In the Midst of Silence

by

KIMBERLY SLOAN

I go through two alarmed doors, my bag is checked, and finally I am allowed into a large room filled with young men, ages thirteen to eighteen. They are incarcerated in the Indiana facility. Some correctional officers stare out at the sixty-eight boys from behind a Plexiglas window, while others circle the room as the boys eat. One young officer folds his thick arms across his chest and paces back and forth. “Better hurry up there men. Too much talkin’, not enough eatin’. This ain’t no vacation. We got to keep to the schedule.” He speaks to no one directly, but sends his deep voice across the crowd of inmates.

The boys are sitting at huge, wooden picnic tables. Many of them will remain sitting at them for the next four hours for school. I walk up to one of the boys and hand him a library book that I checked out for him. The room is full of chatter and energy. I begin to talk to the boy about the book when the correctional officer with the deep drawl shouts above the breakfast conversation: “DEAD MOUTH IT.”

Most boys cringe at the booming command. Others go on eating, numb to the words. I walk away from the student I was talking to, knowing that he is not allowed to speak to me anymore. The room is hushed as the boys finish their meal. As I prepare for the day ahead, I think back to the enjoyable breakfast conversation my husband and I had that morning, and about the unnatural silence of sixty-eight teenage boys in one room. I wonder if my husband and I would be having this pleasant dialogue if we had spent our formative years in the midst of silence.

What Silence Brings

I realized, working at this institution, that many of these boys’ problems with the law are at root the result of poor communication skills. They cannot speak to adults, authority figures, or even peers without conflict. Both inside and outside the institution, they become embroiled in altercations because they cannot explain themselves well. What they mean to say is often misinterpreted by others. While in the facility, many inmates bottle up their feelings and their language in order to avoid conflict, and thus become practiced and professional at silence. They simply don’t trust words, especially their own.

This atmosphere of control and silence is a very difficult one in which to learn the appropriate communication skills that are so crucial if these boys are to effectively manage life’s conflicts. In fact, a stated goal of this institution is to rehabilitate these youths to become contributing members of society. Yet as the Dead Mouth order is shouted out, and the boys swallow their words along with their breakfast, they become increasingly expert at silence.

Finding a Voice

I had been teaching English at this facility as part of my graduate work at Indiana University. My goal became to break down this wall of silence, to help students grow as communicators through classroom discussions and interactions, through the use of literature, and especially through writing. But my students did not love English the way I did, and I was finding it difficult to motivate them. The educational model employed at the facility did not help.

The institution promoted what it called an “individualized curriculum” for each boy. At first this sounded practical to me: sixty-eight boys of varying abilities needed different levels of challenge and work. But, what the “individualized curriculum” translated into was a separate notebook for each boy that contained worksheets and more worksheets. The boys were to sit in silence for four hours a day and fill in the blanks in their schoolwork. They could raise a hand in order to ask a question of the teacher, but they were not to speak to one another in school. There were to be no
debates, no discussions, and certainly no open-ended writings where the boys could be "inappropriate." Some of the officers had confiscated writing assignments my students had written for my class because they were "inappropriate." Some boys were even punished for their writings.

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I spoke to my professor, Hope Elkins, about these challenges to my teaching philosophy. I told her that I refused to employ the notebook curriculum, consequently enduring criticism by some of the officers. I recalled one specific occasion in my class when I was speaking about Shakespeare. I commented to the class that his plays are still relevant today because he wrote about basic human themes we can all still relate to. That is when I saw an officer tap a student on the shoulder, point at me, and then roll his eyes. When I asked the officer about this interaction later, he replied with a question, "How is Shakespeare important to these guys? They can't learn that stuff and it isn't important anyway."

On another occasion, a different officer criticized my teaching of *Twelve Angry Men* because it, in his words, "stirred up too much stuff about race, law and crime." He told me our enactment of the play was simply "too active and loud." During the reading of one of the scenes, this officer had yelled out the "Dead Mouth" command and the boys had to return to their seats in silence. To many of the officers, education in the facility should be about control. To me, education in the facility and anywhere else should be about freedom.

Dr. Elkins listened patiently as I voiced this clash of philosophy. Her solution: we would set up a weekly meeting with a small group of boys in the facility, one that would be less scrutinized by the officers. The boys would have a chance to communicate in a reading/writing workshop, and I would have a chance to find out if, with a smaller group, I could break through the silence and hostility.

