

A COMMUNITY LITERACY PARTNERSHIP

Malala's Story As A Lens For Educational Equity



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"Today we continued to read about Malala and her vision of making the world a better place. My idea of making the world a better place is to help people whose lives are affected by war. We should stop all of the unnecessary violence that has been going on." –excerpt of pen-pal letter from a 7th grade Teens for Literacy student to a College of Education university student

GOALS OF THE COMMUNITY LITERACY PARTNERSHIP

Since Fall 2012, I have served as university liaison for the Teens for Literacy initiative, a middle school student literacy leadership team. The program model provides a forum for students to empower their peers and their community regarding the importance and value of literacy. The initiative also encourages students to consider postsecondary education and their future careers. This partnership between the university and a local K-8 urban public school involves a leadership team of middle school students in grades 6-8 who generate ideas for promoting literacy among their peers. While the students are the architects of the program, I guide our brainstorming and work sessions to propel their ideas into action.

This partnership was guided through the lens 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 literacy tasks required at school. 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). Zenkov and Harmon (2009) describe research reflecting students' attitudes about the perceived irrelevance of school-based literacy tasks that teachers assign. In response, the authors relate how they sought to become "teachers who trust youth enough to engage them with our literacy tasks in ways exceeding the expectations of these young adults and society in general" (p. 575). This collaboration was guided by similar tenets.

Similarly, my goal with this middle school-College of Education freshmen student collaboration was to motivate students to utilize literacy as a vehicle to express themselves

in meaningful ways around a middle school version of the university's Common Read text, *I am Malala: The Girl who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* (Yousafzai, 2013). Reading has social, cultural, and political ramifications. When students become aware of 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 and Piazza, 2008). These adolescent readers remind us that reading and writing are social endeavors that cannot be reduced to mere technical skills (Ivy, 2014). How can a community literacy initiative serve as a lens for deconstructing the personal impact of war and be utilized as a lens for seeking educational equity? This article will detail a semester-long collaboration in which middle school literacy leaders and College of Education freshmen dialogue, teach, and reflect on current issues in society.

For faculty to be effective in supporting students' learning, they must connect with Association of American College and University tenets that "broaden students' perspectives and engage them in problem-centered inquiry about pressing and perennial issues. By bringing students into communities where they learn from those whose experiences and views (may be) different from their own, it also builds important capacities we need to succeed as a diverse and collaborative democracy" (*General Education Maps and Markers: Designing Meaningful Pathways to Student Achievement*, 2015). The purpose of this partnership was to provide teacher candidates with a meaningful opportunity to interact with local public school students in conjunction with the university's Common Read text, *I am Malala: The Girl who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* (Yousafzai, 2013). Candidates are not currently given the opportunity to interact with students in an authentic manner before they are expected to observe and teach in the field.

By providing students with direct experience in dialoguing with middle school students around *I am Malala: How One Girl Stood up for Education and Changed the World-Young Reader's edition* (2014) and the issues presented in the book, this project assisted the College of Education with accomplishing their strategic goal of providing transformative student learning experiences and reinforcing commitment to

the field. 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 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).

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT LITERACY LEADERSHIP TEAM

A group of middle school students- a combination of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade scholars- are chosen every year to serve as a literacy leadership team at an urban K-8 public school. The students, who are selected by the school counselor as displaying leadership qualities, participate in a variety of literacy-focused activities, such as a Banned Book Week field trip to the local public library, in which they researched and read excerpts from once censored literature to library patrons. Other projects include the creation of a school newspaper, a play regarding the ways that we utilize literacy in our everyday lives, video book trailers, and the introduction of local children’s book authors to the school community. Middle school students have strengthened their literacy skills and displayed growth as leaders, creative thinkers and public speakers. As the year evolves, university students are invited to serve as volunteers and mentors for various projects.

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION “LIVING-LEARNING” COMMUNITY STUDENTS

As a component of the Living-Learning Community, students with similar interests and goals have the opportunity to live and study together in the context of university housing. The College of Education LLC is designed specifically for students who are interested in becoming teachers or have career goals that involve working with children. Students have access to a designated advisor, as well as faculty and student mentors to assist with academic and “college-negotiating” issues. As a component of the university’s orientation sessions, students are provided with information about the LLC and can register for a special section of “Investigating Critical & Contemporary Issues in Education.” This course presents an overview of issues facing the field of professional educators, including the social and political contexts of education in Georgia and the United States. Typically, no field experience is required for this course.

This foundation course provides an introduction to the use of research to support practice through an investigation of philosophical questions and current educational issues. Students connect these studies to reflections on their own practice as they develop skills of analysis and argumentation. This particular section is a hybrid, flipped classroom format and

included those with an interest in Early Childhood, Middle Grades, Arts Education, and Health and Physical Education.

