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“Standing strong from the other side of the bars”:

**Examining an arts-based program for students with
incarcerated parents**

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WHAT PERSPECTIVES OF "AT-RISK" YOUTH EMERGES FROM STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN AN ARTS-BASED PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE INCARCERATED PARENTS?

*When I'm down and out
And I'm feeling blue
And I don't know what to do
I know I can count on you.*

*Standing strong, by helping each other
Standing strong together we'll be
Standing strong, stand strong together
Standing strong, helping people like me*

*I may be sad inside
But you only see my smile
Helping you and helping me
To keep us hoping to believe.*

*Standing strong, we can be confident
Standing strong in hard times and all
Standing strong, we'll make it together
Standing strong, you and then me*

*-“Standing Strong” Lyrics from “The Story
of the Broken Bridge” (YWPIP 2010)*

INTRODUCTION

No le digas a nadie./Don't tell anyone. For many families impacted by incarceration the fact that a loved one is in prison is often treated like a secret. Sometimes it is a secret kept away from friends and neighbors. Other times it is a secret kept by children from their classmates and teachers at school. In some cases, where a parent is in prison, even adults keep the secret from the children. For younger children, it is easier to say ‘*Mommy is working.*’ or ‘*Dad is at a special school*’ then it is to say the real whereabouts of an incarcerated mother or father. Regardless of families talking or not talking about how prison has affected them, greater society still talks and makes clear its opinions about *those* who end up behind bars. Shame of being stereotyped; pain of feeling alone or a sense of loss; fear of others-friends, schools, social services finding out.

These are only some of the reasons why many students and their families hide that part of their reality.

The first time I learned some of these reasons of why *one doesn't tell*, was not from my research but from my own experience of having a parent in prison. When I was 10 years old, my mother was arrested while my brother and I were in school. That year there were a series of ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) raids in our town and surrounding areas that impacted many friends and neighbors. In our mostly white, low income rural town, known for its farms and vacation resorts, I was part of a growing population of Latino families moving away from the bigger cities, in search of better jobs, better schools for the kids and a better quality of life in the countryside.

Not having and having *papeles*, or legal citizenship documents, was a regular topic of discussion at home, at *fiestas*; or after *futbol* games on weekends; in the *noticias* on the “Spanish” news channel; and on the phone when talking to family back home in Colombia. Many parents, like mine, openly talked at home about their ‘border crossing’ stories, which were never mentioned in my social studies lessons on Ellis Island and immigration-and with good reason. As the daughter of undocumented parents growing within this close-knit community of families *con* and *sin papeles*, I learned that schools and workplaces were not a safe space to talk about our legal status or of the illegal status of our parents. It was a secret to be kept away from those spaces and people that ignored and condemned us, despite having little to no knowledge of our families beyond their status.

When ICE struck our town, the raids occurred in workplaces and in homes. For many families, like mine, immigrants in prisons or detention centers became the main topic of conversation that was discussed cautiously, with fear, and now further away from kids ears. But I

heard the whispered stories of 5 am raids, with teams of armed police, with unmarked black vans and cars, with screaming kids and cuffed parents. I remember the growing fear on my parents faces, the discussions and stories that now became only within other adults, and stories of friends and families not going to work, driving, or going to school because of fear of being caught, jailed, and deported. Although the raids were within reach, I remember thinking that my parents could not and would not be affected. Although they were ‘illegal’ on paper, they were “American” in real life. Maybe *that* mattered more. They were not “the type” to be deported or go to jail.

My young mind had framed their ‘illegal’ identities outside of the images of court rooms, prisons, detention centers, and even at times, their native country of Colombia. They spoke English; listened to both salsa and American pop music; paid their bills (and *abuela*’s bills in Colombia); raised American-born children; were involved in their education; helped with projects, practices and sleepovers; interacted with many white, legal families in the town. With my dad’s citizenship pending and mother’s developing career as a social worker, their ‘illegal status’ didn’t seem like a crime to me, it just seemed like the ‘American Dream.’

According to adults more familiar with my story, for my family, there was no raid, just two officers who came to pick up my mother in unmarked vehicles. She was allowed to make a phone call to my dad at work. After coming home from school, my father and grandmother informed us with few words and details. They said she was most-likely in state for a couple of weeks and that the deportation hearing would come at some undetermined point in the future. The bail was too high for us to bring her home. Other than that, we didn’t really talk about *it* (my mother being gone). *It* was hard to think about let alone talk about with others. I definitely did not talk about *it* with friends or others at school, as I was warned by family, “*No le digas a*

nadie/Don't tell anyone.” Now my secret, of having an undocumented parent, had intensified by developing a new layer: my mother was in prison. Until one day, in class, I told my secret.

I whispered it to my friend sitting next to me, as I was nervously holding a petition ‘asking the court to release my mom on behalf of Stacey’s friends.’ She laughed and told others sitting next to her, behind her; was not long before the whole class knew. Some students laughed, but most of them just looked down and away from me. After one student a couple rows behind me asked, “*was she dealing drugs?*” my teacher excused me from class because I was “*disrupting class learning with personal issues.*” 5th grade became harder and more painful as I was teased by peers, ignored by my teacher, and missed details and understanding about my once, well-kept secret.

During those months, I missed little league games, my first communion, classes and sleepovers with friends. But I mostly missed my mom, especially during visits when I sat across from her with a plastic window between us. I told my curious coach that I missed countless game and practices because I was ill; I eventually quit. My loving bus driver, Mr. Fred, with a more intimidating raised-eye brow look, was more difficult to lie to; he knew something was up. I always sat in the seat directly behind him so I could ask him about all the places he visited as a veteran, but on many bus rides I preferred to look out the window instead of listening to tales about foreign countries. “*What’s wrong, child?*” He only asked me that once and I froze up with teary eyes. After that, he never asked again, just kept telling me stories, even if I wasn’t listening. Mr. Fred would look through his rearview mirror and occasionally say, “*just hang on there, you’ll be okay. If not today, then tomorrow.*”

The Project

From my sessions, with the Youth With Parents in Prison (YWPIP) project, I learned that many of the students had an adult in their life, like, Mr. Fred, who were in one or way or another supportive and helped them ‘stay strong.’ However, for many, it was the first time that they were in a supportive environment with people similar in age and who shared their experience. Besides, my past experience of having an incarcerated parent, the idea of having an arts-based environment just for kids who have parents in prison was one of the main reasons I was drawn to the project. Since March 2010, in Hartford, Connecticut, I began as a research assistant for the main organization leading the program, the Arts Performance Project (APP) in aim of documenting the program and collaborating with the local policy research group. In addition to AAP, this three-year collaborative, multi-site project also includes a local social work agency for families impacted by incarceration, a local policy research group, CT Department of Correction, two Hartford public schools, a church and a local arts venue who both shared their space for the program. YWPIP combines APP art methods with social work in “bring more voice, visibility, and support” to children with incarcerated parents (APP, December 2010).

