

Chapter 14

Building Connections Between Teacher Education Candidates and Urban Middle School Students Through Social Action: A Community Literacy Partnership

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ABSTRACT

*For faculty to be effective in supporting pre-service educators' learning, they must connect with Association of American College and University tenets. The purpose of this collaboration was to provide teacher candidates with a meaningful opportunity to interact with local public school students. College students exchanged letters, created and implemented technology-based mini-lessons, participated in close reading and critical thinking discussions, and dialogued with middle school students around issues presented in the book *It's Your World: Get Informed, Get Inspired, and Get Going* (Clinton, 2015). The question it seeks to answer is, "Would the use of targeted reading, writing, technology-based discussion, and creation of a social justice project with public middle school student literacy leaders improve pre-service educators' commitment to their field and expand their learning?" This chapter explores a community literacy partnership.*

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. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities text *General Education Transformed: How We Can, How We Must* (2015), "Too many students experience general education not as a conspicuously useful and meaningful component of

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a coherent baccalaureate education, but as a curricular impediment that they must “get out of the way” prior to study in a major. . . they may be unable to visualize a meaningful trajectory in their curriculum, with an attendant loss of motivation and commitment to persist” (p. 5). *It’s Your World* served as a mentor text for the community literacy collaboration. It provided a framework for both groups of participants to gain a deeper understanding of issues facing the world around them—and inviting them to consider how to make a difference. 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. Research has reflected 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. My goal with this initiative was to motivate students to utilize literacy as a vehicle to express themselves in meaningful ways. These adolescent readers remind us that reading and writing are social endeavors that cannot be reduced to mere technical skills (Ivy, 2014). Roskos and Neuman (2014) note that it is “important to consider multiple genres and how these different genres may contribute to children’s knowledge and desire to learn” (p. 508).

Reading in any setting has social, cultural, and political ramifications. When students become aware of the messages about race, gender, and power within the text, they can better connect with their own views about how these issues influence their interpretation of what they read (Hall & Piazza, 2008). Critical literacy “accounts for ways that literacy can be used in service of self-actualization and social change” (Riley, 2015, p. 418). Critical literacy allows students to understand what they are reading from diverse perspectives (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012). A goal of my collaboration was to introduce pre-service teachers to critical literacy so that they can teach their students how to utilize these skills in the future. An additional goal was for the middle school “Teens for Literacy” student leaders to learn how to approach all information from a more critical perspective.

Afflerbach and Harrison (2017) explain that “positive motivation leads to increased engagement, increased engagement leads to continuing reading success, and this ongoing reading success leads to increased motivation.... a key to students’ reading achievement is creation of classroom environments in which motivation and engagement thrive” (p.218). In addition, 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). 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.

Current assessment results reveal that students at the school have yet to realize their fullest potential academically. However, the principal welcomes innovative ways to improve instructional materials, methods, and curriculum and expressed enthusiastic support of the project to support the school’s literacy initiatives. Wilcox and Angelis (2012) describe how teachers and administrators in schools that are higher-performing—regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds—credited

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