

## Using Urban Fiction to Engage At-Risk and Incarcerated Youths in Literacy Instruction

**How can we select literature that will appeal to at-risk and incarcerated teens—and meet the requirements for use in correctional facilities and high schools?**

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On any given day, more than 100,000 youths are incarcerated in the United States (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Countless more are considered “at-risk” for incarceration, based on factors such as homelessness, poverty, gang membership, substance abuse, grade retention, and more.

Unfortunately, gender and race can be considered risk factors as well. The most recent Department of Justice (DOJ) census showed that 85% of incarcerated teens are male (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Thirty-eight percent of the youths in the juvenile justice system are black, and 19% are Hispanic (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The DOJ predicted that the juvenile correctional population will increase by 36% by the year 2020, mostly because of growth in the Hispanic male population (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Research points to literacy as a major protective factor against incarceration for at-risk youths (Christle & Yell, 2008), while reading difficulty has been documented as one of the leading risk factors for delinquency (Brunner, 1993; Drakeford, 2002; Leone, Krezmien, Mason, & Meisel, 2005; Malmgren & Leone, 2000). For teens already in custody, literacy skills are strongly correlated with a lower chance of recidivism (Leone et al., 2005). In fact, reading instruction has been more effective than shock incarceration or boot camps at reducing recidivism (Center on Crime, Communities, and Culture, 1997).

Considering the powerful benefits of literacy for at-risk and incarcerated youths, teachers of these populations hold a position of great importance. In the case of at-risk teens, teachers may help them acquire the literacy skills that will protect against gang involvement, crime, and incarceration (Christle & Yell, 2008). In the case of incarcerated teens, invested teachers may promote the literacy development that will reduce their chances of recidivism (Leone et al., 2005).

However, engaging at-risk or incarcerated teens in literacy instruction is a notoriously challenging task. The majority of these youths perform far below grade level in reading and writing (Hughes-Hassel & Pradnya, 2007; Katsiyannis, Ryan, Zhang, & Spann, 2008). A recent study found that 70% of eighth graders in high-poverty, high-minority middle schools

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scored “below basic” in tests of reading comprehension (Balfanz, Spiridakis, & Neild, 2002).

The situation in juvenile correctional facilities is similarly discouraging: On average, incarcerated youths are reading at a fourth-grade level, and more than one third of incarcerated youths are illiterate (Brunner, 1993). For these teens, reading represents discouraging, thankless labor.

One of the best ways to position at-risk and incarcerated teens for long-term literacy gains is to help them build the leisure reading habit (Hughes-Hassel & Pradnya, 2007). Time spent reading for leisure is correlated with academic success and achievement in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and content knowledge (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Krashen, 1993). The critical ingredient to increase leisure reading is appealing reading material (Hughes-Hassel & Pradnya, 2007), and for many at-risk and incarcerated teens, urban fiction fulfills that criterion (Gibson, 2010; Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006; Stovall, 2005).

## Urban Fiction

“Urban fiction” is a genre that emerged in the 1970s with Robert Beck and Donald Goines, writers who captured the ghetto experience with all of its crime, poverty, gangs, prostitution, incarceration, and drug use (see Hill, Pérez, & Irby, 2008; Morris et al., 2006). In some cases, young adult urban fiction is simply an outgrowth of the original genre, with the same ghetto or barrio settings and gritty content, featuring teen protagonists. In others cases, the language and sexual content has been toned down for the younger audience, although urban themes still prevail. Since its inception, urban fiction has sparked debate; some view it as a compelling expression of inner-city culture, while others feel that the books glamorize behaviors that are destroying urban communities.

Race is one of the key issues at the core of the debate. Proponents argue that urban fiction is capturing “that most elusive and desirable demographic group: young black men” (Rosen, 2004, p. 32) while critics

feel that urban fiction reinforces stereotypes and exploits the black experience (see Chiles, 2006; Rice, 2008). Another area of criticism is focused around language. Much, but not all, of urban fiction is written in African American Vernacular English or Chicano English, and critics have claimed that the nonstandard English sets a poor model for literacy, especially in the classroom (Ratner, 2010, p. 2).

