

5-2018

## Equal Education for all: Myth of Reality? Creating Teachers Who Care

Maya Ramirez  
*California State University, Monterey Bay*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps\\_thes\\_all](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ramirez, Maya, "Equal Education for all: Myth of Reality? Creating Teachers Who Care" (2018). *Capstone Projects and Master's Theses*. 280.

[https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps\\_thes\\_all/280](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all/280)

This Capstone Project (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Capstone Projects and Master's Theses at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Projects and Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csumb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csumb.edu).

CAPSTONE 2018

Equal Education For All: Myth or Reality? Creating Teachers Who Care

California State University Monterey Bay

Maya Ramirez

**Abstract**

All children deserve a quality education, regardless of their life at home, the availability of school resources, or even one's criminal record. Though most current and aspiring educators would find this statement agreeable, the fact of the matter is that very few educators pursue a career in teaching inside a juvenile detention facility. Whether it is due to lack of comfort in this setting or the pre-fixed opinions about what someone who is convicted of a crime "deserves," the reality is that educating privileged students is safer and more desirable. The result is that children who have been convicted of a criminal act are often provided educators who can be categorized as "the bottom of the barrel"—teachers who could not find a job elsewhere and are "stuck" working with kids that they do not care about. On the other end of the spectrum, there are also educators who are passionate about helping and educating this population of youth and make this type of work their life-long work. These educators believe that all, especially the most vulnerable and with the greatest of needs, are deserving of a quality education. Moreover, these educators believe their work is not just to "save" youth, but to open up their perspective on different paths available in their life. So, how do we fix this? A search must be made for educators who are passionate about not only educating youth in the criminal justice system, but towards providing them with an education that allows them to decide upon a life trajectory they would like to pursue. Acknowledging that making "better choices" is undoubtedly the more difficult route, but through a sound education, there is this opening up of another route instantly made available.

## Introduction

Being a liberal studies major, to me, meant joining a field in which I would work with young children, teach them their ABC's, guide them towards an excited attitude surrounding education, and being the remembered and favored kindergarten teacher, Miss Maya. I was quickly brought back to reality when I recognized that being an aspiring kindergarten teacher also came with the baggage of working with other teachers, staff, and principals, dealing with difficult parents, and learning to live off of the very little money involved with this specific profession. But my love for the little ones kept me pushing. I loved being an active part in my service learning classrooms, every time being placed in a kindergarten class, but always in a different setting. A public school, a charter school, a key program, schools in North Salinas, Downtown Monterey and in Seaside: all teaching me new things, and all shaping my view around how I want to design and run my own classroom someday. But as I continued to interact with different types of children, I recognized a shift in my mindset. I want to be more than just the remembered and favored kindergarten teacher. I want to impact young people's lives in positive ways and help those who are most vulnerable and in need. My mind quickly shifted towards helping kids who have been incarcerated, and it did not take me long after that to set my mind on a new profession that I have truly found a passion for: Juvenile Detention Psychologist.

I did not, by any means have a difficult upbringing. Yes, my parents divorced before I was one year old, but I was not old enough for it to cause stress or trauma. If anything, it seemed to have caused more joy as both my mother and father remarried by the time I was four which inevitably lead to being a part of two beautiful families. Double the grandparents, double the love, double the birthday gifts and holiday celebrations, and double the siblings. I was a happy

youngster. But then my dad moved to Las Vegas, and I only saw him and my little sisters during summer breaks and every other holiday. When I was spending one holiday with one family, the other family would not be complete, and as I got older, I missed my whole family being together more and more. I no longer cared about the gifts and birthday celebrations. If I could not see my family and spend time with them, nothing else mattered. I longed for the family reunions that were no longer possible and grew a resentment towards my dad for leaving me and forcing my sisters to live in the next state over. But then a miracle happened: the summer before my junior year, my dad, step mom, and two little sisters moved back to San Diego! And with little thought, I made the decision to move in with them. My mom's feelings were so hurt as I had lived with her my entire life, but I reassured her that it was nothing personal against her, but instead was something I felt like I needed to do for me. I quickly learned that it was one of the many mistakes that I would make within the next three years of my life that seemed to spiral out of control.

