

Guarino, R. (2016). Let the Girls' Voices Be Heard: Poetry as Healing for Girls in Delinquent Correctional Facilities. *Girls Studies: An Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2 (1), 1-17.

## Let the Girls' Voices Be Heard: Poetry as Healing for Girls in Delinquent Correctional Facilities

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### Abstract

This paper explores the power of poetry as a healing for delinquent girls through research and personal experience. These young, at-risk girls' voices are often silenced, and it is time for their stories to be heard.

*Keywords:* empowerment; poetry; healing; at-risk

My arms are wide open as I have girls clinging to my sides, holding on as tight as they can. Their need for comfort and love rises as each girl reads aloud a new poem about self-harm, homicide, drug addiction, and abandonment; each topic brings a new level of vulnerability. *Hold it together, Rebecca. You need to be strong when they are weak.* After each poem the room is filled with silence; tonight seems like a night just to listen. Alisha<sup>1</sup> speaks: "I wrote my first poem. I think it is time I share." Everyone is shocked, eagerly awaiting what she will say. Alisha never writes. But tonight, she reads: "He forcefully came upon me. He held me down and raped me. He raped me for over an hour. I looked at the clock, and an hour had gone by. He threatened to kill me and my family if I ever told anyone." I can't look up. I keep my head down, trying to hide my tears from the girls. Ms. Em, the leader of our poetry sessions, looks Alisha in the eyes and asks, "Did you tell anyone?" After what seems like an eternity, a quiet response follows, "No, this is the first time I've told anyone." Immediately, Ms. Em sternly speaks: "You always tell. I don't care who has done it or how you have been threatened, you always tell. Not a day goes by when you do not tell." Crying, Alisha gets up and hugs Ms. Em. The nurse walks in, saying, "It's time for medication and bed, girls. Poetry is over."

Alisha's story is only one of many from my time volunteering with the Voices of Beautiful Flowers, a program that brings poetry to adolescent delinquent girls living in a juvenile correctional facility. Much like Alisha and the other girls, many delinquent girls have gone through traumatic experiences before entering placement. They often feel trapped and alone, with no opportunity to express their emotions. Thus, they struggle to communicate how they are feeling. Even if they do, the system

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<sup>1</sup>The names of the girls were changed to protect their privacy.

can be insensitive by not prioritizing the girls' needs. In the example above, for instance, bedtime is more important than poetry; therefore, their experiences, situations, and voices are frequently silenced. Having group poetry as therapy allows the delinquent girls to have a voice. Alisha, for example, finally was able to confront her experience of rape. Group poetry gives the girls the opportunity to communicate comfortably with other girls through reading their words aloud. They also gain the benefit of connecting with their inner struggles. Because of their life experiences, the girls can all too easily internalize their conflicts and never actually find ways of coping with and processing their past traumas. Poetry can provide a highly productive communication method for delinquent girls to speak their minds and to heal the wounds from their past. In Dr. Gisela Konopka's essay, "Learning to Cope with Stresses and Strains," she discusses her personal experience working with delinquent girls to achieve healing through the arts: "I found excellent poetry written by girls in delinquency institutions...whether they shared this writing with others or not, for the young people themselves it was a very positive means of coping with frustration and loneliness" (Konopka, 1966).

I have witnessed how the juvenile justice system can be a vicious cycle. The girls get in trouble with the police at a young age, often due to being runaways or in possession of narcotics. Once in trouble with the police and in the system, the girls struggle to get out. As they are too young to go to jail, they get placed into the alternatives: programs, group homes, or detention centers. Placing troubled, at-risk, delinquent girls in the same living area and having them attend the same school can create many challenges. The girls are isolated from classmates in their original schools and prevented from living at home or spending time with their friends and family; they often have no connection to their former lives. Building new and productive relationships cannot always be an easy task. Providing group therapy poetry sessions for these young girls can result in healing from their traumatic experiences and genuine relationships with their peers. The sessions must be led by individuals professionally trained in the psychological development of at-risk girls who know how to manage their emotions so that the girls can reveal information without being further traumatized in the process. Thus, group poetry sessions can help break barriers as the girls share their stories of how they cannot escape the juvenile justice system.

