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Rewriting Inmate Futures: Effective Literacy Education for Incarcerated Peoples and Identities

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Abstract

This thesis explores the transformative impact of literacy in carceral spaces, viewing literacy as not a simple skill, but a form of personal freedom, rediscovery of identity, and a means to bring about positive social change. The thesis explores a number of accounts from educators and incarcerated individuals through observations in the classroom and writing samples to demonstrate the feelings of liberation and healing that writing provides in an otherwise restricted space. Additionally, the limitations on writing in prison for incarcerated people as well as educators is discussed, to show how they impact the authenticity and ability of implementing these programs. The thesis delves into multiple different programs that situate incarcerated people as students, allowing them to express their emotions through different writing practices in the classroom, and the importance of these programs for understanding the school-to-prison pipeline, and where global change and advocacy is needed regarding the criminal justice system. Overall, the thesis argues that literacy should be implemented into carceral spaces to not only provide healing and freedom for incarcerated people, but allows for a platform to dismantle the shortcomings and restrictions of these institutions that confine and silence incarcerated voices.

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Chapter 1. Contextualizing the Work: Interest, Incarceration, and Literacy Expression

Literacy, often understood as the simple ability to be able to read and write, is a fundamental skill that many associate with intelligence and educational level that often transcends beyond these barriers when applied to carceral spaces. Literacy in prison is a contentious and restricted practice. It can be used as an empowering tool within carceral spaces, but must overcome barriers to be implemented. Literacy can act as a link to one's personal identity, allowing them to mend parts of their lives that have been impacted by incarceration. Beginning from early education, incarcerated people have often been deprived of effective and constructive literacy education, due to systemic disadvantages or a lack of personal or educational support, forcing them to go down the road to incarceration. Literacy education can support the transition to one's life outside prison. Moreover, literacy can catalyze a reformation in understanding how marginalized groups are disadvantaged in receiving this education, what leads to incarceration, and how literacy can be effectively implemented into these spaces. This allows for a tangible change within these carceral institutions to mend inmates' educational and personal pasts while providing a window to examine the larger racial and societal shortcomings that lead to incarceration itself. If literacy education programs can lead to an understanding of where advocacy and systemic change are needed, why aren't they present in all carceral spaces? This thesis will examine the meaningful ways in which incarcerated individuals and prison literacy educators have engaged with and found meaning in prison literacy programs.

To understand prison literacy programs, it's important to define literacy, which is often oversimplified. Literacy itself is subject to interpretation based on one's lived experiences, understanding of reading and writing, and societal and educational background. Literacy scholar Deborah Brandt complicates simple understandings of literacy as reading and writing skills in

her essay, “Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading.” Brandt’s definition transcends reading and writing at its core, and asserts that people must understand literacy as it is lived and through the experiences and backgrounds of writers themselves. In this essay, she explains how individual perceptions of literacy can be burdened by factors that deter individuals from wanting to practice reading and writing, such as lack of resources, education, or other constraints of personal expression. People often associate literacy with forced school or work assignments, as Brandt explains, and have negative connotations to its practice. She hopes to expand the understanding of the definition of literacy to help people consider the factors that contribute to these connotations and writes, “I join in other voices who have lately called for broadening the scope by which we study literacy practices and the need to understand school-based writing in terms of larger cultural, historical, and economic currents” (477).

Brandt, in Literacy in American Lives, explores the relationships between literacy and societal expectations and behaviors regarding people’s access to education and literacy tools. She approaches the difficult question of why people seek structure in society, choose to categorize people based on their level of literacy, and distinguish them as such. She writes:

> Social psychology uses life stories to explore people's subjective worlds, seeking relationships among social structure, personality, and behavior. Other sorts of inquiries examine the linguistic forms and functions of narrative accounts themselves to uncover the meaning structures that people call on to bring order to their experiences. (Brandt 10)

This thesis will delve into numerous testaments and writing samples detailing how literacy improved individual people's lives during and after incarceration and demonstrate that literacy is far greater and more powerful than a simple definition of the ability to read and write. It transcends this understanding and provides invaluable expression and freedom. In carceral

spaces, where tools and freedoms are so limited, it is a vehicle to give incarcerated people agency, and a forum to make positive change. Brandt underscores this importance and says, “By expanding the perspective on literacy, by treating it fundamentally as cultural and contextualized, these studies try to democratize the worth and importance of all literacy practices” (8). This thesis will embody Brandt’s sentiments and reiterate the worth and necessity of literacy and literacy programs in prisons.

This thesis reveals that literacy has proven to be an undeniably beneficial step inside and outside of prison and a mode to reclaim power that has been stripped upon incarceration. I embarked on this topic after deciding to go to law school after my undergraduate years, and I hope to expand my breadth of knowledge on this topic, be able to make tangible change within this area, and provide advocacy for literacy in carceral spaces throughout my career. From my standpoint of having the immense privilege of being able to attend higher education institutions, I want to use this access and experience to help those who do not have the same freedoms. In this thesis, I explain the benefits and effectiveness of literacy education programs and educational spaces in prisons, hope to shed light on their importance, and promote their growth and creation.

I will delve into numerous stories of inmate backgrounds and writing samples that convey their emotions, pasts, and difficult parts of their lives or identities that they feel more comfortable sharing on paper than out loud. The incarcerated writers discussed in this thesis practice diverse forms of literacy when exploring identities, as each inmate may feel more comfortable expressing themselves in different forms than others. Additionally, writing reveals larger systemic issues, underscoring where changes need to be made within the prison education systems themselves and in early education programs that encourage the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is the idea that students' only option is to become

incarcerated after school and immediately are funnelled into different carceral institutions. Over-policing, racism in schools, and zero-tolerance policies all contribute to the larger issue of mass incarceration. Learning, practicing, and teaching literacy can connect incarcerated people with their own identities through words and art, with other people or inmates or loved ones, and can situate them for a strong foundation for after incarceration, and options to avoid becoming incarcerated again and becoming part of the cyclical draw of prison institutions.