The second time I ran away from my dad's house was the last, and it was for good. I left his home three months before my high school graduation, and after searching for a place to stay, my dad's eldest brother, and my favorite Tio, took me in. The second time I ran away was when I consciously became aware that I had nowhere else to go, and was potentially ruining my life. My beautiful grandmother-and best friend- had just passed away and I found myself trapped in an emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive relationship that I couldn't shake until I decided enough was enough three years later. I was getting kicked out of and failing most of my classes except AP Literature, getting arrested for shoplifting and drinking, and lying to my parents about my extensive partying habits. The final straw was when I lost my baby when I was seventeen

years old. I was plummeting towards a future that was not so bright. My mother was devastated and I figured my father did not care. I felt like I had failed my parents, and often times found myself questioning how I ended up in such a deep and dark hole. But just as I was about to accept this undesirable fate of mine, my Tio Luis threw down a latter and offered his hand- the first helping hand I had seen in a very long time. If he had not offered his assistance to me, I have little doubt in my mind that I would be one of the incarcerated kids I am writing about today. I was running towards the prison gates at an increasingly high speed, and the gates were just opening when my Tio came to my rescue.

My Tio Lui offered me his home, traveled an hour-long round trip to drop me off and pick me up from school every morning and afternoon, made sure I was fed three times a day, and only expected the highest out of me- in and out of school. He knew what I had been through and how I had previously acted, yet he did not treat me like the trouble maker label I had placed on myself, or someone who deserved any less than what he was offering. He made me feel more at home than I had felt since I left my mom's house two years earlier. During the final months before graduation, he made sure my grades were raised, and that I packed my bags while my dad was at work, so that way on graduation day, I could leave his house for good. I did not see my dad, step mom, or sisters this entire time. After I graduated my Tio surprised me with an angel fruit cake that I shared with my mother, step father, and oldest little sister, and when my biological father and two baby sisters walked into the house, an uncontrollably overwhelming amount of emotion rushed over me. I was so sorry for the hell I had put them through, and I knew that after I left that evening, I would not know when I would see my dad and sisters again. Many kids traveling down this troubled path do not realize that they are entering a point of no

return until it is too late. I was fortunate enough to come to this “aha” moment of realization before it was too late. This is the moment I really wanted to change for myself and the life I was living.

At this time, I did not want to pursue higher education or necessarily follow the law, but I knew that family is what I had wanted all along, yet I had managed to tear mine apart. I wanted to be better for my sisters and to make my parents proud. I did not know how I was going to turn myself around, but I knew I had to start somewhere.

Thinking back on my life, I have realized something: I want to be my Tio Luis. I want to help, regardless of one’s past, to my fullest extent. Offer a genuine helping hand to anyone who is down and in need. I want to show that someone *does* care.

## **Problem**

“The United States leads the industrialized world in the number and percentage of children it locks up in juvenile detention facilities, with over 60,000 children in such facilities in 2011 (Bochenek, 2005). Numerous studies have suggested that placing young people in an adult system is not just physically harmful, but mentally harmful as well. Youth placed in an adult prison have a greater risk of being raped, assaulted, and committing suicide. On top of that, “those who are transferred to adult facilities are more likely to reoffend” (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). So why do we keep placing young, growing humans in a system that does not encourage growth, and in no way humanizes them? For a more worthwhile stay spent in “punishment,” steps need to be taken to make sure that incarcerated youth are learning and growing as much as possible in order to enter back into the free world having learned their

lesson, and having become a better person. This means educating them to the best of our ability. So much money is already being spent towards these kids' stay, why not direct that money towards something beneficial. The interview process for applying educators in juvenile jails needs to be stricter and there should be in place a minimum requirement of having earned a master's degree. Many countries around the world hold these same standards for all their educators, professors, and teachers. If the United States will not prioritize the importance of outstanding educators for all schools nationwide, it should at least be considered for those who need the most help.

Incarcerated youth are already one step behind because of their time spent behind bars. On top of that they are receiving an education that is less impressive than those of free youth. If incarcerated youth are not giving the "best of the best" when it comes to teachers, then how will they ever learn, mature, and grow to their best ability? How can society expect prisons and jail systems to release new and improved humans from the system when they are not given the correct tools and resources while still in the system. It is no wonder there are such high rates of living a lifestyle in and out of jail: there is no realistic way someone would be able to easily integrate back into society when they have been shut off from it for so long. With societal changes moving so quickly in today's day and age, missing just a year would have a huge set back, nonetheless if a child is out of the loop for numerous consecutive years.