In Spring 2010 there were weekly sessions taking place in three various sites: two, in schools during school hours, at Greater Technical High School (GTHS) and Smith Elementary School, and the other, an after-school session at St. Mary’s Parish (St. MP). In the case of the two schools, the kids were selected and invited to the program by the social worker at each school; whereas, the kids at St. Mary’s Parish were selected and given transportation by the social service agency working in the project. From March to June, I attended sessions at GTHS and St. MP as a participant-observer. In GTHS session, depending on the week, had approximately 7 to 10 high school students, 4 college students working as teaching assistants (including myself), 3 teaching artists, and the school social worker. At St.MP, there were 13 to

15 students, depending on the week, ranging from ages 7 to 19 years old, 5 teaching artists, 3 college students working as teaching assistants, and 2 social workers from the agency.

With the group at GTHS, I was involved with the activities and the creation of their art piece, “Our Words”, a spoken-word style CD sharing their stories; however, in the St. MP group, I was more removed from the activities, taking observing and taking field notes, and mostly interacting with the kids during snack time or in focus lead by the policy research investigators. Unlike the GTHS, the elementary school and the group at St. MP did not record a CD, instead they presented their artwork and movement-based pieces at an intimate “sharing” inviting school friends, family, school staff, and YWPIP collaborators.

During the beginning of summer, all the students were invited to Center for Community Arts, the local arts venue collaborating in the project, to participate in a week-long camp session at, which included creating a performance to then show at the end of the week to a larger audience from the community. The camp involved three students from the GTHS sessions to work as assistants (Anthony, Yashira and Robbie, who I later discuss), 8 students from St. MP, 2 new students who did not participate in the previous phase in the Spring, 5 teaching artists, two social workers, 3 college students as assistants, and myself as observer. The performance, “The Story of the Broken Bridge”, was based on a fictional story of a group of kids whose parents were in prison and were on a journey to mend the ‘broken bridge’ in their life. Many kids wrote, included, and performed their own testimonies into the Story, others helped in song-making, and all participated in learning the movement for the performance.

I had the great honor of watching them perform, of seeing the heartfelt reactions from friends and family, and of watching audience members unfamiliar with the kids, become

engaged. The weekend after the performance, I was also part of a special weekend program at the women's correctional facility that was using the same arts-based methods in bringing together incarcerated mothers with their children and families. Only two participants, a pair of siblings, from YWPIP program were able to attend because their mother was at that prison and a client of the social work agency.

During this two-day event, I stayed at a retreat facility with families who visiting their mothers/daughters/sisters/aunts and participated with them in arts activities at the prison; I, along with some the college students, social workers, and collaborators, played the role of 'surrogate child' for a mother whose children were unable to the weekend, but who still wanted to partake in the event. This weekend, although not included in my research, provided a greater and critical scope of the challenges that youth with parents in prisons experience and the experience that mothers have behind bars, as I was interacting with parents, caregivers, and children within a correctional institution.

This past fall I continued with monthly sessions at St. MP, involving both new and past participants and continued to help as a research assistant. I decided that for my senior seminar project, I wanted to investigate the program from a different angle, that had me further engage with at-risk literature and prison-industrial complex literature and it how shapes the identities of the students participating in the program. Therefore, in agreement with APP and my advisor, I focused on the transcripts from the "Our Words" CD and "The Story of the Broken Bridge", interviews with APP's executive director and leading teaching artist, and a case study interview with the three of GTHS students who participated in the performance.

My research question eventually became "*What perspectives of 'at-risk' youth are presented by students participating in an arts-based program for children who have*

incarcerated parents?” Originally, my question at the beginning of the project, was, “*What perspectives of ‘at-risk’ youth emerge from students participating in an arts-based program for children who have incarcerated parents?*” The changes were made in order to add more clarity to what aspect of the program I wanted to investigate. The original question gave the impression that I was investigating connections to ‘at-risk’ from the perspective of the program itself, not necessarily perspectives that emerged from the students’ writings, which I primarily focus on for this paper.

I aim *not to* write about the effectiveness of the program or specifically of the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. Instead, through an analysis of their writings and experience in the program, I aim to present the program as an alternative approach that allows for both a space and vehicle for students to develop their testimonies, their identities, create a sense of community and raise awareness of their shared experience to a sometimes judgmental public eye. Furthermore, I frame the students’ identity-making processes within the scope of two discourses that I explicitly or implicitly present in their writings or interactions with the program: at-risk industry and the prison-industrial complex.

Thus, I start, by providing a brief review of literature from both of these discourses, a review of literature concerning children with incarcerated parents, and arts-programming for ‘at-risk’ populations. Then, I proceed, to discuss at these larger theoretical concepts operate in shaping the identity and public perception of a student with a parent in prison. From there, I shared my data analysis of the prominent themes in relation to these discourses I found in YWPIP, by primarily focusing on writings, field notes, and interviews. Lastly, I conclude with implications that I believe the students and the program suggest for policy-making, education, and arts-based work with youth *placed* at-risk.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At-Risk Students in a Nation Still At-Risk

In 1983, the famous report, *A Nation at Risk*, published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, placed the term “at-risk” in the forefront of education policy. The report’s main objective was to warn Americans of our low academic achievement in the midst of (perceived) economic and social danger in an increasingly globalized world. As a result, a national sense of urgency and need to maintain America’s global, intellectual power surfaced throughout our education system. This report, considered by education historian, Diane Ravitch, is “the most important education reform document of the 20th century” because it not only furthered standardized testing but it also greatly shaped the discourse and practices affecting low- income, urban students of color.