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**Group One: Creating a Permeable Curriculum**

The principal at the facility set up a table for us in the dorm. The gray walls and rows and rows of beds didn't look like a very friendly learning environment to me at first, but the principal informed me that there would be no officers monitoring our studies or my teaching during our once-a-week sessions. The principal "volunteered" two boys to the special program. He thought they were appropriate for the reading course because their test scores were particularly low in reading.

I met Brian and Anthony in the room that first day as they slouched in their seats, their arms crossed tightly against their chests. Brian had not done much in his English class since arriving at the institution six months ago. I had reluctantly read his file one day, hoping to find some way to reach him in class. I typically did not read students' files because I did not want to know what the boys had done to be there, thinking it might influence the way I treated them. I always found the files to be incomplete stories, and Brian's, which related he had stolen a car, was no different. Why did he steal the car? What was his home situation like? I tried to fill in the blanks, but all I really learned was that Brian was a tough case, something I already knew. He was difficult to talk to because he always had his dirty blonde hair in his eyes and would not often look at me. When he did look at me, it was always a shock to my system that caught me off-guard.

Brian's peer in this group was the fourteen-year-old Anthony. He was more willing in class, but I often struggled to read what he had written since he wrote phonetically. Anthony was quite social, he had a contagious wide smile, but he only hung out with the other African American boys in the facility. I wondered how he would interact with Brian in this group with none of his friends around. Yet I never looked in Anthony's file for clues. I didn't want to know why a boy his age would be incarcerated; I didn't want another partial story. All I did know was that it wasn't Anthony's first time in jail. He had been there a few times in his short life.

I began to tell the boys what we would be doing in the group. I told them we would each be reading a book of our own choice and writing stories on topics that interested us.

"Ain't nothing interesting about reading or writing as far as I can tell," Brian said, his chin pulled tightly to his chest.
“Well, I hope this group changes your mind about
that,” I said cheerfully.

“Why do we have to be in this stupid group anyway?
What did we do to get extra school?” he complained
as he flung his hair back. Now his blue eyes looked
straight at me. The shock was effective.

“Yes, how come us?” Anthony asked, sitting up in
his seat.

It became suddenly clear to me how difficult this was
going to be.

I tried to explain how I thought the boys would
benefit. I tried to explain how this educational
experience would be different. School often asked
them to pretend to be something they were not. We
wanted a curriculum that would allow them to be
themselves, to find an overlap between school and
their world. We felt the need to encourage student
choice, to allow them to write about what mattered
to them and to read what interested them. But, the
boys sneered, why would anyone want to read or
write at all? I felt momentarily deflated, but then
decided to try a different tack.

“You like to talk, right Brian?”

“Yes, talking’s all right,” he looked at me through
the dirty blonde hair that covered his eyes.

“Yes, I thought you did. You seem pretty good at it,
too.”

“Yes,” he agreed, his stern look had turned smug.

“Well, I suggest that we not read or write, but talk
then.”

“I’m cool with talking, Brian,” Anthony chimed in
suddenly, trying to break the tension.

“All right, we’ll talk. What do ya wanna talk about,”
Brian asked suspiciously.

So we talked. The O.J. Simpson trial was going on and
Brian seemed quite interested. He proclaimed O.J.
guilty and we all debated the facts. It was not a
surprise to me that Brian would be interested in the
legal system and how it worked and didn’t work; he
had firsthand experience with that system. What sur-
prised me was the way he was talking about the O.J.
trial. He spoke with energy, talking about DNA test-
ing and fingerprinting methodology. This discussion
centered on something that Brian was familiar with:
the courtroom. His “real” world was overlapping
with the “fake” world of school. Maybe school could
become more relevant. Maybe school could offer him
a chance to investigate trials and courts and the very
system that had placed him in this institution. That’s
when the light bulb went off for me. At the end of the
session, I asked Brian if he ever read the newspaper
about the trial. His surprising answer was yes. I sug-
gested we start there. He agreed to bring in some
newspaper articles for our next session.

We discussed trial issues and Brian kept returning to
forensic matters. He had asked that we bring in books
on the subject. He perused the old college texts that
Dr. Elkins had found. He had bought into the group.
But to the officers, this was “questionable” reading.
They were not comfortable with Brian studying the
tools officers use to convict criminals.

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Anthony had chosen the book *Makes Me Wanna Holler* by Nathan McCall, which also raised eyebrows with the authorities who were definitely uncomfortable with Anthony reading a book about a young African American’s rage against white society. After watch-
ing the boys read these questionable books during
their study and even free time, the officers com-
plained to my principal, who fortunately supported
my efforts.

