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# STRENGTHENING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES: BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITH TEACHER EDUCATION CANDIDATES



Anne Katz

## INTRODUCTION

By providing college students with direct experience in dialoguing with middle school students around issues presented in *It's Your World: Get Informed, Get Inspired, and Get Going* (Clinton, 2015), this project provided transformative student learning experiences. *It's Your World* was a mentor text for both groups of participants to gain a deeper understanding of issues facing the world around them—and invited them to consider how to make a difference. The text was selected because it dealt with issues surrounding the topics of poverty, homelessness, gender equity, school, environmental issues, endangered animals, and individual rights, providing content for the project and encouraging peers to take action on these matters. As the middle school and pre-service educators read case studies from the book about individuals who have made substantial changes in their families, their communities, and in our country, students were inspired to take action to do their part to make our world a better place.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since Fall 2012, the author has served as university liaison for the TEENS FOR LITERACY™ program in an urban school in the southeastern United States. Baugh (2017) notes that a “comprehensive reading program incorporates effective instruction, multiple resources, and a wide variety of experiences to help each student achieve optimal reading progress every year” (p. 229-30). Cervetti and Hiebert (2019) explain that “readers use their knowledge to fill out meaning and make connections in a text, and these connections help readers form local and global understandings about the text” (p. 499). As a result of their collaboration with college students, the TEENS FOR LITERACY™ middle school students branched out to cultivate advanced reading comprehension skills, connect as a community of learners, and inspire their peers to participate in literacy endeavors.

## PROJECT PARTICIPANTS “TEENS FOR LITERACY™” Students & Program Model

The TEENS FOR LITERACY™ partnership was developed between the university and an urban middle school

eight years ago as a community outreach initiative. A group of middle school students are chosen each year by the school counselor to serve as a literacy leadership team at the school. The students participate in a variety of literacy-focused activities, such as a Banned Book Week field trip to the local public library, in which they research and read excerpts from once censored literature to library patrons. Other projects include the creation of video book trailers and introduction of local children's book authors to the school community.

## College of Education Living-Learning Community Course

In a Living-Learning Community, students with similar interests and goals have the opportunity to live together and study together in the context of university housing. The College of Education LLC is designed for students who are interested in becoming teachers or have career goals that involve with children. Students are provided with information about the LLC and can register for a special section of “Investigating Critical & Contemporary Issues in Education.” This section is a hybrid, flipped classroom format and included those with an interest in Early Childhood, Middle Grades, and Health and Physical Education.

## DATA SOURCES, EVIDENCE, OBJECTS, AND MATERIALS Project Overview

This initiative entailed exchanging hand-written letters with middle school students around issues presented in the book over the course of a semester. Issues surrounding the topics of poverty, homelessness, gender equity, school, environmental issues, endangered animals, and individual rights were content for the social justice project. Students added “pledge stickers” to a large chart paper as they continued reading to document their commitment to social justice issues and encouraged peers to take action. This was displayed for the school community.

## Pen-Pal Dialogue and College Student Visits to Middle School

University students spent the semester exchanging hand-written letters on notebook paper with middle school

student literacy leaders, sharing insights about school, reading, writing, college life and on issues presented in *It's Your World: Get Informed, Get Inspired, and Get Going* (Clinton, 2015). The professors served as intermediaries, ensuring that the letters were successfully exchanged between university and middle school students at regular intervals.

The exchange of several sets of pen-pal letters followed between the university students and the middle school students. One college student wrote that “Even though I am a long way from home, I am enjoying college. It is opening my mind to new ideas and new cultures that I have not learned about before. I am looking forward to reading these different sections of the book with you and learning more about opportunities for girls to pursue an education, the issues that are important to talk about today in terms of how they affect our world, how people around the world persevere in the face of adversity, and what steps we can take to help make the world a better place.”

In one of the pen-pal letters, a middle school student shared how “. . .we read the author’s idea of making the world a better place. My idea of making the world a better place is to take care of the environment, parks, and the community. . .clean up and recycle so you can live in a healthy community and everyone can breathe fresh air. I would also like to end poverty . . .put the homeless in a home and give them the education they never had. Nobody will have to fend for themselves. . .I will also give pets from the shelter (to those) who dream of having a real family. What is your idea of a better world?”

Another middle school student shared the following with his pen-pal: “After reading about these experiences, I can see why these middle school students in the book want to make the world a better place for herself, her family, and her friends. No one deserves to live in fear of violence and in a place where this kind of war is just their daily life experience. Kids should be able to learn, play, and feel safe without



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worrying about violence. The focus should be on your family and friends, enjoying your hobbies, and trying your best and learning as much as you can in school to make a better life for yourself and the people that you care about.” Students were engaged in writing for an authentic audience.