Based on research and personal experience, this paper attempts to help raise awareness about the issue of silencing young girls while simultaneously giving their voices the stage. I have divided it into three sections. The reader will first gain an understanding of how girls are silenced, which will lead to the question of what can be done through the use of poetry; finally, the reader will see an example of the healing that writing can bring to girls' lives. The first section, *Journey of Being Silenced*, explores the ways in which delinquent girls, who are usually subject to correctional facilities, are silenced in their individual lives and by the greater society surrounding them. It is important, first, to identify the common factors that can lead to girls' oppression so that we can better understand why healing is necessary. If their situations silence these girls, poetry can reverse this silence. The second section,

Poetry Gives the Girls Voices, discusses research that shows the power and success of poetry as a method of healing. Writing poetry can provide delinquent girls with both therapy for their traumatic histories and a chance to voice their stories. The last section, Poetry Sessions in Action: Voices of Beautiful Flowers, presents my personal example of how working with delinquent girls using poetry brings healing to their lives. The three sections combined reveal why and how girls are silenced, how poetry serves as a vehicle for healing and, through a personal example, how group poetry therapy in a correctional facility gives delinquent girls a voice.

Despite the importance of learning about young delinquent girls' experiences, discussions of this topic are rare in scholarly literature. Thus, the research in this section of the paper relies heavily on work by Dr. Gisela Konopka, Meda Chesney-Lind, Laurie Schaffner, and a few other resources that examine the complexities of delinquent girls' situations. This paper will further discussion of the oppression that young, at-risk girls experience. The issue of silencing delinquent girls is one that is extremely important to Girls Studies; therefore, bringing together some of the existing research will ultimately help to give the issue its deserved presence.

### **The Journey of Being Silenced**

All girls have their own stories. They come into placement with their own histories, experiences, and memories. Learning about their lives before placement is essential to understanding the girls' personalities. Coming from broken homes, abusive backgrounds, unproductive schooling, drug abuse, and prostitution, the girls display emotional brokenness. Knowing their background is important to comprehending their situations. Being aware of their past is crucial to providing support through poetry.

Often, delinquent girls have been raised in broken homes, by single mothers. In the documentary, *Girl Trouble* (2006), directed by the independent filmmaker and educator, Lexi Leban, depicts the life of one young girl, Shangra. Her story provides an accurate representation of a delinquent girl's plight, raised by a drug-addicted, single mother. Due to her drug addiction, Shangra's mother had no means to provide shelter for herself or Shangra, so they were living on the streets. Shangra stepped up and tried to take care of her mother, ultimately becoming the maternal figure. Attempting to make enough money for survival, she became involved in dealing drugs. Throughout most of her narrative, Shangra focused on her relationship with her mother and her desire to stay connected. Because she was living on the streets, Shangra was unable to attend school or get an education (Kaczor). Shangra's plight provides insight into some common troubles confronted by delinquent girls before entering the system.

Many delinquent girls face family struggles similar to Shangra's. Often, the young girls have fathers who are incarcerated, so they live only with their mothers and siblings. Even if the father is living at home, neither parent may be in a position to raise children (Schaffner, 2006, p. 87). As their parents are absent, struggling to

provide for their families, or dealing with their own issues, the delinquent girls feel responsible for playing a protective role with their own mothers (Konopka, 1966, p. 53). In her research on working with girls in a correctional facility, Dr. Gisela Konopka (1966) found that “girls looked for reasons why mothers acted the way they did, and they showed an unusual amount of drive to help their mothers. They did not always put it into action, but it was as if they had become the adult and the mother was dependent on them” (p. 53). Rather than nurturing their daughters, mothers frequently became dependent on them. The girls are often not angry with their mothers, but still respect them and hope to take care of them; the girls take on the responsibility of being the adult. Furthermore, they have no way to communicate the internal struggle of growing up without a supportive figure in their households or lives; their problems are left unspoken.

Being raised with poor parenting affects the young girls emotionally. Despite the inadequate parenting that often occurs:

The adult, especially the parent, is someone the adolescent needs to rely on—even if he or she fights the adult. Most of the youngsters I met had no communication with adults, especially not with their parents. There was an insuperable gulf, a feeling that there was no understanding. It went beyond the normal separation of two generations. It left them alone, frightened, angry or desperate. (Konopka, 1966, p. 45)

The girls cannot seem to communicate with their parents. Parents are an essential part of a child’s life, and, without their support, the girls can suffer psychologically, feeling isolated and abandoned. Since the girls’ parents often seem uninterested in their lives and struggle to provide for them, the girls feel as though they are silenced and unheard. As the girls are not taken care of, they grow up quickly and become extremely self-reliant. This independence not only affects their physical survival, but also their emotional lives. The girls learn at a young age to deal with their problems on their own. Thus, they become closed off to communicating with others about their lives. The girls can feel internally trapped with no way out. The absence of a positive role model lessens the young girls’ ability to trust not only their parents, but also all other adults.

