

School on the Inside

Teaching the incarcerated student

By DAVID CHURA

When people hear that I taught language arts for 10 years in a New York county penitentiary, they assume it was a tough job because kids in jail are uninterested in learning. If that were the case, it would be easier to explain the tragedy of their lives. The majority of the teenage boys I taught—

mostly poor and minority—didn't lack ability. They lacked focus and old-fashioned seat time, but most had an aptitude for learning. Some were quite bright. It was just that "other things" got in the way: addictions, street violence, fractured families, homelessness, racism.

But as they confront their chaotic lives, kids in jail share the same goals as their peers in the world outside: get a high school diploma, secure a decent job, go to college, make something of themselves. These young men wanted their school, albeit a cramped space off a noisy prison corridor, to be a "real school." Though beaten down by negative experiences as learners, they still set high expectations for themselves. My job was to prepare them for the state's comprehensive and demanding English exam. Curriculum would be the key.

New York State allows individual districts to choose literary texts based on community demographics and students' educational needs and interests. I designed a curriculum that would be engaging and relevant, yet honored the state's standards. Students read Greek, Norse, and Aztec mythology and such works as August Wilson's play, *Fences*; the poetry of Luis J. Rodriguez and Pablo Neruda; and Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*.

Although the readings hooked students as they came to identify with characters and situations, I knew we had to go beyond cultural relevance if they were to pass the state test. So we slowly assembled the skills they would need. Working with the "critical lens," they learned how to respond to such statements as, "All literature must teach a lesson as well as entertain," explaining why they agreed or disagreed. Students compared and contrasted readings. Two favorites were the urban classics *Manchild in the Promised Land* and *Down These Mean Streets*. They worked to identify and explain the use of foreshadowing, allusion, and conflict (something they felt well grounded in). I encouraged them to hone their facility with these concepts by applying them to situations they



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encountered on the cell block, the music they listened to, and the TV shows they watched.

My students not only discussed, they wrote. They wrote *every* day. They wrote persuasively—taking a stand on a current issue, as one young man said, "Like a lawyer in court"; informatively—gathering, organizing, and presenting facts on topics such as drug prevention and teen violence; and critically—analyzing a story, novel, or poem. Most hated writing, but they knew writing skills were crucial for their diploma. Instruction was a blend of mechanics and content development, confidence building and critiquing, as students learned to identify "audience," establish "voice," structure arguments.

Understandably, not every student mastered the skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. No matter what progress they made, it was still jail. A kid might come to class with a bruised face from a fight on the block or be missing for weeks, put on disciplinary lockup. The temptation is to "dummy down." Too many of my students had been shortchanged by that approach in the past, and they knew it.

Through all the disruption and turmoil, most of the young men managed to sustain their connection to school, even showing pride in what they were doing, be it organizing thoughts into paragraphs or discussing the role of institutionalized discrimination in Mark Mathabane's South African autobiography, *Kaffir Boy*. Occasionally, some young man might even quip about his situation, to show what he had learned. One I recall in particular said, "It's pretty ironic, Mr. C. Here I am locked up in jail, but finally going to school."

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David Chura is author of I Don't Wish Nobody to Have a Life Like Mine: Tales of Kids in Adult Lockup and a frequent lecturer and advisor on incarcerated youth.