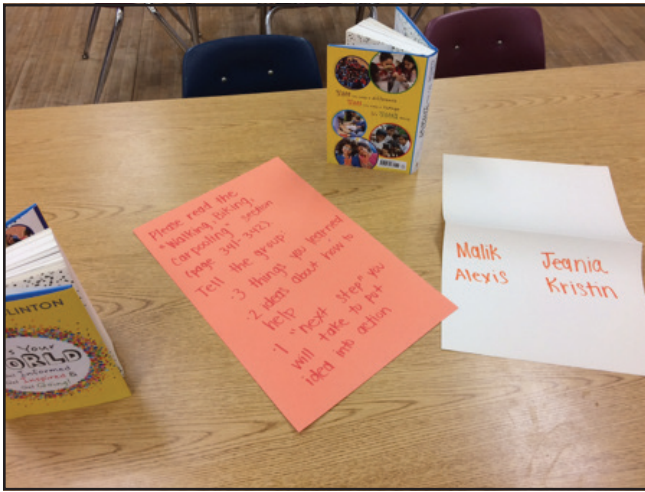
College students visited the middle school students on five occasions throughout the semester. They presented 3-2-1 mini-lessons on sections of the book throughout the course of the semester. They asked the middle school students to re-read a portion of the text and unpack 3 items they learned, 2 questions that they had regarding the material, and 1 action item that they can implement in their school or community about the issue. This format enabled pre-service educators to design and facilitate mini-lessons on the topics covered in the book. Students were invited to consider the role that teachers “play in facilitating productive discussions that simultaneously serve students’ learning needs and content acquisition while also developing their literacy knowledge and skill” (Ford-Connors & Robertson, 2017, p.131).

TEENS FOR LITERACY™ students were also asked to consider the following ideas that the pre-service educators generated:

- Before your reading of *It's Your World*, how would you have defined poverty? How has that definition changed after your time with the book?
- In your opinion, what are some of the similarities and differences between poverty in the United States and poverty in the rest of the world?
- Why is attending school sometimes a challenge for children all over the world?
- Consider what you’ve learned about the global status of girls and women. In what ways does gender impact the lives and opportunities of females in many places throughout the world?
- Do you know your own family’s history of health-related issues? Of those, is there something you are choosing to work hard to prevent in yourself?

Throughout *It's Your World*, different websites are suggested that students can visit if they would like to learn more about a particular challenge or a particular solution addressed in the book. For example, organizations working to increase access to education include [pencilsofpromise.org](http://pencilsofpromise.org) and [roomtoread.org/students](http://roomtoread.org/students). In addition, organizations that are working to fight hunger include [thefooddrivekid.org](http://thefooddrivekid.org) and [nokidhungry.org](http://nokidhungry.org). Students researched these additional websites to learn more about the topic and how they can make a difference. Finally, [change.org](http://change.org) is a website that students were introduced to as a platform where one can launch a petition to

raise awareness or advocate for a change in an area that they feel is personally important.



**ANNOTATING THE TEXT**

This was followed by the “Knew-New-Q” activity (Gambrell, 2014), where middle school students annotated the text. If the information in the text was content that they already knew, students placed a “K” in the margin. If the information was new to them, students placed an “N” in the margin. If students had a question regarding a portion of the text, students placed a “Q” in the margin. Afterwards, students shared their reflections with a peer and wrote a sentence to solidify their “Knew-New-Q” insights. A chart detailing several of these annotations is included below:

Portion of text ( <i>It's Your World: Get Informed, Get Inspired, and Get Going</i> (Clinton, 2015))	Annotation	Reflection (middle school student to a peer/ moderated by university student)
“While they may be able to scrape by, life is often really difficult for low-income families even if their struggles are not obvious to lots of people. Imagine having shoes, but they don't fit, because your parents could only afford to buy one pair for the entire school year so they started off too big, they fit for a while, and then they were too small.” (p. 53)	“K”. I already knew that. I can relate to that situation. I know exactly what she is talking about.	Middle school student- “I can relate to that situation too. I also have one pair of shoes per year. Sometimes it's hard. One day, it will be better”  Another middle school student- “My mama says to be grateful for what we have.”
“More than 4 out of 10 food-insecure people went to at least one more year of school after they finished high school. More than 1 in 5 food insecure households have had someone serve in the military.” (p. 72-3)	“N”. Something new that I learned is that some people who are hungry went to college or served our country.”	Middle school student- “I was surprised to learn those statistics.”  Another middle school student- “Me too. That is not what I expected to read.”
“The world needs as many as 4 million more classrooms to ensure every kid can go to school, get to school in a reasonable amount of time (meaning not in 2 or 3 hours by foot), and be in a classroom that's not overcrowded (meaning not with 100 kids but closer to 20 or 30). (P. 101)	“Q”. I had a question about that. It says that to accommodate all the kids who aren't in school around the world, the world would need to add twice as many schools as we currently have in the United States. How can we help?”	Middle school student- “It says that there are organizations like Pencils of Promise and Building Tomorrow that help build classrooms around the world.”  Another middle school student- “Maybe we can organize a fundraiser bake sale to help support them and help build a school for kids who need help.”