As a result of being raised in broken homes, delinquent girls can have trouble communicating with adults in general. Usually, the girls have only experienced adults in positions of authority:

Most of the teachers, social workers, judges, church representatives, policemen, do not live in their neighborhood, do not experience the noise, the smell, the fighting, the deprivation, the confusion in which most of the girls grow up. They are strangers with power...To the girl[s], therefore, most people in authority are not really ‘people.’ They cannot feel any common ground with them. (Konopka, 1966, p. 56)

The girls feel detached from those who control their environments, viewing them merely as people in power who do not know or wish to know the girls’ stories. This

disconnection creates distrust of authority in general. Often, even in detention centers, the staff is not available to listen to the girls or to help them work through their pasts (Schaffner, 2006, p. 18). The girls' attitudes and resistance toward adults can make it difficult for productive communication. Since the girls have no relationship with the adults who are supposed to help, the girls can feel silenced, believing that no one understands them. The relationships with authority that are intended to provide comfort do not actually provide a safe place for the girls to express their struggles.

Childhood in a broken home is often coupled with the sexual abuse of these delinquent girls (Schaffner, 2006, p. 60). Some men see their daughters or stepdaughters as their sexual property (Chesney-Lind, 1997, p. 28). Victims of childhood sexual abuse experience "psychopathology, sexual difficulties, decreased self-esteem, and interpersonal problems" (Mullen, 1996, p. 7). The after-effects of sexual abuse can also include abortions of unwanted pregnancies, eating disorders, and self-loathing. In conjunction with sexual abuse, girls also often experience emotional neglect (Schaffner, 2006, p. 60). This combination of sexual abuse and emotional neglect can make girls feel emotionally trapped. They often cannot find productive ways to cope and sometimes seek romantic and/or sexual relationships with boys to fill the void (Schaffner, 2006, p. 112). In addition, experiencing depression, self-hate, and disregard can trigger emotions of abandonment. Victims can feel isolated as they have trouble getting past the shame and stigma of sexual abuse ("After Silence"). Having no one with whom the girls can communicate their emotions, they refuse to speak openly about their emotions not only to others, but also to themselves.

After experiencing sexual abuse, the girls often try to run away from home. Despite these efforts to run away, their parents have the power to enforce the girls' return (Chesney-Lind, 1997, p. 28). If the girls continue to flee, they can be incarcerated (Chesney-Lind, 1997, p. 29). Girls on the run without supportive parents often get involved in delinquency and prostitution (Kruttschnitt and Giordano, 2009, p. 123). In fleeing sexual abuse, the girls engage in these activities that add emotional scarring on top of the abuse. Being a young girl on the streets can trigger further feelings of abandonment, leading to the girls thinking of themselves as lost, alone, and misunderstood. This loneliness results in an increased lack of communication, making the girls feel isolated and alone.

Once placed in the correctional facilities, girls can turn from seeking fulfillment in heterosexual relationships to seeking fulfillment in homosexual relationships. While locked up in single-sex detention centers, the girls' needs for "romantic physical closeness" results in relationships with other girls (Konopka, 1966, p. 101). The affection for girls, in Dr. Konopka's research, is stronger for the girls within the detention centers than for the young girls outside. The girls' past experiences often result in loneliness and low self-confidence. As a solution to this loneliness, the girls claim to feel pressure to be with other girls as an escape. In the world outside the correctional facilities, girls can view themselves as ugly, unwanted,

and undesirable, even creating competition with other girls for attention from boys. Therefore, some girls may feel as though they are settling for less than they desire when entering into homosexual relationships (Konopka, 1966, p. 101).

In some cases, the desire for homosexual relationships will result from the fear of men that delinquent girls often have. Girls who have experienced heterosexual sexual abuse can view sex with a man as dirty, disgusting, and threatening. These girls often believe they will not be able to find a man who will respect them. These girls desire a relationship rather than just sex, so they turn to other girls. The girls can be silenced through this process because they do not feel their homosexual behavior will be accepted. For many of these girls, the justifications that they employ for pursuing homosexual relationships can be a cover up for the feelings they do have toward other girls. However, girls may fear negative judgment from authority figures about these same-sex relationships, whether inside or outside the facility; therefore, they may not talk about their relations openly or honestly (Konopka, 2009, p. 102). The facilities often do not provide a safe place for discussing or understanding LGBTQ relationships (Schaffner, 2006, p. 166). Without services and staff capable of addressing these girls' situations sympathetically, the girls may feel further isolated, silenced, and ostracized in their homosexual relationships, relationships they initiated as a refuge from the degradation of the heterosexual relationships they fear.