A Nation at Risk identified urban, minority youth as the most “at-risk,” or susceptible, to experience “academic failure, disciplinary and truancy problems, drug addictions,” and even “teen pregnancies” (Slavin, R. & Madden, N. 1989; Toppo 2008). Nearly 30 years later, the “at-risk” discourse continues to address the same youth population with additional risk factors, ranging from low parental involvement, inadequate nutrition, attention-deficit disorder, and gang violence. Perhaps the significant difference between the discourse and approaches then and to those in contemporary society is that we now have an even longer list of solutions. Social services have advanced, programs, interventions, and practices have developed from a variety of disciplines and fields aiming to address the needs of low-income, urban students placed at-risk.

Ultimately, these varied approaches- evident in social work, education, community psychology, and broader public policy- have made “risk” into the “world’s biggest industry;” enmeshing the terms ‘youth’ and ‘at-risk;’ and overall, causing the “problematization of youth,” specifically in regards to youth of color (Adams 1997, 2005; Beck 1992, 2005; Kelly 2001, 2006). This industry extends to both the public and private spheres as its negative discourse and depiction of youth placed at-risk disseminates across various programs and mediums. For instance, the ‘at-risk’ phenomena has made the ‘closing of the achievement gap’ a critical and urgent issue, as the failing test scores and low levels of education correspond with low-income students of color, mostly residing in urban communities. So, then schools, especially charter schools, have become the institutional site to ‘save’ youth placed at-risk by social and system inequalities.

However, many programs, like the Harlem Children’s Zone and the Obama’s Promise Neighborhood initiatives, now advocate that an education that provides ‘real results’ is not enough in serving the “at-risk’ child of color (Tough, 2006). Thus, rote learning that teaches students to pass the test is now supplemented with a curriculum and school culture rich in ‘moral and character education’ and a sense of competition; extended school days and years to ‘catch them up’ to their whiter, wealthier and high-scoring counterparts; afterschool initiatives to ‘keep them off the street’ and ‘away from non-educational environments’ like their homes and neighborhoods; parenting programs that teach low-income families of color ‘successful’ child-rearing practices (coming from whiter, middle class culture); and community-wide health interventions that aim to prevent youth from or treat youth of at-risk of diabetes, obesity, asthma and heart disease-all ‘at-risk’ medical conditions that are prominent in low-income, students of color populations.

In essence, the majority of the programs, despite their good intentions and efforts at social change, in many ways perpetuate a negative perception of low-income youth of color by broadly applying the label of “at-risk.” In other words, similarly to the way that ‘at-risk’ has enmeshed with ‘youth’, terms like ‘academic failure’, ‘poor health’, ‘dysfunctional homes’, ‘low parental involvement’, and ‘gang violence’ are enmeshed with ‘students of color; or ‘urban or inner-city youth’ or minority students.

At-Risk, Inner-City, Other Labels

We cannot saddle these babies at kindergarten with this label and expect them to proudly wear it for the next 13 years, and think, ‘Well, gee, I don't know why they aren't doing good.’ - Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2006 speech

Despite the growing trend in policy, education, and the overall industry of serving students of color placed at-risk by social inequalities, many educational researchers have critiqued the prominent “at-risk” label, which now has similar labels of “inner city,” “disadvantaged,” and “underserved.” They argue that the use of ‘at-risk,’ as opposed to ‘placed at-risk’, strategically blames the individual, in this case the low-income student of color, for his or her social conditions. Thus, as Ladson-Billings suggests, the continual and institutional use of the label then negatively impacts, almost in self-fulfilling manner, a student’s academic “success” and or “failure” (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Hosang, 2006).

Within the scope of this research, scholars also provide a critical view of the general praxis, or the prominent ‘at-risk’ models (as those previously described), which are often used to intervene in and out the classroom to work with youth of color in high-poverty cities.

The majority of the programs and or interventions are not only seemingly scripted-planning the intervention from birth to a successful college graduation- but they greatly rely on the generalization that *all* low income, urban youth of color and their families have

‘dysfunctional’ and ‘negative’ behaviors and cultural practices. Therefore, in their solutions requires two key attributes: one, a generalizability in order to be replicated in all impoverished urban areas; and two, negative and dysfunctional behaviors need to be replaced with more disciplined and structured ways of life. These ‘ways of life’ or culture, intentionally resemble white, upper- middle class practices and lifestyles, as they are ones that guarantee success and the ones that schools have historically been modeled after and serve (Valencia & Solorzano, 2005; Phillips, 1972).

Moreover, scholars within this body of research suggest that ‘at-risk’, as a cultural-construct, has set up a false distinction between a supposed problematic minority (of low-income and of color) versus a ‘normal’ (whiter, wealthier) majority. Thus, the dominant conceptualization of ‘at-risk youth’ draws unequal attention to what is wrong with *these* kids, *their* families, and *their* neighborhoods, rather than what may be wrong with the institutions that serve them (Hosang, 2006; Valencia, & Solorzano, 2004; McDermott, 1987). In other words, these researchers emphasize how a historical trend of deficit-view thinking continues to shape not only the marginalization of low-income, students of color but also frames their public perception as ‘at-risk’ youth, without a critical discussion of their cultural strengths, resources and daily functional practices that enable survival and success for some. Majority of those working in social services, policy-making and education, rarely ask questions like, “*How do they survive despite the odds? What does success or failure mean to them? Do they identify or react to ‘at-risk’ discourses?*”

Ultimately, by bringing some of the questions to the greater discussion on children placed at-risk, they not only raise awareness of the implications of the labels but underscore the sociopolitical and historical context behind the ‘at-risk’ term. Researchers within the anthropology of education, continue to remind the various fields within the

“at-risk industry” of the term’s earlier versions from the 20th century, which were “culturally disadvantaged,” and “culturally deprived” (Valencia, & Solorzano, 2004) and how their implicit meanings, understandings and overall negative depiction of low-income minority youth are powerful and still at work in education, social work, policy-making, and society’s common sense. Overall, through mostly ethnographic studies, these researchers continue to struggle in shifting the ‘at-risk’ discourse by advocating and presenting youth as “*placed* at-risk,” not simply, “at-risk youth.”

On the other hand, there is still a need for more research and praxis of debunking the essentialization of the “at-risk” student by demonstrating that deficit-thinking models do not adequately inform social change, like the policies, social interventions and programs that are designed to help youth placed-at risk. Ultimately, the ‘right’ research frames the risk-factors as structural deficits not as cultural, individual factors of a particular already marginalized population. Some current popular research models, like participatory-action research models, not only place youth within the ‘bigger picture’ in researching social inequalities, but in the forefront of the research process. These models highlight the agency and critical consciousness of youth while conducting community-based research in order to inform or create grass-roots social change. (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Hosang, 2006; Schensul 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). These participatory research models allow youth to engage in challenging the public perceptions of their varied realities and complicating the generalization that society has of their identity.