POSITIONING STUDENTS AS READERS, WRITERS, LEARNERS, AND TEACHERS

This collaboration entailed hands-on, authentic training on literature discussions around a young education activist for 10 College of Education teacher candidates and 13 middle school students from a local urban K-8 public school.

PEN-PAL DIALOGUE AND COLLEGE STUDENT VISIT TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

University students spent the semester exchanging pen pal letters with middle school student literacy leaders, sharing insights about school, reading, writing, college life and the Young Reader’s middle school edition of the Common Read text *I Am Malala*. College students began by participating in conversations to prepare them for this work. They initially outlined their impressions about the themes of identity, family relationships, cultural and social differences, education, courage, adjustment, and war. Strategies for discussing the values of compassion, fear, resilience, and hope with middle school students were discussed as well.

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 about Malala’s story with you and learning more about the area of Pakistan where she lived, opportunities for girls to pursue an education, her family, her friends, the activities that are important to her, and how she persevered in the face of adversity.” A middle school student shared how “. . .we read Malala’s idea of making the world a better place as she imagined her life after war. My idea of making the world a better place is to end poverty caused by people who have to start their lives over after having been surrounded by violence and the horrors of war . . .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 comfort people. What is your idea of a better world?” Both students were engaged in writing for an authentic audience and sharing valuable insights.

Another middle school student shared the following with his pen-pal: “After reading about Malala’s experiences, I can see why she wants 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 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.”

University students visited the middle school in October. “We discussed not only the issues presented in the Malala book, but also shared reflections on our experiences as students,” says an early childhood education major. “The visit was successful. We had the opportunity to put a face with a letter and to encourage one another in future scholastic pursuits.” Another student noted the following in her final reflection journal:

“I believe that working with the book, *I Am Malala*, was the right choice and added to the experience. It introduced the middle school students to another culture that they may not have known a lot about before our partnership, and showed them that they have more in common with someone that they initially thought was very different from them. More importantly, it introduced students to a current world issue in terms of the reality of topics that they hear about in the news from the perspective of a student their own age. Without this collaboration, they may not have really understood these issues. Also, *I Am Malala* allows them to gain another perspective on how Malala used her situation to make a difference in the lives of others. Perhaps the middle school students will be inspired to use their voice to give back to their own community and make a difference. Plus, it opened them up to another of genre of literature that the middle school students may not have read a great deal of on their own. When I was their age, I was not very interested in nonfiction books; I preferred fiction. It is important to introduce them to different genres early in their academic career so that they can grow as readers. I plan to do this in my own future classroom.”

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT VISIT TO UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

In November, the middle school students visited the university. The field trip began with a campus tour led by College of Education students, highlighting the university's Learning Commons study center, academic buildings, the Student Union Center, and the campus library. This visit provided an opportunity for the students to have a window into the college experience from the perspective of a university student. Following the tour, College of Education students led an hour and fifteen minute course, with all activities designed by these future educators enrolled in the “Critical and Contemporary Issues in Education” course. We began with an outside team-building, ice breaker activity in which each individual described an interesting fact or talent and linked with someone who shared that connection.

In order to build upon the reading of the Malala text, college students were invited to consider the role that “we, as 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). University

students shared a video link from *The Daily Show*-<https://>. This was followed by a discussion of the video clip, in which university students guided the middle school students to discuss Malala Yousafzai’s memories of the Taliban’s rise to power in her Pakistani hometown. The college students also discussed Malala’s suggestions for individuals who would like to assist overseas by speaking about the importance of education for girls around the world.

An interactive chalk talk activity with post-it notes followed in order to reflect upon how students’ opinions on the value of education evolved since reading and listening to Malala’s story in terms of her commitment to education during a time of war. Three large sheets of chart paper were introduced and displayed; students’ responses for each of the “chalk talk” activities included the following:

“How has your opinion on education changed after reading about Malala’s commitment to education in the face of personal danger?”

- “My opinion on education has changed. Malala described how she and her father fought for the right of girls to receive an education, even knowing they could be killed for standing up for their beliefs.”
- “I feel like kids should value education because some kids don’t get it, but it is so important in life.”
- “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, or have to stand up for themselves in the face of violence in order to learn.”
- “I think education is important. I used to think it was just something we had to do. Now, I see how it can transform your community, and I see the importance of freedom of speech.”
- “I feel as though education is power because without education, we will not be able to advance in our life. Education helps us to be able to read well, express ourselves in writing, speak about what we learn, and use technology.”
- “Education is fun. Learn more and be somebody. I learned this from Malala’s story, which she told in her own words and her own voice about her struggles in a time of war. She also tries to stay true to herself and her family, friends, the TV shows she enjoys, and sports that she likes to play, like cricket, even when life was difficult.”

“After reading about Malala’s belief in the importance of education during a time of war, I believe in.....”

