The “Teens for Literacy” program provides a platform for middle school students to motivate their peers and their communities about the importance and value of literacy. A student leadership team composed of twelve sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students exists at an urban K-8 school in the Savannah-Chatham School District. This team generates ideas for promoting literacy. As the faculty advisor for the “Teens for Literacy” program at the school, I consult with liaisons (school counselor, Instructional Coordinator, and principal) and lead weekly “Teens for Literacy” meetings to help the students implement their self-generated literacy ideas. For example, to share selected topics of interest with their peers, students created school newspapers and distributed them to the 4th-8th grades at the school.

Another key “Teens for Literacy” project has been the creation of literacy-related play vignettes that students wrote and performed about the value of literacy in our everyday lives for the entire school as an assembly. The program also encourages students to consider postsecondary education and their future careers.

Over the course of the last school year, the “Teens for Literacy” students chose to teach their peers about the value and power of poetry. In the first edition of the year’s school newspaper, the “Teens for Literacy” students composed acrostic poems to introduce themselves to their peers. Another key project was the production and display of “I am From” poems in the school hallway. The “Teens for Literacy” students decided that having a folder with blank
templates so that their peers could create their own “I am From” poems was a valuable idea. The picture below showcases the “Teens for Literacy” “I am From” poetry display, with sample sentence starters around a poem adapted by Levi Romero: 

(http://www.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/t/Target_I_am_from%20poem.pdf).

The school principal, media specialist, school counselor, and Literacy Coach the school expressed that students throughout the school enjoyed reading the “Teens for Literacy” students’ “I am From” poems. They explained that students throughout the school have taken sample template pages to compose an “I am From” poem of their own. Based upon this feedback and the desire of the school principal to expand students’ writing repertoires, I felt that
implementation of the “I am From” poetry project throughout the 8th grade would positively impact eighth grade students at the school.

I implemented the “I am From” poetry writing and photography initiative with the 45 eighth grade students in Spring 2014. The “I am From” poem idea was inspired by George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From” template (1999). The principal requested that I target the school’s 8th grade students, as she felt that it would benefit their CRCT scores to have additional guided writing practice. I distributed disposable cameras to allow students to document images from their home, school, and community to inspire their poetry writing. I felt that this project would instill personal pride in the eighth grade students and their backgrounds while enhancing their writing skills and encouraging creative expression.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research has shown that the purpose of school-based writing is often unclear to many middle school students (Yancy, 2009). While students often use text messaging and social websites, they rarely acknowledge the connection between the writing they do socially and the writing tasks required at school. This photography and writing initiative has the potential to involve families in students’ education as they document their home and community life through the lens of a disposable camera. Research describes how creating a welcoming environment for families and facilitating their participation in their children’s education leads to future gains in “children’s attendance, interest, motivation, general achievement, and reading achievement” (Padak & Rasinski, 2010, p. 294).

The principal welcomes innovative ways to improve instructional materials, methods, and curriculum. She has expressed enthusiastic support of the poetry and photography initiative. Wilcox and Angelis (2012) describe how teachers and administrators in schools that are higher-
performing—regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds—credited their relationships within the broader community as being very important. This includes trust, respect, a shared responsibility for performance, encouragement of initiative taking, and professional opportunities beyond the classroom. With this project, I took strides towards building upon this relationship with the eighth grade students at the school.

METHODS

The “Teens for Literacy” student leaders introduced the “I am From” poetry project to the eighth grade students at the school. These student literacy leaders shared each of their poems and described what the project meant to them. The eighth grade students were each provided with a disposable camera. They were asked to take 15 photos around their home, school, and community with scenes to inspire their “I am From” poetry writing. “Teens for Literacy” student leaders shared ideas for possible subjects/focal points for their photography, such as a favorite park/shop/restaurant in one’s neighborhood, neighborhood landmarks, a favorite spot at home/school, family mementos, photos, images, and a favorite book/hobby/decorative item.

The students were asked to bring the cameras back to school with them after a two week period. Each students’ photos were developed. They were presented with a writing journal to paste their photos. The photos served as a source of inspiration for the students to compose their original “I am From” poems. Several writing workshops on how to “paint a picture with words” facilitated their ability to describe the snapshots and their feelings towards the images. Students drafted their poems, revised them to make them their best work, and composed a final draft of their poem in their writing notebooks. The notebook served as a forum to document their writing and the creative process, and encourage future writing endeavors.
This project took place in spring 2014. It began in February 2014 and concluded in April 2014. The eighth grade students shared their completed writing and photography with their peers in celebration of National Poetry Month in April 2014. The school Media Specialist also video recorded students’ poems for the school community to enjoy.

RESULTS

Assessment of this project was accomplished through an evaluation rubric of each eighth grade students’ “I am From” journal at the conclusion of the project. Inclusion of specific elements was addressed in the rubric from the Writing and Language standards within the 8th grade ELA CCGPS. Locke (2013) notes that assessment of poetry should include elements of risk-taking, experimentation, inclusion of playful language, and evidence of “pushing the boundaries of his or her writing” (p. 32). The following Writing, Language, and Speaking/Listening standards within the 8th Grade English Language Arts Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (ELA CCGPS) were assessed via the rubric:

Writing-

ELACC8W3

c. Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence, signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another, and show the relationships among experiences and events.

d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

ELACC8W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

ELACC8W5: With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose
and audience have been addressed. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grade 8.)

