

Diversions:

Finding Space to Talk about Young Adult Literature in a Juvenile Home

Every week for the past four years, I have walked into the building, pushed the buzzer, and waited. Sometimes I waited less than a minute. Sometimes more. Waiting patiently, book in hand, I was eventually admitted. Once inside, I signed in, walked to the next door, pushed the buzzer, and waited again. After eight buzzers, eight waits, and eight doors, I was greeted by young faces, sometimes eager, sometimes annoyed, but all waiting. We pushed tables together, sat down, and I asked, “So, what have you read this last week?” Thus began the weekly discussion group, Diversions, held with the incarcerated youth at the Giddings County Juvenile Home (all names are pseudonyms).

The purpose of this article is to describe this program as it has been implemented over the last four years and to provide a rationale for reading books that are culturally relevant to urban youth. Many kids have gone through the sometimes “rotating door” of the Juvie Home, and some of them have read countless books and talked about them in Diversions. While these young people have made some terrible mistakes that have landed them in a detention center, they are more than capable of having intelligent, meaningful conversations about books, especially when those books connect with their prior knowledge and current lives. In addition, I am not alone (see Garth-McCullough, 2008; Janks, 2010; Tatum, 2005, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) in thinking that there are far too many adolescents—incarcerated, not incarcerated, or perhaps not yet incarcerated—sitting in our classrooms waiting for something to read that is of

personal interest to them. It is our ethical and moral responsibility to introduce them to this literature.

The Giddings County Juvenile Home and Diversions—Partners in Reading

The Giddings County Juvenile Home (GCJH or Juvie Home), is a secure detention center for youth ages 11 through 17. Located in a small midwestern city, it was first built in 1936; more recently, the people of the county appropriated monies for a new facility that opened in the summer of 2009. The new building has four pods of 15 beds each, totaling 60 beds for youth in secure detention. According to their website, the GCJH has some core beliefs that drive their programming:

- We believe a Juvenile Home with comprehensive services is an asset to our community.
- We believe Secure Detention should be a safe, secure learning environment that promotes growth, choice, and alternatives.
- We believe youth should engage in a balanced approach to repairing the harm they have done in the community.
- We believe youth have the capacity to change. (Kalamazoo County Government, 2009a, ¶ 5)

The idea of the “rotating door” of the Juvie Home is based on the fact that many young people find themselves coming back all too frequently because of parole infractions or repeated offenses.

The Juvenile Home School is run by the local Regional Educational Service Agency and has two

centers—the Youth Center School, designed for incarcerated youth, and the Intensive Learning Center (ILC), for youth who live in the community but are ordered by the court to attend school at the Juvie Home (Kalamazoo County Government, 2009b). Because of the core beliefs, every student in the detention center attends school on a daily basis, whether he or she is there one day or four months. Classes cover all core content, are small, and are taught by certified Special Education teachers who strive to build relationships with their students. In addition to the schools, the Juvie Home has many programs for residents supported by local people, one of which is Diversions.

Diversions was created as a result of a bar mitzvah project designed to give books to teens faced with a serious or long-term illness. Over time, this project expanded to include residents in the Juvie Home, involving them in weekly discussions about a book they all read in common. The program has been supported by Teen Services at the local public library, a local hospital, and a community foundation. Multiple copies of books are bought through grants provided by the Juvenile Home Foundation or other outside funding sources and are given to the students to read. All books must be in paperback, as hardback books are not allowed on the units; they can and have been used as weapons.

During the past four years, the gender make-up of the group has changed. At first, the group was a mix of boys and girls, which made for some often intense interactions, as they are rarely together at the Juvie Home. There was usually some typical boy/girl posturing as they checked each other out, but, depending on the personalities of the group members, the girls would also often challenge the boys' thinking about a book, which occasionally led to some electrifying exchanges. More recently, Diversions has evolved to be for girls only, so some of the tension is eliminated. Unfortunately, because of a lack of book discussion leaders, there was not a book group for the boys. This arrangement also seems to allow the girls to speak more freely. In fact, Toni told me that she thinks "it's a good idea to discuss books because we can express our feelings about the book. You have conversations about what you think."

