

BOOK REVIEW:

Literacy behind Bars: Successful Reading and Writing Strategies for Use with Incarcerated Youth and Adults (Mary E. Styslinger, Karen Gavigan, and Kendra Albright, Editors)

Review by Nadya Pittendrigh

Styslinger, Mary E., Karen Gavigan, and Kendra Albright, editors. *Literacy Behind Bars: Successful Reading and Writing Strategies for Use with Incarcerated Youth and Adults*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Offered as reflective “notes from the field,” the new collection *Literacy Behind Bars: Successful Reading and Writing Strategies for Use with Incarcerated Youth and Adults* provides thought-provoking resources in a radically under-resourced domain: the collection focuses on literacy for incarcerated youth and adults. Following extended decline in public support for prisoner education since at least the 1970s, the elimination of prisoners’ access to Pell Grants in 1994, and strained state budgets providing an inexhaustible rationale for cuts to education, the volume arrives in a context of extreme austerity, particularly when it comes to education for the incarcerated (Jacobi 106). If, as Tobi Jacobi writes elsewhere, what remains of educational programming in the age of austerity is a patchwork, with little or no state support, most educational opportunities behind bars are actually provided by volunteers (107). With the aim of benefitting other educators who teach or who might consider doing so in prison, *Literacy Behind Bars* registers the textures, rewards, and meanings involved in teaching behind bars, while also offering insights for “those who work with other at-risk readers and writers” (x). Written by professionals involved in teaching in various carceral contexts, the authors describe experiments, projects, and activities that other teachers, inside and outside of prison, might be inspired to adapt. The pedagogical experiences described in the book also provoke reflective engagement with the urgent survival value of literacy, for all students.

Given the context of unprecedented incarceration and declining education behind bars, the collection's editors make a brief case in their Preface for the relationship between literacy and any person's chances for avoiding incarceration. Citing grim correlations between a person's race and poverty level and one's chance of being incarcerated, the authors highlight evidence that "effective reading interventions for juvenile offenders can result in a 20 percent recidivism reduction" (ix). In placing particular weight on targeted reading instruction, the volume suggests that literacy itself offers some hope. The volume's chapters describe such targeted interventions, in both reading and writing classrooms for youth and incarcerated adults.

One of the book's most affecting chapters, "Teaching to the Heart: Fostering Empathy through Writing Workshop," presents the reflections of Timothy R. Bunch on teaching "behind the fence." Having taught in the juvenile correctional system of South Carolina for over twenty years, Bunch first considers the expansion of his own capacities for empathy through the experience of teaching incarcerated young people. He frames his upbringing as somewhat fenced off from crime and its causes, and his growth towards understanding "the everyday heartbreak" of life for his students offers a template for the growth that he routinely witnesses and aims for among his students, through literacy and writing instruction.

Bunch narrates his efforts to foster a "culture of compassion" through foregrounding vulnerability and relational risks within the writing workshop. Early in his chapter, he recounts the realization, while contemplating Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" and the deferred dreams of his incarcerated students, that simply "paying attention to the person in pain" provides an essential prerequisite to empathy (13). His essay follows that directive, tracing the contours of empathy in a series of poignant recollections. He describes one student's transformative

authorship of a poem about abuse by a parent, which provides an opening for the student to articulate empathy for other abused children. Yet Bunch also registers the potential for the failure of empathy. He recalls, for instance, a student blurting out in class one day, “I never thought about the person I killed.” Bunch contrasts this story with that of another student who ashamedly confronts his crime after reading Elie Wiesel’s text *Dawn*, confessing that, like the story’s protagonist, he lost everything because he killed somebody. The narrative suggests that when students connect with some truth about themselves, perhaps a particularly painful truth, it helps them connect to others, and this is the promise of literacy: it is a medium for extending or at least tapping into our empathetic capacities. Certainly, all teachers must feel the urgency of this imperative to teach empathy, and not just among young incarcerated students. But one wonders to what extent literacy’s potential for doing so depends on Bunch’s decency and personal touch, or what is transferrable from his experiences to other classrooms?

The repeated theme in *Literacy Behind Bars*, that instructors must get to know their students’ “authentic literacy practices,” provides some of the volume’s most portable insights for instructors. Many of the collection’s authors advocate for responsiveness to students’ own “learning histories and literacy challenges, as well as their aspirations and interests both inside and outside of correctional facilities” (vii). Yet engaging students’ authentic ambitions and interests means various things in the volume. Kristine E. Pytash presents a multimodal writing project focused on imitating public service announcements, with the explicit aim of making “writing authentic and relevant to youth’s lives” through digital engagement (19). In a chapter called “Writing about the Secrets of Gang Life,” Kendra S. Albright also offers methods for engaging students’ experience and interests, through the special allure of both graphic novels and gangs. Similarly, Vanessa Irvin provides rich insights and invaluable text suggestions for

engaging students on their own terms. Writing from a position of exceptional expertise on street literature, or urban literature, and students' authentic embrace of it, Irvin argues that the experience of reading returns a person to the textures of experience, and that providing incarcerated students with texts that reflect their lived experience is particularly vital. Irvin's chapter promises to benefit those of us who teach students, inside or outside the carceral context, who want to be responsive but who have limited knowledge of the literary niches these students may already inhabit.

Deborah Appleman's contribution to the volume, "Word by Word: Teaching Poetic Economy Behind bars," presents approaches to teaching strategic restraint in writing through traditional literary forms. The enthusiastic responses of her students suggest that rhetorical traditions already familiar to students are not the only way to engage students meaningfully. Those who have taught in adult prisons will recognize the enthusiasm and poetic copiousness of the students described by Appleman. Prisons are full of people who write poetry, as well as people who appreciate poetic skills in one another, and poetry workshop provides a rare space to engage all that vitality. Perhaps particularly in the contemporary carceral context, where the restrictions of prison increasingly mean few educational programs, little movement outside one's cell, or even access to varied experience, adult students in prison tend to participate exceptionally eagerly. Such students, Appleman observes, "flood each writing opportunity," not only with excitement, but often with too many words (3). Hesitant to impose yet more restriction in prisoners' lives, particularly when poetry offers a rare outlet for free expression, she ultimately opts to show her students the liberatory power of literary constraints. As a writing instructor who seeks a culturally responsive curriculum, but who has unresolved questions about what constitutes such a curriculum, I would be curious to know the extent to which these adult poets,

many of whom who already have a relationship to poetry, were persuaded of the value of following these traditional forms or arbitrary constraints. Were they persuaded, as Appleman was, of the economy imposed by these forms?

If there is an ethics implicit in our commitments to basic writers and to helping students advance no matter their level of literacy, that ethics is given a specific and vivid resonance in the context of teaching incarcerated writers. Instructors of basic writing will hear such commitments echoed back to them throughout the book, precisely insofar as we know that “our instructional approaches are only as good as their responsiveness to the neediest adolescents and adults among us” (vii). *Literacy Behind Bars* delivers the experience of teaching behind bars, and perhaps most importantly, persuades potential teachers to offer their expertise to a population deemed as the least deserving of our limited resources.

Works Cited

Jacobi, Tobi. “Austerity Behind Bars: The ‘Cost’ of Prison College Programs.” *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, edited by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott. University Press of Colorado, 2016, pp. 106-119.

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