- “trying to find peaceful solutions when there is a disagreement between people”
- “freedom of expression”
- “figuring out ways to get along with people who may seem different to you at first. We all have more in common than you might think we do.”
- “treating everyone fairly and equally”
- “changing things up and being myself”

- “myself . . . showing good examples to small children”
 - “I believe that no matter what race or gender or religion a person is, everyone deserves an education.”
- “I would stand up for.....”
- “people whose lives have been changed by war and violence”
 - “anyone being bullied”
 - “for my family”
 - “all the kids that need education”
 - “the value of reading and writing”
 - “myself and my dreams. I will let nothing get in my way of achieving greatness.”

The final activity centered on “I am From” poems, inspired by George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From” template (1999). This was motivated by the title of the book for this project, as well as the importance of belief in oneself and your identity, even in the face of adversity. Students were provided with sample sentence starters to spark their poetry writing:

- I am from _____ (an everyday item in your house)
- I am from _____ (detail about home-smell, taste, or feel)
- I am from _____ (plant or flower)
- I am from _____ (family tradition/family trait/family habit)
- I am from _____ (family members)
- I am from _____ (things you were told as a child)
- I am from _____ (family foods)
- I am from _____ (family ancestry/nationality/place)
- I am from _____ (family mementos, pictures, treasures)
- I am from _____ (song or saying)

A sample student poem was as follows:

I am from old family photos.
From colorful Atlanta and creative Savannah.
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.
From mashed potatoes.

From heroic Grandad in a war fighting.
Fighting for our loved ones in my heart.

The college students and middle school students conferred and chatted as they drafted their poems. The class concluded with all parties sharing their poems at the front of the classroom; each middle school student departed with a campus map and brochure of university programs as well as a hard copy of the Young Reader’s edition of the Malala text to take home as a keepsake.

Books geared towards elementary school students inspired by Malala’s story and the importance of personal rights/ freedom were displayed in the school library after the project was conducted along with additional copies of the text for middle school peers to read. These included *Malala, a Brave Girl from Pakistan/Iqbal, a Brave Boy from Pakistan: Two Stories of Bravery* (Winter, 2014), *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).

REFLECTIONS

This initiative, which was designed to deconstruct issues surrounding war and promote the value of education in the face of adversity, 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, dialogue about a text, and envision a future as a college student. The school counselor and principal expressed the value of this initiative for their school population.

In addition, this collaboration provided insight into the placement of powerful learning experiences embedded within the College of Education curriculum. Teens for Literacy provides a significant forum for university students to participate in and support community literacy endeavors around modern-day issues that they encounter in the news and media on a daily basis. Future educators in the Living-Learning community were provided with a platform to apply their textbook learning and place their classroom discussion of theory into practice. A College of Education student noted the value of the initiative with fostering a genuine interest in reading as she stated the following:

“Our goal for the students was to help foster a healthy love and respect for reading and the importance of placing yourselves in another person’s shoes through the perspective of an individual in a book. Today, with electronics and the Internet, books are becoming very obsolete, very quickly. Hopefully, we helped the students to understand that reading is amazing and transformative. In this case, the middle school students read Malala’s story, which shows us the worst

in people and their potential for cruelty on one hand. However, it also shows the lengths that people will go to work for the common good during difficult times. I firmly believe that this is one of the best skills you can give anyone. If you teach someone to love reading and value the power of education, that can never be taken away from them. Hopefully, we planted a seed for that love of reading.”

Another student voiced these sentiments in her final reflective journal:

“I think the Teens for Literacy program allowed us to gain first-hand experience with these middle schoolers . . . and to see what it was like to connect with them in a meaningful way. The teens were able to get a glimpse of what our class is like and what college is like in general. I think (and hope) that I impacted my pen pal Kayla by writing her letters and working with her. I just wanted to encourage her and get to know her as well as I could as well as teach her about the power of speaking out and making your voice heard, like Malala and her father did. This helped shape her character and hopefully influenced the middle school students. Malala had to leave her hometown and way of life due to the war and start again in a new place, begin a new school, and make new friends while trying to stay true to herself and her traditions. I think I Am Malala was a strong vehicle for discussion because her story is so impactful and relevant to all of our lives. It is inspiring to read whether you are in middle school, college, or are a teacher/professor.”

This high-quality learning experience for candidates helped better prepare these pre-service educators for their future careers and connect them to community schools. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning utilizes student feedback to continually improve teaching and learning experiences (Horspool & Lange, 2012). One of the key elements of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is the continuous improvement of the practice of a discipline (Schulman, 2000). The goal of this community-based literacy project was to address the concerns of the candidates as well as facilitate the College of Education faculty's knowledge base.

Afflerbach and Harrison (2017) note 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” (218). 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 surrounding the context of war, and promoted the value of education, in today's world. New insights gained regarding the project's impact on

students' future teaching identity were celebrated.

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