Parents placed in cells, Youth placed at-risk.

Within the at-risk literature, significant amount of research has focused on the societal impact of incarceration by illuminating on the ‘prison industrial complex’ and the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (Davis 1999; Bronstein 2009). More and more, researchers are focusing on the growing population of young inmates or youth impacted by incarceration (Travis 2005; Bearse 2008; Bilchik 2001). Despite the increasing numbers of this ‘at-risk’ population, some researchers have described youth with incarcerated parents as a “hidden and invisible population” due to the difficulty in data collection from families caused by fear and or mistrust of social services (Hairston 2007; San Francisco 2003). However, the need for research is critical as more than 1.7 million children have a parent in prison or jail and approximately half of these children are under the age of ten (NRCCFI 2007).

Moreover, since 1990 the number of female prisoners increased by nearly 50%; three quarters of those incarcerated women are mothers, and two-thirds have children under age 18 (Hairston 2007). Although the Texas Department of Criminal Justice reported in 2008 that there is a 70% chance of children with parents in prison becoming incarcerated themselves, this skeptical statistic and its methods have not been validated by other scholars, despite its common reproduction in other policy brief and other studies (Mosely, 2008).

Overall, current research does not tend to address students with incarcerated parents and their relationship to schooling. On the contrary, emerging data and research collected by educational researchers working with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated youth (many of whom had parents or family members in prison) are contributing significantly to the at-risk literature by developing a youth “voice” and narrative that is uncommon in the broader discourse on incarceration (Winn, 2010; Sharma, 2010). Although youth behind bars are finding a ‘voice of *resistance and resilience*’ within the greater discussion, there is still a need for students with

incarcerated parents—who are often identified with a series of at-risk factors themselves—to have a similar platform based on resistance and resilience, not deficit-thinking, from which to critically engage with their own identities, their peers, social institutions, and the broader public (Arditti, 2005; Smith, 2003).

The arts placing at-risk voices front and center

In spite of negative public perceptions of those who commit crime, lack of understanding of the racial dynamics of our justice system, and an overall dismissal of the possible rehabilitative nature of prisons, many organizations focus on working with inmates both in and out of prison to provide greater awareness of those impacted by incarceration and the need for a supportive reentry of men and women into greater society (Craig, 2006; Clopton, 2008). In few of these organizations, arts-based programming in prisons are popular and seemingly effective, as they strengthen bonds between cell blocks and communities through dialogue and artistic expression; provide a platform for voices from ‘the inside’ to share their stories; provide context for their stories that shed light on how institutions and systemic forces helped shape them into ‘at-risk persons’ and inmates (Davis 1999; Burnstein 2009; Winn 2010.)

Outside of prison, there is a growing trend of arts-based programming for at-risk youth using elements of theatre, visual art, and consciousness-raising, such as spoken word, plays, or mural projects (Fisher 2005; Green, 2010; Winn, 2010; Hosang 2006). However, research did not suggest or identify arts-based projects or organizations that are specifically working with students who have parents in jail. Many students who have an incarcerated parent are officially or non-officially labeled as “at-risk” by their schools and communities. In 2003, a Newsweek article identified children with incarcerated parents as the ‘most at-risk of at-risk youth.’ Within this article, or the studies that went on to reproduce the statement, did not critically address the

continual use of and potential impact of the label, as it may negatively affect a student's self-esteem, relationship to schooling and other social ties (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Articles about children with incarcerated parents only identified a low self-esteem and possible weak social and institutional relationships as primarily due to 'having a parent in prison. They did not investigate or address the ways in which youth with parents in prison are generalized, misrepresented by 'at-risk' research and by the discourses surrounding schools and prisons, and how these greater practices may also negatively impact their development and success. Thus, scholars suggests that arts-based programming for marginalized students may be transformative in creating healthy, safe spaces of consciousness-raising and multiple-identity formation that many institutions like schools and prisons do not encourage (Fisher 2005; Freire 1970; Hosang 2006; Winn 2010).

Furthermore, arts within a social change context challenge deficit-view paradigms and its negative stereotypes that shape 'at-risk' talks; counter the hegemonic spaces and voices that (re)produce them; and provide alternative perspectives in limited, unhopeful conversation on low-income, urban youth of color. Specifically for students with incarcerated parents, this type of alternative programming, that does not evaluate them by risk-factors, standardized test scores, or dismisses their agency or the differences in their common experiences, can potentially identify and address the needs of students, who may be disengaged with social services and schools.

Moreover, arts-based programming may not only paint a better portrait of the experiences of students with incarcerated parents, but they also show promise in developing the political and social consciousness of the students as they negotiate their identities with themselves and with others. Daniel Hosang, one prominent scholar in youth resistance and activism indicates that *"perceptions of young people are key in shaping local policy. When young people can reframe*

the perceptions and issues that they organize around, there is a greater likelihood of success” (Hosand, 2006). In addition, students within these spaces resist, challenge and raise awareness of the ways in which schools (and prisons) as institutions do not address their complex, lived realities and identities through dialogue and artistic mediums. By having artists, educators and scholars connect this approach and process to social change, then hopefully more youth, their insight and experiences can be included in the important discussions of policy and education that shape their futures.

ONE AGAINST TWO: A CLOSER LOOK AT YWPIP AND THE DISCOURSES AROUND THEM

Prison Industrial Complex: “Our current [justice] system has made ‘black male’ synonymous with criminal.” - *Angela Davis*

YWPIP: “Other people judge you when they hear that you have a parent in prison. They think that you’re going to be just like them.”

-Lyrics from ‘Statistics Forget’ from “Our Words”, YWPIP 2010

At-Risk Industry: Bill Cosby insisted it was ‘lower economic people who were ‘holding up their end in this deal.’ Rehearsing the profile of black pathology in its most venomous dimensions, Cosby railed against young people ‘with names like Shaniqua, Taliqua, and Mohammed and all that crazy, and all of them are in jail’ and ‘those standing on the corner [who] can’t speak English. Of today’s black youth...50% are drop out, the rest of them are in prison.’