Another place at-risk girls are misunderstood and silenced is within their original schools before they enter facilities for delinquents. Many schools have a zero-tolerance policy for violence or other infractions (Schaffner, 2006, p. 66). However, girls in poverty-stricken communities often experience sexual harassment in schools. In response to being harassed, the girls decide to carry weapons in order to feel safe (Schaffner, 2006, p. 65). When they choose to use the weapons in schools to protect themselves, the girls get into trouble because of the policy (Schaffner, 2006, p. 67). They are usually sent to court immediately and put on probation. Once on probation, any further trouble they may have with the law, such as running away, can lead to incarceration in a facility. Thus, the girls are often locked up for minor offenses (Schaffner, 2006, p. 67). Often, minor infractions do not receive equal punishment: poor girls of color are quickly prosecuted; however, white girls' offenses may not trigger the same harsh treatment (Vega). Girls of color, in particular, find themselves placed into the system at a very young age, and their punishment does not necessarily correlate to the severity of their offenses (Schaffner, 2006, p. 19). Incarceration does not help to fix the problems these girls face (Steffensmeier and Schwartz, 2009, p. 54). The incongruity between their actions and the severe legal consequences can frustrate the girls; at a young age, being stuck in a system that is extremely difficult to escape can become an aggravating factor for their plight. Once again, the girls may feel isolated and abandoned by a system that is unsympathetic and illogical. There is a lack of communication about the girls' situations in the system that judges them; ultimately, no one hears the girls' stories.

## Poetry Gives the Girls Voices

By the time the legal system places delinquent girls in a correctional facility, the girls feel as if they have been silenced. Girls who are “imprisoned often hide their inner self as a method of self-protection from what is around them. It can cover the true nature of a person” (Kreuter, 2006, p. 42). The girls put up walls, protecting themselves from the potential hurt that can result from trusting people. Even while the girls are sharing their stories, they may remain distanced from their situations; they may try to disconnect from their pasts as much as possible. Schaffner has noted that “Some of the girls who insisted there was no connection whatsoever between their exposure to trauma and their current troubles seemed to disassociate themselves from the terror while they were recounting it. Many appeared a little bored by telling their stories over and over again to yet another social worker...” (Schaffner, 2006, p. 72). She further explains: “Often they deployed a passive voice when describing their victimization...Such a dissociative voice is common among trauma victims; psychologists describe disassociation as a vital defense mechanism in response to crisis” (Schaffner, 2006, p. 67). The girls become immune to their own stories, tending to separate themselves from their pasts. Although they talk about their own histories and experiences, the girls silence themselves by dissociating from the horror of what they are verbalizing. Poetry is often an effective solution to this problem. In order to reconnect with their pasts in a healing manner, the girls can use their voices in writing poetry. Poetry can provide a productive means for reconciling girls to themselves and reconnecting them with their own experiences. Especially in a correctional facility setting, group poetry sessions can provide a safe community where the girls can learn through individual writing and through the writing of others.

Poetry can allow the girls’ voices to be heard. Poetry is a unique way to foster communication in a group home: “Communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, is implicit in the therapeutic process, and often the non-verbal can become verbal through the use of poetry” (Klein and Longo, 2004). Poetry enables the delinquent girls to express what they usually cannot put into words. Despite the difficulty the girls experience in communicating, poetry can be a solution to their internal sense of isolation. Ultimately, “The important fact is that the individual speaks, expresses, goes on record, and communicates his [or her] innermost feeling and hopes through the medium of poetry” (Barkley, 1973, p. 1).

Poetry in a group setting has been productive outside of correctional facilities as well. In her essay, “Poetry: A Therapeutic Tool in the Treatment of Drug Abuse,” the poet Ruth Schechter (1973) discusses her experiences of poetry therapy in a group setting: “Residents listened attentively to one another’s poems, showing concern, offering help and interest. The spirit was: if you can’t say it, write it!” (p. 19). Those in her program saw the benefits of writing poems in terms of self-expression. They recognized that writing could be easier than speaking. Once they wrote about their experiences, their pasts were easier to process and to share. If this

group poetry therapy can be successful in a drug abuse support group, it has potential to be productive in a correctional facility for girls also.