Each of the educators who shared their experiences highlight specific stories that impacted them, and ways in which writing provided liberation for themselves and their inmate students, as well as the limitations to their teachings within these carceral spaces. These perspectives offer examples of the benefits of literacy education from a firsthand view, and the potential freedoms it brings for inmates during and after incarceration. I pulled from numerous different sources that included excerpts from the writing of incarcerated individuals, to not only provide a platform to hear their silenced voices, but as evidence that they are able to connect with themselves and society through expression of writing and art. The excerpts, letters, and poems from inmates coincide with the instructor's inputs, and demonstrate the ability to convey difficult or painful topics to discuss or re-explore through writing or other forms of literacy they feel confident and secure using. By choosing to incorporate these sources, I hope to inspire others to feel compelled to investigate prison literary sources, and understand how hearing these voices can bring about larger change. Different demographics, upbringings, pasts, and struggles that I have found in my research will allow them to discover their own identity, by seeing themselves as students, rather than prisoners. Additionally, a large part of my research is excerpts and stories from educators themselves, both from prison and other educational institutions, to help articulate the firsthand changes that they observed in their incarcerated

students when exposed to literary and artistic expression. The observations, teaching practices, and thoughts of the educators in carceral spaces were invaluable in my research, and also advocate for different programs and ways to incorporate these literacy teachings in other institutions. Both perspectives from incarcerated people, as well as educators build a large picture of the criminal justice system, and the educational and societal shortcomings that lead to the silencing of incarcerated voices.

Incarceration itself deprives people of many different aspects of life, including their freedom, connection with loved ones, and their own autonomy. Within such a restricted and often lonesome place, writing acts as a way for inmates to express themselves through their words and the practice of writing. Further, literacy education is crucial in allowing inmates to do so effectively and creatively. Writing and practicing literacy becomes a bridge to their personal lives in the outside world, a way to transform as a person and one's identity, and provides a lens to see where larger systemic issues need change and advocacy. Literacy and the practice of writing is one way that inmates can reclaim a sense of freedom and agency in a confined space, and rediscover their own educational potential. Many inmates were able to discover areas of interest that pertained to them and their lived experiences, mend past relationships, and discover where advocacy is needed within these larger institutions. Within carceral spaces, there are insurmountable barriers and restrictions on the freedoms and abilities of connection and expression, and lack of supplies and resources. This thesis considers prison literacy as both personal and global, and examines how inmates can transform their writing into a medium for advocacy.

Chapter 2. Criminalizing Education: The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Prison literacy programs cannot be discussed or understood without acknowledging the factors that often lead inmates to prison. Additionally, we must understand the disproportionate impacts that target specific demographics and often discourage success. Many students are inadvertently encouraged to follow down paths that lead to prison from an early age and within early education systems. School systems, specifically in low-income communities often lack the support and resources for students to create a prosperous future for themselves, leading them down paths that may lead to crime, due to a lack of guidance and support. Further, disproportionate discrimination against students of color often place targets on these students to be under harsher disciplinary actions, and more susceptible to falling victim to the criminal justice system. Schools that are underfunded often don't prioritize the benefit of education in formative years, impacting one's ability to find success outside of the classroom, leading students to potentially end up in prison, or other unfavorable circumstances.

The focus on discipline in these underserved schools often specifically targets students of color and students from a low-income background. These policies of over-policing and "zero-tolerance," procedures often strip young and impressionable students of their opportunities to grow as members of society and as students. It specifically affects students who are considered, "at risk," meaning they are being specifically watched or monitored based on behavioral, racial, or other biases that make authorities believe they are a risk to society or the school system. When schools and authorities focus on the criminalization of students rather than their growth, they not only feel underrepresented and disadvantaged, but their opportunities for success reduce as well. This concept is known as the school-to-prison pipeline: a result of lack of educational support and a fixation on neglect and consequence for minor infractions that often

leave students with a lack of options after schooling, besides incarceration. Having increased offices present in schools as well as an over-reliance on punishment lead to minor arrests and a lifecycle within prisons and grappling with the criminal justice system. Whether it is lack of funding in low-income areas or simply ignorance, school systems turning to over-policing and punishment filter students into prisons in a machine-like pattern. African American, Latino, and indigenous students are at an even greater risk of facing these issues, due to racial profiling and hyperfixations on their actions that often discourage them from being able to find stable careers in the future. By dismantling these students' hopes and aspirations from such an early and formative age, their likelihood of incarceration, poverty, and economic freedom in the future are all limited by being racially targeted or disadvantaged due to lack of resources and academic support.

Maisha Winn's essay, "The Right to Be Literate: Literacy, Education, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline" explains the barriers within school systems that specifically target Latino and African students from a young age and sets them at an academic and personal disadvantage. Additionally, she comments on how over-policing, zero-tolerance policies, and increased security are evidence that students in these communities are at a higher risk of incarceration. She writes, "Youth in underserved and underperforming schools that focus more on discipline policies as opposed to academic rigor would benefit the most if educational institutions adopted the view of literacy as a right" (148). Literacy factors into these larger systemic issues and barriers because it is a crucial component of a student's early education and formative years. Literacy is a key component in one's everyday skills, from navigating around public spaces, driving, education, even just for eating or trying to find a restroom. It is a part of everyday life that literate people often do not think twice about, as it has become second nature.

Without these skills, not only does everyday life become challenging and often impossible, but it sets people at an enormous disadvantage for finding future careers and building professional and life skills into adulthood. By setting students at a disadvantage with the school-to-prison pipeline, they not only have limited access to learning tools, but they are led to believe that they are not worth them or that they do not deserve them due to their financial status, race, or other marginalizing factors. With these impositions from institutions in mind, and a lack of early educational support, students become bound for incarceration, presented with few options for the path of their lives. The cycle is perpetuated as school systems in low-income and urban communities struggle to provide adequate and fair education, and students continue to fall in this cycle that is actively worsening.

These tensions within public schools and a lack of support and opportunity are translated to prison literacy programs, where these options are even more restricted. Incarceration already takes away so many freedoms and opportunities for success, so when implementing literacy education programs, it becomes difficult to express and teach authentically. The tension between restrictions and finding freedom is weaved throughout the challenges of literacy education programs. In spaces where supplies, freedoms, and forms of self expression are so limited, it is easy for programs and educators to find obstacles with connecting with students authentically and being able to express themselves effectively.

Within these systems, the tools and supplies needed to hold these education practices are often regulated, counted, and withheld. Pens, pencils, paper, and other basic materials for writing are often hard to come by, and often come with limited access based on prison location and security level. As these materials can be fashioned into potential weapons or other unauthorized activities, it is difficult to provide them freely. Additionally, access to digital

technology, media, and internet are heavily restricted, which limits the capability of which inmates can use this technology to enhance their writing or skills. Censorship in incarcerated writing is often overlooked as well, as some prisons do not allow certain topics or offensive language to be used, which not only erases experiences of inmates, but restricts their ability to convey their ideas authentically, honestly, and truthfully.