-*Black Commentator, 2004*

Social workers and researchers have identified the stigma, or sense of shame, of having a parent in prison as the prominent explanation of why it is difficult for children with incarcerated parents to talk about their feelings and or their experience (Barry 1985; Hairston 2007; Bearse 2008; Clopton 2008; Schafler 2009). The sense of shame is closely tied to the negative public perception that describes prisons as punishing sites for “criminals” or those strayed members of society (Davis 2003). Angela Davis, an anti-prison activist and a leading scholar in the ‘prison industrial complex’ argues that prisons are not only designed to punish, but to “break people” into dehumanized beings once they are behind bars, as they are stripped of their rights and social

ties. In this way, people on the outside view inmates as an isolated subclass in society (Davis 2003). Thus, prison, as an institution, creates and reproduces an ‘other’-based identity against the normative ‘non-criminal’ majority.

Like many scholars and activists, who advocate for the rehabilitative approach in prisons, Davis is also critical of the disproportional racial and gender make-up of prisons. According to the Department of Justice there are over 2.2 million Americans in jail, more than in any other country; about 990,000 of them are African American (2001). Additionally these statistics also document that one in six black men had been incarcerated as of 2001 and if current trends continue, one in three black men will be in prison. Moreover, Connecticut, is one of five states that constitutes the highest “black-to-white ratio” in prisons.

In Hartford, Connecticut, the home of the YWPIP arts program, and recent site of discussion on policies and social services programs with students who have parents in prison, is estimated to have anywhere between “4,500 to 6,000” children with an incarcerated parent (Gottlieb, The Hartford Courant, 2006). Statistics also reflect that although African-American men comprise most of the prison population, there is an increase in Latino men and women of color inmates, whose rates of incarceration are significantly higher than those of white males and females sentenced to prison.

A recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation points out that since 1990, the number of female prisoners increased by nearly 50%; three quarters of incarcerated women are mothers, and two-thirds have children under age 18. A fact sheet published by the National Resource Center for Children of the Incarcerated (NRCC) in 2007, states that more than 1.7 million children have a parent in prison or jail and approximately half of these children are under the age of ten. Furthermore, nearly 10 million children have a parent who is or has been under some

form of criminal justice supervision. Thus, tied to the stigma and sense of shame that many youth of color who have a parent in prison may experience is a close reality that (numerically) reflects prisons as sites for people of color. However, it is not just statistics that perpetuate this stigma; it is the greater discourse around incarceration that relies on negative perceptions and assumptions about people in prisons.

Prominent CNN reporter, Anderson Cooper, aimed in his 2007 special news series on incarceration in the United States to add a “human face” to these statistics; he shares that even he “had no idea” or even expected that the unfolding story behind these statistics would focus on mothers and children impacted by the prison system. Although he and countless others, work towards providing a richer, humanizing portrait of those who are in cell blocks and the system that works to keep them there, much of our understanding and perceptions of prisons comes from a more convincing medium: pop culture.

For example, educational researcher writing on the school-to-prison pipeline, Maisha Winn, notes that popular films, like *The Dark Knight (2008)*, have scenes depicting the “tenuous relationship between the incarcerated and those who have limited, if any, knowledge about the men, women, and children who are behind bars” (Winn 2010). In many ways, the popular image of someone in prison is a person of color, of a low socio-economic urban community, committing a violent or drug related crime, and being an overall ‘hardened criminal.’ Overall, according to Angela Davis, the implication of this image has made ‘black’ or ‘latino’ male synonymous with ‘criminal.’

Therefore, to even talk about inmates as mothers, fathers, or mention their young sons and daughters, would not only humanize and divert from the ‘criminal’ stereotype but in many ways, it might have the public questioning too much by making the issue of incarceration more

obscure for tax-payers. *What happened before the crime? Is it their fault? Is it partly society's fault? Were the circumstances of the crime outside of their control? How do prisons keep maintain a 'revolving door'?*

What I found in my research is that both the predominant discourse of criminality and the predominant discourse of “at-risk” youth, share several salient features. The three most significant similarities between the functioning of these two discourses are: that they individualize blame; that, through the individualizing of blame, they largely ignore the workings of structural inequalities; and that, through re-locating larger structural inequalities into the individual (or group) identity, they both rely upon and continue to reproduce highly generalized perceptions of people of color. Students of incarcerated parents, however, are caught between these two discourses, and are therefore subject to a redoubling of the influence of these features upon their identities. Essentially, both the discourses blame them, stigmatize them, and then in order to help them, label them, as ‘at-risk’ and use popular approaches that rely on antiquated, debunked pathologies and generalizations of low-income youth of color. So then once a student of color has a parent in prison they ultimately, are caught between two very real, not so theoretical discourses of labels or tensions of politically correct, language, but of policies and programs that dictate their futures for them.”

As such, if the “at-risk industry” hopes to be a vehicle through which we might address the structural inequalities at work in these individual’s lives, then increased awareness and precaution are required, as to not perpetuate one discourse, through unwittingly reinforcing its mechanisms of operation by participating in the other.

DATA ANALYSIS: THEMES PRESENTED BY STUDENTS FROM YWPIP

For the following sections, I will be examining interviews, field notes, and CWPIP transcripts of the two main products in the project: “Our Words,” a recorded, spoken-word style,

CD by the Greater Technical High School (GTHS) participants and the transcript of the culminating performance, “The Story of the Broken Bridge,” that involved participants from St. Mary’s Parish (St. MP) and three GTHS participants. I will begin by examining some of the stories, or testimonies, and how they both support challenge the research on children with incarcerated parents. Then, in these findings I will also discuss how the space and project allowed participants to directly and indirectly challenge the ‘at-risk’ identity associated with having a parent in prison through art-making. Lastly, I will provide an analysis, of why this space and its alternative approach to identity-making have promising implications of social change for youth of color who have incarcerated parents.

