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### **Writing as an Act of Empathy and Vulnerability**

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**Abstract**

This article details a Summer Learning Institute that took place at a local juvenile detention facility and incorporated writing into a service-learning project as a way to explore and empathize with perspectives and experiences different from one's own. The article specifically details how writing units framed as *writing the self*, provided youth the opportunity to engage in acts of vulnerability and empathy.

*Keywords:* Juvenile detention facility; writing; writing instruction; service learning

### Writing as an Act of Empathy and Vulnerability

Morrell (2015) contends, “writing can be seen as self-fulfillment or self-humanization even as it is also clearly social activism” (p. 176). Writing, therefore, can be a tool for personal and collective liberation providing the opportunity to reflect on new experiences to consider different perspectives and process life circumstances. Additionally, scholars have examined how writing can serve as a living of and a re-living of experiences (Johnson, 2017; Macaluso, 2013; Yageiski, 2012). Seen from this stance, writing can be especially powerful as a reflective activity when paired with a service-learning experience as a tool for personal and collective liberation.

Yagelski’s (2012) describes writing as praxis as “writing as a practice of being” (190). This ontological theory of writing considers writing as a “vehicle for individual and collective transformation” and an avenue to “understand ourselves and the world we share” (p. 190). Furthermore, Johnson (2017) draws on Yagelski’s theory of writing to frame *writing the self*, which “involves a dialogic process of talking and writing about one’s life trajectory, personal identity, and lived experiences” (p. 29). In this article, I call on these perspectives to describe four writing units that took place during a service-learning project at a juvenile detention facility.

Situating the writing instruction from the perspective of *writing as praxis* framed around a service-learning event deliberately invited the students to focus on writing as a way to make sense of the project, explore their feelings about their project, and understand who they were in relation to those benefitting from the service-learning project. Students’ connection to their writing and to the writing experience allowed them to express their understanding of how others might be thinking, feeling, and experiencing. Paired with service-learning, writing can be an effective pedagogical tool for providing students’ insights into the lives of others, while being a means of exploring notions of self. In this manuscript, I specifically detail how writing as part of

the service-learning project provided an opportunity to engage youth writing as praxis, as an act of vulnerability and empathy (Johnson, 2017; White & Epston, 1990; Yagelski's (2012).

Two questions guided this work:

- How did students' writings display empathy towards others?
- How can writing be a tool for self-compassion?

First, I provide an overview of the research on the writing as praxis and *writing the self*-perspectives. This is followed by an explanation of detained youth and their literacy practices, which provides insight into how youth are positioned as readers and writers inside the juvenile justice system, and how their writing identities position them within and out of the juvenile justice system. Then, I describe the juvenile detention facility and the instructional context detailing how with my colleagues and I organized and implemented the Summer Learning Institute. Finally, I describe students' writing opportunities during the Summer Learning Institute, exploring how writing gave voice to their empathetic stances. I use this project and the writing of youth in juvenile detention centers to provide evidence of their writing identities.

### **Summer Learning Institute Principles**

#### **Writing as Vulnerability and Empathy**

In this project, I drew upon the writing as praxis lens, combining ontological theory with a sociocultural view of literacy. In this sense, the emphasis was not on writing the texts, but rather I was interested in how youth were writing to experience themselves in the world (Macaluso, 2013). Yageiski (2009) writes, "when we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to each other and the world around us" (pp. 7-8). From this perspective, writing becomes a vehicle to help us understand ourselves and broaden our understandings of how we are

connected to the world and to others (Yageiski, 2012). Through writing we can gain an “awareness of and attentiveness to self, but also an awareness of one’s interconnectedness with the world” (Macaluso, 2013, p. 436). The writer, connected to the self in the present, is also connected to the reader in the future, creating a community around a piece of writing (Macaluso, 2013). Understanding writing from this stance, allows us to explore how writing builds connections between the self and others.

Furthermore, scholars have examined how viewing writing and writing instruction from this perspective allows for writing to be a living of and a re-living of experiences. For example, Johnson (2017) explored how three Black queer youth used writing in an after-school writing club to disrupt gender norms and expectations while affirming their own identities. Through their writing they were able to tell their “unfiltered truths” (Johnson, 2017, p. 28) allowing for writing to be “restorative and transformative” used “for change and truth-seeking practices” (p. 17).