"During 2004–13, adolescents made up 10 percent of the U.S. population age 12 or older but were offenders in 22 percent of all nonfatal violent victimizations" (Juveniles and Violent Crime, 2017). And not only were they the offender, but adolescents were also a majority of the victims which inevitably leads to retaliation and an endless, never ending cycle. In 2015,

roughly 72,000 adolescents, eighteen or younger, were arrested in the state of California alone with numbers growing annually. If all these inmates are in a class of roughly 25, California would need a minimum of 2,880 passionate teachers hired assuming only one were to be assigned to each class. Attempting to tackle this gargantuan dilemma is not an easy or quick fix, however, if everyone at least shared these same ideals and goals, than change can be made in the right direction towards a more educated America, wherever one resides. Change is long and hard when every single person is on board and shares the same opinion. Change is long and hard and nearly impossible when the topic is so controversial. However, I do not think that the struggle should slow down the fight towards well-rounded education provided for all.

In a course I am currently enrolled in (LS 383: Innovative Approach to Schooling) the class explores many different styles of education. Virtual schooling, homeschooling, comparative national education (particularly in Japan), ethnocentric schooling (American Indian Education specifically), alternative schooling (high school), democratic schooling, Waldorf schooling and Montessori schooling are all studied in extensive detail. Ironically enough, there are more incarcerated kids and youth in the foster system than there are children in all of these previously stated schooling styles combined, yet this population is not mentioned once. What does this tell you about America's outlook on this group of young people? In Mark Salzman's *True Notebooks: A Writer's Year at Juvenile Hall*, Salzman discusses a conversation he has with a coworker of his from the prison. A question similar to the one I have proposed arises in conversation, and this is the response: "It tells them [incarcerated youth] that society simply wants to dispose of them. It's obscene, it's unconscionable that we aren't willing to do better than this! We have given up hope on rehabilitation. That says more about us than it does about

these children” (Salzman, 2003, p 26). Salzman briefly touches on the ragged conditions of the juvenile hall he is working at, and the message it sends the prisoners. The respect or understanding for these children is ultimately nonexistent. This message the system is subliminally sending to its incarcerated youth rubs off on them and can be seen and displayed through their attitudes towards the system and figures of authority inside it.

So, why do children need a full and well-rounded education that is not mitigated because of their history? Adolescents and young adults who are tried as adults will never learn how to be an adult in society that gives realistic opportunities for them to grow and thrive in an outside world that they did not grow up in. “Teen gang bangers be steppin’ out of the pen after twenty, thirty years of livin’ like animals, comin’ of age in a place where nobody trusts nobody, bein’ treated like less than a piece of shit. Wha’ch think they gonna do? Most they family be dead by then. What they got to live for? Revenge. Nothin’ else”( Salzman, 2003, p 289). This comment made by one of Mark Salzman’s students in his writing class at LA’s Central Juvenile Hall is an important one to dissect because at first glance, it is imperative to understand that a child is saying this. This seemingly obvious idea on how prisons affect children is made by a young incarcerated man in very realistic conditions for him. The overall, big idea that locking away the bad from the good is not as thought out or a realistic compromise to young crime. This quote parallels with the quote from page twenty six when Salzman’s coworker is first speaking to Mark about the program.

## Literature Review

When reading *Mark Salzman's True Notebooks: A Writer's Year at Juvenile Hall*, the reader is quickly and easily able to pick up one of the main themes: the power of words. This is clearly seen as Salzman continuously encourages his class filled with incarcerated boys to keep their pen moving during their hour spent together twice a week, letting out memories, thoughts, and emotions. Initially hesitant, the boys eventually began to write without shame. Salzman's writing class quickly became a safe place within the prison walls. "...all agreed that the class worked because it was the one place they knew they could express themselves without fear of being judged, and I was the one adult they could count on not to play the role of authority figure" (p 225). Of course not all pieces were works of art, but more often times than not, Salzman would leave the prison truly blown away by the thoughts and feelings the boys were able to express through the use of written words. It became such a remarkable program in just the first year that they were able to hold an all day writing convention with multiple units and even the girls side of the prison. Other incarcerated boys wanted to join in the learning and sharing of true feelings. The jail environment is such a harsh environment, that when these boys are finally shown some positive attention, they thrive.