Saying and Not Saying ‘I have a parent in prison’

I think that especially with kids who have parents in prison where it’s all a secret, it’s a burden, and it isn’t something that they talk about, is just getting them to talk about it, to admit... Of course, they already have admitted it, by stepping into the room. So, then beyond that, to then be able to say it, and then say something about it, is really difficult. To then go even further to talk about a story that kind of reflects... is hard and it takes time. (Kerri Interview, 11/2010)

In my first session with the kids at St. Mary’s Parish, almost six months ago, I still remember the silence that occurred after Kerri, the leading teaching artist, explained what everyone in the room had in common: a parent in prison. The 12 kids, who enjoyed the informality of the snack session and were laughing throughout the “warm up” activity, became slightly removed and quiet once *it* was said out loud. In a recent interview, Kerri reflected on those first sessions and explained that just by “walking into the room, the kids have already admitted *it*”- ‘it’ being the secret of having a parent in prison. However, the goal within those initial sessions was to not only have the “kids say it,” but then, “to say something about it” and to hopefully share their thoughts with others. In that first session, after Kerri spoke, Julie, a

teaching artist whose mother at the time was in prison, shared her experiences working with the dance company who helped reconnect her and her mother. The majority of the kids were attentive to Julie's story; some made eye contact with her, others listened, few continued to stare at the floor.

During Julie's brief talk, Malik, a 7 year old boy with a father in prison, shyly asked her, "*Do you know who I want to see?*" When both Kerri and Julie asked, 'who?' he covered his face uncomfortably, smiled and whispered "*everyone.*" When Malik's question was posed to the larger group, no one answered. It seemed as though the room had anticipated Malik's response to be 'my parent.' Shortly after, Julie shared, "*I would like to see my mom.*" Everyone in the group looked up and smiled, either to themselves or someone next to them. At that point, it seemed like the general sentiment in the room conveyed that the hardest part of the introduction was over.

Within this initial meeting, two important qualities to the group were established: the first being that all the participants knew why they were, and the second, that within this space, it was okay to talk and *not* talk about it. In talking about it, in sharing their story, their *testimonio*, as scholars, Nunez-Janes and Robledo describe, a social and individual healing can emerge from 'bearing witness' to someone's story (Nunez-Janes & Robledo, 2009). What is also embedded in the act of listening to and telling a personal testimony is that as a group, then critical counter-narratives/stories are presented and given voice, after dominant discourses have silenced, ignored, and marginalized them (Nunez-Janes & Robledo, 2009). Testimonio, as I will later discuss, also played a role in developing a sense of community in the group after the summer performance of "The Story of the Broken Bridge."

The silent tension from this early session, made apparent the difficulty for this mostly elementary and middle school aged group, to talk about their experience. Therefore, it was

important that sessions for this group used other mediums besides discussion, in which participants ‘played’ with their ideas, thoughts, and feelings related to having a parent in prison through song, dance, and movement. In the first few sessions, the kids demonstrated a greater ease of engaging with the topic through these mediums, like drawing murals about prisons or engaging with a fictional story whose characters shared the same experience. Malik, in the third session at the church, was the first participant to share with the group why it was perhaps easier to draw about prison and the loved one there, as opposed to talking about those thoughts in public:

It’s hard because it gets in your head and then you forget what you’re going to say. And then it comes into your dreams and then your nightmares. In the hospital they were trying to get the memory out of my head with a shot of medicine. But they couldn’t because there was too much knowledge. (Field Notes, 4/20/2010)

Through tears, pauses for catching his breath, and a persistence to articulate his answer, Malik powerfully shared a part of his experience of having a parent in prison. After he spoke, the silence and discomfort emerged once again within the group who wiped tears off with shirt sleeves. It was not his particular story that resonated with many of his sad or quiet peers; it was the difficult emotions associated with thinking, talking, or not talking about their parent in jail.

If Malik’s conversation took place in a clinical setting, a social worker or psychologist might respond by asking Malik for an elaboration of ‘it gets in your head’, or more about his father, or the details of the memory at the hospital. However, in this particular setting, the focus was not on the unsaid details of Malik’s particular situation. Instead, the emphasis was on the sharing of his story, his *testimonio*, with others, the ‘bearing witness’ of others, and how they responded, even without words. No one in the group asked for details, or even disclosed some of their answers to ‘why is it difficult to talk about their parent?’.

On the other hand, they didn't really need to respond. Through their tears, attentiveness to Malik, and even the pat on the back of the person sitting nearby that I observed, there was this unspoken agreement within the group that it just was really hard to talk about *it*. Some of the reasons why it was or it wasn't difficult to talk about would emerge in later stories. Throughout the program, the group never questioned or judged someone's ease or difficulty in talking about their experience; it was just accepted.

Malik's early sharing was a pivotal moment for the group; it established that although it was difficult to talk about one's story, that one could be communicative about through other mediums, to a degree that felt comfortable and safe. Although there was no direct mention of 'stigma' or 'shame' in Malik's testimony and the group's response, it was clear that the child felt enough trust with the group to share his story, without the fear of being stigmatized, in the way that he was in school (we later learned throughout the program from his social worker that he was teased for having a father in prison). This sharing marked a sense not only a sense of trust, but safety, and community as well that would further develop within the group.

"Things are different for me"- Learning the varied experiences of YWPIP

In the same way that it was difficult for the kids at St. MP to break the silence, or to talk about the elephant in the room, it was also hard for the 8 high school students at GTHS. Despite the difficulty in talking throughout that first session, this group of older YWPIP students made clear from the outset that even though they shared a common experience; what they said and thought about, how they said, and to whom they discussed their story was different. More importantly, those differences mattered in their resistance and critical insight about statistics and stereotypes that labeled them and said 'who they were.'

In the first session, three teaching artists, three college students working as teaching assistants, the school social worker, and I attended. Unlike St. MP, I participated in all of the activities, discussions, and took little to no notes during the sessions. Upon entering the room, the majority of the students, who recognized each other from either class or passing in the hallway, didn't formally know that they shared a common experience.

After introductions and the explanation of why everyone was in the room, Kerri, asked for any volunteers willing to share their initial thoughts. No one responded; most students seemed nervous as they looked around the room, to see if someone would respond. After an awkward silence, Kerri suggested an alternative question to the group: to rate from a 1 to 10 scale (ten being almost impossible to talk about and one being generally easy) their difficulty in talking about having a parent in prison. This second approach, perhaps less intimidating, generated a greater response, in which most students answers were in the 8 to 10 range, some in the 5 to 7, and few said 2 or 3.

Following that scale, some participants agreed that 'breaking up into smaller groups' would be better or 'easier' to talk in, so we did so accordingly. The groups consisted of a teaching artist, assistant, two high schoolers, and a writing prompt to start the conversation. I worked with Rebecca, a first year student and Damian, a sophomore, who, despite their general uneasiness of talking about the topic, shared more than I had expected to with complete strangers.