### **Juvenile Justice System**

Youth in juvenile detention centers typically carry the stigma of being illiterate, or at best, struggling readers and writers. Research has suggested detained and incarcerated youth are typically two years behind their peers on standardized reading assessments (Drakeford, 2002; Foley, 2001) creating a false impression that all youth in these settings are unable or unwilling to read or write. I agree with Kirkland (2019) that research assessing literacy through this narrow lens has contributed to the deficit narratives of youth in detention centers, particularly minority boys, who make up the majority of the detention center population. This research, and the ongoing perception of youths’ low literacy rates, has led to the implementation of interventions that are often skills-based reading programs, such as the Corrective Reading Program, as a way to narrow the “gap” and remediate test scores (Drakeford, 2002). This research and the resulting

instruction oversimplify the ways young adults engage in literate practices, fails to recognize young adults' personal and culturally relevant literate practices, and creates an oppressive stigma that perpetuates a sense of failure. In addition, overly simplistic conceptions of literacy produce oppressive educational consequences. Education in juvenile detention facilities and youth correctional facilities are often characterized as prescriptive, skills-based instruction, with ineffective assessments, and low-level curriculum. Researchers note that classrooms within these settings often have "one teacher providing an inflexible curriculum to students of multiple age levels and learning needs" (Karger & Currie-Rubin, 2013, p. 107). Youth are often prescribed a curriculum that is neither culturally relevant, nor academically engaging. The result is that youth begin to see literacy as a skill, a thing to acquire, rather than viewing themselves as literate beings.

This dominant view of detained and incarcerated youth as illiterate, struggling readers and writers, compounded with an education that is prescriptive and skills-based, continues to marginalize of these youth and perpetuates the deficit view of their lives. Consequently, Kirkland (2019) suggests that researchers should instead be asking how "low literacy rates" and "high incarceration rates" might share a "common structural cause such as institutional bias or trauma" (p. 5).

### **Juvenile Detention Facility**

Over the past two years, I have had the opportunity to design and implement a summer learning institute at the detention center. This project is based on a 9-year relationship I have with the detention center. The detention center is in an urban setting in the Midwest. It is a short-term pre-and post- adjudication correctional facility. During the calendar year in which this program took place, 562 youth were detained with the average daily population consisting of

thirty-six youth and the average length of detainment recorded as thirteen days. Of the 562 youth, 107 were female, and of that population, fifty-four self-identified as Black, seven as biracial, one as Native Hawaiian/Pacific, and forty-five as White. Of the 455 males detained, two identified as Asian, 310 as Black, thirty-four as biracial, one as Native Hawaiian/Pacific, and 108 as White. Because of the transient nature of youth within the system and because of privacy and confidentiality concerns, the detention center provided aggregated data about youth who have been detained for the previous calendar year, instead of the specific demographic data for the summer learning institute.

The transient nature of youth within the juvenile justice system influenced how I designed the summer learning, as Mulcahy et al. (2008) suggested that one solution is to design an intervention that is short in length but that is intense during that period. On average, youth at the detention center stay for 12 days; therefore, the summer learning institute took place for 2.5 hours each day from 3:00-5:30 in the afternoons, for three weeks. Each day over the three-week time period, 42 youth participated in the project. There were youth who participated for the entire three weeks, while others participated only for a few days. I work to provide learning experiences that are flexible and participatory.

While I partner with the detention center teachers and staff throughout the year, I work especially close with them during the summer learning institute. In addition, my colleague and I provide our teacher candidates in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program the opportunity to participate in the summer learning institute as we believe it is critical for teacher candidates to have clinical experiences in diverse settings in order to learn how to develop and implement instruction rooted in strength-based pedagogies. Together, we developed a curriculum and learning goals so that everyone, myself, my colleague the detention center teachers, and MAT

teacher candidates, are working collaboratively to build the curriculum. With extensive feedback and support from myself and colleague, 24 MAT teacher candidates worked in teams of 3-4 to design daily lesson plans. My colleague and I were assigned to co-teach the lesson with one team of MAT teacher candidates and the detention center teachers.

