Standing Strong from the other side of the bars:

Examining an arts-based program for students with incarcerated parents

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MARCH 2010-HARTFORD-BASED ARTS PROGRAM
Two (of Three) sites:
- Church 13 kids (age-7 to 19)
- High School 10 Kids (age-15-18)
- (Middle School 10 Kids)

WORKED AS A RESEARCH ASSISTANT
- Participant Observer
- Case Study (of High Schoolers)
- Interviews

Spring 2010 Workshops, Summer Camp, Summer Weekly Prison visits, and Fall 2010 Workshop at The Church

DRAWING: WHAT IS PRISON? AGE 9
Children with Parents in Prison

- ‘Prison industrial complex’ and the ‘School-to-Prison Pipeline’ (Davis 1999; Bronstein 2009).
- But there is FEW research on children with incarcerated parents.
- Of 2.2 million inmates, approximately 1 million are African-American (Dept of Justice 2001).
- CT - 1 in 5 States: Highest ‘black-to-white’ ratio (Sentencing Project 2001).
- Since 1990 the number of female prisoners increased by nearly 50%; 3 out 4 women in prison are mothers, 2 out of 3 have children under the age 18 (Hairston 2007).
- More than 1.7 million children have a parent in prison or jail and half of these children are under the age of ten (NRCCFI 2007).

7 out of 10 children with incarcerated parents will end up in prison (Texas Dept. of Criminal Justice 2008).

“Hidden and invisible population” (Hairston 2007; San Francisco 2001)
Research Question:

What perspective of “at-risk” youth emerges from an arts-based program for students who have incarcerated parents?

Methods:

* Analysis of past field notes, transcripts of CD and performance, interviews, focus group and art work
* Continued as participant-observer (Fall 2010)
* Additional Interviews
Prison Industrial Complex

Men and women of color
Low income communities
Drug and violent related crimes
‘Revolving door’ of Prison

YWPIP

“At-risk” Industry

Academic failure
Poverty
Teenage Pregnancy
Truancy
Prison
Poor health
“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

“Our current system has made ‘black male’ synonymous with criminal.” – Angela Davis
In many ways, schools (and prisons) as institutions, do not address the complex, lived realities and identities of students who are placed at risk.

Growing trend of arts-based programming for youth placed at risk using elements of theatre, visual art, and consciousness-raising, such as spoken word, plays, or mural projects (Fisher 2005, Green 2010, Winn 2010).

This program allows for a different space and perspective to emerge about youth placed at risk, specifically those who have parents in prison.
Track: “Statistics Forget”-

“It’s hard when people talk about their parents—I can’t be involved.”

“I hate when people say they can’t stand their parents.”

“Statistics say we’re gonna go to jail. People automatically assume that.”

“I never had a dad.”

“I think I will make it.”

“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.”

“I am SMART, emotional, OUTGOING, responsible…and I had/I have a parent in prison.”
Co-constructing Identity: I am NOT, WE are not

Differences in their expression, their stories and experiences

Engaging with those differences despite a common experience

Creating their space, within an UNSAFE space

Talking back to greater public

Sayin’ it. It’s ok.

Difference in expression

Creating their space

“Meeting others like me.”
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

“This is prison. It’s like a portal. You’re stuck and you can’t get out.”

-Drawing: What is Prison? Age 10
Voice & Representation

Process and Product Provide Visibility
Greater Sense of Community
Implications for policy, education and communities