The nature of the "rotating door" at the Juvie Home does present some challenges, and flexibility is key. Teens who attend one week may be gone the

next, only to be replaced by new members with different personalities and needs. Last week's group might have seven out of eight new faces this week. A plan to read half a book during the week may fall apart when circumstances result in five students not having read the book, two having read part of it, and one having finished it. Discussion leaders in this program learn to adapt, revise, and persevere.

Over the years, paperback books have been either donated or bought so that each pod has a rolling library shelf of fiction and nonfiction books for free reading. It is a testament to the teens' strong desire to read that new titles need to be added constantly to keep them current and interesting. Our weekly discussions usually began with the question, "What have you read this week?" Answers came freely and enthusiastically as they shared what they had read from the books available within each pod. Once everyone had a chance to talk about her personal reading, the attention inevitably turned to the Diversions text. Book discussions usually lasted around an hour and could be lively and spirited or subdued and quiet. As with any group of readers, much of that depended on the book read. For this constantly changing group of readers, other contributing factors could include a new group member who was

afraid of being in the Juvie Home and was thus unwilling to share, the emotional turmoil of learning that someone was going to jail, or personal issues, such as abandonment, anger, or some other emotional state, all of which could result in a lot of off-topic, almost therapeutic, talk. But Chrystal understood the importance of these weekly discussions when she said, "This helps you understand it better 'cause maybe somebody can explain it to you. They have another point of view or can explain it."

The one constant was the idea of making connections. Very simply, we hoped to help these young readers make the same mental connections that are a vital part of any reader's active reading—the kind

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of reading we hope for and teach in our classrooms (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). Of course, they have to meet us halfway—they either had strong connections to the book or they didn't. The importance of making connections was apparent to Kyana when she explained, "I can relate to the books. Sometimes something in their lives is like yours." Tamara said that a book could "relate to how my life is right now."

Isn't this what we hope for our students—to make strong personal connections with literature that lead to real discussion?

If that connection was particularly strong, the conversation tended to be vigorous and could be, at times, downright intense. An example of this is when we were reading *Rooftop* (Volponi, 2007), and they were discussing the "blue wall of silence" associated with the police in the book. They were arguing

loudly with each other about what that phrase meant, and they cited their own experiences with local police. The supervisor of the Juvie Home happened to walk past just then and, looking concerned, turned to say something to the kids when I told him that they were actually not angry at each other but were involved in a heated discussion about the book.

Sometimes they learned something important from the books. When reading *Right behind You* (Giles, 2007), one of the girls remarked, "I wondered about if you did kill someone, what would your life be like after that? This book told what really happened. It's not all happily ever after." This is the kind of life lesson that, unfortunately, can become all too real to these young people. Learning it through the safety of someone else's fictionalized story is obviously preferable.

Isn't this what we hope for our students—to make strong personal connections with literature that lead to real discussion? To read something that makes them think deeply about life decisions? Such is the vibrant, passionate, and ever-changing nature of *Diversions*.

The Importance of What Book We Read

It has become common knowledge that, in order to comprehend a text, one of the many things good readers do is to make active connections to what they are

reading (Beers, 2003; Burke, 2001; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). In particular, as Keene and Zimmerman (2007) explained, readers make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections that make reading far more personal, enjoyable, and relevant. When discussing the aesthetic stance—reading that is centered on a lived experience—Rosenblatt (1978) noted that the reader may make strong connections "identifying with one character, seeing glimpses of a relative in another, impersonally sitting in judgment on a third" (p. 67). Those connections are made to that which the reader already knows, demonstrating that activating or accessing prior knowledge is also vital to active, meaningful reading (Smith, 1978; Wilhelm, 2008; Weaver, 2002).

Building on these two important components of reading, Garth-McCullough (2008) researched the importance of culturally bound prior knowledge on reading comprehension. Culturally bound prior knowledge is defined as "items that members of a cultural or ethnic group would be more likely to know as a result of their interactions or experiences with other members of that group" (p. 12). Working with 117 urban eighth-grade African American students, identified as low-, medium-, and high-achieving readers, she researched the relationship between these students' culturally bound prior knowledge and their comprehension of six texts from three different cultures (African American, Chinese American, and European American). The study showed that these students' comprehension of the African American stories was significantly higher, regardless of their reading level (Garth-McCullough, 2008).