Arguably the most controversial issue of all is the content of urban fiction. Advocates have framed urban fiction as cautionary tales, or even modern day descendents of didactic folk tales (see Morris et al., 2006). However, detractors have contended that street lit reifies crime, substance abuse, promiscuity, and violence (e.g., Alexander, 2005; Chiles, 2006; Stovall, 2005). Professor Andrew Ratner (2010) reported that his students, in-service teachers, wonder if urban fiction is to be “yet another vehicle for cynically marketing nihilistic lifestyles to kids in the inner cities” (p. 2).

## Challenges to Using Urban Fiction in the Classroom

With such incendiary content, few educators would risk teaching a title from the urban fiction genre. Moreover, while it can be controversial to bring “edgy” literature into a regular classroom, it is doubly so in correctional institutions, where teachers and librarians must contend with formal restriction of literacy materials.

It is not surprising that with such vulnerable populations as at-risk and incarcerated teens, the debate over appropriate literature is vehement. Literature is powerful in its capacity to introduce new ideas and contribute to belief formation (Escalas, 2007; Green, 2004; Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999). Correctional and public school administrators, parents, and mental health professionals are understandably concerned about literature romanticizing behaviors that could lead (or have already led) students into custody.

Paradoxically, sometimes the most sensitive situations require the greatest risks. In the introduction to the 2006 Juvenile Offenders and Victims National Report, Howard Snyder and Melissa Sickmund wrote,

America’s youth are facing an ever changing set of problems and barriers to successful lives. As a result,

we are constantly challenged to develop enlightened policies and programs to address the needs and risks of those youth who enter our juvenile justice system. The policies and programs we create must be based on facts, not fears. (Report Summary, para. 1)

It is clear that fear (of promoting antisocial behaviors, for example) can be a factor in restriction of literacy materials. But how much of that fear is well founded, and are there facts that might negate some of the fear? While Snyder and Sickmund (2006) made a salient point in general terms, research is fragmented on the topic of literacy education for at-risk and incarcerated teens.

However, that is no excuse for continuing to implement educational programs that don't work (Coffey & Gemignani, 1994) and avoiding literacy materials that might be effective. As literacy expert William Brozo (2002) wrote,

To presume that reading itself will transform conditions that plague young men such as poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, crime, and irresponsible fathering is recklessly naïve; however, to ignore the potential of active literacy for ensuring that fewer adolescent males become nowhere kids is equally naïve. (p. 156)

Considering the benefits of literacy for at-risk and incarcerated teens, the common difficulties associated with engaging them in literacy instruction, and the remarkable figures on sales of urban fiction to minority teens, it is necessary to examine whether these books might be a major resource in building literacy with these populations.

## **Engaging At-Risk and Incarcerated Youths With Literature**

Studies are sparse on the topic of literacy instruction for incarcerated teens. However, statistics tell us that the typical at-risk or incarcerated teen is male, impoverished, from a minority background (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), and a struggling reader (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). In the following subsections, I will explore what research has told us about the best practices in literacy instruction with these populations, and how that research may apply to urban fiction.

## **Reaching Reluctant Male Readers**

In the past decade, as concern about male literacy has increased, the research community has approached the topic from several angles. A solid body of work indicated that choice in texts is a powerful incentive for adolescent males to read (Brozo, 2002; Fredrick, 2006; Oldfather, 1995; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), and is related to motivation to learn, better understanding of content, and stronger recall (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

To apply this research to at-risk and incarcerated youths, we need to be acquainted with their reading preferences. Unfortunately, little such data exists, save for Nidorf Juvenile Correctional Facility's Amazon .com Wish List, the only such list which appears to reflect solely inmate requests.