During group poetry sessions—unlike creative writing workshops for professionals—no criticism is needed. The girls are free to write however they want, in whatever style they desire. In a group poetry therapy environment, “poems are never edited. Editing belongs in a poetry-for-craft setting” (Klein and Longo, 2004). The girls do not feel the pressures of judgment or the threat of correction; they can write freely whatever is on their minds. Therefore, without the formal structure or demands of a writing class, “There is...only listening. In poetry as therapy, people learn to listen to themselves more and more, and to respect their voice” (Longo). There is comfort in this absence of criticism and in the freedom simply to write; that gives the girls a chance to use their voices while feeling liberated and expressive. An accepting environment is essential to delinquent girls, as many of them have felt lost and abandoned throughout their entire lives. Once the girls see that they are respected, they can allow themselves to be more vulnerable and continue to communicate how they feel.

Group therapy can be beneficial both to those sharing their poems and to those who are merely listening. In a juvenile delinquent facility, the girls can often relate to each other’s experiences. By attending group poetry sessions, the girls learn more about their friends’ pasts and come to understand each other better. When listening to a poem that easily “speaks to our experience, there is a shift, a click within. Someone has understood our darkness by naming their own. We feel less alone” (Klein and Longo, 2004). Those who are merely listening feel a connection to the poetry being read. Their feelings of loneliness lessen as they learn about the struggles of others, which are often similar to their own experiences. The girls can find peace in knowing that others can express what they cannot. Knowing it is possible to express difficult emotions, the girls may experience the motivation finally to articulate how they feel. Thus, through poetry sessions, “a young person might learn for the first time that he [or she] has the power to move other people” (Fridman, 2010). The feeling of helping others can provide a means of communication so that the girls will no longer feel silenced, but valued instead.

Not only does poetry benefit those listening, but also it can move those who are reading aloud. As poetry is a shared experience, “When strong emotions can be expressed in an acceptable, safe manner, these feelings can subside. There is great release, and enjoyment in sharing with others, who identify. Balance is restored” (Longo, 2014, p. 6). The girls reading aloud feel emotionally and physically rejuvenated. Sharing their words and having their voices heard by others can be both comforting and motivational. Girls can finally feel connected to others and learn to trust them. Vulnerability within group poetry sessions can improve communication as the girls read and write poetry and comfort each other. For girls who have experienced a history of isolation, the group poetry sessions provide opportunities to be a part of a community of other girls with similar struggles. Ultimately, this reverses the silence girls have endured throughout their entire lives.



The process of writing poetry can help delinquent girls communicate with their inner selves. Often, girls silence themselves as they try to avoid processing their situations. It is common that “Within the bounds of a correctional setting we find a great deal of hidden creativity. Supposedly impossible, frowned upon, non-verbalized feelings are discovered. The need to express the soul is another often-suppressed wish of the resident of a correctional institution” (Barkley, 1973, p. 1). Therefore, creating a safe environment for the girls can encourage them to discover that hidden creativity, expressing what is commonly suppressed.

The girls have experiences that have made them feel silenced and neglected. Writing poetry can help break this silence. Poetry “brings clarity and order to what is chaotic or not understandable. When we are able to connect with something deep within and express it, there is a sense of relief and satisfaction in communicating first with ourselves and then another person” (Longo, “Poetry Therapy”). Often, girls have trouble sorting through and making sense of their pasts. They have memories that seem incomprehensible. But, writing poetry can teach them to communicate with their own psyches, as well as with others; they no longer silence themselves, but instead can express their experiences through poetry. It helps the girls to move toward self-discovery: “one of the benefits of poetry reading and writing is not only does it help define the ‘I’, but strengthen it. This is necessary if we are to be a part of the world...and when we feel ourselves not alone in the world, but a part of and integrated with all that exists, self-esteem grows” (Longo, “Poetry Therapy”). As the girls discover what they have suppressed, they feel connected; they have finally communicated. They are no longer silenced, but relate to the world around them. This comfort builds their self-esteem and confidence.