Ebe (2010) created a Cultural Relevance Rubric that she used with English Language Learners (ELLs). Working with young ELLs, the researcher asked the students to first rate a given text to determine its cultural relevance to the reader. She then administered an In-depth Miscue Analysis Procedure (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005) using the same text. It was found that the students' comprehension was better for the text they rated as being more culturally relevant (Ebe, 2010). From these studies, it is apparent that matching readers to books that reflect their own culture(s) can have a significant effect on their comprehension and engagement. It is these kinds of books that may encourage them to want to know and

read more as they relate to the characters, setting, and plot on a personal level.

When working with urban youth in general, and the incarcerated youth in the Giddings County Juvenile Home specifically, issues of social justice also come into play. When speaking of social justice, Nieto and Bode (2010) assert that “social justice is not about ‘being nice’ to students, or about giving them a pat on the back” (p. 46). Rather, social justice is about providing education that confronts untruths and stereotypes and focuses on topics related to inequality. Teaching with a social justice perspective means providing all students with the resources necessary for a quality education that draws on the talents and strengths of our students, thereby rejecting the deficit perspective that is far too prevalent in our schools. In addition, social justice is about “creating a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change” (Nieto & Bode, 2010, p. 46).

Janks (2010) adds another perspective to social justice issues when she speaks of the need for students to have access to various forms of discourse, such as different audiences, platforms, or modes of distribution (e.g., publications). In the context of education, one form of discourse can be book discussions (Daniels, 2002) in which students are free to express their thoughts and opinions about books they have read in common with others. When done in safe environments—ones in which students can take the risk to disagree and have spirited interactions based on the reading, knowing that their own experiences and knowledge are valued—these discussions often become important support for the students, addressing not only literacy needs but also the personal and social needs of the students.

Diversions—Weekly Spirited Interactions

My position has been to serve as the main facilitator of the weekly discussions; as such, I have chosen and ordered the books. As an avid reader of young adult (YA) literature myself, I make it a point to keep up with the latest in YA lit by reading *The ALAN Review*, attending the annual ALAN (Assembly of Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English) Conference, checking in with the Teen Services head librarian at the local public library on a

regular basis, and keeping my eyes and ears open for anything new.

Typically, a book is read and discussed for two to three weeks. The average stay in the Juvie Home is 11 days, with students coming back all too frequently because of probation violations or other personal issues. This fact made flexibility a vital component in planning and conducting the book discussions; although it took about two to three weeks to get through a book, the members of the discussion group could change drastically from week to week. Further complicating the process was the fact that many of the students were struggling readers and received extensive Special Education services. In spite of their struggles, however, they genuinely wanted to read the YA books that were presented so they could be a part of the group. In general, the participants in Diversions wanted to be there, had read some portion of the chosen book, and wanted to talk about it—although the weekly snacks and frequent pizza helped, too!

In addition to reading many excellent YA books, there were frequent visits by YA authors, co-sponsored by the local public library and the Juvie Home. For example, in the four years I’ve been involved with Diversions, we’ve brought in John Green, Allan Stratton, Ron Koertge, Paul Volponi, Sharon Flake, Angela Johnson, Sharon Draper, Lisa McMann, Kadir Nelson, and Joseph Bruchac. In each case, at least one of the author’s books was read in preparation, and during the visit, we had a small-group discussion with the author, who also personally signed copies for the readers. These books went home with the students when they left the Juvie Home.

The next section describes a few books by some of the visiting authors and brief descriptions of their related visits. A bibliography of books read over the years is included at the end of the article.

Books We Have Read

Chanda’s Secrets (2004) by Allan Stratton. Set in Africa, Stratton tells the story of Chanda and her struggle to keep her family together as her mother is dying of a disease no one wants to name—AIDS. Chanda’s love of her younger siblings, Iris and Soly, keeps her fighting those who would tear them apart. Adding to the struggle is the fact that Chanda is a good student and would like to stay in school, but the horrors of the

disease and its effects on her family make life continually difficult.