Within these brief interactions, the other college student and I listened to what they had to say, asked few questions, and responded to their informal questions about us. Damian mentioned several times how he didn't like talking about *it* too much, but was also, 'getting used to' the fact his mom was in and out of prison. When I asked what kept him focused, he answered sports,

working, and “staying strong for his little brother.” Rebecca didn’t share as much and was hesitant at times, but would occasionally respond to Damian’s story by saying how ‘things’ or her specific situation were different or similar. Most of Rebecca’s comments referred to the fact that her father was coming out of jail and that she just didn’t like to share her business.

Once everyone was talking in their respective groups, the session went by quickly. I remember some students were just looking at the clock, waiting for the bell to ring. Conversely, I remember looking around at some students who were still talking, not caring how many minutes were left in the period. Afterwards, the teaching artists and assistants briefly commented on not only the variation in their willingness to talk about their experience, but also the variation in their experiences.

The following are some samples from YWPIP writing that describes their experiences:

“I wish my Dad could have watched the basketball games he missed out on. Out of all the years I’ve played basketball, he was only around for two or three seasons. Him being there with me at those games would have made it way better. I miss when I’d wake up late for the games and he’d drive real fast for me to get there on time.”

“He was arrested in front of me – I’ll never forget that.”

“I was young when my Dad went to prison and I didn’t understand. When I started understanding, we still were always in contact. And my Mom made sure that we got what we wanted and needed so there really was no difference. The only real difference was that he was not there physically. But he was in the sense that my Mom continued on what he started.”

“Most times as a child, growing up without a parent becomes an obsession. I was just 5 and Daddy wasn’t there. I was Daddy’s little girl and that was a hard fall. Growing up it became hard to express myself. Crying became my best friend and it would lead to anger. Nowadays, people think I’m happy because I smile but I’m really not. I depend on myself and don’t like to open up to others because I’m afraid of being hurt or let down.”

“I’m alone. I sit and have no choice but to think. I cry, wishing that daddy was by my side. I want the hurt to go away. I want to feel the rush. ..the rush....As the

blade cuts my arm and the blood seeps through, I feel it. I can't explain this feeling, but for the moment it feels good. As the blood comes out, I feel the pain/anger leave my side. This is my way of feeling better. People may not agree...but this is me... well, the old me."

"I wasn't sleeping, didn't want to go to school, eating only sometimes,-- I was just generally stressing."

"I always feel like I can never get anything I want. Like if I go to the mall and I see all my friends buying stuff they like-- it makes me feel like a window shopper. It's hard to wear the same stuff always—the same hairstyle—nothing different, nothing new. My Mom is coming home soon—I think she is going to have to step up."

"It's hard when people talk about their parents—I can't be involved—like my Mom did this or bought me that --because mine are not there."

"I get upset when people talk about how they can't stand their parents. It's hard to hear them complain. It almost feels like they're taking advantage. I wish everyday that I could have a parent around."

"I raised myself. None of my family members wanted to take me in, no one cared about me, so I just did it, did what I had to do. I never had a dad to teach me right from wrong, Never had a mom to tuck me in at night, I only had the streets. I blamed my parents for all the things that I went through. I felt that nobody cared about me so why should I care? What did I do to deserve a life like mine? I made a lot of bad choices when I was mad that I am not proud of-- that sometimes I wish I could take back. I changed in 8th grade when a friend died. It was hard, a wake up call. Now, if I help you out I'll be happy about myself--I am trying to change how I am. I used to not care about anything."

Some students currently had mothers, or fathers, or both in jail; some had parents released from jail; others had parents that were recently admitted; and others had parents expected to come out soon. They had or were currently experiencing stable and unstable home life situations; some loved school, while others didn't; some said they cared about school, others said they didn't; some said school (staff, teachers and other students) sometimes just didn't understand; some were academically 'on-track' others had 'fallen behind'. There were some students who had contact with parents, while others didn't; most had fathers in prisons; most hinted that crimes were related to drugs or violence. A few students had found ways to cope and

others were still looking; some students identified friends and families as the main providers of support, but hardly mentioned social service providers.

Some described prison as ‘runnin in the(ir) family’ and others said it was their parent’s first time; all had heard about statistics that suggested ‘they, too would end up jail’ and all had an opinion on the issue. All of the students were either African-American or Latino, mostly coming from low-income neighborhoods throughout the city. These qualities highlight that there isn’t ‘one story’ or general representation of a student who has a parent in prison, despite the popular trend of depicting one through the ‘at-risk’ literature focusing on this youth population. The fact, that these students initially shared these details with in the first few sessions, suggests that they both shared and differed in the normative representation of an ‘at-risk student with a parent in prison’, even though the differences, such as doing well in school, over-coming the stigma and shame, and the strong and weak relationships with their parents and families are not given much attention in the literature.

In consequent sessions, students who kept attending and even new ones who joined the group, engaged in this exchange of stories, by commenting, reflecting, and responding through small group and large group discussions and writing. Despite, some people missing the session or new faces appearing, everyone in the group had established a sacred rule: “what was said in the room, stays in the room.” In the following session, one participant, Tewan, commented how he had made eye contact, in passing, with another student that he had met for the first time in the group. When asked how it made him feel, he briefly responded, “felt good.”

Creating a Sense of Community:

Similar to the St. MP group, GTHS students within the first few sessions the students established both a sense of community and safe, communal space of community. However, GTHS students established a sense of trust and space within a classroom, during school hours, which is typically viewed as a non-safe place for 'at-risk youth.' Doing programming similar to the YWPIP project in schools were considered by some researchers as 'unsafe' (CCSU Conference on Children of the Incarcerated, Spring 2011). According to some researchers, schools are not general sites in which students should have or have these personal conversations, nor are schools responsible for the home life of the student, thus schools are just inappropriate sites for programming of this nature. The main concern, that deemed 'unsafe' warned that unforeseen student tensions and problems could arise, if therapists or specialists were not there to intervene.

Despite, knowing and personally hearing some of these opinions, Kerri, as the leading teaching artist, who had successfully worked in 'unsafe' zones like prisons and alternative high schools, insisted that these sessions could be possible with this traditionally unsafe space for youth placed at-risk. A theme that the program learned in its recent Fall session with the high schoolers, is that they appreciated the space and opportunity to come in talk about their experiences. Anthony, a second year participant and past assistant in the summer camp performance, shared that he liked the program last year because he 'got to miss class.' But this year, as students now no longer had a common study hall period in which to meet and had to ask for permission, student initiative to ask for permission and continuing to come was key in keep the group together and the space.

