

Fall 2019

Literacy Behind Bars: Successful Reading and Writing Strategies for Use with Incarcerated Youths and Adults

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Recommended Citation

Hilliard, Stephanie. "Literacy Behind Bars: Successful Reading and Writing Strategies for Use with Incarcerated Youths and Adults." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, pp. 111 - 115. doi:10.25148/clj.14.1.009062.

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Literacy Behind Bars: Successful Reading and Writing Strategies for Use with Incarcerated Youths and Adults

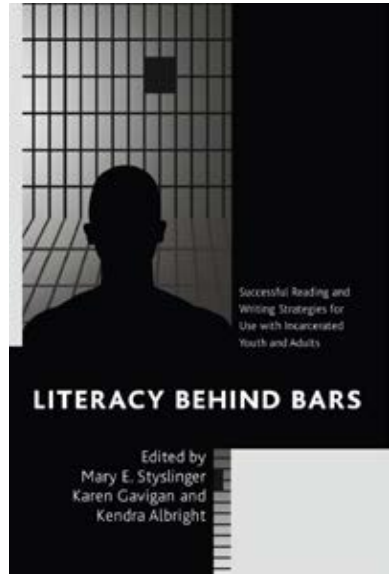
**Mary E. Styslinger, Karen Gabigan,
and Kendra Albright, eds.**

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,
2017. 105 pp.

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Literacy *Behind Bars* introduces its core focus in the subtitle: the goal of this text is to provide “strategies” aimed at improving the reading and writing skills of incarcerated persons of all ages. However, while this goal seems wholly explained by the book’s title, it does very little to fully encapsulate the full breadth and depth of the book’s content. Edited by a trio of authors who each have various experiences teaching in the penal system, *Literacy Behind Bars* features a wonderful diversity of information that reaches far beyond the goal set by its title.

The book is tall and thin, almost feeling more like a composition notebook than a scholarly work. Simply perusing the size and shape of the text, one might come away with the impression that the text will be unable to fully deliver on its premise, as the content spans a mere 85 pages. Within moments of cracking the book open however, this impression feels unfounded. The foreword, written by William G. Brozo, serves as a broad introduction to the text itself, while the preface of the text offers much-needed context that lays the groundwork for the kind of spaces in which the following chapters were conceived. As a teacher who has worked in a prison classroom, I was heartened to see this framing, as *Literacy Behind Bars* sets itself apart from its modest title quickly, providing context and information that can inform any audience about the landscape of prison teaching, regardless of their previous experience or knowledge. Both the foreword and the preface include broad-stroke information that informs readers about the scope and scale of the American prison system, and by extension, its classrooms. One does not have to have previous experience with prison teaching to come away from the foreword feeling prepared to understand the context in which this text is focused.



Each chapter recounts a particular teaching or study experience, all of which are centered in an educational space within the American penal system. The students in question for this text range from juveniles to adults, and the reasons for their incarceration are just as diverse.

Although the foreword and preface provide a sound overview of the prison system and teaching “behind the fence,” consequent chapters further describe the uniqueness of teaching in the penal system, not just at a macro level, but at a micro one as well. The chapters do not appear to be organized in any particular way, but all include accounts of teaching in minimum-to-maximum security facilities, describe varying levels of technology access (some classrooms had strict rules about access to and possession of pencils, while other facilities allowed students supervised use of the Internet), and explore various contexts in which incarcerated learning occurs, including traditional classroom spaces, book clubs, and libraries. Although this wealth of experience is not framed as an explicit primer into what teaching within the prison system can entail, the text does, in fact, provide a solid overview of the various ways in which prison teaching is encountered. A reader with no previous knowledge of this work can come away from the book with a strong understanding of the physical spaces in which prison education occurs.

Turning from the physical space of learning to the learners themselves, despite the occasional references to why these students are incarcerated, these notes are always included in a respectful way, which speaks to one of the unspoken goals of the text; it is clear from the rhetoric of the various contributors that these authors care very deeply for their students, are keenly aware of how outsiders view them, and have a vested interest in combatting the stereotypes attributed to incarcerated learners. This view is evidenced in several places. In “The Places We Can Go: Book Clubs for Social Justice,” authors Jennifer L. Doyle, Elizabeth M. Bemiss, and Mary E. Styslinger recount the experience of running a book club. The authors note that the purpose of the club was to “combat stereotypes and oppression in the everyday lives of students who are incarcerated” (Doyle, Bemiss, and Styslinger 56). Another chapter, “Theme for English B” (where “B” refers to a cell block), explains that the focus of prison teaching requires teachers to “reframe the conversation about what [students’] behavior means” and to view these students “as people with needs rather than as a problems to be removed or contained” in order to “disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline,” a concept which is explored in the foreword of the text, as well as subsequent chapters (Williamson, Mercurio, and Walker 67). The same chapter also engages in important social justice work with regard to its focus on humanizing the students in question. In a particularly heart-wrenching section, the authors recount how juvenile students, when faced with a uniquely traditional classroom space, began to allow themselves to be vulnerable children within the classroom. The “symbols of innocence” permitted in this particular context “provide comfort and solace” to “children who are in need of comfort, protection, and hope” (Williamson, Mercurio, and Walker 67). Multiple chapters (including the aforementioned two) reference negotiation, vulnerability, and the humanity that these educators have made a primary goal of their pedagogical decisions within the prison space.