In *The Adolescent Girl in Conflict*, Konopka (1966) provides anecdotes from her work with girls in a juvenile delinquent facility where group therapy was effective. As she explains, “Self discovery clues were heard in new ways, urging honest, precise and concrete revelations in poems. Imagination stretched toward personal identity and human values” (p. 19). Poetry became so healing that “Residents had begun writing the ‘unspeakable.’ As the program developed, poetry therapy proved to be a curative bridge, demonstrating that a poem can snap the lights on, offering clues for preventive medicine, hastening self-discovery. Response from residents often was, ‘Yes, now I see’” (Konopka, 1966, p. 18). The girls were learning from their experiences and seeing the value of poetry. They recognized that poetry has the capability of helping them through self-discovery, while showing them a creative means of coping.

By sharing her experiences, Konopka (1966) pushes readers to view the girls as individuals. She encourages them not to disregard what the child is saying, but rather to listen in an unbiased manner. She recalls, “I asked the girls for diaries or poetry, and those who wanted to share them with me...It was touching and miraculous to see how open the girls were, how very seldom they purposely distorted their stories, how hungry they were to talk to someone who would listen without penalizing them for their confidence” (p. 13). Konopka demonstrates the success of

providing poetry sessions for young girls in correctional facilities. When given a comfortable environment in which they can express their emotions, the girls will take advantage of the opportunity. Often, girls in placement are looking for ways to share their stories and to find people who will listen; the girls merely need a chance to use their voices and be heard. Since they have been silenced throughout their lives, it is essential for treatment facilities to provide them with this option.

The treatment facilities must create productive environments in order for poetry sessions to be successful. Throughout my experiences, I have seen some essential needs that correctional facilities often neglect. Poetry sessions should connect with social workers and psychologists. It is important that the staff, workers, and volunteers collaborate in helping the girls rather than compartmentalizing each area. The girls will benefit most if all the adults working with them are on the same page with the same goals. In order for the girls to receive the most effective assistance, the services at the facilities need to be supportive. Poetry sessions can open up traumatic memories and thoughts, and the girls need help coping with these through medication, support, and therapy. The staff members should be highly qualified to handle the emotions that the girls experience from their pasts. As long as the facilitators are structurally strong and supportive, group poetry therapy can thrive.

### **Poetry Sessions in Action: Voices of Beautiful Flowers**

In my work with *Voices of Beautiful Flowers*, I have witnessed the success of group poetry. *Voices of Beautiful Flowers* is led by Ms. Em, a woman whom I met through an education course about diversity taught by Professor Shuaib Meachamb at the University of Delaware. One Wednesday, during my education class, Ms. Em came to speak to us. She started to share her life experiences: emigrating from Trinidad to New York City as a young girl, losing loved ones, publishing her own book, and even opening her own bookstore. My heart softened as she told us about a treatment facility for troubled teenagers where she volunteers. Every Wednesday night, Ms. Em visits young girls from ages eleven to eighteen and shares poetry with them. During her lecture, she offered to take students with her to visit the girls. That Wednesday night, I canceled all my plans, picked up Katrina Bleeker, another undergraduate at the University of Delaware, met Ms. Em at her bookstore in Delaware, and drove with them to Philadelphia to meet the girls.

During our program, we do our best to make the session an open time for the girls to share. Most days, the girls come in with pages of poetry that they have written throughout the week, which they are excited to share. We sit in a circle, so we can all see one another, and we listen to each girl as she reads her poetry. The girls are eager not only to share their writing but also to get feedback from the group. Sometimes, the girls are just excited to see volunteers and to be together so that we can all simply sit and talk about their lives and how their weeks are going. The importance of *Voices of Beautiful Flowers* lies in the comfort and foundation that

poetry provides. The freedom in being able to share their poetry has created a safe environment for the girls to talk about their lives.

We call our program *Voices of Beautiful Flowers* for specific reasons. We refer to the girls as beautiful flowers because we watch them enter the correctional facility as little seeds and then blossom into beautiful flowers. We have added the word “voices” so the girls know that, when they enter into our community, their voices will be heard.

The routine of our sessions is simple. Not much of their writing happens during the session; instead, they share what they have written on their own. We meet once a week for about an hour and a half with the girls. Usually ten to twenty girls show up, but poetry is open to all the girls in the facility. The development of the girls’ poetry from their first session to the session before they graduate often shows dramatic improvement in their writing skills, emotional stability, and confidence. When the girls first arrived, they were extremely shy and embarrassed to share any of their writing. We gave the girls a journal and told them to write anything on their minds throughout the week. We did not give the girls any poetic instruction as we did not want to limit their possibilities; rather, we would read poetry from previous graduates of the facility and work by other famous poets, such as Tupac and Langston Hughes. As some girls in the poetry sessions shared their writing, they encouraged the other girls to write about their experiences as well. After only attending group sessions, girls were undoubtedly motivated to write, for they wanted to participate in the sharing. After attending multiple poetry sessions, the girls felt more comfortable writing. Occasionally, if a girl was very self-conscious about writing, Ms. Em helped her start off her poem, asking what was on her mind and guiding her simply to write down her thoughts. Once the girls gained confidence, their poetry was incredible. Other than helping them edit their grammar and spelling, we let the girls’ voices take flight. To my surprise, the girls’ poetry was powerful and well-written, even though their at-risk situations compromised their formal education. Their writing was not impressive because of their poetic styles, but rather because of the feelings they expressed.