This fall, Anthony, in a session I attended was not only more outspoken than the summer or the spring, but he also took ownership in the group when he shared with new students: "*last*

year, I liked coming because I got to miss class. This year I want to be here. And whatever is said here, just so you know, stays here. It's good just to get it off your chest." What perhaps, indicated a greater sense of community throughout this program, was the performance itself, in which students spent less than week, creating movements, writing songs, writing their stories and rehearsing their parts.

The 3 GTHS students, Anthony, Yashira, and Robbie, played a significant role in encouraging some of the younger participants to write and perform their own *testimonio*. According to the high school students, they never had explicit conversations about their parents or their feelings with the younger kids; most of the conversations and interactions were based on video games, drumming, graffiti, or singing-(all talents and skills that high schoolers were able to demonstrate throughout the camp). The three students expressed similar sentiments of how it "felt good to help them feel better" and to "help them be strong"; a shared interest in the healing and witnessing of personal stories, are keys aspects of both the process and results *testimonio* that the GTHS experienced.

As an observer, I also saw how the many of the younger students began to partake in *testimonio*, either by being quite and attentive listeners, saying 'shh' to any students talking while others were reciting, and others by writing and sharing their own stories as well. During rehearsals when the high school students read some of their written pieces out loud, some of the younger female participants from St. MP, were to some degree influenced to write their own pieces as well. For example, in the Spring session at St. MP, Michelle and Deshae had done some writing, but both mostly used visual art and movement to express their ideas, feelings related to their stories.

The second day of the camp, DeShea, decided that she wanted to write her own story instead of working set design. And Michelle, who was a pretty quiet participant, asked Kerri if she could write and add a piece to the script the day before the performance. Both DeShea and Michelle wrote and bravely performed their own pieces, each with describing different details and emotions:

When I think about prison I imagine that my loved one doesn't have to be in prison and that everything is going to be all right. When I think of myself in the future I see me and my father close and making up the time we lost and I have to forgive him for the time we missed out on. - (partial selection of DeShea's piece)

Well I was young and my life just barely began. I always was thinking about my emotion and I was faking that I was happy. But really I was sad and also mad at my Dad. At first, I was confused and didn't know what to do. I was happy at one time and sad at the next. I just couldn't read my text. I moved away from my Dad. I was young and he was never there so I thought he didn't care. That made the rest of my life wrong and complicated. -Michelle

DeShea became nervous when performing her piece and ask one of the teaching artists to stand next to her and say some of her lines. Little by little, DeShea slowly performed her piece as she was holding the teaching artist's hand, talking through the parts she felt more comfortable in saying and asking the artist to read the more difficult lines. At one point, her nerves were noticed by Yashira, one of the high school students standing behind her, who then stood up and held DeShea's hand, so that she can confidently finish her piece.

Not only did DeShea get through all of her lines, but she surprisingly decided to add another line that she wanted to share with the audience: *"Sometimes people say things happen for a reason, but sometimes that's always not true."* According to Kerri, this was a pivotal moment not only because there was a sense of community within the group, that was displayed between this interaction, but also pivotal because DeShea was able to develop her piece from "I

have a parent in prison” to then be confident enough to “say something about it” or of the experience, as she alluded to her own thoughts on fate at the end of her piece.

VOICE, REPRESENTATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR YWPIP

“I am: Smart, Emotional, Outgoing, Responsible, Tired, Quiet, Loyal, Sensitive, Meticulous, Curious, Positive, Respectful, Insightful, Trustworthy, A leader, A good listener, A perfectionist, Confident, Exhausted, Cool, Nice, Loud, Friendly, In love, Grateful, Caring Courageous, And I had/I have a parent in prison.”-Lyrics “Our Words”

“I am not the fault for my parents to be in prison and I shouldn’t try to blame myself because it’s not my fault.”-St. MP participant, age 14

“I can stay strong whether or not my parents are in prison.” –St. MP participant, age 19

For many youth with incarcerated parents, their stories are either reduced, generalized, hidden beneath labels, or ignored and misrepresented by public perception, statistics and or a limited discussion of risk factors by two prominent discourses: the prison industrial complex and the ‘at-risk’ industry. In addressing the needs of low-income students of color who have incarcerated parents, the need for quantitative figures and research that identifies the ‘right’ program has in many ways, trumped the need to have a greater student voice within these larger discussions that shape the policies and the institutions that shape their identities and experiences.

Their stories are just or perhaps, more important than the numbers used to measure who they are, the scores they attain, and the numeric percentage that predetermines their fate as inmates. It has been that it is within their stories and the expression of them, that the program provides both a space and medium to develop their resistance in being labeled as they critically engage with those glossed over representations of ‘at-risk’ youth. More importantly, the program provides a platform on which students can use a variety of mediums to share their greater story as a group and their individual testimonies in aims of raising more awareness of who they actually are and how they want to be viewed in the world.

In terms of connecting this program to activist work with youth, I see this program as a stepping stone in a greater sociopolitical process. For many students, this program was the first time in which they were able to openly talk with others, similar in age, about their stories, their thoughts, fears and ideas. Additionally, one of the program's strengths is that is provided different experiences for the younger and older youth. It was extremely difficult for both groups to talk about it but both groups found ways to communicate through various modes of art that felt most comfortable and safe for them. With more time and continued participation, I believe that the high schoolers, with their dialogue and writing will continue to develop critical insights on how their experiences are situated in the larger scheme of youth politics.

Perhaps, as that point, the high schoolers will be influential in participating in advocacy reforms for children with incarcerated parents. However, the program and its participants are not at the point, yet; rather I view them participating in the initial steps of personal expression and from that, raising more visibility. If we are to continue making policies, designing schools, or running interventions to 'save youth' we need to not only significantly, shift how we discuss and overall imagine low-income youth of color in our daily lives but, we also need to have those policies and practices address the complexity and depth of who they are. Listen to what they say. Engage them in our discussions. And ultimately, let them paint a portrait of who they are would like to be, before we write them off with a standard script.

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"Statistics say we're gonna' go to jail. People automatically assume that."

*"They used to argue when I was younger that I was going to jail just like my Dad. You can't get mad-that environment is all you know-you just gotta get out. I know what I'm going to make myself better-I tell them that they're wrong."
-Lyrics from "Our Words" made by YWPIP participants, 2010)*