

Librarians as Agents of Change for Incarcerated Youth

Jaime Bravo

Dominican University

Many people imagine librarians working in public or academic libraries. They picture them reading to children, working with the public, and answering reference questions. While this is all true work of librarians, society can also imagine them working beyond these roles and settings. As librarians are agents of literacy and educational development, it is important to consider their role in providing services to disenfranchised populations. One population in particular, incarcerated youth in the United States, have been ignored because they are seen as troubled and a burden to society. The struggles faced by youth of color in the 21st century are far more complex than many can handle, causing education systems to fail them and increasing the chance of involvement in the criminal justice system. While incarcerated, it is important for youth to have access to educational resources that promote literacy skills. Librarians and literacy programs are of great impact for many youths in detentions centers and are a key role in breaking recidivism cycle by fostering positive life decisions.

The first juvenile court in the U.S. was established in 1899. Its primary focus was to assist minors with treatment and rehabilitation (Tsui, 2014). This was seen as a good approach for separating minors from adults and providing aid to a group that was still developing mentally and physically. Many believed this approach was lenient, and during the 1960's the Supreme Court required juvenile courts to have formal hearings and meet the standard of due process and fair treatment (Tsui, 2014). Despite this reform, there has been an increase in youth convicted as adults every year in the United States with an estimated 250,000 new inmates annually (Aray, 2011).

In the United States, there is an estimated 92,854 youth in juvenile detention centers, and they are predominantly Black and Hispanic males (Woodward, 2009). The Juvenile Justice statistics show ratio of youth of color detained vs. white youth 3 to 1 in the United States

(Woodward, 2009). In 2007, the highest offences reported of incarcerated youth were 25.9% property offences followed by 11.7% technical violations and 8.6% drug offences (Gerdes, 2012). The annual cost on average to incarcerate a single youth in the United States is \$88,000 dollars, which is twice the amount of tuition to a private University (Levin & Lubow, 2012).

One may ask why so many states invest in sending youth to detention centers instead of providing programs and services for underprivileged communities. Studies suggest four main reasons juvenile courts send many low-level offenders to correctional institutions. First is lack of programs and services for certain youth, such as those in and out of foster homes and in welfare programs. Second are counterproductive financial incentives, as there are incentives to having high numbers of minors in detention centers (i.e. more filled beds equal more funding). Third reason is expressed as juvenile detention center being seen as dumping grounds. Youth that have mental health or behavioral problem are groups that society sometimes does not want to deal with, and the justice system may see incarceration as a rehabilitative solution. Lastly, there is a tendency for courts to punish defiance and not delinquency. Studies have found that youth who demonstrate to the court that they cannot or will not obey its orders are more likely to be incarceration (Mendel, 2011).

In 1994, Congress eliminated funding for many educational programs in federal prisons and detention centers through Pell Grants (Music 2012). Betsy Clarke, president of the Juvenile Justice Initiative, states if youth are locked up and punished harshly, offered fewer developmental programs, and given no future planning, then they are more likely to become repeat offenders (Woodward, 2009). Similarly, a survey conducted by Campaign for Youth Justice found that 78% of the public preferred the juvenile justice system to focus on prevention and rehabilitation services rather than incarceration and punishment (Levin & Lubow, 2012).

Therefore, it is important to consider how literacy and educational programs provide youth with skills essential to professional and social development while serving their sentence.

Literacy and education have always been a way of empowering individuals and communities. Reading has become an integral part in the lives of mostly everyone and it's a skill need to be successful in the 21st century (Drakeford, 2002). Unfortunately, many youths in detention centers have a hard time reading or do not find reading useful in their lives. Data from project read indicates that the average reading level nationally for 9th grade youth in correctional facilities is of a 4th grade level. Studies demonstrate that 85% of all juveniles who enter the juvenile justice system are functionally illiterate (Music, 2012). Many juveniles that are sent to juvenile facilities have not had the most positive life experiences, and for many the education system has failed them.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a complex problem of policies that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system (Elias, 2013). Major contributors of the pipeline are police presence in schools, harsh tactics, and automatic punishments that lead to suspension or expelling. It is inequitable that the groups that are mainly affected are racial minorities and children with disabilities. If students falls into the school-to-prison pipeline, there is a small chance, due to cuts in detention centers educational programs, that the student will finish school (Elias, 2013). Studies indicate that inmates that receive literacy help have a 16% chance of returning to prison versus 70% for those receiving no help (Music, 2013). Incorporating reading interventions into a juvenile detention and rehabilitation plan have demonstrated that juveniles gain a sense of capability and confidence in succeeding once leaving the facility (Music, 2013). Confidence and capability can help many youth finish school or look for jobs and begin to feel like they are contributing to society.