Table 1

**BUILDING UPON THE TEXT: TECHNOLOGY-BASED MINI-TEACHING DEMONSTRATIONS**

In order to build upon the reading of the text, the college students selected issues discussed in the book. The pre-service educators wrote short scripts, rehearsed, and recorded the scenarios on iPads around the theme of bullying. The video clips consisted of scenarios that could occur in school or in the community, and the middle school students were asked how they would respond after viewing the video. This provided the college students with an opportunity to lead the mini-lesson and facilitate a discussion as future educators.



Collaboratively, we wanted to develop a project on the middle school campus or in the neighborhood. Social action activities such as planting a tree around the school campus, a clean-up day, a food drive, recycling efforts, and posters to display messages about issues presented in the book were subsequently implemented by the teens. The middle school students also created a display in the school library with the *It's Your World* book as well as books geared towards elementary school students on these issues. Books included in the display included the following texts: *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and her Family's Fight for Desegregation* (Tonatiuh, 2014), *Drum Dream Girl: How one Girl's Courage Changed Music* (Engle, 2015), and *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah* (Thompson, 2015).

**RESULTS**

An interactive chalk talk activity with post-it notes followed to reflect upon how students' opinions on the value of education evolved. Three large sheets of chart paper were introduced and displayed; middle school students' responses included the following presented in Table 2:

How has your opinion on education changed?	I believe in...	I would stand up for...
-“My opinion on education has changed. I feel like kids should value education because some kids don't get it, but it is so important in life.”	-“freedom of expression”  -“treating everyone fairly and equally”	-“anyone being bullied”  -“for my family”  -“all the kids that need education”
-“I used to believe that education was important, but now I believe that it's really important because some people don't have access to it.”	-“changing things up and being myself”  -“myself . . . showing good examples to small children”	-“education and self-improvement . . . being a better version of myself”
-“I think education is important. I used to think it was boring and just something we had to do. Now, I see how it can transform.”	-“keeping the neighborhood nice so people can enjoy their surroundings and be proud of where they live”	-“myself and my dreams. I will let nothing get in my way of achieving greatness.”
-“I feel as though education is power because without education, we will not be able to advance in our life such as being able to know how to use technology.”	-“I believe that no matter what race or gender, everyone deserves a free education.”	-“the environment and keeping our neighborhood clean and safe for the people in our community”
-“Learn more and be somebody.”		

Table 2

## CONCLUSION AND SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE

This project provided the opportunity for authentic feedback from teacher education candidates, middle school students, as well as public school administration and College of Education faculty. Middle school students were able to meaningfully interact with future educators, learn about what it means to be a college student, dialogue and write about significant content, and envision a future as a college student. These results indicate that the middle school students reflected upon issues of poverty, homelessness, gender equity, school, bullying, environmental issues, endangered animals, and individual rights, among other social issues covered in the book. Growth in the values of compassion, fear, resilience, and hope with middle school students were exhibited as well.

University students described how their view of literacy instruction evolved over the course of the semester as they worked to help middle students understand issues presented in the book and their applications in today's world. New insights gained regarding the project's impact on students' future teaching identity were celebrated, as documented in the patterns noted from semi-structured interview data. These included the following: fostering genuine respect for literacy endeavors; text versus digital reading/ learning and implications; authentic literacy instruction/ real-world applications; connecting with local students; college preparation for mid-

dle school students; social justice text and implications; exposure to world issues; expanding world view through literacy practices; and exposure to different genres.

Approaching instruction in a collaborative manner is a practice that should become more commonplace among universities and public schools. Potential challenges to implementation of the program include scheduling, organizational logistics, and funding limitations. Continuous and open dialogue among university faculty, the school principal, and the school counselor is paramount to program success. Mutual respect of each contributor's role is imperative. This project makes significant strides toward helping TEENS FOR LITERACY™ students, and their school community, assume the identity of a lifelong reader and writer. These insights facilitate the ability of education professionals to examine how to better prepare our students and their families for the demands of a twenty-first century world through a collaborative approach.

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