CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

It was impossible for me to approach the study of Passages Academy myopically. My intention was to create a portrait of a school, a faculty and student body and to sketch out my place amongst these groups. I have tried to present this free of bias, judgment and, whenever possible, emotion. Nonetheless, it is difficult to describe a system with which I am so intimately involved without feeling the need to expose important trends that warrant further evaluation. For that purpose, I will use this final chapter to acknowledge the implications of this study as it pertains to discussions of juvenile detention education, particularly in light of the emerging shift to a more robust prison industrial complex. I hope to present a unique perspective on the ways this shift may affect the educational and economic futures of New York City's court involved youth and, if possible, offer modest prescriptions to address this situation.

First, it is important to make explicit the following data surrounding incarcerated youth:

- Incarceration rates are climbing.
- Black males are five to seven times more likely than white males to be arrested for similar crimes (Dance, 2002).
- Thirty-two percent of youth in juvenile correctional facilities have been previously identified as having special learning needs.
- In 2010, New York City spent over six and a half times more to incarcerate one young person than it did to educate him or her. The cost of detaining a juvenile offender in New York City was $358/day; in other words, it cost $130,670 a year to confine a young person to a secure detention facility. By contrast, the New York City Department of Education spent $18,597 annually per student on education (Public Education Finances, 2010).

In this book I have identified the relevant frameworks of thought for educators within a juvenile detention classroom setting and observed how theory underpins juvenile detention and education. Teaching at Passages Academy is in many ways a snapshot of New York's, past, present and future. As a means of emancipation, teachers have to use the students' lives

as a starting place and extend beyond their own horizons. Many of the children in this study are lost, confused, scared and lacking a sense of self. Real, everyday life problems and needs of students, that is, the immediate context of students' lives, must be part of the lived classroom experience. Unfortunately, it is often easier to ignore such complex and challenging issues, choosing instead to emphasize the means of strict technical control and judicial coordination that disavow the language kids use.

In this study, the issue of discrimination amongst or against the incarcerated youth has been highlighted and the need for anti-discriminatory policies have been demonstrated. It is important to stress, though, that policies seeking to right this particular controversy must take into account the very personal needs of each individual student. To ignore the circumstances of the students' lives is to miss an important part of the story and this part of the story oftentimes feels all too easy to omit.

It is evident and, at the risk of editorializing, discouraging to witness how the juvenile justice system in New York City is becoming increasingly punitive and lopsided with regards to race and geography. While this book has explored structural, governmental and pedagogical issues, my first-hand experience also includes witnessing the profoundly distressing consequences of this shift for the children and families of our poorest communities. Needless to say, there are dramatic fiscal concerns as well. Yet as a teacher in a classroom full of faces and names (and not spreadsheets), these concerns can seem far less relevant.

The difficulties described in the previous chapters are beginning to be acknowledged by more formal institutions and recently there have been some positive steps toward easing the complicated bureaucratic inconveniences that students face.

In 2012, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the Juvenile Justice Reform Initiative, "Close to Home." A major aspect of this reform seeks to discontinue the practice of sending many juvenile offenders from New York City upstate to detention centers located hundreds of miles away from their families and communities. Most young offenders sent upstate often serve short sentences of less than six months, but the isolation created by long distance incarceration can further fray family ties that were often tenuous prior to detention. The Governor's "Close to Home" initiative has brought youth in upstate detentions centers back to facilities in New York's five boroughs that offer more intensive supervisions and, most significantly, allow inmates to stay closer to their communities. Nonetheless, as the *New York Times* reports, there is a growing feeling among policymakers

(including prosecutors) that the "Close To Home" initiative does not go far enough. Critics say that New York must "limit the number of young people sent to expensive prison-like residential facilities with the goal of creating more community-based intervention programs." Such alternative programs have proved less expensive and more effective at reducing crime (Confessore & Lippman, 2009).

If adolescence were not already difficult enough, incarcerated students transitioning back to their homes and community schools face several obstacles made exponentially more difficult by systemic complications. One of the more challenging aspects of re-entry is the lack of any official system in place for tracking and monitoring the enrollment and transfer of materials for students returning to school. Consequently, many students released from juvenile detention experience numerous obstacles, even in matters as simple and practical as obtaining transcripts and transferring credits from correctional schools to their community public schools (Black, 2005).

