



EDU**T**OPICS

Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice

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One School, One Book

Poems Had High Impact On Students' Artistic Flow

For many, it was the power of reading about their own experience in the form of poems. Some who read about how artists express their feelings decided to try it themselves. The powerful messages in the poetry collection entitled "Punching The Air" reached the students of Yvonne B. Miller High School in many ways. But instructors agreed on one thing: The "One School, One Book" project brought together young men sharing a common experience through literature and art in a way that few had seen before.

The project's goal was to bring students together through the common reading of one book to engage them through social emotional learning (SEL) by means of a literacy component. The book chosen, "Punching the Air" by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, tells the story of a group of men accused and incarcerated for a crime they did not commit yet who find redemption through the experience, each in their own way.

Nearly 51 students across several units at Bon Air expressed a desire to participate.

"Once they had read the book they began to express themselves artistically during their lunch breaks," says Library

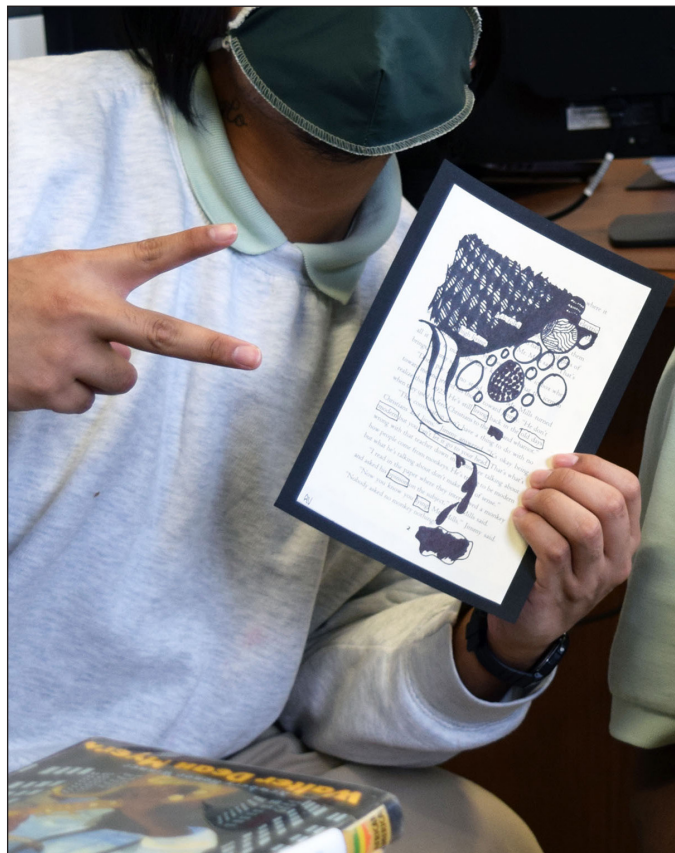


Assistant Vilma DeBarros. “The results were nothing short of amazing. We met twice with students to give them more opportunities to explore different kinds of poetry and art forms. The book focuses heavily on art, citing many artists and their work so this is a natural connection to make with them. The poetry reinforced the purpose of using art and literature to make sense of life events.”

Planning for the effort began last fall, when De Barros, Special Education Instructor Dr. Bethany Sharpe, Art Instructor Suzanne Lloyd and Videography Instructor Thomas Scott wrote the initial proposal, got it approved, and ordered the books. DeBarros and Dr. Sharpe then met with several unit counselors and BSU staff to explain the initiative and seek participation. The response was overwhelmingly positive with several unit staff requesting to be included.

Once the books arrived and were distributed, the students began reading. “Because the book is written in poetry form, we encouraged the students to write and create their own work similar to what they were reading,” DeBarros said. “We were excited to be invited to the students’ presentations of their creations and led a discussion with the students afterward.”

Art Instructor Lloyd interacted with the students during sessions, providing them artistic assistance and encouraged them to



A student displays an example of “black out poetry.”

consider their compositions and the use of a variety of lines (thin, medium and thick) to enhance their creations.

“They were comfortable asking for help and I was happy to give them ideas or show them how to sketch something using scrap paper,” said Lloyd. “Many expressed interest in taking an art class in the near future, so for me that was an added bonus. The students used their time wisely, working alone or with one other person. They shared a positive rapport, helping to create a peaceful atmosphere.”

In addition to the “blackout poetry” art projects, Lloyd introduced students to “calligram” word art. A calligram is a word or piece of text in which the design and layout of the letters creates a visual image related to the meaning of the words themselves. “This art form has become popular with younger artist in recent years,” Lloyd said. “Our students seem to enjoy it as well because it allows them to express themselves in new ways.”

“This project offered tremendous value to our residents,” said Counselor Eva Skillman. “So many of them were very proud of their creations and were showing off their projects to me and others.”

