

Davis Projects for Peace: Grant Application

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Books Not Bars:
A Peacebuilding Summer Workshop for Incarcerated
Youth in New York City

New York, USA

Proposal

For two years, we have been running a tutoring program in two youth detention centers in the Bronx, New York. In our time there, we have watched incarcerated young people work to overcome extraordinarily difficult circumstances and struggle to pursue their educational goals and a better life for themselves. However, because of the violent context within which they are learning and the past experiences many have suffered, the students in our program have a great deal of trouble advancing in their education. These students see conflict and violence modeled for them both inside and outside of prison, and far too many become lifetime participants in the criminal justice system. In fact, nearly 80% of people incarcerated in the United States do not have their high school diploma. We see our students pushed further away from educational opportunities and into situations of socioeconomic dependence on criminal, and sometimes violent, activities. Although education is critically important, it is clear to both us and to our students that young people involved in the criminal justice system need much more transformative programming in order to truly help them extricate themselves from these cycles of violence.

With these experiences in mind, we want to propose Books Not Bars: A Peacebuilding Summer Workshop for Incarcerated Youth in New York City. This project will engage a select group of incarcerated young people between the ages of 13 and 18 in both classroom workshops at the Bronx Hope Youth Detention Center and field trips in New York City. The curriculum will focus on examining issues of peace and conflict in contemporary urban culture, deconstructing patterns of oppression and cycles of violence that urban youth are subjected to, facilitating dialogue around peace and conflict, and helping students build skills for analyzing the dynamics of violence and conflict in their own communities and assess their participation in them. All the assignments and activities will also be developed to help students practice specific curricular skills necessary for succeeding in the New York State public education system, in order to help students with their individual educational growth. In this way, Books Not Bars will work to promote peace and help alleviate situations which cause and perpetuate conflict by helping students understand and analyze issues of conflict and violence affecting their own communities, while simultaneously supporting them in advancing their own educational goals and obtaining their high school diplomas.

Books Not Bars will be organized and implemented by Zoe Ridolfi-Starr and Tanika Lynch, Columbia University juniors. Zoe and Tanika currently run a tutoring program in youth detention centers in New York City, and are working with the Bronx Hope Youth Detention Center in that capacity. They will work with students for 12 weeks for 13 hours per week, for a total of approximately 160 hours of classroom and workshop time. Classes will happen twice a week on weekday evenings from 3pm to 6:30pm and field trips and workshops will be Saturdays from 10am-5pm. Our curriculum will be composed of the following units: Introduction and pre-assessment (1 week); Gangs and community violence (3 weeks); Police and state institutions (2 weeks); Incarceration and crime (2 weeks); Schools and bullying (1 week); Relationship violence and domestic violence (1 week); Conclusion and evaluations (1 week). Each unit will ask students to engage with the material in three dimensions: formal and institutional contributors, sociocultural and community contributors, and personal/individual contributions.

Tanika and Zoe will work in collaboration with the Bronx Hope Detention Center's primary social worker, Ms. Wood to coordinate the on-site workshops. Ms. Wood will be the point person for identifying student participants and communicating with the supervisors of the group homes where these students live. Zoe and Tanika will also work with Sonia Golarza, the Director of Programs for the NYC Division of Juvenile Justice, in order to coordinate the off-site elements of the project (field trips designed to enrich the curricular experience for the young people and provide case study material for deeper explorations of the peace and conflict). This will include coordinating the required supervision procedures for off-site field trips with incarcerated youth, which require 1 office of the Department of Youth and Family Justice per every 6 students. An example of a field trip: a trip to the Nuyorican Poetry Café, where students will watch artists communicate feelings of anger, desperation, and other conflict through an artistic medium, followed by a workshop on art as a forum for expressing and handling conflict, and a written assignment allowing them to analyze some medium of art (poetry, rap, short story, movie) that addresses a peace issue.

The expected outcomes for this project are:

- 1) **Outcome:** Students will be able to identify and define the root causes of violence in their communities at the state/institutional, sociocultural, and interpersonal levels.
Measurement: Each unit will include assignments that ask students to identify, analyze, and evaluate the root causes of violence and conflict at these various levels. This outcome will be evaluated by examining the growth of students' work and progress during each unit, particularly focusing on the differences between the Intro assessment assignments and final reflection piece.
- 2) **Outcome:** Students will increase their critical awareness of the issues addressed in each of the 5 unit areas covered by the units.
Measurement: Each unit will begin with a "What Do We Know" assignment or facilitated conversation, and this will serve as the starting point for student knowledge around each topic. Students will demonstrate progress through the quality and frequency of their contributions to group dialogue and activities, and their mastery of the topics demonstrated in their assignments.
- 3) **Outcome:** Students will develop the analytical tools to assess their roles and relationships to conflict and violence in their own communities, and build the language and confidence to continue these conversations in their own circles.
Measurement: The Intro unit will ask students to complete a self-evaluation, in which they will indicate their knowledge and comfort level in constructive communication, their participation in conflicts and violence, their personal traits, skills, obstacles, and challenges in conflict resolution, and other key factors. A similar self-evaluation will be conducted at the conclusion, and growth will be partially measured in this way. Additionally, we will observe each student's participation in group dialogue and team dynamics as an indicator of conflict resolution skills and individual relationships to systems of violence. After 3 weeks of community skill building, we will engage students in peer feedback, which will allow them to practice participating in constructive communication and demonstrate their progress through these interactions. Finally, a large part of the Final Reflection project will ask students to facilitate a 1-hour conversation about violence or conflict in a space that is personal to them (like a sports team, their family, their group home residents), and report and reflect on this experience. This will serve as a marker for growth in this outcome as well.
- 4) **Outcome:** Students will measurably advance their proficiency in reading comprehension, spelling, grammar, development and execution of an argument, and cohesive writing.
Measurement: Students will be given 3 assignments (one reading comprehension and analysis, one written reflection, and one oral argument) during the Introduction and Assessment Unit. These will be evaluated according to the NYS grade level standards for English proficiency. We will identify the level at which each student is performing, and these grades will be used as the baseline from which we will measure student progress in reading comprehension, spelling, grammar, development and execution of an argument, and cohesive writing. Through subsequent assignments and the final reflection project, we will track each student's growth.

There are significant prospects for future impact with this project. The greatest impact will be on the lives and futures of the students who participate: these children will develop the emotional and analytical tools to deconstruct dynamics of violence and conflict in their lives and communities, and will use these to make positive and peaceful choices in their lives far into the future. Additionally, they will have enhanced their formal education prospects by developing specific English and writing skills, which will allow them to be more successful in future academic and career goals. Books Not Bars will empower these young people to continue these conversations outside of the program, and affect the futures of other young incarcerated people and the long-term health of their overall communities. This is an extremely underserved, under-supported, and very vulnerable population right here in our own community. An investment in their futures like this project would be incredibly important to them and extremely significant in shaping their growth as young people.