

Literacy Practices in Immigrant Detention Centers: A Conceptual Exploration of Access, Resistance, and Connection

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Abstract : Since 2004, the U.S. immigrant detention system has imprisoned more than five million people. President John F. Kennedy famously dubbed this country a “Nation of Immigrants.” Like many of the nation’s imagined ideals, the historical record finds its practices have never lived up to the tenets championed as defining qualities. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees argues the educational needs of people in carceral spaces, especially those in immigrant detention centers, are urgent and supported by human rights guarantees. However, there is a genuine dearth of literacy research in immigrant detention centers, compounded by a general lack of access to these spaces. Denying access to literacy education in detention centers is one way the history of xenophobic immigration policy persists. In this conceptual exploration, first-hand accounts from detained individuals, their families, and the organizations that work with them have been shared with the authors. In this paper, the authors draw on experiences, reflections, and observations from serving as volunteers to develop a conceptual framework for the ways in which literacy practices are enacted in detention centers. Literacy is an essential tool for accessing those detained in immigrant detention centers and a critical tool for those being detained to access legal and other services. One of the most striking things about the detention center is how to behave; gaining access for a visit is neither intuitive nor straightforward. The men experiencing detention are also at a disadvantage. The lack of access to their own documents is a profound barrier to men navigating the complex immigration process. Literacy is much more than a skill for gathering knowledge or accessing carceral spaces; literacy is fundamentally a source of personal empowerment. Frequently men find a way to reclaim their sense of dignity through work on their own terms by exchanging their literacy services for products or credits at the commissary. They write cards and letters for fellow detainees, read mail, and manage the exchange of information between the men and their families. In return, the men who have jobs trade items from the commissary or transfer money to the accounts of the men doing the reading, writing, and drawing. Literacy serves as a form of resistance by providing an outlet for productive work. At its core, literacy is the exchange of ideas between an author and a reader and is a primary source of human connection for individuals in carceral spaces. Father’s Day and Christmas are particularly difficult at detention centers. Men weep when speaking about their children and the overwhelming hopelessness they feel by being separated from them. Yet card-writing campaigns have provided these men with words of encouragement as thousands of hand-written cards make their way to the detention center. There are undoubtedly more literacies being practiced in the immigrant detention center where we work and at other detention centers across the country, and these categories are early conceptions with which we are still wrestling.

Keywords : detention centers, education, immigration, literacy

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