The voice and tone used by Salzman is so effective because his use of language is so real. As an "outsider" and someone who has never experienced a great majority of what the boys have been through, it is difficult for him to truly grasp such an alien and even taboo concept and genuinely understand the boys and their circumstances. Walking into the program, Salzman

himself was hesitant about giving the class a shot, however, with time and getting to know the boys, he learned to not just hear them, but to actually listen to the words coming out of their mouths. All judgements he previously had of any of the boys quickly went out the window. He got to know the boys for who they were, right then and there in his class. They were not just humans, but young boys who had made a mistake. Salzman heard and learned about the kids' pain, struggles, and fears in such a raw form. In closing his eyes and opening his ears, he briefly lived vicariously through their words a part of their lives that they chose to share with him. He gets to know the kids, connecting with them in an unexpected way that he himself had not prepared for and quickly cared very much for them. They were young boys who struggled and failed at living in a man's world, and quickly fell into it in the worst, harshest way possible. Salzman's writing is so touching because of the obvious surprise he felt throughout his entire experience in this writing class. By the end, not only does he care very much for the boys, but the boys care about him equally as much. "The printed message inside confirmed Superintendent Burkert's fears about the writing program. It read, 'You really made me feel special'" (p 209).

As Salzman began his conclusion of his book, he discussed his experience in attempting to explain exactly what he had done inside the prison walls to a group of writers while away at an artist's colony get away of sorts. Naturally, many questions were asked, in which Salzman only had beautiful responses to. The questions asked conveyed responses that seem to have more emotional value than ethical, however Salzman expresses himself perfectly:

Q: “Wouldn’t you be having more of an impact if you worked with kids before they become serious criminals?”

A: “I had to admit that, yes, early intervention programs for at-risk youth are highly effective... but I told her, in all honesty, my primary goal with the boys at K/L had never been to save them or improve them or even to get them to take responsibility for their crimes. I was there because they responded to encouragement and they wrote honestly; surely that sort of interaction between teacher and student has value”

Q: “Do you ever worry that you might actually be making their lives harder? I mean- they’re facing a brutal environment in prison. You’re teaching them to become vulnerable, which is important for society, but won’t they have to unlearn it to survive where they’re going?”

A: “...a little good has got to be better than no good at all... I went there: not because I always enjoyed it, and not because the boys always enjoyed it, but because most of us seemed to agree that it was a good thing to do. Even Jose, who claimed it had all been for nothing, had never skipped a class” (page ending in 323).

Mark Salzman understands that these are all valid questions and even recognizes that he had thought about them in the past. He weighed the advantages and disadvantages of affection. Some of his responses seem so simple, yet make much more sense than if he were to attempt to make his actions have deeper meaning than they actually had. Salzman did what he did because it felt good, for both him and the boys, not because of how appealing it was or was not to the public.

If more teachers and educators were to take on this same attitude around entering a prison and working with incarcerated youth, perhaps there would be a lesser number of boys and girls returning to jail later on in their lives. If these children were to receive love, attention, and warmth on top of a solid educational foundation, than maybe they would have more of a shot of being released and succeeding. Through Salzman's argument, creating a system to equip teachers and challenge students appropriately has much to do with compassion and understanding: "True justice cannot exist without compassion; compassion cannot exist without understanding" (p. 155).

In William Ayers' book, *A Kind and Just Parent*, a major theme surrounds that of building a framework for how to develop caring teachers. In entering a classroom of juveniles himself, he has first hand experience in working with and understanding this undesirable population. Ayers takes note of the worries and concerns that most would have in entering this type of environment, and then flips the script, humanizing the children, and attempting to convince his readers that those in which he is working with, are just children. "I've learned by now to take the kids as they are, to work with them exactly as they present themselves to me, to suppress the obvious but unfair and inappropriate question: "What are you in for?" (p. 3). From the very beginning, Ayers does not try to hide his curiosity in entering the prison to his reading audience, but then makes very clear that once he has acknowledged these ideals, moves forward in thinking on how he can best suit and address these kids needs. He also clearly breaks down the exact pathos appeal he is trying to convey: "We are not optimists because we can predict a bright and beautiful future, but we're not pessimists either, because the future is unknown and

unknowable. We are, rather, active participants in possibility, willing workers in the fields of what could be, but is not yet. We are compelled by love- love of children and youth, love of a world in need of repair- and powered by hope” (p. 178). If everyone reading this, and discussing this book were to take on this mindset, than there would potentially be a much brighter and intelligent, longlasting, and growing system put in place of the system that we currently have that is instead dark, ignorant, short lived, and stagnant.