Although readers of this book may not approach it with the intent of engaging with prison education as practitioners, the book features many suggestions for writing instruction that could be implemented in any teaching context. The first chapter, “Word by Word,” explains that, due to the unique situation in which incarcerated students find themselves, these students are apt to “overwrite” often, primarily due to the sheer amount of time they have to write, as well as the relative freedom that writing allots them within a space that is almost ubiquitously restrictive. In “Word by Word,” Deborah Appleman explains that the unique context in which these writers find themselves reveals “one of the biggest challenges that incarcerated writers face,” but this issue is not wholly relegated to these particular students (3). Many young writers, upon being given the freedom to write in a supportive context, find it difficult to manage their writing in a meaningful way, leading to unneeded additions and addendums that ultimately take away from their overall purpose. In an effort to combat this challenge, Appleman introduces her students to writing genres that force a limited, but full-bodied structure. She selects the genres of haiku, sestina, and six-word memoir, which not only help to explicate the need for careful rhetorical choices in one’s writing, but also introduces genres that encourage writers for whom long-form genres are not enjoyable or useful. In one student’s case, although he disliked writing longer pieces of writing, he “churned out sixty, yes sixty” haikus for his final portfolio (4). The section also shares some of the students’ work. Of six-word memoirs, Appleman shares the following: “Six words? For this much pain? (R.B.) Thorns stay buried in the redeemed. (C.C.)” (7). The aforementioned six-word memoirs are only two of the examples Appleman includes. Other examples include haikus and sestinas—in fact, the chapter includes over thirty examples of student work.

Appleman’s chapter is not the only one that features pedagogical and assignment-based advice that can be taken “beyond the fence” and into traditional classrooms (Styslinger, Gabigan, and Albright x). Further, the text also focuses on a broad range of teachers with varying levels of experience. While many of the contributors are veteran educators (both inside and outside of the prison system), one chapter by Mary E. Styslinger and Timothy R. Bunch, entitled “Reading Buddies,” explores the experiences of novice teachers who worked with incarcerated students as part of their teaching development. This teaching experience, framed as a “collaborative, literacy-related partnership” serves to “[broaden] perceptions of self and others,” a useful skill for any teacher in any context (Styslinger and Bunch 71-72). This project is also useful for demonstrating the importance of the idea of “meeting students where they are,” as the authors ask, “how many of us become English teachers because we want to teach *reading*?” (Styslinger and Bunch 72; emphasis added). Once again, although the space in which these lessons are learned is a non-traditional space, the lessons carry far broader implications that can be applied in any teaching context, including those navigated by novice educators.

Perhaps one of the most wonderful aspects of the book is in the rhetorical choices the authors make regarding the unstated goal of the text, which is humanizing the students with whom they work. Incarcerated students are often misunderstood, vilified, and vulnerable, and humanizing these students is no easy task, considering how

incarcerated individuals are often viewed outside the fence. Appleman's decision to include so many wonderful examples of the creativity and power of these students' words serves to contest some of the stereotypes that prison educators are most concerned with combatting. As these students' voices are so often categorized as unimportant, featuring their voices is a brilliant way to demonstrate one of the many ways these students defy expectation.

Although the main focus of this book is traditional writing instruction, there are chapters that incorporate multimodal composition. "Composing Public Service Announcements," "Writing About the Secrets of Gang Life," and "Creating a Community of Writers Using Graphic Novels" each tackle multimodal writing assignments, focusing on PSA videos and comics respectively. These pieces delve deeply into multimodal composing practices; moreover, each of these chapters also describe the assignments in detail, so any teacher could adapt them to their own teaching contexts.

Literacy Behind Bars boasts many strong points, but there are some areas that feel lacking. The book seems exclusively concerned with the process of teaching English, writing, and reading, which is useful for English teachers, but this is not the only subject area to which incarcerated learners are exposed. Though the tips and tricks in *Literacy Behind Bars* are probably most useful to instructors of English and writing, the broader implications regarding how to approach and engage with incarcerated learners could be useful for instructors of any subject.

The text also opts to allow chapters to speak for themselves; it does not converse across its own content, though the preface does offer an explanation for the "Parts" presented in the book. As the chapters themselves function both as singular pieces and as parts of a holistic whole, the lack of explicit framing towards the goals of humanizing incarcerated students and combatting the school-to-prison pipeline places the onus of drawing these broader connections on the reader. The organization of the text into three sections—Supporting Writers, Encouraging Readers, and Inspiring Partnerships—does little to comment on the idiosyncrasies of certain pieces.

Specifically, the lack of cross-talk across the text feels especially needed in situations in which contributors opt to use language that can contribute to stereotypes about incarcerated students and spaces. For example, in "Books behind the Fence," Susan McNair comments often on notions of safety and criminality regarding a prison library, and these foci imply that incarcerated students are always criminals who are ready to commit another crime at any moment. Because there is very little broader framing given by the editors which speaks directly to this stereotype, the rhetoric of this chapter actively works against the rhetoric found throughout the rest of the book, and the lack of broader framing on the part of the authors leaves McNair's comments unchallenged.

Ultimately, despite these issues, *Literacy Behind Bars* is quick and accessible, while also serving as a robust primer on teaching in prisons. The wealth of knowledge regarding the unique context of prison education can be useful for anyone who is considering prison teaching, and the text provides a broad range of information that can help a novice get started. The inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives with regard to the ages of the students, the varying levels of security and technolog-

ical access across multiple spaces, and the experiences of both novice and veteran teachers allows for an expansive view of what prison teaching can entail. The pedagogical commentary and teaching materials are worth a look, as many of these could also be useful to teachers teaching first-year writing; Appleman's short-form writing approach seems particularly valuable here. I highly recommend this text if you are interested in learning about teaching in the penal system, if you are an English teacher looking for some innovative assignment ideas, or if you simply want to learn more about the discourses surrounding prison education. Although *Literacy Behind Bars* claims to be of best use for working with incarcerated students, its reach extends beyond its title.