A genre analysis of the list indicates that of the 108 fiction titles requested, just over half (55 titles) are urban fiction. Of the 94 nonfiction titles requested, over one third (36 titles) are similar to urban fiction in general subject matter such as prisons, gangs, drugs, and street violence. So, with the little information available, we can surmise that many incarcerated teens (and by extension, those at risk for being incarcerated) would elect to read urban fiction or titles with similar content.

In addition to choice of reading material, many researchers have advocated creating a more "male-friendly" literacy curriculum by selecting texts aligned with male readers' interests (Booth, 2002; Brozo, 2002; Brozo & Schmelzer, 1997; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Based on documented factors such as the prevalence of gang involvement, substance abuse, and fatherhood in the at-risk and incarcerated teen male population (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), we can conclude that gangs, substances, and sex are among their interests. These elements provide the backdrop to urban fiction; they are part of the texture of street life and a reality of living in the ghetto or barrio.

Approaching male literacy from another angle, some theorists have contended that critical literacy is key to broadening male adolescent conceptions of masculinity—and, by extension, their willingness to engage in reading, which many regard as a feminine or "gay" activity (Martino, 2001, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). A critical literacy approach would include interrogating masculinity as it is represented

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in various texts to allow room for more diverse interpretations of gender (Martino, 2001).

“Questioning the ways boys *do boy*” (Kehler & Greig, 2005) would ideally refine both students’ critical abilities and social identities (Martino & Kehler, 2007). In the case of at-risk adolescent males, whose gender identities often depend on being “fighters and lovers” (Payne, 2005), urban fiction could provide rich texts for such analysis.

The male characters in these books usually epitomize a masculinity that is rooted in violence, dominance, and aggression. Many at-risk and incarcerated male teens are living out the results of such gender identities, and might benefit from the opportunity to examine them at the safe distance offered by literature.

**Best Practices in Literacy Instruction for Minority Youths**

With minority youths comprising 61% of the juvenile correctional population in the most recent (2006) census, studies on reading, race, and multicultural literature also have much to tell us about what kinds of literature might contribute to incarcerated teens’ literacy development. The research is consistent: When youths “see” themselves in terms of race, culture, and lived experiences in the literature they read, they benefit academically, personally and socially (Bishop, 1992; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Mason & Au, 1991).

More broadly, culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994)—or “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2000, p. 29)—results in increased student engagement and positive gains in achievement (Chapman, 1994; Foster, 1995; Hollins, 1996; Krater, Zeni, & Cason, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Sheets, 1995).

Unfortunately, culturally responsive teaching can be a challenge when the culture of the student(s) clashes with the dominant culture. The “cultural knowledge, [life] experiences, and frames of reference” (Gay, 2000, p. 29) of impoverished,

gang-involved, minority students are devalued and frequently outlawed in general society.

And yet, the research on culturally responsive teaching indicates that if we are to engage these students academically, it is those same life experiences that provide the most fertile ground for connection. Urban fiction may provide a unique bridge between literacy and real life for many adolescent inmates, and thus holds potential as a powerful tool in building literacy and producing some of the social, personal, and academic benefits indicated in the research on culturally relevant teaching.

Scholars in “hip-hop-based education” (Hill, 2006) have already explored this potential with hip-hop texts, lyrics so saturated with the same cultural references as urban fiction that the latter is also known as “hip-hop fiction.” Researchers have found that hip-hop texts may promote student engagement (Hill, 2006; Mahiri, 1998; Stovall, 2005), scaffold traditional curriculum (Mahiri, 1998; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Rice, 2003), and build critical consciousness and activism (Dimitriadis, 2001; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

With the close relationship between hip-hop music and urban fiction, these studies may be regarded as quasi-test cases for the potential of urban fiction as educational texts. As Hill et al. (2008) wrote, “The street fiction genre provides an extraordinary opportunity for teachers to make effective use of students’ interests and lived experiences in the service of high-quality English education” (p. 80). So, as with the research on reluctant male readers, the research on readers of color indicated that urban fiction is likely to prove compelling to at-risk and incarcerated teens—largely young, impoverished, black and Hispanic males.