In addition to being controversial, both books were
difficult to read. Brian worked hard at understanding
his book by writing down notes, page numbers of
problem areas and vocabulary he did not understand
to discuss with me later. This was not an assignment or even a suggestion; he did this because it suited his own needs as a reader. Perhaps for the first time in his high school career, Brian simply wanted to know.

Anthony was reading at the fourth grade level, so his book selection created quite a challenge. He turned to one of his best friends, an older student who was not in our reading group. Although this young man would often refuse to do his classroom assignments, when Anthony told him about some of the plot of the book, the young man volunteered to help, reading and talking even during the television hour. When I asked Anthony what they talked about at night, he told me that they discussed how their neighborhoods in Indianapolis were similar to that of the main character in the book. The relevance of the material was key to their motivation and effort.

We had gotten them reading. And we were still talking. Now, how could we get them writing?

Dr. Elkins suggested that Brian and Anthony keep special interest scrapbooks. We spent one session making individual books out of contact paper. Brian chose to create a scrapbook on alternative music and he wrote down lyrics and clipped pictures from music magazines his family and I brought him. He showed me each new addition immediately.

I found Anthony’s scrapbook particularly fascinating. It started out to be about basketball, but soon there were short biographies of famous African Americans in the scrapbook (Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King, Jr.). He had researched these on his own using the facility’s encyclopedias. The first entry in the book was the poem “Dream Variations” by Langston Hughes. Anthony had added a page to the front of his scrapbook so that the poem would be first. Hughes’ words: “To fling my arms wide/In some place of the sun” began this young man’s prison scrapbook. When I asked him about the changes to his scrapbook he told me he wanted something that “would get him going.” When I named it a motivational scrapbook, he said that was a good name because “I sure don’t want to be here (prison) again.” Words were beginning to be linked to action for Anthony. Poetry, biographies, words of all kinds were connecting him to the outside world he felt apart from. He even kept a piece he had titled “My Plan” in the book. It stated:

My plan is when I get out im going back to work with my grandfather, and stay out of the streets so much. I plan on going back to school for my mother and for my self. Because if any thing else thats all she would want from me is to go to school. And I wanna take good care of my baby, too.

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I did not know before this that the fourteen-year-old boy was a father. My jaw must have been hanging open when I read the plan because I remember Anthony asking me, “What is it?” I told him that I didn’t realize he was a dad. “You never asked me,” he responded. I congratulated him on the fine plan and for recognizing that getting an education could help him take care of a family better. He flashed me his bright, contagious smile. To my surprise, Anthony gave me the scrapbook when he was released so that I “would remember him.” How could I forget?

As another way of moving the boys from speech to writing, we introduced dialogue journals, which soon became a place where the boys wrote about other interests and concerns, not just about our group. One time, for example, both Anthony and Brian wrote to us that they thought that we should have been allowed to meet in our group even though they were on “lock down.” Some marijuana and pipes had been found in the dorm and the principal didn’t think it was a good idea for us to meet in our group, or to do anything “unusual” since the boys were upset. What Anthony and Brian were upset about was missing our group. This is what Anthony wrote to me:

It's so stupid. I like when we meet in the dorm. We get to be us back there with nobody watching us all the time. We don't do nothing wrong back there. The officers are mad at me anyway cause in the search they found 100 D.O.C. pencils in my locker. I don't even
know why i did it i don't know why i took them all. my daughter is getting to visit me. fridays could you stay for visitin so you can meet her?

When their social worlds were allowed into the curriculum, the boys wrote and read for their own purposes. In fact, there was no way to separate out their "real" lives from their school lives.

We moved from the dialogue journals into working in an authoring circle. We wrote and revised a story inspired by a scene chosen from a magazine. Anthony chose a picture of kids playing basketball, graffiti-covered walls towering behind them. Anthony seemed instinctively to have been drawn to this picture by the adage, "Write what you know." He wrote about two young men who lose their money to a hustler on the streets of a city. The two youths play "three ball monty," a game where a ball is hidden under one of three cups and the players have to guess which cup it is under after the hustler moves everything all around. The main character in the story sees the guy running the game do "flip switch and flip move" and catches him doing the "slip of the sleeve" trick. The piece had a flow to it. Anthony's voice clearly reflected the world that he knew — the city, a place of games, crime and action. I can still see him, reading his story to our group and tracing the round pale bullet scar on his arm with his fingers.