In the chapter "Writers Speaking Out," of *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing,* Elliot Johnston and Tobi Jacobi discuss these possible limitations within carceral education systems as well. They explain that within *SpeakOut!*, one prison literacy program in Colorado, writers and administrators must fill out a permission form to publish work. In our modern world of social media and digital media, it is incredibly easy and accessible to give your writing and art to a larger audience with the click of a button, often with no censorship, edits, or commentary. However, this ability is completely removed from carceral spaces, so regulations are much heavier when producing writing and work, and even then is often heavily censored. According to the writing guidelines that Johnston and Jacobi detail, writers must adhere to these restrictions, along with the additional permissions needed to produce an output to an audience:

Our community partners (The Larimer County Detention Center and Turning Point Center for Youth and Family) have outlined the following restrictions:

- No gang references (this also applies to artwork).
- No cursing beyond "damn."(Profanity included in the submission will be starred: ****)
- No derogatory language about sponsor institutions (i.e., "LCDC is full of d****.")
- No overt, graphic sexual content.

• No derogatory or "hate" language that targets specific identity groups (based upon race, gender, sexuality, etc.) (183)

Oftentimes, writers need to use profane language or curse words to authentically and truthfully convey their feelings and detail their experiences as they lived them. With these restrictions, writers are siloed into writing a specific way to adhere to the guidelines. Although these programs are incredibly effective, important, and need to grow, there will always be restrictions on the liberties that inmates have with their writing and art.

Tobi Jacobi and Stephanie L. Becker comment on this difficulty in their article, "Rewriting Confinement: Feminist and Queer Critical Literacy in SpeakOut! Writing Workshops." They detail the story of a young incarcerated girl who they call "LL," who writes poems and narratives recalling her past drug uses and frustrations with administrators within the prison (35). They explain that she often pokes fun at the teachers in her writing, and is often at odds with her instructors. They explain that despite their disturbance with her writing and her continual breaking of guidelines, they must try to allow her to express herself authentically to preserve the importance of the classroom space and respect for students. They write, "Perpetuating such absences by navigating the dual pressures of responsibility to writers and institutions can diminish the possibility of critical pedagogy (35). Here, they are expressing the difficulty in wanting to respect the writing and process of each of the incarcerated students, but also adhere to the guidelines that they are given. This example represents an ongoing struggle of allowing writers to express freely and authentically, but causing a struggle within educators and institutions to allow this expression with such heavy restrictions.

Educators themselves often struggle to cope with these restrictions within their own teaching styles and classrooms as well. They must operate outside of their typical teaching

practices to adhere to the guidelines to which they are confined. Kendra S. Albright, in the chapter "No Hugs for Thugs," which appears in the edited collection *Literacy behind Bars*, finds that she was constrained as an educator in her classrooms within prisons, and she struggled to authentically connect with her students. She detailed that such constraints are reminiscent of the ways that some school systems are implementing programs to curb gang activity as early as middle school. This intervention can be harmful as it normalizes these practices during formative ages for students, making them believe that it is an inevitable part of their futures. In prison classrooms, she was reminded to not hug her students, even when they broke down crying or displayed extreme trauma responses. She writes, "A relationship between a teacher and her students becomes a gateway to the subject. And it isn't about the teacher, about any of those white-savior.teacher-as-hero motifs. No, it's about letting the learner know that you have an authentic interest in him and his learning, that he won't be exploited or misunderstood" (Albright 36). Albright wants to ensure that she is not falling into the trap of glamorizing these situations, or acting as a savior through her privileges of freedom. She is able to come and go to these spaces as she pleases, and wants to avoid unintentionally using her own privilege to teach in ways that are self-righteous or disingenuous. Albright is making a critical commentary on the commonality for educators to take these conflicted stances, and how they can impact educators and students alike. Her feeling constrained is a miniaturized version of the constraint and confinement that inmates feel. These restrictions create an unnatural environment, which takes away from the effectiveness of the connections between students and educators and in turn, the fruits of their education. Despite these restrictions, Albright is aware of her own privilege in these settings, and tries to ensure effective and genuine connection and education through her teaching.

Wendy Wolters Hinshaw and Tobi Jacobi comment on these restrictions in their critique of some prison educators in, *What The Challenge of Representing Women in Prison and Their Writing*, and say that educators "occupy positions of privilege and mobility through their abilities to move in and out of prisons, to access women's writing, and to ultimately control its circulation" (Hinshaw and Jacobi 70). The idea of mobility outside of prison is explained through privilege to leave the carceral education space, a privilege that prisoners do not have. Although they are in prison for different reasons, their writing is at the discretion of their educators and they often do not have control of where it goes or how it is distributed.

Prison educator and professor, Deborah Appleman comments on this idea in *Words No Bars Can Hold: Literacy Learning in Prison,* saying, "education seeks to humanize, incarceration inevitably seeks to dehumanize" (39). In an already dehumanized and societally deconstructed environment, further restricting literacy practices creates a larger disconnect between inmates understanding their pasts and bettering their future by harping on the traumas of their pasts. Again, the privilege of educators to have their own personal freedoms and leave carceral spaces as they please demonstrates the risk of educators infringing on the effectiveness of literacy programs, and inmates finding freedoms and satisfaction through their writing. Jacobi and Becker suggest that educators situate themselves as activists, to expose the shortcomings of the criminal justice system to overcome the barriers that face them as prison educators. They write, "Rather than situating ourselves as merely complicit buffer zone agents of razor wire, we can self-identify as allies in the abolitionist fight for more equitable systems of justice and representation" (39). They propose that by being activists for more equitable systems of justice will highlight the needs and rights of incarcerated people, to be able to implement effective and authentic strategies in their classrooms, without simply having to be complicit in following

guidelines imposed by the institutions. If educators become complicit in these rules and lack a passion and understanding of the truth of the inmate experiences, the rich benefits of practicing literacy in prison will begin to be overlooked and the opportunities for them will lessen. As practiced by Jacobi and Becker, educators can curb this by advocating for their students, and fighting for equal educational opportunities for them, despite their incarceration.