Another major theme is that of its title; creating a system that simulates a kind and just parent. In doing so, one must look at the repercussions of a child who lacks an adult figure that embodies these characteristics. “ There is a terrible, unmistakable link between poverty, abuse and neglect, and juvenile delinquency... further, ‘being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 55%, as an adult by 38%, and for a violent crime by 38%’” (p. 41). A theme within the main theme would be the usage of emotional appeal on Ayers’s readers. Throughout the entirety of the book, the way he writes his story, thoughts, and feelings on the topic, it would be impossible not to agree with what he is saying, and attempting to humanize and see these offenders as children. When introducing one of his students he details them in such a way that one would envision a young child they possibly know, or have known in the past. “Jeff is a little kid- wide-eyed, mischievous, quick to smile, immature (p. 2). However, later on, the reader may be caught off guard when learning that he was arrested for murder. A young boy arrested as a teenage, who still has very childish characteristics, is being tried for murder, and none of his out of jail, or off the record characteristics and personalities will be taken into consideration when it comes to punishment or what his possible motives for the crime he committed could have been. Ayers is able to describe the kids in his books in a way that no

newspaper or late night story on television could or would give. It is so important to my claim that this book be read and understood because a sense of who these kids are are really brought forward in a powerful way. Reflections on their own cases and situations are discussed, and an understanding is built, while the wall that may have possibly been in place, begins to deteriorate.

*Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times*, by Luis Rodríguez, was the thirds and final book I read this semester for my capstone project, paper, and presentation. In Rodríguez's book, there is this morality and savior mentality. However, not in a forceful way you may have assumed, through a church for example. When I was first gathering my ideas about what my capstone would be doing and saying to those who read it, I found myself struggling with letting go of trying to "save" these kids who potentially did not want to be saved. The words I used, and the strong opinions I expressed, bordered the same nature as force feeding. And although I do feel strongly about what I think should happen, and how this topic needs to be looked at, with the reading of Rodríguez's book, I was able to come to a more realistic, and ultimately more helpful approach in the long run.

Rodríguez stresses the idea of helping when someone is ready to ask for it for themselves. As an ex-gang member, and "juvenile delinquent" himself, he makes it very evident, that helping someone who does not want help is a waste of time, breath, and effort. Not only did he fall under the wing of gang life, but so did his children. And as much as he did not want his children harmed or end up in jail, he made the decision to allow them to make their own decision, and come to him for help when they were ready. Rodríguez was able to turn his life around and

engulfed himself in a career and a life in which he worked hard to guide at-risk youth. One of the major quotes that I took away from this book, and that I will always remember is this: “No one could untangle me. I had to unravel myself” (p. 14). Rodríguez became a mentor to many youth in his community. In taking on this leadership role, he emphasizes, to his readers who perhaps have never experienced this life style, the notion that joining a gang is not to shoot and kill people, especially when entry is at a very young age like twelve or thirteen. Instead, joining a gang is potentially for friends and family who have struggled and endured the same experiences as others. The majority of gang members are originally attracted to a gang for comfort, family, friends, and safety.

In the documentary *Paper Tigers*, directed by James Redford, the film crew records the lives of six students at Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, Washington for a year. Ranging from freshmen to seniors, the audience gets an inside look at the in and out of school lives of these six teenagers. Struggling with relationships, substance abuse, and school work, the teachers and staff employed at this school are the most caring and invested group of school employees I have ever seen. They encompass the characteristics of a kind and just parent that is needed in all schools regarding children who are “at risk” or already behind bars. These adults were the support system that these adolescents needed and with that, the children thrived in ways they may not have without these role models. “Increasing researchers are identifying toxic stress as a key contributor to epidemics of poverty, violence, and disease. This is the story of how one school and one community have responded (2:35).