Brian, by contrast, chose a picture of a small cabin that was covered in multicolored Christmas lights. There were huge snow-capped mountains in the background and the cabin was dwarfed by the scenery. Brian wrote a happy story about a family spending Christmas in the mountains together. There was really no conflict in the piece. It simply described the perfect holiday, the perfect family. The father in the story was especially strong. This was a story of what he never had, and a story of what he wanted to have someday. Anthony was writing about what he lived; Brian was writing about how he wanted to live.

After a few shy sessions, the boys who initially claimed to hate writing now worked diligently, even giving each other good feedback. For example, Brian told Anthony that he should add some description of the setting to his story so people who had never been to a city might "get a feel for the place." Anthony told Brian that he liked his mountain setting, but he thought that "something should happen to make it seem more real. No family’s that happy." Brian was talking about sensory imagery and setting details, while Anthony was talking and plot and conflict and tension in writing. They were slowly becoming writers because they were a part of a writing community. It was the interaction that made the writing important. There was no Dead Mouth in that dorm room. We were rarely silent.

Hope Elkins and I also wrote, putting our stories out for the boys' comments. It took time, but the boys became comfortable giving us feedback. I remember Brian holding his long hair back away from his eyes as he looked over my story. His look was intent as he placed stars in the margin when he found a section he liked.

"Mrs. Sloan, do you really think he'd say that? I don't think he's got the guts to yell at his mom that way. What if you put something in earlier in the story so it's not so much a shock that he's doing all that."

"Yeah, I agree with Brian," Anthony chimed in. "I just don't see him actin' all bad like that. Maybe you could have him go under a spell or something that makes him act not like himself if you want him to be all mad and stuff."

The students were my audience now. They became more comfortable giving the teachers feedback about our writing because they came to understand that they were responding not as students to a teacher but as readers to a writer. This give and take in the midst of silence had helped the boys become more confident learners. They were finally beginning to believe in their abilities, believe in their voices. On Brian's last day he told me, "Don't worry, I'll finish my story. You tricked me, but I guess I'm a writer now. I'll keep writing, if you keep teaching." It was a deal.

Group Two: Hope and Voice
Brian and Anthony had talked about the reading/writing group with their peers. So, when we asked for volunteers for a new group when our first two students were released, we were overwhelmed by the response. Almost everyone wanted to be in the group. Five boys were chosen by the facility director and the principal and were told it was a "privilege." The second group of boys came ready and willing to talk, read, and write. They had heard from Brian and Anthony that the writing group was fun. One student said he had heard that in the
group "you got to write what you wanted to — not like in school."

Two of the five boys were African American and the other three were Caucasian. Three were tenth graders and there was also a sixth grader and an eighth grader. We could tell from the beginning that these boys had established an agenda for the group. Joe told us so in our first session.

"Well, Mrs. Sloan, the truth is, what we want to write is poetry that will impress our girlfriends," he said with a big grin. The rest of the boys replied with laughter and affirmations. There were high fives all around. We promised that we would bring in volumes of poems for the next session and would get them writing soon.

Although we read and responded to poetry by established writers and shared different poetry writing, it didn't take long for these students to start bringing in poetry they had written on their own. They were writing voraciously, bringing in several poems a week. However, all of the poetry they brought to our group was what they called "love poetry" and all of it rhymed. Yes, they were writing about what they knew and about what they cared, but we wanted to expand their idea of poetry.

We suggested to the boys that we use an authoring circle to get feedback from their peers and teachers on how to make their writing better, and the students quickly agreed. We knew we would have to model our own poetry and bring up discussions about topic, tone, imagery, and other poetic devices as we became a more cohesive group. We also knew that hearing "constructive criticism" about their poetry was going to be a little scary for the boys and we set out to make the group as comfortable as we could.

Unfortunately, at least from a teacher's perspective, it was not long before our group of five boys diminished to two due to releases and transfers. David and John were the two who remained. David was a seventeen-year-old tenth grader reading and writing on about the seventh grade level. John was a tenth grader and was on the appropriate reading level for his age. I never read their files to see what they had done to be incarcerated and David never did tell me. John was quite talkative and told us during the first session that he had sold drugs at his school. In addition to selling, he had a drug addiction of his own and was using the time in prison to try to break the physical addiction to cocaine. Both students were relieved when the writing group became smaller.

"Now we can really work seriously on our poetry. We'll have more time now," David smiled.