**Evaluating Urban Fiction**

Based on the arguments presented thus far, I propose that urban fiction can be a good choice for educational use with incarcerated and at-risk teens. I sympathize with the concerns of critics who feel that some urban literature celebrates the lifestyles that lead many teens into the correctional system. Unfortunately, because of this edgy content, many teachers have taken an “all or nothing” approach to the genre.

To readers unfamiliar with ghetto settings, nonstandard dialects, and gritty themes, the presence

of any of these elements may appear as a signal for literary “trash.” This is a serious oversight that may deprive many at-risk and incarcerated youths of a chance to connect with literature.

Within the urban genre, there also exist stories of excellent literary quality that deal with profound themes of humanity, and are set in contexts, peopled with characters, and written in dialects that will resonate with many at-risk and incarcerated teens. My goal is not to defend the entire genre as appropriate for use with these populations, but to impress on readers that within the genre exist some of the best books for engaging at-risk and incarcerated youths. As with any teaching materials, discrimination is required.

This raises the question of how to select the best urban fiction to engage young readers, without romanticizing destructive habits or lifestyles. To that end, I have developed an evaluative method and applied it to 100 titles in the young adult urban genre. The limitations of my undertaking are clear. My method of evaluation is subjective, and of the hundreds of young adult urban titles in print, I reviewed only 100 for this study.

I urge teachers, correctional facility staff and librarians to borrow what they like from my evaluative process, or use it as a launching point to develop their own. For teachers who are facing challenges bringing urban fiction into the classroom, such an informal evaluative tool may prove valuable in demonstrating to concerned parties that thought and care have gone into selection policies.

At the least, I hope to bring to my readers’ attention some excellent titles in this often disregarded genre. As librarian Josh Westbrook (n.d.) noted, “Kids are living stories every day that we wouldn’t let them read” (as cited in Hamilton, 2009, para. 48).

Evaluating literature is a slippery task. What constitutes an appropriate (or inappropriate) book to use in literacy instruction with at-risk and incarcerated teens? The answers can be as varied as the respondents. For a simple evaluative process that would apply to these populations, I turned to some common problems inherent in juvenile criminal behavior and created a series of three questions to ask of each book.

On a basic level, crime is antisocial. The majority of juvenile offenses are personal crimes or property crimes (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006)—in other words,

offenses against an individual or a piece of property that belongs to someone else. It seems clear that acting in the best interests of others is a skill lacking for many juvenile offenders.

Research has shown that many inmates have difficulty empathizing with others (Winters, 2000) and may suffer self-centered cognitive distortion (Barriga, Landau, Stinson, Liao, & Gibbs, 2000), a disorder in which an individual “behaves according to his or her own views, expectations, needs, rights, immediate feelings, and desires to such an extent that the legitimate views of others...are scarcely considered or are disregarded altogether” (Baker, 2009, para. 1). Therefore, my first question, inspired by Brozo (2002), is “Does (one of) the main character(s) ‘ultimately prevail in doing what is right for the people around them?’” (p. 9)

A second common issue for at-risk teens and juvenile offenders are self-destructive behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse, running away, gang involvement, and promiscuous sex (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). In relation to these behaviors, many juvenile delinquents exhibit poor self-understanding that may manifest in self-serving cognitive distortions (e.g., I have a right to do anything I want; it was someone else’s fault I did this) or self-debasing cognitive distortions (e.g., I am incapable of improving, so I might as well do what feels good; Barriga et al., 2000). Therefore, my second question is “Does (one of) the main character(s) grow in self-understanding?”

Finally, between 48% and 85% of juvenile offenders have been diagnosed with emotional/behavioral disorders and may suffer despair, suicidal thoughts, and anger management issues (Zabel & Nigro, 1999). In light of these statistics, it seems important that the ethos of proffered books not feed or celebrate negative emotions or tendencies. This gives rise to my third question: Is the overall tone of the book one of hope or possibility rather than despair, egotism, or anger?