Chapter 3. Writing as Liberation: Personal, Professional, and Beyond

Liberation through writing and practicing literacy is a theme that is woven throughout my research. Incarcerated people have been able to connect with the classroom material, to discover parts of their identity that have been stripped by incarceration, mend difficult parts of their pasts, and see where transformation in society is needed. Deborah Appleman explores these reclamations of freedom and extensions of the self and identity beyond the prison walls in her book, *Words No Bars Can Hold: Literacy Learning in Prison*. Appleman is a college professor and teaches college-level courses to inmates. She incorporates examples of specific stories that stuck her, as well as some samples of their writing in letters and poetry. Despite these inmates being in different locations and prisons, their stories can all be interwoven parallel to one another in the healing that literacy and writing provided for them. Early on in her book, she detailed the potential romanticization of the discourse surrounding prison education, and the frequency of people to believe that it will entirely shift one's identity and experiences into a simplistic understanding of each individual and larger systemic issues. She explains that words won't dismantle reality, and that, despite each powerful story of reconnection or healing, it is still a carceral space. There are many flaws in the system, and each inmate has their own, often traumatic, experience. Despite the pain of revisiting these traumas, it is important for inmates to tap into these difficult pasts to express themselves authentically and be able to make positive change within themselves, as well as understand how they have been impacted by their trauma and the criminal justice system. Appleman focuses largely on not erasing the experiences of each person, but understanding how they will play a role in their writing and journey of finding their identities within the classroom. This consideration is crucial when understanding how literacy education plays a role in inmates, and the understanding of the challenges and limits to this

education is necessary in understanding the transformative nature of writing while avoiding the glorification of a complicated topic. The expressive freedoms and mending perception of the self and other relationships through primary source material from inmates will be used in my thesis as evidence of the effectiveness of these education practices.

Literacy Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Women: Sentences and Sponsors by Melanie N. Burdick examines the ideas of literacy freedoms by taking a close look at four different incarcerated women and their experiences with this type of writing and education and the freedoms it provided for them. Burdick is a college writing professor who focuses on teaching writing in women's prisons. A large part of her focus is on inclusivity, and understanding how each inmate's experience shapes the way they view literacy and relate to writing practices. Through her own observation of her own family members' incarceration, she chose this area of study to be able to shed light on individual's stories who are often "invisible or voiceless" (Burdick 15). In her book, she explains the familial and educational background of these four women, what their memories of literacy are, and how they practiced writing within prison. Additionally, she explained how each of the women used writing to transcend their prison sentences, reconnect with family on the outside, and where they took their literacy education after incarceration. Each of the four women, Diane, Becky, Grace, and Lexi, were given pseudonyms to preserve and protect their identities and reasons for incarceration. Oftentimes, incarcerated students find themselves feeling as if their words and writings have no weight, and cannot be valuable or impactful because of their derivation. However, Burdick's text challenged these beliefs and empowered these women to understand the value of writing themselves.

Writing acts as a medium in inmates' lives to mend relationships, with family, friends or otherwise. As they are confined to their prisons and sentences, their writing can say what they struggle to express otherwise. They can reclaim a sense of freedom, and reach out to those close to them, to not only have a sense of the world outside of prison, but reconnect with and heal tumultuous or broken relationships. All of the women in Burdick's writing have stories and experiences that were different, but all four of the women were able to gain a sense of reclamation of their lives, and a positive transition to amending the relationships between them and their families. Further, their families reciprocate the eagerness to reach out and rekindle broken relationships, which was unexpected to many of the women.

The first woman Burdick introduces is Grace, a forty-six year old Latina woman, who was incarcerated for over three years, and had five children prior to her incarceration. She graduated from high school but did not attend college. Grace recalled her experience with writing and associated her memories with passing and writing notes in class, which eventually shifted into writing a letter to her abusive father, expressing how he made her feel, and removing him from her life. She detailed her thoughts and emotions in journal entries to her children, with the assumption that all of them may not read it. To her surprise, her children all read it, and even disputed over who was able to keep possession of her journal. Burdick details Grace's reaction and says, "Describing how her five children fought over the journal made Grace frustrated that they had to share something they found so valuable, but also pleased that they cared enough to want to read what she'd written" (Burdick 48). Not only was Grace able to realize that her children were reciprocating in eagerness to reconnect with her, but she was able to understand that her words had value to herself. Burdick further explains this discovery and detailed how motherhood tied into these connections and says that the women, "have a voice

within their children's lives and to hear their own maternal voices speaking loudly within their own narrative identities" (Burdick 51). Once incarcerated, these women are stripped of their titles and responsibilities as mother, and feel disconnected from their maternal selves. As they are taken from their children, it is difficult for them to feel this mother-child connection through prison walls. However, writing and speaking with them via letters or emails often allows them to rekindle their connections with their children and with their own maternal roles.

Burdick explains that these women were able to make sense of their pasts, such as complicated relationships or abuses they endured, and have their unanswered questions and concerns put at ease by communicating with their children. In all of her discussions of the different agencies and reclamations that the women gained from these practices, she describes them as a "marker of transition." Despite their incarceration or length of their sentence, each woman was able to heal a part of themselves from beyond the fence, and transcend these systemic barriers that separate them from their humanity. Not only does this underscore the empowerment that inmates can gain from this pedagogy, but it provides an example of ways to restore the humanity of these people, and give them back a sense of their own lives and identities within a confined space.

Trauma-related emotions and feelings are also evoked when revisiting these past experiences and not only lead to the dehumanization of these inmates within the classrooms, but also remind them of their often traumatic or violent pasts that they've endured. As described by Burdick, she has a personal connection to incarceration, which motivated her work. This is an example of how engaging in this type of education often resurfaces past emotions or experiences that haven't been revisited. Despite the difficulty in revisiting these traumas, using literacy as expression of pain and emotions can be a healing and empowering action.

Hinshaw and Jacobi comment on these larger issues in *What Words Might Do: The Challenge of Representing Women in Prison and their Writing*, and highlight the differences between effective and ineffective ways to communicate these emotions. They argue that some educators ask the inmates about their pasts or what brought them to prison in ways that are not constructive, and reopen wounds or traumatic experiences that they do not wish to revisit. They also comment that the media often portrays incarcerated writing or literacy education with details and accounts of inmates' crimes, but that she has found that these practices work best when inmates aren't categorized or labeled for their pasts or mistakes, and are seen and taught as students in a classroom. They say that asking the women to disclose information about their crimes and pasts is, "...enabling them to describe their experiences in their own words and thereby speak back to the limited frameworks imposed on them by the justice system and the public…" (Hinshaw and Jacobi 73). Hinshaw and Jacobi introduce this idea in their critique, and make a critical argument when studying and practicing literacy in prison, to ensure a positive and productive environment. Bringing up these difficult parts of inmates' pasts reminds them and each other that despite any progress they've made or educational steps they've taken, they are still in these systems and alludes to them being minimized to their crime rather than their humanity or words. This is a consideration that must be taken when understanding this type of writing and this type of educational discourse, to act as a reminder to humanize these stories, and understand each experience distinctly from the crime.