As a white, middle class teacher educator, I am continuously called upon to reflect on the complexity of my teaching and to remain cognizant of the power dynamics at play within the detention center space, between the youth, the staff and guards, the MAT teacher candidates (the majority of whom self-identified as white), and the detention center teachers. I continuously reflect on Hinshaw & Jacobi's (2015) argument that educators working within these spaces must acknowledge the limits and compromises necessary in any carceral education program; however noble the aims and values of our educational programs, they seldom literally "break down the walls," despite the romanticized ways by which we might like to talk about them or the titles we might use for our published collections. This is also about understanding the extent to which our participation in prison programs makes us complicit in the larger prison-industrial complex; working to improve the conditions of women's incarceration is not the same as, and may in fact be in direct opposition to, working to abolish the modern prison system (p. 84).

I know that the choices made, and the teaching of writing is not a neutral act (Fecho, 2003). I intend to interrupt the dominant narrative of youths' literacy practices, while also advancing conversations of equity in teacher education. This includes all spaces where youth are educated, rather than deliberately ignoring the youth who receive the majority of their education in detention centers.

The summer learning institute partnered with a non-profit organization dedicated to providing prosthetic hands to children in need, both in the United States and internationally. Using 3D printing, pieces of the prosthetic hands are printed and assembled. The program's interdisciplinary curriculum supported the project, which was a central part of the summer learning institute. Each week, the curriculum was guided by an essential question with targeted learning goals (see Figure 1 for each week Essential Questions and Learning Goals). During the Summer Learning Institute, youth explored the following questions:

1. What does it mean to do for others?
2. How do we do for others?
3. What is the impact of doing for others?

**Figure 1***Essential Questions and Learning Goals*

<p><b><u>Essential Question of Week 1:</u></b> What does it mean to do for others?</p> <p><b>Learning goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand value of serving</li><li>• Understand how our needs can give us insight into others' needs</li><li>• Gain insights into lives of teens who have lost limbs</li><li>• Learn about residual limbs, phantom pain, and referred pain</li><li>• Determine ways to help those who have lost limbs</li></ul> <p><b><u>Essential Question of Week 2:</u></b> How can we do for others?</p> <p><b>Learning goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand the anatomy of the hand</li><li>• Understand design of prosthetics by building them</li></ul>
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- Empathize with those who have lost limbs

**Essential Question of Week 3:**

What is the impact of doing for others?

**Learning goals:**

- Demonstrate understanding of the impact of the prosthetics
- Create messages of hope to convey the impact of prosthetics
- Interpret the potential meaning prosthetics could have in another's life

Over the course of three weeks, youth studied the anatomy of the hands, including the muscular and skeletal structure, as well as the nerves in the hands. In addition, students sculpted clay models of their hands with symbols to express their own identities. During the second week, one class period was spent teaching youth to assemble prosthetic hands. Students worked with partners and a total of 21 prosthetic hands were assembled and sent to children in need of a hand through the nonprofit's outreach efforts.

Throughout the three-week period, reading and writing were integrated through the reading of stories about people who had lost limbs and the reading and writing of poetry centered on loss and hope. They read and wrote readers' theatre scripts and designed social media campaigns for Hands of Gratitude. In addition, youth composed letters to the recipients of the prosthetic hands. For the purpose of this manuscript, I describe four main writing units, including (1) Reader's Theatre scripts, (2) letters to the recipients of the prosthetic hands, (3) a social media campaign for the non-profit, and (4) poems of witness. I also explore how these units were framed as writing as praxis.

As this was part of a larger project investigating the MAT teacher candidates' experiences learning to implement service-learning projects, consent was obtained from the

youth for their writing to be described and shared. Pseudonyms are used throughout the manuscript.

## **Writing Units**

### **Reader's Theatre**

Reader's theatre is an instructional approach in which students go through rounds of the dramatic readings of scripts without physically acting out the script. Typically, reader's theatre is used as an instructional approach to improve students' fluency; however, for this project youth wrote scripts as a way to engage in a constructed conversation representing what they hoped would be the recipient's experience when receiving the prosthetic device. Therefore, rather than writing being an "isolated act of self-expression," the constructed conversations allowed youth to imagine their "interconnectedness" to others (Macaluso, 2013, p. 436).

