



Supporting Kids in Custody

by AWELE MAKEBA



The three summers I worked at the Juvenile Justice Center (the JCC, also known as Juvie Hall), I taught drama as a literacy intervention on the male units and my students, in turn, taught me. This is what I learned:

- **See the teens' humanity.**
- **Don't judge.**
- **Provide them with a survey to ascertain their areas of interest:** What are they curious about? What are their personal life needs, hobbies, and so on? In addition to any diagnostic you may be able to administer, ask them to identify a particular literacy need they would most like to address and work on.
- **Allow the relationship you have with the teens to evolve; in time, you may be able to ask them to share the circumstances that brought them to detention.** Not all youth living in custody are there because they broke the law. Some do not have family who can take care of them for various reasons, ranging from death, lack of resources, adult hardships, abandonment, and incarceration. Sometimes, the teens believe their foster or group home placement is unsafe, and they may run away repeatedly to protect themselves and their sense of well-being.
- **Ask the teens, if they could give their top 5 to 10 instructions to the adults in their lives, what would they say?** What do the teens need and in what ways do they wish the adults closest to them would show up? This exercise centers the teens' voices and needs and helps them develop the agency to advocate for themselves. It also teaches and guides the adults who have the best intentions, but may be operating without youth input. The guidance I've received from 14- to 18-year-old youth has helped me provide the support that most benefits the adolescents I'm attempting to serve.

Additionally, what resources do the youth need? The teens I served asked for:

- **Books in which they could see themselves** (see Julia Torres' accompanying curated literature collection). Also see: *Cultivating Genius: How to Select Culturally and Historically Responsive Text: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad and *Create Textual Lineages with Students* (Alfred Tatum's research). schoollibraryjournal.com/story/diversity/create-textual-lineages-with-students-diversity-facing-history-and-ourselves

- **Journals to write in** (but pen and pencils can become weapons—staff may not want to give them writing instruments. See if you can arrange for writing at a specific time and then require the youth to turn in their writing instruments before returning to their unit).
- **Create Book Clubs** such as the Coming of Age in a Complex World from Facing History and Ourselves. Featuring an Identity and Storytelling Text Set, Unit Planning Toolkit, Book Club Guide, and more, this modular program was developed for grades 8–10 and provides resources to create a unit based on coming-of-age texts that meets your goals and the needs of your students. For more information visit facinghistory.org/ela/coming-age
- **Plays to read and perform.** I introduced them to [August Wilson's](#) 10-play cycle and they loved it. The head of juvenile hall court schools and head of probations observed my classes, saw teens totally engaged in the plays, volunteering to read, do text analysis, and even word call at a snail's pace while their peers coached them. The next day I was asked what additional materials I needed. The JCC managers brought dictionaries, 16 copies of the scripts—one for each of the 16 teens in the class. The boys were begging to be in my drama class rather than being sent back to their unit. They enthusiastically volunteered to play roles in the plays as they were entering our classroom prior to even taking their seats.
- **Author visits** either before or after the teens have read their books; search online for book trailers and recorded author interviews.
- **Audio books with a copy of the book** is great way to “grow & stretch” readers who may be multiple levels below a proficient reading level, but who want access to particular books. The audio book can “read them to sleep” at bedtime; serve as a companion; and provide the teens with an uplifting storyteller voice in their heads that brings the gift of story—a welcome relief from the cacophony of voices in their environment, shouting, demanding, directing, reprimanding, threatening.

About Awele:

Awele (ah WAY lay) is an award-winning and internationally known storyteller/teaching artist, literacy specialist, and recording artist who is recognized as a “truth teller,” an artist for social change, and someone who sparks “aha!” moments. See [Awele](#); [@AweleMakeba](#).

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