Hinshaw and Jacobi write that some educational systems enforce these expectations to detail past traumas or other abuse people have suffered when writing in prison. While it is helpful to reflect on these issues and heal from one's past, it must be done sensitively, and in a way that allows the inmates space to share at their own discretion and in whatever form they

see fit. Forcing people to open up about these difficult times often steers inmates away from the classroom, as they feel siloed into focusing on parts of their lives that they do not wish to relive. Hinshaw and Jacobi writes that putting inmates in these situations, specifically women in their writing:

> ...not only reinforces institutional and public expectations that the women take responsibility for these crimes, but it also flattens the experiences of all of the women, equating them all as simply having reacted to the behaviors of others, whether abuse or insufficient attention (Jacobi 74).

They explain that this homogenizes the experiences of the inmates, and detracts from the purpose of healing and reimagining education through writing. Many inmates have suffered incomprehensible violence and abuse, whether physical or mental, and must grapple with these experiences while being incarcerated.

Also in "Writers Speaking Out," by Jacobi and Johnston, they include poems and excerpts written by inmates that emulate some of these traumatic experiences. In one poem "Do You Dad?" from this chapter written by a prisoner called Melissa R., she writes, "Do you remember your two best friends? Huh dad? Do you remember leaving them to watch us? I do daddy, and even though I don't remember their names, I remember the way they used to touch me and tell me not to tell" (192). She continues, "Do you remember that I was only 12 when that happened, and do you remember how much pain I felt before I slit my wrists and climbed up on that chair, and put that sheet around my neck, and took that last breath before I kicked the chair from under me? Do you dad?" (192). These horrific details from this poem explain not only Melissa R's experiences, but also highlight the commonality for inmates to have endured these traumatic sexual and violent abuses, often leading to suicidal ideations or attempts. Johnston and

Jacobi reiterate the importance of approaching these cases with sensitivity and a willingness to listen and allow inmates to divulge at the capacity of their own desire, rather than by force or pressure to participate. This poem was an example of allowing a student to disclose their experiences in their own artistic way, using poetry conventions such as rhythm and repetition, to convey their experiences through their writing while incarcerated.

Similar to Grace, Deborah Appleman introduces Fong, one of her students who shared the same difficulty when revisiting a traumatic past when in the classroom, who embodies this reinstallation of confidence. She detailed the stories of four different incarcerated men and their personal experiences leading to their incarceration, as well as excerpts of their prose and poetry. She breaks each chapter of her book up with different stories of inmates who impacted her, and her take on the need for more literacy education in prison. She reflects on her experiences and highlights the potential of transformation that writing provides for inmates. Featured in Appleman's chapter, Fong is a Hmong man who resettled in the United States after fleeing Laos. He explained that he came from a strict family with many siblings, where expression of affection was rare. He said that he was able to learn the reality of punishment early on, as he often suffered punishments from his father. Growing up in Detroit, Fong explained the negative reality of his schooling, which was filled with fighting, violence, racially charged gang activity, stealing, and many other impactful extremes. Fong was involved in a fight which resulted in the death of another Hmong man and is serving a 25 year sentence. Fong was reluctant to write, and turned in his assignments late, as he felt he "really wasn't a writer yet" (Appleman 71). According to Appleman, he also struggled with the language barrier, so she suggested he write in Hmong first and then translate to English so he could articulate his thoughts. She said that Fong found this strategy extremely helpful, and allowed him to write freely. In one of his poems

Fong writes, “Fold it-tuck it inside an envelope, mail it to a world that does not write me back” (Appleman 72). Fong clearly struggles to see the purpose of writing, but is nonetheless expressing his feelings. His feelings of isolation and rejection from the world make it difficult for him to connect with others through writing. Despite this, he continues to write despite his lack of confidence. Appleman describes him and says, “He still struggles with the gathering darkness that seems to regularly settle on the horizon of the incarcerated and has fits of inadequacy and doubt” (Appleman 72). Appleman is empathizing with Fong and explains that the conditions these individuals are in often strip them of their confidence and humanity, making it difficult to engage in actions that may reinstill their self-worth or allow for the expression of emotions.

Zeke, a white, middle-class man who came from a stable home is another man Appleman introduces. Appleman explains that after a failed robbery attempt, Zeke was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Having completed 20 of those years and barely passing high school, Zeke largely focuses on education and has received his associate’s degree and is working towards his bachelor’s. Zeke feels as though writing can communicate his experiences with the world, and uses it as a form of therapy. In one of his poems he writes, “They hold grips on invisible bars set in place as stripes coursing through their hopes and dreams” (Appleman 87). And, “The people I know go to bed in a cell but live in whole scenarios in lives all around the world…” (Appleman 89). These two excerpts from Zeke’s poetry touches on the constraints within prison, but also the aspirations of inmates that are being diminished. Interestingly, he claims that inmates have lives around the world, which he implies that they achieve from writing. He is expressing that despite the confinement and isolation that incarceration brings, inmates can still fulfill their goals and aspirations through the outlet of writing to transcend the confinement, and bring their mental

state to a better place and ensure a strong foundation for larger opportunities, inside and eventually outside of prison. Zeke seeing himself as a writer, rather than a prisoner opens these doors for his educational and personal opportunities for growth and development, into a strong and functional member of society through his writing and work.

Such self-empowering writing, as several prison literacy educators note, is enacted in a wide range of genres. In the chapter, "Creating a Community of Writers Using Graphic Novels," of *Literacy behind Bars*, Karen Gavigan detailed the expansion of the inmate's understanding of their own writing capabilities, as well as different styles of writing that they could use to express themselves authentically and comfortably. She explains how graphic novels, memoirs, and personal narratives are all ways inmates can express their thoughts, and can shift styles if they struggle finding their voice with a particular one.

Gavigan explained that many students were drawn to writing graphic novels as they saw their own experiences played out through art and writing, and saw it as a way to convey their experiences. She explained that it often can be less intimidating than standard texts and that the use of color and images can engage the inmates skills beyond typical prose. She explained one graphic novel that she often showed in her classes, *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* (Neri 2010), and that many of her students connected with the main character, Yummy, as his experience in gang activity in a crime-ridden town also rung true to some of their experiences. She believed that graphic novels such as this one could lead to more authentic writing and says that, "The combination of art and text in *Yummy* makes for ideal writing prompts, and can serve as touchstones for other engaging discussions and writing activities" (Gavigan 64). By using writing as a tool to express oneself outside of typical prose or essay writing, the inmates were able to understand their own potential through unexpected mediums.