Framed in this manner, students wrote and read reader's theatre scripts to consider multiple perspectives. The teachers hoped that by writing conversational scripts, students would consider how another person might react to a situation and verbally express their feelings about a situation. Specifically, the reader's theatre activity asked students to write their own reader's theatre script with the following questions in mind:

1. What would I say to someone if I could give them this hand I made in person?
2. What do I think they would feel when they receive this hand?
3. How would I start talking to someone to help them?

Teachers began this lesson by preparing students to write their Reader's Theatre script and introducing them to how people express their emotions. Movement was significantly limited in the detention center classrooms, so when students entered the classroom, they were assigned a seat and could not move from their seat unless they had permission from the guard to stand.

Reader's Theatre became an avenue for incorporating play and theatre within the constraints of the classroom.

Beginning with a Charlie Chaplain clip, our teams of teachers asked students to consider how people convey emotion. After exploring the movements Chaplain used to convey emotion and meaning through physical cues, students began to brainstorm how people convey meaning through words. Through video clips and class discussion, students learned the following theatrical terms: volume, inflection, speed, and tone. In small groups, students and teachers applied these terms to a variety of sentences, including "I did not eat a slice of pizza yesterday" and "did you fill the tank with gas?" The teachers then read a reader's theatre script that they wrote as a mentor text. Students noted when the terms were used to emphasize an emotion or idea and used these mentor texts to craft conversations with youth who might receive a prosthetic hand.

Youths' readers' theatre scripts often conveyed elements of gratitude. For example, Joe started his script by asking the person how they were doing since they received the hand, and in response the person responded, "Thank you so much. I like it." Jameson's reader's theatre script did not only have the recipient saying thank you, but he also included the sentence, "I am glad I could help out because sometimes I wish I could help people and it meant a lot to help you out. Thank you." In this sentence, Jameson reveals that he wants to help others and is grateful for the opportunity to do for someone else.

Scripts also described what they believed recipients might be able to do now with their prosthetic device. For example, Joe included the following conversation as part of his script:

*Person:* "I have been doing a lot of different things like playing sports, trying to build things."

*Joe:* “What types of sports have you been trying to play?”

*Person:* “I’ve been trying to play a lot of handheld games.”

*Joe:* “What types of games?”

*Person:* “Table tennis, air hockey, and Nintendo DS games.”

Through thinking about what the kids might do with their prosthetic hands, youth imagined how they might have shared experiences, such as liking to play games. In addition, youth considered how the recipients might now feel about having a prosthetic device and offered words of support. In Steve’s script, he encourages the reader not to feel “different,” but to “recognize everyone’s differences.”

The reader’s theatre script writing was an opportunity for youth to create dialogue that represented their experience and what they hoped would be the recipient’s experience when receiving the prosthetic device. The reader’s theatre script writing demonstrated youths’ propensity for helping and caring for others. Their scripts demonstrated how youth were making sense of how not having a prosthetic hand might limit the kids’ activities and how receiving a hand might change what people were able to do and participate in. They extended these thoughts into empathetic stances by offering words of encouragement and hope.

### **Writing Letters to Recipients**

As part of the non-profit program, students learned about the organization, including how the prosthetic hands were distributed and the areas in the world where the organization worked. Because the organization knew some of the needs of the people in advance, teachers were able to share with youth the stories of four individuals who would be receiving a prosthetic hand. One of our goals was to help youth feel personally connected to the youth who would be receiving the hand. After building the prosthetic hand, youth then designed a bag to hold the prosthetic hand

and wrote a letter to the recipient, even though the organization didn't know everyone who would be receiving a hand. By creating a tangible item (e.g. the prosthetic hand) for someone in need and writing a letter to that person, youth acknowledged their capacity to empathize and to immerse emotions with the literate act of letter writing. Yagelski (2012) notes that writing "brings together past, present, and future" (p. 192). When writing letters, youth were reflecting on their own experience of making the hand, while anticipating what it would be like for someone else to read their writing and receive the hand they made.