Poetry has the power to positively impact each girl’s life. I learned that group poetry sessions are a good start to creating a supportive group for young, delinquent girls. The concept of poetry is low-pressure for the girls; they can write about anything they desire, even if it isn’t personal or about their lives. The title, “Poetry Session,” as opposed to “class” or “workshop,” establishes a comfortable atmosphere where the girls feel welcome. Once the girls start coming to poetry sessions, they appreciate the power inherent in poetry. As each girl shares, more girls feel encouraged to open up. Girls can come and read from their journals, sing, or do anything they would like during these sessions; poetry is just a convenient place to start. As long as the girls find a creative form of expression, we can see that they are growing. However, poetry is essential to the environment of group therapy.

Poetry helped the girls to cope with situations that they had pushed far down into their pasts. The girls who have experienced situations like rape, abuse, or

commercial sexual exploitation often do not acknowledge the memories of their situations. I saw girls who avoided processing their experiences because it was too painful, and they were ashamed. The girls often cannot sit and talk about what they have been through; however, they can write. While alone, the girls write, finding ways to express their feelings. Then, once they have communicated with themselves, they can more easily communicate with others. For example, Alisha, in the anecdote that opened this paper, could not process her past until she started to write. Then she was suddenly able to share.

I have seen the power of poetry bond the girls to one another. Group poetry therapy, in my experience, creates relationships among the girls. As we share thoughts during group session, the girls often say that they read each other's poems prior to our meeting. When needing the confidence to read aloud, they look to their friends, who have already read their poems, for encouragement. We also encounter girls who write poems together. If they feel they have experiences that were interconnected, the girls will write a joint poem. That shows how the girls have not only learned to communicate as part of their own personal healing, but also they have learned to trust and communicate with others. By relating to each other's experiences, the girls are more able to connect and communicate through poetry.

The girls wrote poems that finally acknowledged many of the past experiences that silenced them. They wrote, for example, about coming from broken homes: "Our house was always a mess there was pee all over the bathroom. At fourteen I was taken from her because she was abusive then I got adopted and felt like I never belonged" (*Voices of Beautiful Flowers*, 2014, p. 82). The girls wrote about not being able to talk about their pasts: "So many tears I've cried for all this pain I have inside, crying is what I do, it's how I make it through all the challenges I face" (p. 170). They wrote of losing loved ones on the streets: "My brother got shot in front of me because they set him up, so my heart is broken apart" (p. 19). The girls wrote about everything they were feeling and experiencing. From broken families to drug and alcohol addiction to their relationships with boyfriends to relationships with girlfriends to observations about the world around them, the girls wrote about what they encountered in their lives. They wrote about these experiences, but, ultimately, writing poetry led to healing.

I have seen poetry working to further the girls' inner healing. The girls often enter poetry sessions in a terrible mood; however, once the poetry session is over, they leave relieved. For example, one night Anna walked in and grumpily sat down in the corner. She refused to talk to anyone. I went over to her and gave her a hug. She immediately threw her journal at me and told me which page to open, and I read her poem:

**I Can**  
You can love me  
But only I can make me happy  
You can teach me  
But only I can do the learning

You can lead me  
But only I can walk the path  
You can promote me  
But I have to succeed  
You can coach me  
But I have to win the game  
You can even pity me  
But I have to bear the sorrow  
For the gift of love  
Is not a food that feeds me  
It is the sunshine  
That nourishes that which I must finally harvest for myself  
So if you love me  
Don't just sing me your song  
Teach me to sing  
For when I am alone  
I will need the melody

Anna's poem was not entirely negative. She was struggling with motivating herself to change—recognizing how she needed to take responsibility for her actions and how she could move on from her past. Anna's story shows that the girls frequently don't know what to do with their emotions; they do not know what to say aloud. Rather than talking, Anna let her writing do the job. Through her poetry, she was able to express her emotions to me, an authority figure whom she trusted. Once I gave her affirmation that her poetry was beautiful, she shared it with the group. She read her poem twice that night.

