

Education Not Incarceration: Impact of Academic Service-Learning on a Pre-service Teacher

Cynthia Maceda
Florida Atlantic University

I am a student at Florida Atlantic University, double-majoring in Psychology and Secondary English Education. One of the required courses for the education major track is *Introduction to Diversity for Educators*. An essential component of the course is participation in 15 Academic Service-Learning (A S-L) hours, which allows students to use the material taught in the classroom in a real-life setting. Because of her personal connections, my professor offered the class the opportunity to conduct A S-L at the local jail with incarcerated juvenile males. Seeing the setting and population as a unique opportunity, I quickly expressed interest. The experience I gained opened my eyes to the social injustices that are prevalent in our education system, especially with marginalized youth; it has exposed me to an incredibly diverse facet of the education system, and it allowed me to have the chance to experience the life of an educator in the rawest form possible.

My position in A S-L was to literally assume the role of a “student-teacher.” I worked with the incarcerated students either individually or in small groups consisting of two to three juveniles. We would discuss the lesson, what was expected from them, and how to complete the lesson. Each time I helped a student, I witnessed other students opening up to the idea of asking for and accepting help. With this population, there is an expectation to be a “tough guy” and a certain stigma toward being educated or asking for help. During the first week of my A S-L experience, the students frequently asked me, “Why are you here?” as if the only way to enter the facility was by summons. After telling the students that I had *voluntarily* signed up to do my hours at the jail, their “tough guy” personas dissipated. It was almost as if I had to go through some sort of test to gain their trust. As a result of “passing” their initiation, students began to change their behaviors including: avoiding lockdowns, sitting for the entire class period, and most importantly, participating in classroom discussions. The incarcerated students could not fathom that someone would want be in such a place helping the students often forgotten. This was the defining moment in my A S-L experience—the moment where the purpose of the experience was identified. The purpose of this experience was not to undermine law breaking, but to give these students a chance at becoming the best versions of themselves possible.

As the naïve student I was back when I began my A S-L experience, I never fully grasped the impact I was making until the eight-week period was finished. Entering a frigid and bare corridor, latching onto an elevator, pushing the number 14: Juvenile Unit, and then being greeted by about 30 young, vivacious, and sadly, full of potential students is something I will never forget. I learned that a teacher-to-student relationship is built and thrives on mutual trust. When the trust foundation is set, the teacher serves as the beacon of education and that is exactly how I felt every time I walked into one of the jail wings and saw an ocean filled with lost, floating boats waiting for their beacon to guide them where they needed to go. I was their beacon. I was able to sharpen my dialogic communication skills that are so crucial to not only classroom settings, but to life in general. Oftentimes, misbehavior from incarcerated students may simply be the actions of a frustrated child and all they need is for someone to listen and exhibit empathy. Putting aside the unfortunate circumstance that led the students to incarceration and giving them

undivided attention and support is something I believe was one of the contributing factors to the overall success of my A S-L experience.

Introductory to Diversity for Educators is a preparatory course designed to expose students to different cultures and supply students with multicultural teaching content in order to better prepare future educators. There is no better place to witness diversity than inside a jail. As a result of this observation, the same professor who initially offered the A S-L experience believed that my A S-L was a prime moment to introduce Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices—pedagogy grounded in the educator displaying cultural competency and the ability to relate course content to the students’ cultural context. The time I spent in the jail with the incarcerated students was not only time spent assisting them with their homework and lessons, but it was also an opportunity for me to see first-hand what theory to practice is all about. Because of my growing interest in education, marginalized youth, and more specifically, the school-to-prison pipeline, my professor, a doctoral student, and I developed a unique mentorship to assist me in not only having a successful A S-L experience but also developing my own research project. My efforts with individual and small group sessions, introducing Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices to students and teachers in the jail, and a passion that seemed to grow by the second, all came together to create my first presentable research project. The A S-L experience has and will continue to initiate the development of many research projects, conferences, and Alternative Spring Break trips focused entirely on marginalized youth. Without the inclusion of A S-L in education courses, this incredible feat would not have been feasible.

What affected me most from my experience at the jail were the interactions I had with students. One unforgettable experience occurred with a seventeen year old who had been in and out of the system all his life, was reading on a second or third grade level, and was placed in the sixth grade. He clearly had little to no motivation or confidence in his abilities. I noticed how far behind he was when the students were asked to take the mandatory writing exam and he struggled tremendously. I noticed that he would daydream and make no attempt to complete assignments because he struggled with writing. After seeing him struggle so intensely, I made a conscious effort to work closely with him because I knew he would benefit the most. I spent classroom time reading the worksheets out loud to him and asking him the questions that followed. It amazed me how he understood the majority of what I was saying. He absorbed the information and he was able to verbally demonstrate his learning. After spending considerable time with this one student, one of the main teachers at the jail came up to me and told me that I was doing a phenomenal job with him. He continued to tell me that he was one of the more troubling students because he would get frustrated and leave the class, resulting in a full-day lockdown. But since I had been working with him, his frustration levels dropped and he avoided lockdown. The teacher also noted that the student asked to work with me, even on the days that I was not at the jail. Toward the end of my stay at the jail, he changed so much to the point where he was sounding out words and writing them on his own. I saw great improvements with this student and knowing that I helped him reach that point was an incredible feeling.

The jail is similar to the public school setting in the sense that it requires students to learn and be tested on the state-mandated materials. The most obvious distinction between public schools and the jail is that these students have committed crimes, are awaiting trial, or are serving their sentence. The majority of the students were African American and many of them had been in and out of the juvenile justice system from an early age and have been labeled “at-risk.” I became acutely aware of how real, serious, and distinct my experience was when one day I was overlooking the lobby wing from the teacher’s workroom. I realized that this wasn’t a

traditional classroom where most of the kids are motivated and happy to be there, I was in a jailhouse classroom with students who had committed crimes and felt that they had no reason to better themselves because this was all they had known. This moment of daydreaming essentially was my epiphany. I knew that this population is who I want to work with, and I knew that the educational injustices that plague this population are what I want to address. The untraditional student group served as my catalyst for social change because I saw something different about them. I noticed that these students have the same intellectual capabilities as their non-incarcerated peers. At the end of each day, I had the same thoughts that I had when I observed a traditional classroom: these students were smart, funny, and full of potential—they just had some unfortunate circumstances and made some bad choices. I also learned to not judge a book by its cover. This was by far the most valuable lesson I learned while teaching at the jail. During my last visit, I was told by one of the teachers that it was incredibly brave of me to be open to this opportunity because most people would just turn their backs on these students if they knew that the majority of them had committed hardcore crimes like murder and armed robbery. But I chose to not know the students' criminal history because I did not want to judge them or treat them differently. The kindest and probably the smartest student in the classroom was awaiting trial for murder, and if I had known that before interacting with him, I might have looked or treated him differently as a result. Or maybe I wouldn't have. The realization that a crime does not define the student will not only serve me well as a future educator, but in life in general. Everybody has some baggage and if I choose to judge a person based on his or her past, I will never be able to see the real person.

I am grateful that I took the opportunity to do my A S-L hours with such a diverse group of students housed in the county jail. In this extremely difficult, different, and culturally unique setting, I was able to learn about myself and better my teaching practices. This was an experience that I will never forget and based off of my efforts in the jail, I think I made a difference in my students' lives.

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