Using different mediums of writing and incorporations of different literary styles encourages individuals to seize the opportunity provided to them within prison walls, and express their stories in ways that give them comfort. Whether connecting with other inmates, family members, or simply using writing as an outlet, it is a tangible way to have a feeling of agency and self in an otherwise constricted and punishing system. Writing taking different forms will play a large role in understanding literacy education, to ensure purposeful and effective writing practices. Each benefit that writing provides reminds inmates of their humanity and separates them from their crimes while in carceral spaces. Though literacy and personal expression both hold different interpretations to different people, allowing inmates to write in ways they feel comfortable and feel their words have purpose and intent can not only help them heal relationships from their pasts, situate them as students rather than prisoners, and highlight where they see larger systemic change is needed.

One incarcerated person who discovered the power of advocacy and larger change through his writing is Chris, a man that Deborah Appleman describes as a handsome and quiet man who expresses himself through written word and visual art. She explains that he has been incarcerated for over ten years for gang-related activity. In her descriptions of working with Chris, she discusses his unique position as a participant in the writing collective within the correctional facility, and his optimism for the program and the role of writing in the lives of himself and his fellow inmates. Chris focuses on optimism and using his voice for positive change within his own lives, and as a guide for others looking to express their own voices. When explaining his purpose of writing, Chris says, “The nonfiction pieces I write through a lens of advocacy, designed to initiate an alternative regard to the societal assumptions that construct my

surroundings. This fiction and personal memoir I construct to make sense of topics such as forgiveness, redemption, and unrequited love; such that mirror my efforts in visual art" (Appleman 60). Here, Chris focuses his energy within his own writing, to break the constraints of his surroundings, and amend the emotions and experiences that may trouble him from his past.

His explanation of using writing as "advocacy," is particularly interesting because it seems Chris wants to act as a role model for other inmates or constrained individuals who are seeing an outlet for their own emotions or situational realities. In one of Chris's poems titled "That Picture on the Wall," he refers to someone he calls "She" throughout. He writes, "She gets where I've been & believes in where I'm going" (Appleman 67). He finishes, "She is faith, telling me I am worth the fight to be a better man as I live out my days from expendable binds clutching the ideals of her through bleeding fists" (Appleman 67). Chris is explaining the feelings of constraint and pain within himself and while incarcerated, but maintains a strong relationship with his faith and expresses this through his writing in order to see a better future for himself. His powerful words demonstrate not only the pride and strength that writing has provided him, but also allow him to stay loyal to the faith of a brighter future, and express his hardships through words during this journey.

The motivation and empowerment that Chris found is an example of many programs with the same goals to bring about positive change through literacy, to improve incarcerated lives and the criminal justice system as an institution. *Doing Time, Writing Lives*, by Patrick W. Berry details Berry's experience with college programs in prisons, and where he observes areas for improvement, as well as aspects that are useful within these organizations to bring about systemic change. He describes his time with *Project Justice*, the organization from the Midwest

where students can take upper-level courses to receive an education that will steer them to a career following their incarceration. Having a personal connection to the criminal justice system, Berry has been a firsthand witness to the flaws of the system through his own father's incarceration. Berry details his observations within the system and the increasing and worsening issue of mass incarceration, commenting on how the school-to-prison pipeline, The War on Drugs, and unequal education are all issues not only worsening within themselves, but adding to the ongoing issue of mass incarceration. One aspect of this text that is particularly notable, is Berry's emphasis and explanation of solidifying the inmates lives and experiences after incarceration, in addition to while being incarcerated. Often in prison literacy education and outreach programs, the emphasis is solely on benefitting and educating inmates while imprisoned. While equally important, acknowledging life after incarceration to increase one's opportunity for further education and employment is a crucial aspect of this education that is often overlooked.

Berry deconstructs the accepted definitions of literacy that are normally understood and accepted, but must be understood in a larger context to fully understand how it can impact and improve the lives of incarcerated people, during and after their sentence. He quotes Jody Shipka's 2003 definition of literacy, "It is especially about the ways we not only come to inhabit made-worlds, but constantly make our worlds—the ways we select from, (re)structure, fiddle with, and transform the material and social worlds we inhabit." Both of these writers believe that literacy spans far beyond the ability to read and write, and are determined to clarify this definition to be able to segue these beliefs to promote improvement and new opportunities. Berry explains that there is a sense of agency that is achieved once people learn about the opportunities that are available to them through literacy, and see it as a "third space," outside of

the person and the institution. He explains that inmates often see their employment as unfeasible, as they feel they do not have the tools or access to tap into these types of agency and see this as "distant knowledge of outside worlds." So, Berry details his participation in the teaching of professional literacy skills within prison, to facilitate a transition to the "outside world," that may feel distant to inmates.

Starting with tutorials on how to construct resumes, cover letters, and formal proposals, inmates began to build skills that went beyond their beginning of literacy education of prose and poetry. Berry asserted that many students felt as though they were unqualified for job positions as most of their work was while incarcerated, or only had entry-level positions to display on their resume and in an interview. Berry aimed to break down these ideas, and reimagine each of these jobs and experiences, to honestly and accurately portray each inmate as someone eager to reform their past, but not erase it. He "considers an approach to teaching professional writing that attempts to honor the knowledge and expertise of students" (Berry 70). Seeing professional writing and its components as its own genre, Berry explains his goals when helping students write cover letters and job application materials and says, "The discursive movement between where they are and where they want to be is often considerable and subject to awkward enactments as students aim to construct new identities" (Berry 70). Once again, the theme of remembering one's experiences and not negating them in hopes to pretend or fabricate one's life is emphasized in this point. He continues by explaining that one must not lie or exaggerate the contents of their resume or experiences, but highlight them in a way of acknowledgment of their impact, and what each student took away from them. This way, the student can accurately convey their experiences truthfully, and assert an eagerness to grow and "metamorphosize," by drawing on their strengths, and not being shameful of their pasts. This breaks down not only the

negative perceptions that the inmates have of themselves and their lives, but in society as well. By demonstrating to employers that these inmates have taken the time and effort to embark on learning about these tools and engaging in them shows that they are productive future members of a workforce and in society, and therefore should not be dismissed.

Chapter 4. Beyond the Bars: Writing as a Catalyst for Advocacy and Global Awareness

When inmates are exposed to the opportunity and proper teachings of literacy while incarcerated, and educators are able to observe the need for these programs and larger issues at hand, they are often motivated to convert their observations into larger, tangible changes addressing these disparities on a global scale. Observing and participating in these practices often provides a platform to see where students are disproportionately disadvantaged during formative years, leading them down a path of incarceration. Not only are these patterns apparent during incarceration, but also lead to recidivism and a lack of ability to find personal and professional success following incarceration.