Librarians can play a key role in implementing these literacy programs and can ultimately reducing recidivism of incarcerated youth. In “It is All About the Kids: Presenting Option and Opening Doors,” author Joni Richards Bodart presents the case of Amy Chaney, a librarian making a difference at the Juvenile Justice Center in Alameda County, California. Chaney implemented a library in the facility that has made positive impacts in the lives of youth who are there serving time. Librarians bring a new perspective on life to many of the juveniles in the detention centers as well as foster a culture of excitement for reading and lifelong learning (Bodart, 2008). Chaney explains once basic needs are met, people begin to start thinking about their lives and reflecting on their decisions. Librarians play an important role by giving alternatives and options to youth through literacy that perhaps were never offered to them before.

Another successful example of this was in a Fort Bend County Texas detention center. Librarians implemented a successful model called “My Reading Coach” that helped youth with phonemic awareness, grammar and reading comprehension. Data indicated the program improved reading in 30 to 50 hours (Music, 2012). Once the ability to read was present, youth had the option to visit the library in the detention center where librarians supplemented additional reading and literacy programing. In a study to evaluate the effectiveness of an intensive literacy program aimed at increasing literacy skills, youth demonstrated positive gain in oral fluency, grade placement, and attitude (Drakeford, 2002). Attitude is a problematic aspect for many youths in detention centers, because they are believed to be violent and unmanageable. However, as this study demonstrates, literary programs can bring a more positive mindset and progressive outcomes for juveniles in detention centers.

People might reject such programs because lack of funding or staffing. There is a need for materials, so there are many libraries that will donate books to the detention centers. In the

state of New York, the Prisoner's Reading Encouragement Project (PREP) has donated more than 55,000 books to 23 New York state prisons (Music, 2013). Librarians operating programs for incarcerated youth, especially those lacking funds for collection development, could benefit by reaching out to other public libraries and organizations. Sharing collections and other materials can increase options available in detention center libraries.

Librarians and groups outside detention centers have made efforts to connect and provide literary materials to many juveniles in detention centers. Baton Rouge Parish Library in Baton Rouge, Louisiana has librarians doing outreach, weeding collections, and facilitating teen programming for their local juvenile detention center. Positive outcomes that come from outreach efforts are bringing reading resources, exposure to the outside world, and "traveling beyond the bars that lock them down" (Roos, 2012). Liberation Library is a group in Chicago that provides books to 3 Illinois juvenile detention centers. Their mission is to "provide books to youth in prison to encourage imagination, self-determination, and connection to the outside world of their choosing" (Liberation Library, 2015). So far the organization has sent 83 book donations to the 3 state juvenile centers in Illinois. They also have pen pal mentors and send book marks. It is important to encourage reading, writing, provide resources, and connect with juveniles in detention centers because studies suggest the positive impact is instrumental.

Literacy programs should not only be suggested, they should be implemented in all detention centers. It should be done with librarians that can ignite the passion for reading that they themselves carry within them. For many racial minorities entering juvenile detention centers, it might be the first time someone has dedicated time to or believed in them. Librarians can be a positive influence within literacy programs and lead youth into a successful path to adulthood. For many juveniles, the education system has failed to provide the encouragement

and incessant passion for knowledge. Though, as discussed previously, literacy programs can reduce the rate of recidivism and provide juveniles with the fundamental skills to be successful in the 21st century. Librarians can truly bring a positive influence to many juveniles underestimated and unrepresented by the vast majority.

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