Chanda's Wars (2009) by Allan Stratton. Taking place soon after her mother died, this sequel to *Chanda's Secret* (2004) finds Chanda and her young siblings facing the terrors of war in their home country. When they go to visit their mother's family, Soly and Iris are kidnapped and forced to be child soldiers. Chanda's commitment to always care for her brother and sister is put to the ultimate test as she tries to save them from the many horrors of war.

Rooftop (2006) by Paul Volponi. Addison and Clay, two cousins separated by a family argument, find themselves thrown together at Daytop, a drug treatment center. While they struggle to get their lives together, trouble seems to follow Addison wherever he goes, eventually leading to a fatal shooting on a rooftop that introduces questions of innocence and truth.

Black and White (2005) by Paul Volponi. Marcus (aka Black) and Eddie (aka White) have been buddies for years. Both star basketball and football players at their high school, they are inseparable. Even when plotting to steal enough money for senior dues and new kicks for the team, these two stick together . . . until one robbery goes awry and questions arise about which one was seen at the scene of the crime. Issues of racial profiling and betrayal tear the two friends apart.

The Skin I'm In (1998) by Sharon Flake. Maleeka, who has clear, smooth, ebony skin, is taller than others in her class and is under constant attack for that dark skin. She wishes she looked different, more like the lighter-skinned girls in her school. When a new teacher, Miss Saunders, who has a giant white stain across her dark face, challenges Maleeka to accept the skin she's in, Maleeka starts to see herself for who she really is and her life slowly begins to change.

Money Hungry (2001) by Sharon Flake. Raspberry Hill loves money. She buys cheap candy and sells it at her school, cleans houses, washes cars, and skips lunch, saving the proceeds so she and her mother will have enough money to never be homeless again. But no amount of money can quiet the questions that disrupt her sleep as she struggles with acceptance, fear of homelessness, and constant doubt.

The First Part Last (2003) by Angela Johnson. Bobby and Nia love each other as only two young

teenagers can. When Nia tells Bobby she is pregnant, they must inform their families, both of whom had high hopes of college and careers for their children. Their lives change as they struggle with what they should do once the baby is born; should they keep the child and raise it as their own or give it up for adoption? Unfortunately, no decision is ever easy.

Heaven (1998) by Angela Johnson. Fourteen-year-old Marley's life is turned upside down when she realizes that the people she thought were her parents are, in fact, her aunt and uncle, and her "Uncle Jack," who travels all the time, is her father. Searching for answers, she seeks wisdom and help from her friends, including Bobby (from *The First Part Last*) and his young child, Feather.

Authors We Have Met

Sitting down and discussing a good book is essential to understanding (Burke, 2001; Daniels, 2002). Sitting down and discussing a good book with the author is pure joy. Several authors have graced the many locked doors of the Juvie Home, and each one has brought his or her own story to share with the kids. Below are brief descriptions of a few of the author visits we have enjoyed in the past four years, with personal reflections by two authors, Allan Stratton and Paul Volponi.

Allan Stratton

Allan Stratton visited the Juvie Home before *Chanda's Wars* (2009) was published and talked with the kids about the research he did in preparation to write *Chanda's Secret* (2004). While they could not relate to the setting of the book (Africa), the students made strong connections to Chanda's fears of abuse and being alone. They also had much to say about Esther, Chanda's friend, who was involved in prostitution to help her family survive. The discussions were lively and personal as they shared their own stories with Stratton, and he encouraged them to write their stories, as they, too, could be authors. Everyone benefited from this visit; as Stratton states:

One of the most memorable and moving readings I ever gave was for the Juvie Home. It was at a detention lockdown for kids who were serious offenders. I had lunch with the teens—a very friendly and delightful group; you'd never have guessed they were in trouble—and then I did a presentation as I read from *Chanda's Secrets*. Usually teens

connect most to Chanda, but this group connected mostly with her friend, Esther, a young woman whose parents had died of AIDS and who had gone to work the streets in hopes of earning enough to care for her brother and sisters who had been taken from her.