There is a growing need for advocacy on these fronts and a gap in awareness about these issues within the criminal justice system that many educators and inmates are attempting to remedy through their relationships with literacy and activism benefitting inmates after prison. "Writers Speaking Out," details one of these programs that is attempting to use a collaborative approach to rehabilitate inmates through expression and writing, to promote systemic change on a larger scale.

SpeakOut!, which is a writing workshop based out of Fort Collins, Colorado focuses on critical thinking and creative expression through writing for writers in correctional institutions. The program also produces a biannual journal, which gives writers a tangible product of their work, and a goal to contribute to a larger output. When inmates have the platform and opportunity to produce a piece or writing or work, they are more likely to see the value in practicing their expression and literacy skills, and see its broader application. Jacobi and Johnston explain the educational philosophy of SpeakOut! and write that it is, "...educational programming that moves beyond the expectation of individual reform and rehabilitation—and

toward a tactical (and revolutionary) approach to literacy-as-activism" (Johnston and Jacobi 174). The program does foster a space of expression and transformation, but holds a larger goal of advocacy for inmates and their experiences, and societal reform of prison classrooms as a foundation in its practices. SpeakOut! educators connect with their students through literacy and improve their education and expressive skills, while also being motivated by a larger need for awareness and change.

The program offers numerous types of writing and literacy practices that participants can explore, including creative writing, poetry, prose, and memoir writing. Through these different mediums, participants use group discussions, and read and edit one another's work within the classroom. With the implementation of these revision and peer-editing practices, inmates can not only gain a sense of camaraderie between themselves, but also understand the larger change they are making within society through their writing and transforming each other's relationships with education and literacy. The chapter by Johnston and Jacobi details the impact that the program has on the lives of inmates and awareness of these issues within carceral institutions. They write, "The *SpeakOut!* program works to embody and enact principles of critical community literacy by carefully considering issues of power, interaction, and representation across the various sites and activities we engage" (Johnston and Jacobi 180). Although some may see programs like this as something to fill the time while in prison, its effects are much larger than what meets the eye. As previously discussed, practicing literacy skills and artistic forms of expression within carceral spaces redirects inmates to connect with each other, and their past traumas and experiences to mend parts of their lives that often get disregarded upon incarceration. In addition to these personal benefits, people "on the outside" of prison can use prison writing and art as a window to hear the stories of inmates, and ways that their lives have been shaped and impacted by the flaws

of the criminal justice system. This window can also be accessed by inmates themselves, to see how the larger institution and criminal justice system disadvantaged and targeted them by connecting with other inmates through art and writing, and having conversations within the classroom that would not take place elsewhere.

Johnston and Jacobi comment on the different mediums that inmates feel connected with that allow them to express their thoughts and write:

> Through poetry, prose, artwork, and more, these scribes record difficult pasts, seek redemption and battle adversity, un leash political polemics, write love letters to estranged partners, issue missives of inspiration and warning to younger community members, and, especially in the case of teenage guys, show an exuberance and emotional resilience through humor. (Johnston and Jacobi 184)

While some of these methods may seem unorthodox or out of our traditional understanding of literacy, there is no guideline to how people feel connected to forms of expression that feel healing and conducive to them. Whether that is through prose, or comedy writing, as Johnston and Jacobi explain, the students are able to dismantle their identities as inmates, and view one another as students in an educational setting. By relieving each other of the labels placed on them through prison, or earlier in their lives leading to prison, they can see how they have been targeted by the system, and see where more awareness and advocacy are needed once out of prison, or how they can bring this attention through their art and writing.

One poem written by an inmate in this program who uses the pen name “M1ss Beehaved,” writes a poem called “Dear Government,” where they express the pain and suffering that incarceration has brought to them and their family, but also the issues they observe within the system. They write about the lack of support after prison, and reduction of their rights and

say, “Strip me of my Parental Pride, / Label me a felon, leaving me no rights. /You wonder why I’m hopeless, /Not caring if I’m homeless” (190). They express that the government does not care if they end up homeless, and how they feel permanently labeled as a “felon.” This quote from the poem encapsulates the importance of programs like *SpeakOut!*. Inmates feel labeled as felons, or other distinguishing characteristics often given to prisoners, and feel as though these labels follow them for the rest of their lives. However, the program provides an opportunity to express these frustrations and lack of support from the system. This connects inmates with themselves and each other, while simultaneously making a change in the criminal justice system itself. Typically, people who aren’t incarcerated can gather, protest, hold sit-ins, and other forms of raising awareness, but these abilities are stripped in prison. *SpeakOut!* and other programs with the same goal and literacy practices offer a way to resist and fight against these issues through art and writing.

The author continues and writes, “They are the state /Strong, powerful, never to underestimate. /I can be locked away, /But their laws will never go away” (191). Here, they describe the system as “strong” and “powerful.” These words they use to describe the government evoke a sense of helplessness against these large institutions and systems that target individuals. With the school to prison pipeline and the countless occurrences of recidivism, people are shuttled to these systems, with no other route to turn down, and no resources following incarceration, if they are ever released. These writings underline the importance of programs and increased awareness of the shortcomings and targeted and discriminatory actions of the criminal justice system. The inmate conversations, peer discussions, and writing and artistic outputs are all ways to combat these atrocities, and the need for these advocacy programs and awareness initiatives is growing. The more we as a society can have a window into carceral

spaces and access to inmate voices is how these changes can be implemented through advocacy, support, and an understanding of the circumstances that often lead people down the road to incarceration.

Deborah Appleman also found a similar yearning and call-to-action in her interactions with students, reemphasizing the need for advocacy and a global awareness of these disparities. Some inmates found themselves reflecting on their own pasts, and seeing how systemic oppressions and racism impacted their lives, and how this evoked a need for change. LaVon is the next inmate who Appleman writes about. Having been incarcerated since he was younger than 18, LaVon has served over 20 years in prison after being arrested for a gang-related shooting. LaVon, an African American man often writes poetry condemning Donald Trump and supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement, specifically after the brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020. He often writes about the disadvantages and discriminations of Black individuals within the criminal justice system, and underlines the systemic profiling and oppressions that the system imposes. LaVon, unlike many of the other inmates, has no interest in publishing any of his writing, and simply wrote for himself and for his long-lost daughter. In one of his poems he writes, “Justice wasn’t born blind. She turns a blind eye as tipped scales overcrowd brick cells, that happen to be full of black males” (76). Here, La Von is expressing the reality of being a black man within the criminal justice system, and the ignorance that authorities display when addressing racial discrepancies and inequalities. He underscores that not only is the system itself flawed based on biases and extra aggression towards people of color, but that it intentionally turns a blind eye to these issues and inhibits their resolution or improvement. His poetry and position were particularly impactful, because they gave his perspective as a Black man within this system that purposefully is oppressive to him and others. This reality plays a large role in the

treatment, access, and rehabilitation that is available in these systems, and varies depending on who the system favors. The choices of these individuals to be optimistic in their writing and write about systemic issues as a motivation for change within these heavily flawed systems brings the benefits of prison literacy to the forefront. Inmates underlined the disadvantages that disproportionately affect incarcerated populations as well as their own personal emotions and experiences to bring about reformative change in their own lives, their future freed selves, and for their fellow incarcerated inmates whose voices have not been heard.

