free choice reading amongst the juvies is still the favored activity for passing time on the inside. The idea is spreading, too. Across the state in another residential setting for adolescents on the edge, known as a youth ranch, a

counselor who attended the class reads aloud to his residents each night before they drift off to sleep. He reported that throughout the day residents ask if he “is going to read to them tonight” despite the attrition that naturally occurs at the youth ranch. Tiffany’s interest in young adult literature blossomed as she read and continued to collect books. She shifted from wanting to be a teacher to becoming a librarian. She was recently promoted to Youth Services Director at a library in Alaska. Stephanie, now working full-time in a preschool returned to work on a graduate degree in reading. In another off shoot from this branching idea one of our class participants started a library from scratch in the alternative high school where she is teaching. Here efforts were noticed. This past summer she was hired as a consultant to create a library in a newly built alternative high school. This time they gave her a budget. In various high school neighborhoods parental groups are meeting with school personnel to dialogue about substance abuse. Youth task forces are popping up in area high schools. Neighboring communities are inviting gang activity experts from law enforcement connections to raise awareness and head off potential problems. I have conducted numerous workshops about adolescents at risk with colleagues, staff members and teachers who work in public schools or facilities for incarcerated youth. Ben decided to combine two of his passions, working with juvies and teaching adults, by working on a doctorate in criminal justice. A seed planted among people who share a love of books and a genuine concern for youth continues to flourish.

Appendix

Recommendations For Schools and Communities Focused on Adolescents

When positive role models are not available students will drift toward gangs to meet their need to belong. To avoid this misguided direction set up a task force with parents, school personnel, school resource officers, probation officers, and other adults in the community who work with adolescents.

Schools need to take action to create a climate that welcomes students.

School staff need to seek out kids on the edge and communicate with them on a daily basis. Schools need to organize activities that keep kids on campus over the noon hour and seek input from students on what they think would make the school a welcoming place.

Create mentoring programs with community and faculty members.

Offer a host of choices from therapy groups to courses in which the content includes strategies to improve self esteem, anger management skills, family dynamics related issues, sexuality, and positive social skills.
Set clear rules and treat students fairly. Students seek respect just like any adult.

Develop a climate in the community that shows empathy, not judgmental behavior toward youth.
Channel students toward other subjects and interests besides academics such as creative writing, computer graphics, drawing, and all aspects of music including composing and recording.

Communities must take responsibility for teens rather than leaving it all to the schools. Communities regardless of size must act on any gang related activities immediately and not live in denial until it is too late.
Offer opportunities for parents and the community to learn about available services ranging from gang prevention and youth activities to support groups and adult mentoring programs.

In addition, students who were held accountable by a school which lacked appropriate services such as school counselors, school resource officers, social workers, reading and study skills support staff, parenting workshops, and alternative school options have led to delinquent behavior.

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