Letter writing is often a way of meaningful communication for youth at the detention center, as this is a main form of communication with family and friends (Pytash, 2016). Therefore, youth expressed they were familiar with the genre. Together as a class, youth and teachers brainstormed the types of statements that might be included in a letter. This discussion was brief, as students indicated they already had specific ideas and things they wanted to write to the young person receiving the prosthetic hand. Students also often included inspirational quotes or sayings. For example, one student wrote, "with pain comes strength" alongside a note that reminded the recipient that "despite your disabilities you are perfect no matter what. Be true to yourself and never let hate bring you down." Youth wrote encouraging statements, such as "keep your head up" and a consistent message was focused around "worthiness." For example, multiple students wrote lines such as, "don't let anybody or anything bring you down or make you feel like you're not worthy enough."

The letter writing provided a way for youth to express their hopes for the young people receiving the prosthetic devices. The youth's writings displayed feelings of connectedness to the recipients. By creating a tangible item for someone in need (e.g. the prosthetic hand) and then

writing a letter to that person, youth acknowledged their capacity to feel for others and to extend these emotions into the literate act of letter writing.

### **Social Media Campaign**

During the assembling of the hand, many youths were enthusiastic, expressing interest in continuing the activity after leaving the detention center. Teachers provided students with information about the non-profit, but teachers also highlight the many ways youth could become in social movements that help others. The purpose of developing a social media campaign was to help youth consider how social media can be used to engage people in social movements and encourage participation in social and political causes (Gleason, 2018). In this way, the act of writing allowed them to consider their connectedness to others. As a class, we discussed how even if people cannot physically engage in social or political movements, writing with social media still allows people to actively participate. Teachers felt that this was especially important as youth expressed that outside of the detention center they often used social media, specifically Twitter and Instagram.

Using the GRASP acronym (Goal, Role, Audience, Situation, Purpose), teachers tasked students with creating a social media campaign for Hands of Gratitude. Students were told that they were working for the non-profit as a social media specialist with the goal of spreading awareness of the organization and to inspire new donors. Students were asked to prepare an Instagram campaign, including creating a visually initial post, short explanation, and hashtags, in addition to expanding on the current logo or creating a new logo. Because of the restrictions of technology use in the detention center, these were created on paper.

One student, Sean, created two Instagram posts. The first used the Hands of Gratitude logo and included the tag line, “there’s a change of attitude.” He explained that he wanted to

emphasize how having a prosthetic device not only gives the recipient a hand, but also gives them positive feelings. His handle was @AnewLife, and the post called for volunteers to help out. His second Instagram post used the line, “where there’s a hand, there’s...” with an image of the word “hope” and hands shaped like a heart. His post shared his experience. He wrote,

Okay, today it took maybe 15 minutes to change someone’s life today and make hands. I want everyone to spread the word about our new hands. You never know who needs a big big blessing like this.”

The social media assignment allowed youth to call on their personal literacy practices to recognize how they could participate in social and political movements through literacy. Teachers were able to teach persuasion and rhetoric through this familiar genre so that students could creatively consider why this project was important and how one might use social media to generate excitement about the non-profit or other social and political movements.

### **Poems of Witness**

During the third week, teachers introduced students to poetry of witness: poetry that gives witness to the injustices of the world, human tragedy, and human pain. Studying and writing poetry of witness was a vital part in the interdisciplinary unit in that the lesson invited students to consider the pain of others and their own traumas, realities, and emotional pain. Additionally, youth expressed their own pain and traumas through reading and writing poems of witness. As Yagelski (2012) notes, writing can be a “vehicle for identifying and addressing some of the complex questions that characterize human life, including how we tell stories to make sense of difficult experiences” (p. 200).

Throughout our time with students, they often shared their love of music; therefore, the poetry lesson began with a video of Jay-Z discussing how rap music is poetry. The goal was to

help students highlight the connection between genres as they began to study and write poetry of witness. The teachers asked students to reflect on the video, specifically when Jay-Z explains that he wants people to “try and figure out why” certain songs can exist, and the meanings people assign to lyrics. Students were asked to complete a quick write in which they wrote their favorite lyrics and explained the meaning of the lyrics. Many students discussed how certain lyrics give them hope or make them feel like someone else understands their experiences or allows them to express their pain or frustrations.