Dominique T. Chlup of Texas A&M University details other prison literacy programs that have adopted similar goals and practices. One program, developed by Temple University's Lori Pompa, the *Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program*, connects college students and incarcerated individuals in classrooms in prisons. Pompa tries to connect her students inside the prison walls, with the context of the criminal justice system and the lives of students on the outside, while educating the college students literate about life inside prison and carceral spaces. She describes this program as a "mutual exchange," where students can "reflect critically on their knowledge of crime, criminals, and punishment allows them to situate their reflection within their own experience while also holding open the door for them to dismantle long held stereotypes and misperceptions of prisoners and prison life" (Chlup103). Students complete reflection papers, final papers, and read multiple different texts regarding criminal justice. By situating all of the participants as students, regardless of their backgrounds, emphasizes the partnership that Pompa is trying to foster, to give students skills and inspiration to make larger systemic changes and become aware of advocacy opportunities regarding prison reform and within the criminal justice system. Within this program, there is a large emphasis on the mutualism that can arise from combining college education with prison education, to dismantle

both the incarcerated people's and college students opinions and predispositions about one another to meet at an understanding of one another on a human and educational level to represent and advocate for larger change. Programs like this, as well as *SpeakOut!* are few of many programs that are occurring and growing, and are chipping away at the issues within the criminal justice system through literacy and education to spread global awareness of the faults and flaws of these institutions.

It is important to not view these programs through a jaded lens and see them as the cure-all for issues within the criminal justice system. When seeing the liberation, awareness, and freedoms that these forms of advocacy can provide, it is important to not glamorize these programs and circumstances. It is still a prison. There are still restrictions. But despite these barriers, using these programs can bring awareness to these barriers, to see just how controlled and restrictive these programs are during and following incarceration. The way to curb these larger issues is to continue to advocate for these programs, and emphasize their importance, to inmates and to people who are not incarcerated. Once these walls between inmate voices and society as a whole are broken, people can begin to see the lack of support and resources within prisons, and the disproportionate targeting of people that leads to incarceration to begin to dismantle the blockades within the criminal justice system that continue to harm inmates and their futures.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

When I embarked on writing this thesis, I knew that I wanted to provide tangible evidence of the effectiveness and importance of literacy and education programs in prison. I want to not only emphasize this importance in closing, but provide a space that explains the functions of these programs, with clear and evident reflections and results from inmates who have benefited personally, inside and outside of prison. Understanding a broader definition of literacy as a pathway to see its impacts in carceral space is an integral part of understanding how these programs can lead to larger global changes. Upon reading inmate's perspectives on literacy programs, the work they have produced, and hearing firsthand from educators the difficulties and obstacles faced by inmates, my understanding of literacy as a gateway to success grew. Literacy is not just the ability to read, write, and communicate. It is the interlinking of one's inner-troubles, identity, and emotions to a physical output. This production of writing, art, and expression is an element that can be reclaimed by inmates, providing a sense of freedom in a confined space. In prison, where these freedoms and spaces of personal reflection and growth are limited, writing and artistic expression allow inmates to strip themselves of the labels of prisoners and delinquents that follow them through prison, and often affect them in their early lives. In the cases of Chris, Fong, Zeke, Diane, Becky, Grace, Lexi, and the other inmates who were able to place their human identity over their prison identity, connections were formed in a multitude of ways. They were able to rekindle relationships from their pasts, use these literacy experiences as a vehicle of improving their lives and careers, and acted as an exercise to heal their own trauma in an environment that was conducive and comfortable to their growth. The access and space given to them allowed empowerment between one another and themselves.

Despite the growth and transformative nature of literacy education and educational spaces in prison, there still is a need for growth within this area of study. Described by Jacobi, Johnston, Appleman, Hinshaw, and others, there still are insurmountable barriers and limitations to these experiences. Lack of awareness, access to tools, funding, and empathy are all factors that make these programs difficult to implement within carceral spaces. As prison is inherently restrictive, and every move and interaction is monitored, literacy becomes a safe and healthy way to break these barriers. People often disregard incarcerated people, deeming them unworthy of education, or minimize them based on their access to literacy or educational background. My goal with this thesis is to tangibly demonstrate that there are ways to implement these programs, improve inmate lives, and provide an opportunity for growth and brighter futures. Empathy and awareness are key aspects that are necessary to seeing these possibilities, and I hope that myself and readers continue my understanding of these barriers, to understand that despite labels, crimes, or inmate backgrounds, each person deserves an opportunity to grow as a person and a student through access to literacy education.

Programs like *SpeakOut!* and *Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program* are key to spreading this awareness and potential growth for inmates. The access to educational tools and spaces, in an environment that is structured around producing writing and artistic outputs for inmates allows inmates to engage in advocacy for themselves and others. Having a product that they work towards during their time in the classroom structures their efforts, and shows them that the work they are putting in and the connections that they make between themselves and each other are real, and are leading to positive change. This not only shows incarcerated people that their lives and work are worthy of being heard and understood, but it inspires other institutions to

implement similar programs, and provide similar opportunities for self-improvement and global awareness and change.

I hope that this thesis inspires further efforts to create and expand literacy education programs and opportunities in prisons. By increasing this awareness and promoting this access, resources, connections, and institutional support will all grow. To understand how important and life-changing literacy expression and education in prison can be, people need to empathize with inmates and incarcerated people, and see them as humans and students, rather than prisoners or criminals. Regardless of one's past, experiences, or upbringing, every incarcerated person deserves the space and freedom to express themselves through literacy and art, and education programs that foster these environments and spaces are the key to recognizing the positive global change they can create. Each student can release, heal, and cope with their emotions through writing, giving them the opportunity to grow as a person in and out of prison. Of course there will always be barriers and limitations to these freedoms, but the growth and uplifting of educational programs in prison will dismantle and break these limitations, and give incarcerated people the opportunities and spaces that they deserve.

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