Language-

**ELACC8L1:** Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

**ELACC8L2:** Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Speaking and Listening-

**ELACC8SL5:** Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest.

Below please find a chart which details results of the assessment rubric after students completed the project:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8th grade ELA CCGPS Standards</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing Standards ELACC8W3 ELACC8W4 ELACC8W5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Standards ELACC8L1 ELACC8L2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking and Listening Standard ELACC8SL5</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Informal assessment of the project occurred through teacher interviews, student feedback (post-project survey), and through anecdotal records. The school librarian/media specialist video recorded students’ poems as an additional means to showcase their work for their peers, school community, and family.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Implications for the “I am From” poetry and writing project are as follows:

a. Students explored their home, school, and community in order to collect ideas for composing their own original “I am From” poem.

b. An objective for this project is to encourage students’ creative expression through photography and writing in a meaningful way.

c. An additional aim is to instill pride in students and their unique backgrounds.

d. A final goal is to provide a forum for students to view writing as an authentic and meaningful experience for personal expression, hopefully inspiring a life-long dedication to the craft.

In Writing Now (2008), a research brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English, the authors note that in our changing world, we write “differently—often digitally—and we write more than in the past” (p.1). Specific to middle school students, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2010) has included a detailed focus on necessary literacy skills per their College and Career Readiness Standards of the Common Core State Standards. Students are expected to know how to meaningfully integrate technology throughout all literacy experiences—including reading,
writing, communicating, collaborating, listening, and interacting with peers through a range of
texts (Smith, 2013).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE STUDY

Throughout literacy instruction, teachers should relate lessons to readers’ interests and
goals, creating value and engagement in learning (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). It is important
for researchers to further examine how teachers can support and inspire readers in the classroom,
providing students with tools and strategies for success as they move forward in their academic
and personal lives. Ma’ayan (2010) noted that making room for students’ voices, literacies, and
lived experiences is a “first step in…shifting schools to be successful learning spaces for all
students” (p. 653-4). Research should address learning conditions that motivate students to view
both reading and writing as enjoyable and worthwhile activities, and to become aware of the
myriad of possibilities that each presents. This perspective will serve students well as they
continue to grow and evolve as readers, writers, and learners.
References


APPENDIX: Selected Student Poems

“I am From” Poem

I am from old family photos.
From colorful Atlanta and creative Savannah.
I am from the clean and sweet.
I am from the old Oak Tree.
The Oak Tree whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I’m from crazy drawings and funny readings.
From strict Mom and Dad.
I’m from talking and learning.
And from entertaining.

I’m from smart and curious.
And sticks and stones.
I’m from hip-hop dancing.
I’m from Savannah and busy Michigan,
Salads and fruits.
From heroic Grandad in a war fighting.
Fighting for our loved ones in my heart.

“I am From” Poem

I am from flatscreen television.
From spirited basketball games and all types of shoes.
I am from black and orange Nikes and athletic shoes.
I am from the green flowers.
The tall Oak Tree near my house whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I’m from sports and brown eyes.
From brothers and sisters.
I’m from watching tv and exercising.
And from sleeping late.

I’m from manners and paying attention.
And you win some you lose some.
I’m from celebrating Christmas with abundant gifts and bountiful food.
I’m from medium-well steak and spicy hot wings,
From a caring grandma who helps me with school.
Picture of me and my family.
A wooden picture shelf in hallway that displays good memories.
“I am From” Poem

I am from the hot sizzling stove.
From scorching heat and freezing ice.
I am from the shattered mirror.
Of the scary haunting feeling.
I am from the dazzling purple rose.
The tall brown Oak whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I’m from having cookouts and being strong.
From my encouraging mother and my strict father.
I’m from fighting and good soul food cooking.
And from baking delicious sweets.

I’m from having pride and being an excellent leader.
And what goes around comes around.
I’m from having lots of talents.
I am from singing and dancing.
I am from rapping too.
I’m from beautiful Savannah and famous Atlanta, GA,
Good ol’ corn and white rice.
From going through tough trials.
My mother is strong.
Sweet memorable photos on my white walls.

I will never forget where I am from.
.

“I am From” Poem

I am from competitive basketball.
From sports games and a green comfy couch.
I am from the big beige house,
A cozy home.
The Oak Tree whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I’m from tall genes and shooting hoops.
From my smart twin brother and 6 siblings.
I’m from making funny jokes and having a good time.

I’m from “do your best” and “respect your elders.”
I am from “follow directions.”
I’m from trying hard in school.
I am from my favorite subjects, P.E. and social studies,
Where I am learning more about Georgia.
I’m from Savannah and Georgia,
From spicy tacos and hot buffalo wings.
I am from being a part of Teens for Literacy.

I am from being a leader.
I am from inspiring others.

“I am From” Poem

I am from computers,
From television and mirrors.
I am from the beautiful land of
Cinnamon, blue, brown, and vanilla.
I am from the roses.
The Oak tree whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I’m from cookouts and having fun.
From my mom Kia and my dad Kelvin.
I’m from loving each other and watching t.v. together,
And making crafts.

I’m from “no running” and “no yelling,”
And “if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.”
I’m from shopping.
I’m from Savannah and the hot summers.
String beans and chicken legs.
From falling on the concrete in a buggy.
Mom has a little crazy kid.
Pictures that have a surprising touch to them,
In my heart.