Relevant, Safe Schools for All

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A Google search on “bullying and middle school” yields a staggering 16.6 million hits. Indeed, such concern impacts our many students, as the U.S. Census Bureau estimates a 2012 population of some 24.8 million 10- to 15-year-olds in the country, of whom nearly half a million are not enrolled in school. In the wake of the fear created by high-stakes tests that have hijacked our schools in so many instances, now more than ever we need teacher leaders who excel at more than simply imparting information and controlling discipline.

A strong instance comes to mind, as recorded in the book Letters to a Bullied Girl, which shares some 125 letters of more than 500 total written in 2007 from persons of all ages across the country to a young adolescent bullying victim. Begun by two California high-school aged sisters as a way to help the younger adolescent victim of whom they had heard, this hugely successful and visionary campaign had the full support of many teachers and a building principal. But true to ideal middle school philosophy, it exemplifies how students can act decisively, wisely, and warmly when frameworks are built that encourage democratic action. Reminiscent of the It Gets Better campaign launched on behalf of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, this letter campaign was a grassroots effort to allow adults and youth to reach out in support to a victim whose immediate community did not offer such solidarity. “For Olivia Gardner, an epileptic, the bullying began in middle school. It took the form of name-calling after she suffered a seizure in front of her peers. Olivia was singled out as different, rejected by her peers, and tormented in the hallways and on the Internet with an ‘Olivia’s Haters’ website created by her classmates. Olivia’s bullies dragged her backpack through the mud, taunted her in school, and wore ‘I Hate Olivia’ bracelets. With each incident, Olivia withdrew.” While Olivia’s story has a happy ending, she did not receive emphatic support from her own middle school.

This issue of Middle School Journal offers examples of middle level professionals who act heroically to give unconditional support to all adolescents, not unlike Emily and Sarah Buder, the two sisters who reached out collectively to Olivia. Alfred Tatum, Lisa Delpit, Pedro Noguera, and countless other scholars offer further ideal lessons for educators who should work as engaged and informed advocates for varied populations of youth.

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Theater of the oppressed in an after-school program: Middle school students’ perspectives on bullying and prevention

This article examines students’ participation in Boalian Theater activities to role-play, rehearse, and develop strategies to use when bullied or witnessing bullying.

Foram Bhukhanwala

Introduction

Bullying is a form of aggression where there is systematic use and abuse of power (AERA, 2013). It is now considered a prevalent and often neglected problem in schools both within and outside the United States (NEA, 2003). Bullying occurs in all grades across gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. This paper is relevant to middle school teachers and administrators as it examines the role of Theater of the Oppressed activities as a tool for engaging middle school students in talking about their experiences with bullying and rehearsing possible actions when being bullied or witnessing acts of bullying, with the goal of creating a more humane environment.

Early adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change during which these 10- to 15-year-olds form their adult personalities, dispositions, values, and attitudes (NMSA, 2010). Adolescents need experiences that help increase self-efficacy and a positive ethnic identity. At the same time, they need experiences that help them to understand racial, ethnic, and/or sexual differences by engaging in perspective-taking and empathy.

Many times, middle school students respond to racial, ethnic, and/or sexual differences in their peers by bullying. About 28 percent of 12- to 18-year-olds have reported being bullied at school during any school year (DeVoe & Bauer, 2011; Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2012). Bullying occurs with greater frequency among middle school-aged youth than high school-aged youth (Nansel et al., 2001). Research findings on bullying show that bullying is often aimed at specific groups. For example, students with disabilities (Rose & Espelage, 2012), African American youth (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Omrod, 2011), and LGBTQ youth (Espelage, Green, & Polanin 2012; Potat & Rivers, 2010) are vulnerable groups to bullying, harassment, and victimization.

Middle school students learn best in safe environments that are characterized by active student engagement; where students have opportunities to share, reflect, and imagine possibilities; and where their oral, written, and artistic voices are heard (NMSA, 2010). One such learning environment is created with the use of Boalian Theater.

Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (TO) is grounded in the work of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) and is a safe aesthetic and a democratic space for young adolescents to come together to rehearse for reality and restore dialogue among human beings (Bhukhanwala, 2007; Boal, 2003, 2006; Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010; Harman & French, 2004). For Greene (1995), aesthetic spaces allow students and teachers to imagine. Imagination is a way of engaging in empathy and perspective-taking: “It is becoming a friend of someone else’s mind” (p. 38). With this approach, theater is seen as a reflection of daily activities and serves the function of bringing a student
community together for celebration, entertainment, and dialogue (Blanco, 2000), as well as for problem-posing and generating multiple possibilities. Jackson (1991) says, “Victims of the oppression under consideration are able to offer alternative solutions because they themselves are personally acquainted with oppression” (p. xxiv).

Bullying is an action that is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). In more recent times, this definition has broadened to include varied forms of aggression such as verbal, physical, sexual, or digital media-based (for example, text messages, social media, and websites); or it may include being threatened, having things forcefully taken, or being socially excluded (Espelage, 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2008).

There are no simple explanations for bullying; rather, it is a complex phenomenon with many causal factors and consequences. There is consensus among researchers that being a victim of bullying can have serious socio-emotional and academic consequences. Children and youth who have been targets of bullying behaviors have reported low self-esteem (O’Moore & Kirkham, 2001), as well as psychological complaints such as depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007; Espelage & De La Rue, 2011; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Limber, 2002). Students who are bullied may avoid taking the school bus, using the bathroom at school, going to school altogether, or may take steps to harm or end their life (NEA, 2003). Furthermore, bullied students may become less engaged in school, their grades and test scores may decline (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011), and they are at a higher risk for poor school adjustment and delinquency (Farrington & Ttofi, 2011). It is noted that cyberbullied students experience negative outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance, similar to those experienced by their traditional counterparts (Schneider, O’Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Wade & Beran, 2011).