"Close To Home" is a good example of a well-intentioned policy that has been a struggle to implement in a practical context. And, more broadly, it speaks to the increasingly Byzantine nature of the juvenile justice system. Nonetheless, it is an important program and, more significantly, the intent behind it indicates a focus on these vital issues.

In June of 2009, the first official principal of Passages, Sydney Blair, retired after twelve years of leadership. Since her departure, the school has had five different Principals. During the post Sydney Blair years (six years at the time of publication), Passages Academy has closed, reopened, then closed—some within months of opening—more than seven additional school sites.

In 2011 the Department of Juvenile Justice merged with the Administration for Children's Services to create the Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ). DYFJ now runs the non-secure, limited secure and secure juvenile detention settings from where Passages Academy Schools are housed. Additionally, the DYFJ has eliminated its aftercare programs in the wake of almost $12 million in cuts. The direct effect is that caseworkers providing transitional support to students are no longer located in the youths' neighborhoods, working instead in detention centers. In order for aftercare services to be effective, clients must be able to access them – and must feel comfortable doing so. By shifting its aftercare from the community into detention centers, the DYFJ no longer sufficiently meets the needs of the children and their families. Thus, many of the 5,000 youths under 15 who are annually discharged from city detention have been left to face these transitions alone (Education in Detention, 2012). The ripple effect of budget

cuts for children who are incarcerated feels exponentially more significant; their tenuous transitions into adulthood are thrown off course at the worst possible time.

Furthermore, if adolescence were not brief enough, New York is one of four states that treats minors aged sixteen and over as adults in the criminal justice system. They can fall under the jurisdiction of the State Supreme Court and the supervision of the New York City Department of Corrections and may be incarcerated on Rikers Island pre- and/or post-trial, where they can serve sentences of up to one year or in upstate prisons for even longer periods. All other governmental and non-governmental agencies define adulthood at an older age: eighteen (Department of Health and Mental Hygiene), twenty-one (Administration of Child Services and Department of Youth and Community Development) or up to twenty-four years of age (in the case of some Community Based Organizations and health clinics). Although these differing definitions of adulthood may seem like benign bureaucratic technicalities, they can actually create problems of coordination among governmental and voluntary agencies that affect these youth, pre- and post-release.

New York residents have the legal right to continue public education through age 21, whether incarcerated or not. Students who enter the criminal justice system are unlikely to graduate from high school on time. Again, this is another example of a seemingly unnecessarily complicated bureaucracy causing countless real world problems for children at one of the most sensitive times in their lives.

Historically, re-entry became an issue of concern in the nineteenth century, leading, in 1870, to the formation of the American Correctional Association, which addressed the support, transition, rehabilitation and opportunities for former prisoners. For more than a century, until the mid-1970s, there was an overwhelmingly "unified recognition of the importance of rehabilitation programs to provide education, vocation training, psychological treatment and other life skills to prepare incarcerated people for a promising return to their community" (Curtis & Spriggs, 2001). Yet the criminal justice community's goals for the penal system throughout the country have slowly evolved (or devolved) to the point that, over the last few decades, rehabilitation has been replaced by deterrence and incapacitation.

Programs in the community that assist with re-entry have traditionally been few in number and limited in scope. This represents both in-prison and post-release transition programs, which are equally critical to their success and to public safety. In his 2004 State of the Union address, President

Bush recognized that there is little continuity between prison programs and re-entry programs, saying, "If they can't find work, or a home, or help, they are much more likely to commit crime and return to prison."

Student transition requires a long-term road map with explicit directions. If the policy-making agencies are not persuaded by a moral imperative, then maybe the strategic and financial fact that it cost $358 a day to keep a child locked up will reinvigorate these much needed aftercare/re-entry programs. Without such help, the current system has created a civic death penalty for former custodial students. At the risk of repetition, the financial implications discussed above seem like the most egregious bureaucratic oversight because the equation is so simple and the solution so clear.

As important as it is to address and re-evaluate how students are handled in this complicated system, it is also important to reflect on how teachers can be best prepared for working in schools like Passages Academy. As explained in a previous chapter, I came to Passages in a roundabout way and, up until then, had never heard about any school that catered to this student body. I felt disappointed that I had not been made aware of this kind of school throughout my many years studying to be an educator or during my pre-service teaching; I would have immediately jumped at the opportunity to work at a school like Passages. In this way, I think it is important that those studying to become educators have the chance to learn about this and other kinds of alternative schools.

