

# Teaching during an epidemic of mass incarceration: The service of art education

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## Abstract

This visual essay details the arts partnership between a university professor, her students, and the Richmond City Justice Center (RCJC) in Richmond, Virginia, USA. Within a service-learning framework, this ongoing collaboration explores arts curricula and pedagogies sensitive to issues of race, gender, institutionalization, justice-oriented theories, and historically underserved populations, as well as the impact on pre-service arts education students in their becoming teacher.

## Bio

**Dr. Courtnie Wolfgang** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art Education at Virginia Commonwealth University and a member of the VCU Open Minds faculty. Her research foci include intersections of post-structural, post/feminist, and queer theories with arts pedagogies, school and community teaching, and justice-oriented Arts Education practices. Other recent publication sites include *Visual Arts Research*, *Studies in Art Education*, *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, and *the Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*. Ongoing projects include collaborative arts-based workshops with adolescent girls in juvenile arbitration and development of arts courses for incarcerated adults at the city jail in Richmond, Virginia.

The United States of America is experiencing an epidemic of mass incarceration. With only five percent of the world's population, the US has 25 percent of the world's prisoners. Put another way, the disproportionality of the rate of incarceration in the US is currently at 500 percent. Increased attention paid to mass incarceration, its systemic historical roots, and its effects on communities directly and indirectly (Alexander, 2012) coupled with staggeringly high numbers of students being "pushed out" (Morris, 2016) of school before completing the requirements for graduation provoked me to look more closely at the service of art education. (How) do teacher preparation programs actually prepare future art educators for the challenges of teaching during an epidemic of mass incarceration, and how might arts-based research methods facilitate that preparation?

To establish a framework for arts pedagogy during an epidemic of mass incarceration, one must first investigate the epidemic itself. In 2013, the Pew Research Center ([pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)) estimates that 2.7 million children in the US had one or more incarcerated parent. That data is increasingly discouraging for communities of color. An estimated 11.4 percent of black children in the US have one or more incarcerated parent, compared to 1.8 percent of white children in the US (Galea, 2016). But the impact of mass incarceration does not only affect children of incarcerated persons. Zero tolerance behavioral policies in schools- policies that enact strict punishment for violations to school rules- have produced sharp increases in in and out of school suspensions for students. The US Department of Education conducted a nationwide survey in 2012 and reports that of the 49 million students enrolled in school that year, 3.5 million students were suspended in-school (removed from class but still required to be present in the school building, often in a secluded, monitored space); 3.45 million were suspended out of school; and 130,000 students were expelled from school (US Department of Education, 2012). Studies also show that black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students in the US (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014). The number of incarcerated persons in the US has more than quadrupled in the last four decades, rising from fewer than 350,000 in 1972 to more than 2 million today (Alexander, 2012). These data also reflect a disproportionate number of persons of color behind bars.

According to the US Department of Education (2016), 82 percent of teachers in the US are white. Considering what is known about the disproportional

rates at which black students are suspended or expelled, there are also correlations to be made about the school experiences of white students who elect to become teachers. The NAACP estimates the incarceration rate for black men to be six times the rate of incarceration for white men (2016). Statistically there are far more black Americans directly affected by incarceration. As a condition of certification to teach in the United States of America, a prospective teacher must complete a criminal background check. What can be inferred from this is that, with very few possible exceptions, many teachers do not have personal experience being incarcerated; and for the overwhelming majority of teachers in the US their whiteness has, in one way or another, helped to insulate them. I, admittedly, am one of those white women.

As a professor of art education at a public university in the Southeastern United States, I consider the service of art education a project of developing empathy and critical pedagogy as well as developing skills for teaching art. Many of my students complete their degrees and go on to teach in schools with high occurrences of student poverty and in school populations that are predominantly black or brown. Since incarceration disproportionately affects poor communities and communities of color (Alexander, 2012), the likelihood of new teachers working with students directly affected by incarceration is increased in those school environments.

This project, I submit, makes no claims to recreate the trauma of being incarcerated, having a parent or family member incarcerated, or living with the direct impacts of mass incarceration as a child, adolescent, or adult. Instead, it attempts to crack one of the many barriers to empathetic pedagogical response through arts-based methods as dialogue. Arts-based methods disrupt steadfast theories about what constitutes research, but are critical to progress as they create space for the renegotiation of disciplinary practices and standards (Leavy, 2009). For this reason, arts-based methods are useful in the examination of individual growth and the service of art education, in particular with respect to historically underserved communities.