Writing can also provide a tangible way to connect the girls to the dreams they have for their futures. In her poem, Nikki wrote, "I write because it makes me feel like what I'm writing can be accomplished" (*Voices of Beautiful Flowers*, 2014, p. 80). As she writes about her goals, she feels they are achievable. Rather than her aspirations remaining fantasies, poetry brings her dreams to life; she believes her dreams can be realized. Other girls often write about the plans they have for the future, what they want to be:

**Past, Present, Future**

Today is today  
Tomorrow is tomorrow  
Past is past  
First is first  
Last is last  
What does this mean?  
It means that you shouldn't dwell on your past.  
Move on, focus on your future.  
You should live for today;  
Because it may be your last day.

During our poetry sessions, we engaged the girls in an activity called “Why I Write.” We had each girl write a poem about why she writes. One poem by Emily follows:

**Why I Write**

I write because it amazes me,  
It helps me imagine more and more;  
It’s like something is opening up a door  
To help me see who I’m really suppose to be;  
A beautiful young lady,  
And not on these streets going crazy.  
I set here and cry myself to sleep,  
Just wondering who I, Tulip am;  
Really supposed to be I don’t know,  
That’s why I write.  
I see my brother in the street  
Getting killed just wishing that fun  
Wound would have healed.  
Is it true we lie, cheat and steal?  
Maybe so, will I, never know.  
Please someone tell me am  
I really suppose to be me?  
And that’s why I write  
Just to see  
Why I write.

(*Voices of Beautiful Flowers*, 2014, p. 84).

In Emily’s poem, we fully see the power of writing poetry for its own sake. The writer’s imagination expands, as she opens her mind to explore so much more than she thought she could. She looks beyond the limits she had set for herself to the person she really wants to be. In the midst of her reflective thoughts about her personality, she immediately thinks of the death of her brother. Through writing, she is able to think about the past and express her frustration with her brother’s fate. By writing this poem, she demonstrates how poetry can stretch her imagination, challenge who she is, and enable her to reflect upon the murder of her brother. Poetry, in this sense, has been a growing, healing, and expressive process for Emily.

In the midst of our poetry sessions, we published a book of the girls’ poems, *Voices of Beautiful Flowers*. Helping to publish the girls’ poetry was a powerful and inspirational activity. Although nervous, the girls were excited that their work would be in print. The possibility that their voices could be heard and make a difference in other delinquent girls’ lives inspired them. Anna wrote, “I write to help other girls like me...” (*Voices of Beautiful Flowers*, 2014, p. 82). Publishing the girls’ book continued the process of healing for these young girls and had a positive impact on others. As the girls read poems written by academy graduates, they were encouraged by their words and strove to be like those girls. They wanted to be poets. Thus, by

connecting with other girls' poetry, the girls were inspired. By publishing a book of the girls' original work, we hope that it will inspire other delinquent girls and help educate those unfamiliar with the system as well.

My work with the girls through *Voices of Beautiful Flowers* has taught me the benefits of writing. I have seen the healing that writing can bring into each girl's life. The juvenile justice system can be a vicious cycle for these young girls, as their voices are silenced along the way. They often feel neglected, abandoned, and misunderstood. Providing group poetry sessions can teach them to use their voices to connect with their inner selves, as well as with the other girls in placement. Poetry offers a means for the girls to heal from their past experiences. Their poetry can help others better understand where they come from and who they are as individuals. The more the girls write, the more inspired they become. Each poem has its own way of fighting for each girl's voice to be heard. To some, poetry fills the holes in their hearts and lives. The poetry is not merely made up of words on a piece of paper, it is made up of anything and everything each girl needs at that moment. If poetry can mean this much to one girl, imagine what it can do for others too:

**My Poem**

My poem can fight  
My poem can sing  
My poem can fly  
But it has no wings.  
My poem can wake  
you up from your sleep  
My poem can rhyme  
and stick to the beat  
My poem can give  
My poem can take  
My poem can tell  
the real from the fake  
My poem can see  
My poem makes you read  
My poem isn't food  
but it does fill a need.

*The author would like to thank Margaret Stetz; Mae and Robert Carter, Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Delaware, for their help in preparing this manuscript and for her encouragement in pursuing my passion for participation and research in Girls Studies, focusing on the juvenile justice system.*

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