In no way is it easy to constantly be the strong shoulder to lean on. You can see that throughout the entirety of the film when zooming in on the teachers and how they feel about how the year with these kids is going. On numerous occasions when a teacher put their all into the child, there was not an expected response. One instance in particular stood out to me. Mr. Gordon, one of the science teachers at Lincoln High School seemed to have made a special connection with one of Lincoln's senior boys, Steven. An attempt to improve grades is made, colleges are applied to, and there seems to be a light at the end of Steven's tunnel. Steven seems excited to have an array of possibilities in his life open up once a caring adult enters his life. "According to research about childhood trauma, all of the risk factors adverse experiences can be offset by one thing: the presence of a stable, caring adult in a child's life" (9:52). However as the date of graduation closed in, Steven all of a sudden was no longer attending school or responding to Mr. Gordon's texts or phone calls. Steven has been spooked; never experiencing the possibility of a positive outcome to his life, Steven fears it is too good to be true. He even sends Mr. Gordon hateful text messages, in hopes that his caring teacher may no longer care. However this is not the case, Mr. Gordon understands what Steven is going through and pushes onward, showing Steven that mean words are not going to lessen his love and connection they had made throughout the year. With enough coaxing and home visits, Steven eventually comes back around- just in time to graduate high school. The overflow of emotion and excitement is almost too much for the two of them to bear, as they truly have accomplished greatness. Mr. Gordon does not stop showing love for Steven after he has graduated Lincoln High. He helps pack up Steven's belongings and moves him into his college dorm. A real connection is made.

This is an extreme case, however what if we had a nation full of teachers and educators who cared this much about all their students? Made sure they there is always someone in their corner, rooting them on and pushing them to the fullest, allowing them to be the best student, and human possible? Being there even when the student does not believe in themselves. If this were the case, the country would have an overabundance of educated youth entering the world, ready for anything that comes their way. The future is in their hands, regardless of if they are prepared or not, so why not strive for excellence?

## **Method**

I put together a survey questioning the ethical views and values of aspiring teachers. The idea behind the questions were that of potentially pushing future educators out of their comfort zone and taking an honest look at who would and would not be fit as an educator inside a juvenile detention facility. The survey was sent to all of my liberal studies classmates consisting of questions that ask about their comfortability and ideas surrounding being in a prison and teaching incarcerated youth. My survey is twelve questions long (see appendix)- seven yes or no questions, and five likert scale. In total, I received 56 responses back. My hopes were to better understand individual responses, as well as conceptualize a consistent idea or trend as a group. Early on, simple questions are asked, like, “Do you think incarcerated youth are deserving of an education” but as questions get farther along in the survey, they become more difficult to answer honestly, forcing the responder to truly think about their own opinions, biases, and morals. My goal is to open the eyes of a certain type of person that might thrive in this style environment if

this possibility had not yet been thought of or explored. Preferably, I see an educator who has yet to think about or explore this style of teaching, and spark their interest and passion towards this type of work. Through the entirety of my capstone project/presentation, one of my main objectives is to show that kindness, sympathy, compassion, and excitement should all be the type of energy focused on these students, making student and teacher outcomes most satisfying and worthwhile.

## **Findings**

When reviewing the data I received back, there were some very noticeable trends. The first, and most expected was that for question one, every single responder agreed that all children are deserving of an education. As liberal studies majors, I expected nothing less. When questions arise asking about their own comfortability in entering and teaching incarcerated youth- the education that they unanimously believed to be deserving of- numbers start to decline, however not as much as I had originally anticipated. 82.8% claimed that they themselves would enter a classroom of incarcerated youth to teach; the remaining 17.8% admitted to not being comfortable in this setting. The next few questions ask about comfortability based on the crimes committed by the students and their curiosity surrounding the student's cases. 86% claimed that if the details of student's cases were omitted from their knowledge, they would still enter the classroom. But, 51.7% of those who responded this way also claim that curiosity or constant worry about the crimes committed would tempt them to ask questions regarding their cases or arrests. What really caught my eye most was when asking about the ability to maintain either an

unconditional, professional, respectful, loving or educational environment and attitude throughout the entirety of the class. On a scale of 1-5, there were consistent 3's across the board. Some answered with 4's and 5's and there was the occasional 1, however, most responses hovered over 3 (neutral), telling me that either, an educator is not sure how they might feel half way through the course, or an educator would go in to this style classroom without full confidence in their feelings towards this population of students from the start. Whatever the case may be, these numbers confirm my initial idea that teachers are not prepared, mentally or educationally to step into a classroom behind bars.

