

Davis Projects for Peace Final Report

SECTION I

- a. Books Not Bars
New York City, United States of America
Columbia University
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- b. Books Not Bars is an anti-violence education program focused on engaging incarcerated youth in critical conversations about interpersonal and institutional violence in their communities, learning about the history and legal framework at play in these conversations, and developing life skills to navigate issues of violence, and a political analysis from their lived experiences. The program also works to support the academic growth and empowerment of students by developing challenging, strategic lessons plans designed to help students improve key reasoning, reading, and writing skills that will help them achieve their educational goals in the future.
- c. In addition to the grant from the Davis Foundation, I also received a fellowship from Columbia University's Van Amson Fellowship program, which provided me with free housing on campus and a \$3,000 stipend for the summer. This was essential, because it allowed me to focus the Davis funding on program costs but still earn enough money to support myself and have safe and comfortable housing.
- d. The most significant barriers to making change in my program were structural issues. The first and most significant is that our students cycle in and out of the centers frequently, so we have very little time to get to know our students, build up a relationship or sense of trust with them, and create a program that builds over time. This makes it very challenging to make a long-term impact on our students, and this in turn can make it tougher to plan the curriculum, evaluate our areas for improvement, and keep all the volunteers motivated. To keep our project moving forward, we had to build opportunities for connection and evaluation into each individual session, and work hard to find meaning in more creative or non-traditional ways. It was very difficult to navigate this, but we ended up having a really excellent team of volunteers who worked very hard with me on creating meaningful lessons and connections with our students, and who went way above and beyond to do so.

The second challenge was that guards are always present during our sessions and field trips. The relationship between our students is often really toxic, and is fundamentally violent. They frequently disrupt our session by talking to the kids, talking loudly to each other in the room, or otherwise interrupting the focus in class. Other times, they will insult or undermine our students' and their learning abilities or personal attributes. They police the kids' interactions with each other and regularly reinforce hierarchies of power, and often include us in their authoritarian approach to interacting with the youth. This creates a huge obstacle for us in connecting with the youth, especially because we have to maintain a positive relationship with the guards in order to access the centers and work with the kids. We tried to alleviate this dynamic within our program by breaking down the typical sense of authority in a classroom setting and situating ourselves more as peers than as authority figures--we sit in a circle together rather than facing up front, prioritize the thoughts and perspectives our students over our own, we give them agency in the sessions by giving them choices of what snacks, activities, and lessons they want to have, and allow the kids to use informal language. We also talk with the staff and guards after each session to debrief and ask for any feedback, and try to respect their input as much as possible without compromising our values and goals.

Some of the things that worked very well were allowing the students agency in determining various aspects of the program. For example, when they got to choose which snacks we brought, which ice break games we played, which play to see for our field trip, they felt empowered and this helped them feel connected to us and comfortable in our program. This worked better than I

imagined it would even. The journaling exercises we did at the beginning and end of each session were also a huge success; many students wrote exceptionally thoughtful and interesting entries, and some felt comfortable sharing things in the journal that they were not able to share anywhere else. We were able to help several students who disclosed serious situations in their journals to get help and also were able to connect on a deeper level with students, often visiting them to talk outside of program sessions or accompanying them to court or medical appointments.

There are significant prospects for future impact with this project. The greatest impact will be on the lives and futures of the students who participated: these 35 children had the chance to develop the emotional and analytical tools to deconstruct dynamics of violence and conflict in their lives and communities, and will hopefully use these to make positive and peaceful choices in their lives far into the future. Additionally, they have enhanced their formal education prospects by developing specific English and writing skills, which will hopefully allow them to be more successful in future academic and career goals. Books Not Bars worked to 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. The volunteers who participated in the program (all other Columbia students or recent alumni) also were impacted: they were immersed in a world far from the academic environment of Columbia University, and had the chance to share the knowledge and resources we are lucky to have with young people who have been denied access to many of those resources. They got to practice working with young people, developing curriculum, and learn about the dynamics of youth detention centers in NYC. We received stellar reviews at the conclusion of the program from our students, the detention center staff, and our volunteers, and one of the centers explicitly requested we continue running the program during the year. We are currently working to find funding to continue this program for the current academic year.

SECTION II

- a. I define peace as the sense of security a person or community feels when they have confidence that their needs are met and rights are protected, and can pursue their goals, experience life, and engage with the world in whichever ways feel best for them. My project contributed to peace by helping students improve their academic skills so they can achieve their educational goals and hopefully have access to better opportunities for stable jobs and housing, instead of the precarious situations that often come with poverty and can result in violence. It also contributed to peace by empowering young people to analyze the history, politics, and current situation of violence within their own communities with a critical lens, and encouraging them to continue these conversations beyond our program and get involved in creating change. Getting to know my students this summer and the very complex life experiences that have brought them to juvenile detention has brought into sharper focus for me the reality that violence is so often a symptom of complex factors that go way beyond individual decisions or mistakes, and that advocating for a more peaceful and nonviolent world requires a comprehensive approach that addresses many elements and alleviates conditions that can lead to engagement in violent behaviors, by focusing on health, mental health, education, safe housing, stable and well paying employment, and respect for people of all genders, races, abilities, and backgrounds.
- b. My summer was an incredible experience that challenged me to work harder, teach more creatively, devote myself more completely to my students, think more critically about the violence inherent in the prison system, and be a fiercer advocate for vulnerable young people than ever before. Myself, my students, my volunteers, and even the staff at the detention centers concluded the program having learned a great deal about ourselves, each other, and our relationship to the violence that exists in our world and our communities, and feeling empowered to continue talking about, thinking about, and working to change these issues in the future.