And serious they were. They both came prepared with new poems and revised poems for each session, taking notes as the other read his works aloud. John kept his poems in a special black three-ring binder. He would carefully write and rewrite and mark each paper with a draft number. David was less worried about organization. Much of his writing was on napkins and other scraps of paper. Both boys were open to suggestions for their writing from the start. For some time, they had little to say about our writing, but eventually, they were not the least bit shy about giving feedback to their instructors. That was when we knew we had created a safe place for them to write and to be heard. One day, John just couldn't contain himself anymore. "I just don't get that line!" he told me. "What do you mean that the 'colors squawk like seagulls?'" David chimed in. Finally, I thought, now we are a literary community.

The students had now moved beyond their love poetry and were writing about real personal experiences. The day David knew he had a final revision of his poem "The Box," he burst into the dorm and placed a neatly hand-printed copy for each of us on our table.

"I did it! I took all of your suggestions and my pen and my brain and I did it! You're gonna love it," his blue eyes darted from one face to another to read a reaction. Then, with pride in his voice, he began to read. The poem was about a young boy's imagination and how it could turn a simple cardboard box into anything: a spaceship, a cozy house, a jet, a train, a boat, or

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Then again, it could be a little car,  
To get me out of this house when things get hard.  
I can drive it to Disneyland or to the white beach's sands.  
I can get away from my mom's hitting, cruel hands.  
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David had allowed his social world to converge with the world of school. He shared his box and all of the
pretend places or things that it could be in order to escape an abusive mother. He shared poems about a childhood lost and an unsure future.

John wrote about various topics. He wrote about the benefits of being poor with a family over being rich and alone. He also wrote about the horrors of cocaine addiction, something he had battled with himself. In a riddle poem called "Who Am I," the last two stanzas speak of John’s own addiction:

I began costing you more and more,
So you stole from people when you couldn’t afford.
I ripped you apart from the inside out; I was in control, without a doubt.
I made you do the most horrible things,
You were my puppet, and I pulled the strings.
Your body was dead, and I was your brain,
But you had to keep going though you knew it was insane.

It all ended in one last breath.
I became your life and the cause of your death.
If you don’t already know, I’ll tell you my name.
My first is Co, and the last name is Cain.

Both boys had come a long way since the first “love poems” they had brought in to the group. They wrote poems on a variety of topics and in a variety of styles. They both preferred using rhyme, but they had experimented with free verse as well. The had learned about poetic devices and about audience and tone. But, more importantly, they had allowed their lives into school and school into their lives.

**The Voice Speaks Out**

I was both nervous and excited when Dr. Elkins suggested we present our experiences at a reading conference at Indiana University. Yet I was certain that the educators attending the conference would be interested in the correctional setting that I worked in and the methods we had used. On the day of the conference, I immediately noticed that the room I would be speaking in was bright and colorful. It was a contrast to my usual gray surroundings at the facility. The room was full of busy chatter as teachers and other professionals waited for me to move to the front of the room. The noise suddenly stopped when I went to the podium. It was as if I had given the Dead Mouth command to this group, but there were no alarms and no resistant scowls staring back at me. The group smiled and looked welcoming, and I felt my anxiety level go down quickly.

I stood before the audience and presented the information above about the correctional mentality, the silence, and the workshop’s methodology. But the real stars of the show were David and John who had brought their poems to the college campus to read to the teachers and administrators. The boys had been amazed when I had been able to get permission for them to attend the conference. They were nervous about the adult audience who would be listening to their poems. They were equally nervous about the correctional officer at the back of the room with a radio strapped to his belt and his arms crossed tightly against his chest.

Yet they stood before that silent, intimidating audience after I finished speaking and in small voices began to read their poems. As the applause grew from the audience, so did the boys’ confidence. Their voices became clearer and louder as they read each of their pieces. They smiled when the audience applauded and congratulated them. The boys answered questions about being incarcerated, about their writing process and how they got their ideas. Mostly, they communicated appropriately and smiled a lot.

After the presentation, several people crowded around the boys to ask them more questions. David shouted across the room to me, “Mrs. Sloan, Mrs. Sloan! I’ve got business cards!”

And here was David, standing with a large group of professionals around him, his hand clasping business cards from editors who wanted him to send them his work. His eyes were as wide as his smile as he held the publishers’ business cards above his head for me to see.

His smile said much to me, but it was the strength of his voice that said so much more.

**Reference**


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