I'll never forget the concern of these young women and the heartache they felt for Esther, whose story paralleled so many of their own. Truly a humbling and moving event that I have cherished—and will continue to cherish—forever. (A. Stratton, personal communication, January 28, 2011)

Paul Volponi

Volponi's books are frequently set in New York City and involve issues that the Juvie Home kids could easily relate to—family, friendship, and betrayal. Many of the kids loved his books, so we arranged for Volponi to pay a summer visit. He shared a small luncheon with the participants and conducted large-group discussions about his books, which the kids had read voraciously. He told stories about his life as an English teacher on Rikers Island, the jail in New York and the basis for one of his newest novels, *Rikers High* (2010). As an added incentive for the kids, Volponi asked to play basketball with them. Two teams—Volponi and the staff of the Juvie Home versus the kids—played multiple games and enjoyed every loud, raucous minute. The time spent with Volponi was informative and inspiring to everyone—students, staff, and the author. He states,

I was just blown away by how this outside reading program captured the kids on every level, how it meant so much to their routine, and gave them so much stability and hope in themselves. I almost couldn't believe that Allison and her coworkers were providing that level of service and getting this kind of incredible response. And later that night, before lights-out in the facility, when a student and I took turns reading over the PA system to the teens in their rooms, I felt like the promise of a better tomorrow had been delivered. (P. Volponi, personal communication, January 30, 2011)

Sharon Flake

Sharon Flake visited the Juvie Home late one evening and met with a group of girls who had read many of her books. As they sat around the table, Flake asked the girls questions about their lives, and they willingly shared their stories. In turn, they asked her questions about her daughter and her life as a mother and an author. Flake encouraged them to write their own lives as they are the experts and their stories need to

be told. The mood around the table was one of trust and acceptance as these young women shared their lives with an author who obviously understood them.

Angela Johnson

Angela Johnson joined us one day for a luncheon discussion about her books. The girls had many questions about Bobby in *The First Part Last* (2003) and were enthralled by the boy in the photograph on its cover. Johnson told them that this boy was found walking down the street and agreed to have his picture taken for the cover. The conversation included teenage pregnancy, parenthood, and raising small children. Johnson's acceptance of and interest in these readers was sincere and meant a lot to each one of them.

As an added incentive for the kids, Volponi asked to play basketball with them. . . . [They] played multiple games and enjoyed every loud, raucous minute.

And So

The Giddings County Juvenile Home is a vibrant place filled with young people who have made some bad decisions in their lives. It is also a safe place for them, as they are cared for and listened to and have both support and multiple opportunities to make new and better decisions. Discussions about YA literature frequently lead to stories and connections about personal mistakes that mimic those in the books read, making *Diversions* one of those opportunities for change. These books provide another safe space where we can talk about our own lives through the lens of fictionalized characters that become real to the reader.

When I asked them what kinds of books they read in school, in one voice they said "boring books." Then they listed textbooks—science, math, history, algebra. When I asked them what kinds of books they read in their English classes, they said, "Grammar." They admitted to reading a page or two of some required book but quickly putting it down, since "there was nothing in there that made sense to me." And yet, from what I've learned in *Diversions*, there are so many powerful YA books that interest these young people. Why wouldn't we take the risk to let them read books in

school that speak to them on a personal level? Why wouldn't we want to open up these vital discussions and help our students become better readers?

I'm often asked why I continue to read books with these kids. Do I really think these books will make a difference in their lives? Yes, I do, for multiple

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reasons. First, I believe that the more they read, the better they will read. Reading, as we know, is vital to a successful life, and these incarcerated youth need all the support they can get to achieve some level of success. Being literate will surely contribute to their education and personal lives. Second, I believe that somewhere, sometime, when faced with a difficult decision, some choice that could be potentially harmful, they

will have a fleeting memory of someone else who had that choice. Maybe it was Bobby, Addison, Eddie, or Marley. Maybe those connections they made with the characters in the books read during Diversions will remind them that there are other choices they can make. Maybe when they think about what happened to those people, they just might make the right decision and those hours of reading and discussion will be life changing.

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Books Read for Diversions

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