

# High school book club with prisoner on Death Row explores the complexities, joys of Black life

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Through the book club with Ohio prisoner Keith LaMar, then-high school teacher Rachel McMillian strove to teach her students that those who are imprisoned have valuable life lessons to share. LaMar and McMillian also published a scholarly paper about prison abolitionist literacy initiatives in elementary education. Credit: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when young people across the U.S. were struggling with the isolation, disruptions and frustrations imposed by shuttered schools, online learning and the dearth of social activities, the students in then-high school teacher Rachel McMillian's social studies class participated in a unique book club—which she co-led with a man who is on Death Row.

Now a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, McMillian documented the experience in a new paper, [published](#) in the journal *Urban Education*.

When the book club began in January 2021, Keith LaMar—"Mr. Keith" to McMillian's students—had spent about 30 years in solitary confinement after being convicted of murdering five other prisoners during a 1993 riot at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville.

McMillian taught in [public school](#) for 10 years prior to joining the faculty at Illinois. Because [mass incarceration](#) affected her own life—and many of her students' lives—she was a longtime volunteer with the Ohio Innocence Project, and she frequently invited people who had experienced imprisonment into her social studies classes.

After reading an article LaMar had written that described how solitary confinement had forced him to confront himself and compelled him to learn to read and write so he could advocate for justice on his own behalf, McMillian wrote to him, inviting LaMar to share his journey of self-education and his perspectives on life with her students.

LaMar responded and suggested they form a book club, with the first selection being Zora Neale Hurston's novel "Their Eyes were Watching God." Published in 1937, Hurston's story explores a young woman's search for identity and love amidst racism, violence and loss.

"I believed that this would not only be an opportunity for the students to slow down under the extreme stressors of the pandemic, but that the book club could also become a place of healing for all of us as we built a community with Keith across (and in spite of) anti-Black boundaries and borders," McMillian wrote.

McMillian stated that her purpose in writing the paper was "to document the complexity of Black life and Black joy—the beautiful/ugly experiences that are so much a part of the texture of human development and [social relationships](#)," a quotation from Harvard University scholar Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's study about identity and portraiture.

McMillian said she hoped that the students' weekly discussions with LaMar—facilitated through 30-minute phone calls with the prison—and the parallels drawn between his experiences and the novel's themes would ease the stigma associated with incarceration that some students felt and enable those in her class to better understand the perspectives of people who have been imprisoned.

"These are people who have been oppressed in some of the most brutal ways, yet have found ways to live, love, build families and survive in the midst of that," McMillian said. "So, it's extremely important to bring those voices into the classroom, and we shouldn't hide from those stories or steer children away from them."

High school curricula that included the voices of those who experienced incarceration were nonexistent at that time, McMillian said, although in rare instances students might be assigned to read "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" or the work of scholar and political activist Angela Davis.

Today's young people are named the "Trayvon generation" by one scholar because their worldviews are shaped by repeated acts of anti-Black violence such as the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, the

17-year-old Florida youth killed in 2017, McMillian wrote in the study.

As teachers, "How do we attend to both pain and joy in our classroom ... and access the sources of strength that transcend this American nightmare of racism and racist violence?" she asked.

To shed light on injustice, as well as on the social and systemic problems that lead to prison, McMillian suggests that teachers cultivate the traditions of Black storytelling and critical race testimony—defined in the study as "the act of bearing witness from a critical perspective to the trauma/s of racism as it is socially reproduced, institutionalized and structured."

While it may not be possible in every school to bring in people who are or have been incarcerated as she did with LaMar and the book club, McMillian suggested that the perspectives and stories of this important population can be introduced through "prison abolitionist literacies"—narratives and teaching practices that raise awareness of the injustices of mass incarceration and use literacy to strive for abolition, emancipation and freedom.

In the context of discussing Hurston's novel, LaMar shared his personal stories of resilience, perseverance and healing. Naturally, the students were curious about LaMar's life, including his ability to create a meaningful existence despite decades in solitary confinement and how he endured the looming specter of his execution date, then scheduled for November 16, 2023. Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine later issued a reprieve, and LaMar's execution is currently set for January 13, 2027, according to a media release on the state of Ohio's website.

While the book club discussions centered on the themes in Hurston's novel, they also encompassed self-education, Black history, music and culture. Following the "extrajudicial murders of George Floyd, Breonna

Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and countless others, our conversations began to center around anti-Blackness and the issue of Black death," McMillian wrote in the study.

"It really grounded us in those moments when we were experiencing a lot of anger and fear and frustration," she said. "The book club allowed us to just be together, enjoy each other's company and not really focus so much on everything that was happening around us. It enabled us to just love on each other and experience a freedom that we weren't really experiencing outside of that space."

One student later wrote that her experiences with the group enabled her to build a relationship with her father, who was incarcerated during that time, McMillian said.

The students in the book club were in a teacher-preparation program, and McMillian wanted them to learn that it is okay to be in community with people who are incarcerated, a philosophy she also applies in training preservice teachers at Illinois.

"They'll be faced with issues of incarceration, either through their students or their families, and I want them to start to understand those impacts when they are young," she said. "Bringing those voices into the classroom allows people to learn from their stories."

**More information:** Rachel McMillian et al, *Our Eyes are Watching God: Bearing Witness to Black Life and the Complexities of Black Joy on Death Row*. *Urban Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00420859241227949](https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859241227949)

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