Students and teachers then watched a short video clip on the power of poetry and vulnerability. The teachers shared that while some poetry of witness might focus on world events, such as war, genocide, or racism, it was also a way to explore everyday events that are not always masked as injustices, but really are in fact part of human tragedy. Students went back to their quick write and considered how their favorite lyrics make them feel and what the lyrics might say about their experiences.

During many of the lessons, at least one MAT teacher candidate, detention center teacher, or myself sat with students and led small group reading, conversation, and wrote besides students. Thinking and writing alongside students provided support and provided a way to create community in the classroom.

Working in these small groups, students and teachers read Langston Hughes’ “Mother to Son” and drew an image from the poem. For example, many students and teachers drew an image of stairs. After explaining their decision and describing what their images might represent, the teachers facilitated small group discussions with students around the following guiding questions:

1. Who in the poem seems to have lost something or have been lost?

2. How are they coping?
3. What is the poet trying to say about the world?

Students related their responses back to the images they drew as they considered the many meanings of the poem.

Students and teachers then worked in their small groups to read Martin Espada's "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper." Once again, students drew an image and discussed the following questions:

1. Who in the poem seems to have lost something or have been lost?
2. How are they coping?
3. What is the poet trying to say about the world?

After drawing connections between the two poems, students were asked to make their own connections to the poems. They were then given the opportunity to write their own poems. Students used poetic imagery to express painful experiences and share painful histories. For example, Steve wrote, "people around me send so many shots I need a vest," with the images of "shots" and a bullet proof "vest" to highlight how he feels like he must protect himself from others around him. And he personified a reference to the detention center when he wrote "First Street say so much about me when I leave they might not forget me." Jameson also used imagery in his poem. He titled his poem, "Lock-box" and included the line "I keep everything tied up like a tight belt" to explain the painful emotions he deals with consistently.

This lesson emphasized how poetry can provide people with an outlet for sharing painful experiences, and it can be used to evoke empathetic emotions. Calling students' attention to the images in the poem helped them understand how the poets were writing about their own

dehumanizing experiences. Writing provided students an opportunity to voice their histories and experiences.

### **Discussion**

Tatum (2019) powerfully writes that being unable to read and write “imprisons” youth by a “form of reading and writing violence that can be more suffocating than a cell” (p. 112). I agree with Tatum and advocate for an education that builds relationships to texts (Tatum, 2019). I believe that youths’ relationships with texts can be built by first recognizing and legitimizing their personal writing practices. This acknowledgment allows educators to implement strength-based pedagogies which focuses on youths’ experiences writing (Johnson, 2017). When designing the curriculum, our team of teachers carefully considered the writing practices, such as letter writing and social media, that we knew were personal writing practices, and we then built on these practices by providing relevant and meaningful opportunities for youth to engage in writing. Writing in this sense prompted the exploration of complex issues as youth considered not only their experiences but who they were in the world.

As youth experienced writing, they shared who they were at that moment, but writing also invited them to consider their past selves that had led them to that moment. Through their writing they experienced an awareness of self, “selves that exist at a moment in time that is connected to other moments in time through the act of writing” (Yagelski, 2012, p. 192). Being incarcerated is a traumatic experience, and youth at the juvenile detention center have lived trauma before arriving there. Consequently, they understand the experience of coping with a trauma, which their witness poems revealed. In their writing to recipients, their positive messages focused on recognizing that everyone has differences, and they consistently wrote reminders to the recipients to be proud of what makes each person unique. Their writing also

contained messages of hope for a better future. For youth at the detention center, the messages they wrote to recipients could have been messages they were hoping to receive in their own lives. Yagelski (2012) writes, “writing has the capacity to intensify our sense of being. We do not exist because of writing, but writing can bring our being more sharply into focus; it can make us more aware that we exist” (p. 192). Having students engage in writing while creating a prosthetic device provided students an outlet for their empathetic responses to themselves and others.

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