If, after reading a book, I could answer “yes” to at least two of the three stated questions, I considered the book to be a good choice for use in literacy instruction with this population. The Table contains a list of the young adult urban fiction, thematically organized, that met these criteria in my survey of 100 titles. Some have won literary acclaim and are used widely in classrooms. Others are characterized by edgier content, or else have not become well known in the educational community.

**Table Street Literature Organized by Theme**

Theme	Sample titles
Homelessness/Runaway	<i>Becoming Chloe</i> by Catherine Ryan Hyde <i>Dark Dude</i> by Oscar Hijuelos <i>Drift</i> by Manuel Luis Martinez <i>Tyrell</i> by Coe Booth*
Teenage Pregnancy/Parenthood	<i>After</i> by Amy Efaw <i>Baby Girl</i> by Lenora Adams <i>Broken China</i> by Lori Aurelia Williams <i>The First Part Last</i> by Angela Johnson* <i>Hip-Hop High School</i> by Alan Lawrence Sitomer* <i>Imani in Young Love and Deception</i> by Jackie Hardrick <i>Like Sisters on the Home Front</i> by Rita Williams Garcia*
Dealing/Addiction	<i>Dope Sick</i> by Walter Dean Myers* <i>No Way Out</i> by Peggy Kern and Paul Langan <i>A Piece of Cake</i> by Cupcake Brown <i>Street Pharm</i> by Allison van Diepen
Gangs/Street Violence/Crime Life	<i>The Afterlife</i> by Gary Soto <i>Black and White</i> by Paul Volponi* <i>The Brave</i> by Robert Lipsyte <i>The Coldest Winter Ever</i> by Sister Soulja* <i>A Different Kind of Heat</i> by Antonio Pagliarulo <i>Drive-By</i> by Lynn Ewing <i>Emako Blue</i> by Brenda Woods <i>Homeboyz</i> by Alan Lawrence Sitomer* <i>The Hoopster</i> by Alan Lawrence Sitomer* <i>Jumped</i> by Rita Williams Garcia <i>Monster</i> by Walter Dean Myers* <i>Party Girl</i> by Lynne Ewing <i>Patterson Heights</i> by Felicia Pride <i>Retaliation</i> by Yasmin Shiraz <i>Schooled</i> by Paul Langan <i>Snitch</i> by Alison van Diepin <i>Trino's Choice</i> by Diane Gonzales Bertrand <i>Trino's Time</i> by Diane Gonzales Bertrand
Incarceration/Rehab	<i>After</i> by Amy Efaw <i>Jude</i> by Kate Morgenroth <i>Lockdown</i> by Walter Dean Myers <i>Right Behind You</i> by Gail Giles <i>Rikers High</i> by Paul Volponi <i>Rooftop</i> by Paul Volponi <i>Upstate</i> by Kalisha Buckhannon <i>Who Owns Kelly Paddik?</i> by Beth Goobie
Foster Care	<i>After Tupac and D. Foster</i> by Jacqueline Woodson* <i>America</i> by E. R. Frank <i>Ball Don't Lie</i> by Matt de la Pena <i>Last Chance Texaco</i> by Brent Harting
Addicted/Incarcerated/Absentee Parent	<i>Begging for Change</i> by Sharon Flake <i>Bucking the Sarge</i> by Christopher Paul Curtis* <i>The Illustrated Mum</i> by Jacqueline Wilson <i>Kendra</i> by Coe Booth* <i>A Little Piece of Sky</i> by Nicole Bailey-Williams <i>Mexican White Boy</i> by Matt de la Pena* <i>Saint Iggy</i> by K.L. Going <i>Street Love</i> by Walter Dean Myers* <i>Take Me There</i> by Carolee Dean <i>When Kambia Elaine Flew in From Neptune</i> by Lori Aurelia Williams

Note. Asterisks denote titles that are deemed canonical urban literature.

## Using Urban Literature in the Classroom

Urban literature can be used in the classroom in the same ways that any literature is used. Titles lend themselves to specific instructional purposes based on their strengths. For example, *Tyrell* (Booth, 2007) would make an excellent study in character development, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 2006) could be used as a mentor text for exploring voice, and *Rikers High* (Volponi, 2010) would provide a rich source for a study in setting.

