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Voice Paper #2
Singing the Blues: The Role of Gender in the School-to-Prison Pipeline

[Folsom Prison Blues](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2sPvjlTdHo)

I hear the train a comin'

It's rollin' 'round the bend,

And I ain't seen the sunshine,

Since, I don't know when,

I'm stuck ~~in Folsom Prison~~,

And time keeps draggin' on,

But that train keeps a-rollin',

On down ~~to San Antone~~.

When I was just a baby,

My Mama told me, "Son,

Always be a good boy,

Don't ever play ~~with guns,"~~

~~But I shot a man in Reno,~~

~~Just to watch him die~~,

When I hear that whistle blowin',

I hang my head and cry.

~~I bet there's rich folks eatin',~~

~~In a fancy dining car,~~

~~They're probably drinkin' coffee,~~

~~And smokin' big cigars,~~

~~But I know I had it comin',~~

I know I can't be free,

But those people keep a-movin',

And that's what tortures me.

Similar to the incarcerated male in this song, sung by Johhny Cash, when I was in high school, my classmates and I more often than not felt “time was draggin’ on”. We felt stuck and often daydreamed about what others were doing outside the walls of our school. We could hear the cars “rollin’ on by” and despite how much our “mommas told us to never play” in school and focus on establishing a future for ourselves, it was not as easy as it seemed. It seemed “tortuous” that for eight hours a day we were imprisoned, unable to be “free”, while those outside did not have to struggle to survive eight hours of boring standardized lecture and useless academic material. In my high school it was somewhat of a rarity to see students sitting quietly at their desks engaging in rigorous academic study for the full hour or so they were in class.

           I remember vividly sitting in biology class as my teacher wrote in large font on the chalkboard “FOCUS”. That ultimately became a sort of class motto and after a few days it also became the class joke. “Focus or else!” one student would say, and everyone else would join in in the laughter. This was a pattern consistent in every class, not just our science or math classes (although it was in these classes that we often found ourselves more or less always distracting each other with notes and chitter chatter). I would over hear teachers discuss the reasons why this was; sometimes they would employ that we were over active because we had just come from lunch break, they would blame certain individual students and argue that they were responsible for provoking class misconduct among other students, or they would wonder as to whether it might be their lesson plans that just weren’t intriguing enough. They would strategize with one another and come up with lesson plans that involved keeping us active. Halfway through the activities however, someone would complain about how tedious or irrelevant the activity seemed to be and all hell would break loose. The teachers would get frustrated, because we would distract them from finishing their lesson plan and they would assign the rest of the activity as homework in addition to the homework that had already been assigned. Instead of listening to their students and trying to understand why we could not focus in class, they would presume that as a default we did not care enough about our education, that we were problematic, or that we were simply hungry for attention. They would assume that our inability to focus and follow classroom etiquette was due to a “lack of character or a lapse in character” (Winn 2011).

This “lack of character or a lapse of character” assumption is a major theme across our readings about the school-to-prison pipeline, and is very much tied to the concept of privilege in the classroom. Who is allowed to speak up in the classroom and who is allowed to speak to certain issues about how the system is failing , stems from social structures that determine what is considered socially and culturally legitimate. In my classrooms, no student was allowed to interrupt a teacher with “unimportant” conversation-- what was considered important, of course, was determined by the teacher. The label “student” seemed to hinder us from getting more out of our education, because we were not considered legitimate voices on the subject of what a good education consists of. Moreover, the issue of not having voice in the classroom also proved to be very gendered. Having taken classes where students were on higher tracked classes, there were times when speaking out or about a topic was more of a viable option for male classmates as opposed to female classmates. Speaking strictly about my experience, there were times when the males in my classrooms were more willing and able to speak in class. What was interesting about the latter was that females did not speak up because they hadn’t done the readings or the homework, but rather because they simply did not understand it. Teachers then would assume that they did not care as much as their male counterparts, and when the very same girls would speak to the difficulty of the work, teachers would assume that they did not understand because they did not read it.

In *Girl Time Literacy, Justice, and the School-to Prison Pipeline*  author Maisha Winn discusses how one main contributor to the school-to-prison pipeline is what has been referred to as the “discipline gap”: a history of “denying equality in education and miseducation” that leads to a disparity in educational achievement across race, class, and gender. In examining scholarship and school practices in my experience, teachers neglected the factors which contributed to the girls’ “discipline gap” and instead constructed negative images of students, specifically girls in the academic sphere, so as so as to not run the risk of finding solutions to the educational disparity that further disenfranchises girls who lack educational achievement due to institutional support. As is the case with my high school, punishment, rather than scholarly assistance was utilized as a way to make sure female students engaged in rigorous studies.

Understanding levels of literacy from the onset is a crucial step in getting girls to achieve academically. This is true more so among girls in urban high schools, because the concepts of literacy and illiteracy are major contributing factors in female dropout rates. Girls in these communities are not taught to achieve more than domesticity, thus when they are told by teachers or other academic advisors that they do not care about their education or that they do not try, they come to internalize the belief that they are unable to excel academically and find the solution in dropping out. Many drop out of school and ultimately end up living in the same zip codes as their parents, pursuing lifestyles that inhibit upward mobility, because they learn to internalize the negative connotations that come with being “illiterate”, and feel inadequate and incapable of achieving anything but domesticity. Furthermore, because this is a highly racialized and classed issue, minority races are those that suffer the consequences of dropping out of school at higher rates than their white counterparts. In addition, involvement in criminal activity, abusive relationships, and incarceration are major issues that are on some level attributed to dropping out of school.

But how do we begin to tackle the issue of literacy among these girls? A major issue in literacy among girls in urban high school, is that the reading material assigned in school is very much useless in relation to other issues they have to deal with on a day to day basis. It is crucial here to be aware of the culture of power that is attached to literacy and that continues to determine what we as a society deem as legitimate literature and reading material. In his work, *Distinction a Social critique of the Judgement of Tast*e, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu studies the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods and their taste for them are produced, while at the same time discussing the different ways of appropriating such goods, and what social conditions must be present  in order for a mode of appropriation to be considered legitimate (Bourdieu 3). He discusses the role of cultural capital-- exposure to the cultural practices of the elite--has in determining one’s ability to attain a specific grasp of works that have value or meaning. He argues that cultural capital determines one’s cultural competence and ultimately works to mark and legitimize social differences. In terms of literacy, what is deemed as legitimate literature is determined by groups of people who are not taking into account what connects to particular students’ experiences, and who neglect the value and meaning of other forms of literature, further marginalizing girls and justifying gendered differences in literacy.

When it comes to literacy among girls in urban high schools, it is important to look at how teachers and administration take on these issues in the classroom and to learn new ways to determine what we deem as valuable literature among populations that do not have the access to cultural capital. This is not to say that different populations should have different standards, but that the concept of cultural capital should be more versatile. I contend that current models of education continue to be elitist, and in order to change this, there must be a conversation as to how we learn what we need to learn from the classroom without there being such disparity among different groups.