During a time of such vulnerability and growth, these children who are already one step behind because of their arrest record should have teachers who are the best of the best, and not those who cannot find work elsewhere and end up in a jail. These kids need compassion, empathy, love, and positivity to radiate off their educators, to set an example, and give them the reassurance that someone does care and wish to see them succeed. By no means should every future or present educator be placed in this type of educational environment, however, searching for those who would thrive in this type of schooling is crucial. The idea of wanting to help this particular group of children is heroic and valient however, realistically for humans, it is much more difficult to maintain these devoted and unbiased ideologies. "True justice cannot exist without compassion; compassion cannot exist without understanding" (Salzman, 2003, p 155)

## **Conclusion**

When stepping into an uncomfortable situation, it is realistic and understandable to have doubts, and premeditated ideas surrounding what you have just gotten yourself into. "Better to

meet each kid as a student to resist the urge to know him through his criminal charge to push all that to the background” (Ayers, 1997, p 4). Even Mark Salzman, who had been working with his students and found a special place in his heart for them questioned their validity behind their own feelings of what is or isn’t fair, and how the system should or should not treat them. “Yes, you’ve [a young inmate in Salzman’s writing class who had recently been convicted of murder and was awaiting his transfer to an adult max prison] been hurt- but what about all the damage you’ve done? Are you any better than the people you’re blaming? If you think it’s unfair that society judges you, what gives you the right to judge society? You say you’re just defending yourself when you shoot at your enemies, you’re just trying to survive when you steal cars and rob stores- aren’t people like me just defending ourselves by locking people like you up?” (Salzman, 2003, p. 291).

## Appendix

### CAPSTONE Survey

This survey is designed to understand how future educators feel about working with “difficult” students. Teachers often say they “love” kids, but really mean they love “good” kids. My hope for the survey is to see the breadth of per-service teachers expectations. I am intentionally seeking to understand the ethical nature of teaching in urban contexts.

\* For the purpose of this questionnaire, think of “incarcerated youth” simply defined as a young person who has made a poor decision that has landed them in a juvenile detention facility. It could be because of a case as minor as petty theft, or as major as murder.

1. Do you think incarcerated youth\* are deserving of a higher education?

Yes

No

2. Would you be comfortable teaching a class of child/teenage criminals inside the walls of a juvenile detention facility?

Yes

No

3. Would your teaching methods in a prison with “criminal students” differ from your teaching methods in a traditional public or private school?

Yes

No

If yes, what would be different?

---

4. Would the severity of their crime matter in your willingness to educate these types of students?

Yes                      No

If yes, what type of crimes would make you uncomfortable/unwilling to work with a student?

---



---

5. Would you still be willing to enter this jailhouse school if all details surrounding the students' cases were omitted from your knowledge?

Yes                      No

6. Would curiosity tempt you to ask questions or constantly worry about their doings that landed them in juvenile hall?

Yes                      No

7. Do you think you could maintain an unconditional attitude and environment during your time working with these "criminal" students throughout the entirety of the course?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		Disagree	Neutral	Agree

Strongly Agree

8. Do you think you could maintain a professional attitude and environment during your time working with these "criminal" students throughout the entirety of the course?

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---



## References

- Ayers, W. (1997). *A Kind and Just Parent: The Children of Juvenile Court*. Boston; MA: Beacon Press.
- Bochenek, M. G. *Children Behind Bars. The Global Overuse of Detention for Children*. Human Rights Watch. The Rest of Their Lives: Life Without Parole for Child Offenders in the United States. © 2005 by Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/children-behind-bars>
- Child Trends DataBank. (2015). *Juvenile detention*. Available at: <https://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=juvenile-detention>
- Redford, J. & Rritzker, K. (Producers), & Redford, J. (Director). (2015). *Paper Tigers* [Video File]. Retrieved from [https://www.amazon.com/Paper-Tigers-Jim-Sporleder/dp/B01KKYE5II/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1526327287&sr=8-1&keywords=paper+tigers](https://www.amazon.com/Paper-Tigers-Jim-Sporleder/dp/B01KKYE5II/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1526327287&sr=8-1&keywords=paper+tigers)
- Rodriguez, Luis. (2001). *Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times*. New York; NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Salzman, M. (2003). *True Notebooks: A Writer's Year at Juvenile Hall*. New York; NY: Vintage Books and Toronto; Canada: Random House.
- Sipes, L. A. Jr. (2017, February). *Juveniles and Violent Crime*. Crime in America.Net. Retrieved from <https://www.crimeinamerica.net/2017/02/21/juveniles-and-violent-crime/>