Teachers and librarians can also work with students to compare how a theme is developed across texts. For instance, *Homeboyz* (Sitomer, 2008), *Jumped* (Garcia, 2010), *Patterson Heights* (Pride, 2009), and *Retaliation* (Shiraz, 2008) would make a strong combination for exploring cycles of violence, and *Lockdown* (Myers, 2010), *Rikers High* (Volponi, 2010), and *Upstate* (Buckhannon, 2006) could be contrasted to examine the emotional realities of incarceration.

Ghetto and barrio settings can also be compared along different dimensions, as can plot structures, such as the home-adventure-home cycles in *Illustrated Mum* (Wilson, 2006) and *Upstate* (Buckhannon, 2006). Urban literature can be incorporated into more global literacy projects as well. A class hero study might include *Dope Sick* (Myers, 2009) to investigate the qualities of a reluctant hero, or a unit on language might explore the imagery and metaphor in *Mexican White Boy* (de la Pena, 2008) or *America* (Frank, 2003).

Like any literature, urban fiction can also be used in the classroom as the basis for theoretical discussions. Latrobe (2009) provided an overview, specific to young adult literature, of some useful discussion frameworks based in various branches of criticism, including reader response theory, sociological criticism, and psychological criticism.

From a critical literacy standpoint, urban literature provides rich opportunities for discussion around questions of power, privilege, identity, and race. Urban fiction can be used to offer at-risk and incarcerated youths a chance to interrogate narratives that mirror the narratives of their own lives—exploring in a safe landscape the ways they have been impacted and positioned by other “readers” of their lives, and also to “consciously use texts to mediate

the world and their senses of self” (Bean & Stevens, 2007, p. 29).

Bean and Moni (2003) offered scaffolding for such discussion, including questions around novel structure, reader positioning, and gaps and silences, that can be applied to almost any piece of urban fiction (see also Bean & Stevens, 2007). Such critical discussions may lay the groundwork for students to read the world with attention to agendas, inequities, and social transformation, and reposition themselves as actors with agency in these areas (Morrell, 2008).

### Take Action!

1. Focus on building your classroom library with additions of recently published, high-quality urban literature. Publicize your acquisitions to your students through book talks, read-alouds, book displays, and browsing time. If possible, allow checkouts from your classroom library.
2. Consider areas in your curriculum where you might incorporate urban literature. If you'd rather not replace a classic in the curriculum, consider using urban literature alongside a canonical text with a similar theme.
3. Offer an urban fiction title among the book choices if you teach literature circles.
4. Take the time to read urban literature, and become familiar with authors and subgenres. In this way, you can develop the knowledge to make meaningful recommendations to your students.
5. You may only have a brief period to work with students if you teach incarcerated teens. Try using interest inventories or short student bios to speed up the get-to-know-you process, and help you connect students with books that might speak to them personally.
6. Build bridges with parents and administrators by sharing research and inviting feedback. Be transparent about the reasons you use urban literature in the classroom. Have alternative assignments ready for the teens of any parents who may object to urban literature.

Finally, as well as using urban literature for focused instruction and discussion, it is helpful to provide consistent exposure to the genre through free choice activities such as silent reading, read-alouds, book talks, and checkouts from class libraries. This may aid in capturing the interest of incarcerated teens who will only be in the classroom for a short period.

Even if teachers must conform to a structured curriculum that leaves little flexibility in text selection, compelling books speak for themselves. An attractive, accessible classroom library that includes a good supply of urban fiction will draw students, especially if they are allowed time to browse or introduced to books that match their personal interests.

Many reluctant readers have no idea what a range of excellent texts are available, and sometimes all it takes to light a spark for reading is exposure to a book that speaks to the reader's life experiences. In any given year, if we teachers can help make even one connection between an at-risk or incarcerated teen and a text meaningful to him or her, our efforts will have been successful in an important way.

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