In addition to making future teachers aware of the myriad school systems, teaching colleges must also prepare teachers to address a varied student body. As an example, my students have an often-contrary disposition based on their extreme life circumstances. Schools of education need to play a role in fostering a more flexible dogma that allows teachers to more effectively serve diverse classrooms and student groups. Much of my job is not something that can be taught; it is based on instinct and difficult to articulate to someone who has not been inside this kind of classroom. It is therefore that much more important to provide future teachers with the tools they need to approach this and any other uniquely challenging classroom setting.

Finally, I think it is vital to increase the number of African American teachers, particularly men, who currently represent less than 2% of America's K-12 teaching force. As the demographics of incarcerated youth indicate that the population is overwhelmingly comprised of young black men, it seems important to have people of a similar demographic leading the classroom. My illustration of Mr. Smalls' successful classroom navigation in a previous

chapter is emblematic of the benefits of this relationship. It would be a serious mistake—however it might seem—to overlook Mr. Smalls' identity as it relates to his incredible impact on these students. He is a wonderful teacher and an inspiring person and it is for this reason that children benefit by being exposed to role models who share their background. And even more subtly, Mr. Smalls' identity may provide the students with a feeling that they can follow in his footsteps in a more literal way, teaching and being a role model to other students like them.

Most significantly, although Passages can offer a wonderful alternative education, it and similar schools are often lacking in sufficient attention paid to students. A recent report about the school at Rikers Island echoes some of the problems I see at Passages. According to NY1 News, the average high school student at Rikers Island "reads at a fifth-grade level and many of the 16- to 21-year-old inmates are functionally illiterate." Compounding these disadvantages, almost half of these students have special education needs and many are classified as emotionally disturbed. Cara Chambers of the Legal Aid Society explained that:

> In many circumstances, you're looking at children who have struggled for years and years with undiagnosed disabilities with limited access to high-quality education and then you put them into facilities that also are not capable of providing them with the high-quality education that they need and deserve. (Street Visuals, 2010)

Regardless of their emotional or learning disabilities, it is important to remember that children in detention are, in fact, children. Like all children, they are unique and require special attention. Fortunately, Passages Academy is designed in a way that acknowledges that students are not mini-adults and should not be treated as junior convicts. The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed this when it declared that adolescents, even those as old as 17, were not eligible for the death penalty because they "cannot with reliability be classified among the worst offenders, because their overly impulsive and immature brains aren't developed" (Green, 2010).

Inside Passages, the young people in class are seen as students who have been sent here to learn; they are always referred to as students, never as prisoners, inmates, or detainees. They are not just locked away in a cell to sit around and wallow, scraping each day into the wall. Rather, the Passages system asks them to reflect, examine what they did (or did not do) and take some responsibility. At its best, the school can provide an emotional and spiritual experience that can alter the trajectory of its student's lives.

There has been a very clear and somewhat naïve consensus among educators, policy makers and scholars that detention invariably has life-changing effects. But, of course, one should not simply assume that some experience of incarceration would necessarily rehabilitate a student. A more likely (if unintended) consequence of detention is that a student returns to the community sicker and slicker. Arresting kids and throwing them in a school like Passages often feels like taking parts from a car, making them worse and putting them back in. And the demands on teachers sometimes make them feel as though the system is turning surgeons into butchers.

My life as a surgeon/butcher is consumed by urban education within the judicial system, but I straddle two very different worlds. I have one foot planted in academia, where I read about statistics and philosophical theories and draw broad conclusions about a massive system. My other foot, though, is in a classroom with individuals who account for those statistics and are governed by those philosophical theories. This book is my attempt to bridge the gap between these two worlds. After all, though these worlds may appear dramatically different and constantly in flux, life on the ground at Passages is, like anywhere else, often mundane.

Amongst the jargon I hear throughout the day in the hallways of Passages is the word "maintaining," as in:

- *Hey Jennifer, how are you doing?*
- *Maintaining.*

This word is, pointedly and appropriately, used to describe a feeling of determined resignation. It simultaneously reflects apathy and resolution and I think, inadvertently, sums up the current status of education within the juvenile justice system. We are progressing, if slowly, fiercely looking ahead and always maintaining.