Leavy also states that, “the creative arts can help qualitative researchers pay closer attention to how the complex process of meaning-making and idea percolation shapes research” (p. 10). She continues that the iterative process of qualitative research praxis is one of emergent meaning through the labeling, identifying, and classifying of concepts, interrelation, patterns, and theory generation and that “visual and other arts-based methods make this process

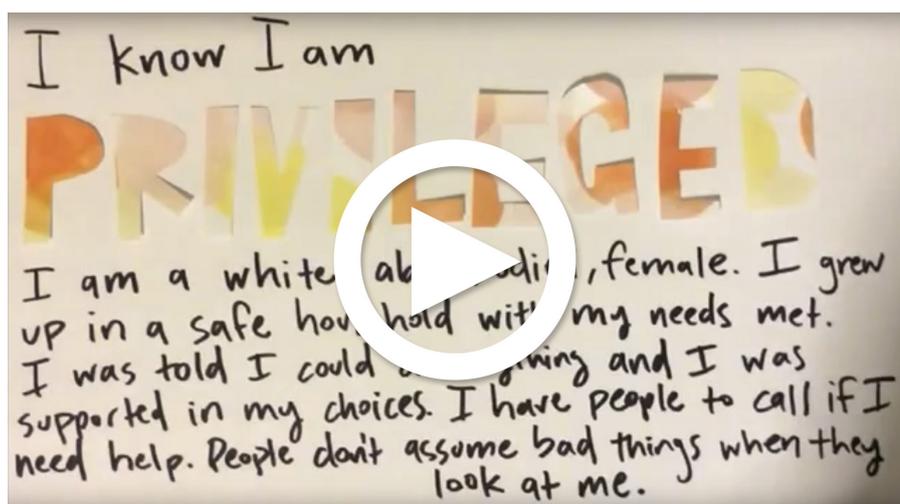
explicit [by drawing] out the meaning making process and [pushing] it to the forefront” (p. 11). Further, interdisciplinary arts-based practices have the potential to access new audiences, to pose questions in new ways, and for entirely new questions to be asked. The arts can be emotionally and politically evocative, they have the power to captivate, to be powerful. The arts “can get at elements of the lived experience that a textual form cannot reach... [evoking] compassion, empathy, and sympathy, as well as understanding” (p. 13). They have the ability to raise critical awareness and build coalitions across groups and to challenge dominant ideologies.

The frequency of the application of arts-based methods in identity work, according to Leavy, is due to the ability of the arts to challenge stereotypes and generate dialogue, that the arts ideally inspire emotional responses resulting in highly engaged dialogue. “The kind of dialog promoted by arts-based practices is predicated upon *evoking meanings*, not denoting them” (p. 14).

In the spring of 2015, I taught my first university course at the city jail in Richmond, Virginia. As a requirement of enrolling in the university course I was offering, university students would accompany me to the city jail each week for instruction. Every semester the pedagogical iteration shifts slightly as I ask myself, “who am I in service to?” While attempting to combat the myths and misinformation about incarcerated people that my students, however well-intentioned, sometimes have am I also creating a spectacle of incarcerated people? Without the virtually impossible permissions I would need to assess the impact the arts programs have on my incarcerated students, I can only rely on their anecdotal responses: sometimes positive, sometimes critical. I can, however, ask my students to reflect and respond to the impact these collaborative learning environments have on their becoming artist/educator.

Artist and educator Tesni Stephen participated in three university courses which met at the city jail during her graduate studies at VCU. Because of her sustained experience over the course of 18 months with the students at the city jail, a tenure longer than any other student’s at that time, her reflections have a perspective unique to her peers. For this reason, I was particularly compelled to share her arts-based response. The video collage, submitted as a reflection on her experiences in the courses and her process of becoming-arts educator, is also a reflection of that sustained engagement with a population of incarcerated persons and an acknowledgement of possible obstructions to empathetic pedagogies. The video juxtaposes images of the American Civil

War Confederate monuments with shots from one of Richmond's historically black neighborhoods. Stephen uses the tension of the American South's complex racial history and continued inequity as the frame for her revelations becoming teacher. It is at once tender and awkward in its honesty, but more importantly represents a critical move away from the colorblindness often found in arts pedagogies (Desai, 2010). Further, arts-based methods of research, like this one, have the ability, as Leavy (2009) argues, to widen the scope of who benefits from and is engaged in academic scholarship. "Free from disciplinary jargon and other prohibitive (even elitist) barriers, arts-based representations can be shared with diverse audiences, expanding the effect of scholarly research that traditionally circulates within the academy" (p. 14). Taking into account these potentials of arts-based methods, one might agree with Leavy's assertion that "arts-based practices help qualitative researchers access and represent the multiple viewpoints made imperceptible by traditional research methods" (p. 15).



Video 1. Video collage by Tesni Stephen.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B81ovi3gDc1kb2t1RDBtM2JybUk/view>

The service of art education is perhaps still inventing its critical role in combating myths and misinformation about who is incarcerated, who can learn, and how. In the collaborative learning environments at the city jail, I found evidence of art education students' "expanded understanding of what knowledge is, how people come to know things, and who has access to knowledge... about becoming empathetic, relational teachers with new awareness of how poverty or privilege shapes lives" (Buffington, Wolfgang, & Stephen, 2017). I posit that the arts-based methods through which students, like Stephen, share those findings make perceptible the multiplicity of access points to learning

and becoming-artist/educator. Further, I suggest that these are important first steps in developing critical arts pedagogies: the service of art education in the era of mass incarceration.

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