Bullying creates a climate of fear and disrespect in middle schools and has a negative impact on student engagement and learning (Mehta, Cornell, & Gregory, 2013; NEA, 2003). Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszweski (2003) argue that middle school teachers and other adults should stop bullying behaviors because of their serious socio-emotional and academic consequences yet also because they are unfair and deny students their basic human right to a safe environment.

Though teacher monitoring can be an especially important intervention, middle school personnel including classroom teachers do not respond adequately to student reports of bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brien, 2007; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). There are a variety of reasons for this lack of intervention, including failure to recognize bullying behaviors, failure to understand the importance of intervening, and lack of knowledge about how to intervene effectively (Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001; Limber, 2002). It is therefore important for middle school teachers to participate in professional development experiences that instruct them in bullying prevention and intervention.

However, it is equally important to prepare middle school students themselves, and to rehearse with them actions they can perform to intervene in bullying situations and help foster a more humane environment. There are a variety of reasons for empowering students with bullying intervention skills. To begin, bullying often occurs when a teacher is not present (i.e., on the playground or bus, in the bathroom, at lunch, or even off school grounds), and as a result students cannot always count on a teacher or other adult to be there. Consequently, we need to create learning opportunities so that students will be confident and know how to intervene in a humane way when bullying situations arise. Also, if bullying leads to depression and low self-esteem, one way to counteract these negative consequences is to create intentional spaces where middle school students have opportunities to use tools and develop dispositions that could help them address bullying behaviors. When young adolescents develop abilities to help themselves they may be likely to restore their self-confidence and sense of security.

The question this issue raised for me was how I could facilitate Theater of the Oppressed activities to help middle school students make sense of bullying. I hoped these activities would engage students in perspective-taking and empathy as a way to address the issue of bullying and as a way to work toward building a more humane environment. This article explores the potential of the aesthetic space offered by the Boalian approach to engage middle school students in negotiating their experiences with bullying in school. In this way, I seek to help them go beyond imagined limitations and engage in what Maxine Greene (1995) calls “social imagination”—the ability to imagine new possibilities and believe that they can make a difference in home and school life.
Theater of the oppressed

Critical Performance Pedagogy (CPP) acknowledges that all learning is influenced by cultural differences and by the context in which it takes place (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2004), and that we need to attend to that which is expressed and to the voices that are silenced. In other words, we need to study the socio-cultural-historical-political frame within which knowledge is constructed, in addition to studying the content itself. My work with CPP in teaching and teacher education is informed by Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (TO).

Influenced by Paulo Freire’s views on democratic education, Augusto Boal developed TO to offer a theatrical space for people to come together to rehearse for reality, engage in a critical dialogue, and build a more humane environment (Boal, 2003, 2006). In a Boalian approach, it is in the aesthetic space in which active engagement and imagination can be realized. For Greene (1995), aesthetic spaces allow students and teachers to imagine. The task of the participants then is to find openings and possibilities that can become a stepping stone onto different ways of thinking and acting (Popen, 2006). Within aesthetic spaces, we dramatize our fears, give shape to our thoughts/perceptions and rehearse our actions for the future in a relatively safe space, as well as engage in empathy and perspective-taking: “It is becoming a friend of someone else’s mind” (Greene, p. 38). These aesthetic spaces “make possible imaginative geographies, in which opportunities for transitive knowing are freed up” (Popen, 2006, p. 126) and transformative learning can occur.

Boal (1995) argues that one of the properties of the knowledge—enhancing power of the arts is self-reflectivity—has the capacity to allow us to observe ourselves in action, imagine ourselves as actors and agents of change. Theater of the Oppressed is a “mirror which we can penetrate to modify our image” (Boal 1995, p. 29), and a space where we can rehearse possibilities to change the image we carry of ourselves and those we have constructed of the world we live in. During the process of self-reflection and imagination, participants examine and express their feelings of oppression, constraint, and powerlessness, and recognize their agency in addressing these complex feelings and power imbalances.

Of the many theatrical pedagogies Boal created, I was most interested in adapting Image and Forum Theater to create a theatrical space for students first to share their experiences in school and then to participate in theatrical conversations regarding bullying. Bullying is one type of oppression that many students experience as it involves an imbalance of power relations (Espelage, 2012; Olweus, 1993; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Furthermore, it creates a climate of fear (NEA, 2003), and bullying behaviors are unfair and deny students their basic human right to a safe environment (UN General Assembly, 1948). In Boalian Theater, students participate in transforming their experiences with bullying by rehearsing interventions they could make in the future to prevent bullying that they may personally experience or may witness. One intention was for students to respond and to engage in perspective-taking and empathy as one of the ways of responding to bullying experiences and making sense of the differences they experienced. Boal (2003) argues that when participants empathize, they begin to bridge the distance between self and others. They also begin to experience the “other” as human—as human as themselves. Thus, empathy for the actor may motivate the audience members to intervene in the events on the stage. For Boal (1995), the movement towards intervention in the enacted scenario is an outcome of empathy that may result in the liberation of members of the audience from oppressive barriers to action.

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Participation in theater has been shown to promote student growth in self-understanding, empathy, understanding of human emotions (Crawford, 2004; Grover, 1994), and perspective-taking, i.e., imagining what other people may be thinking and feeling (Moskowitz, 2005). Perspective-taking skills can help reduce bias and, as a result, promote feelings of connectedness and mutual understanding between individuals (Moskowitz, 2005). The two processes of developing empathy and perspective-taking that are at
the heart of Boalian approaches are dispositions called for in responding to bullying in schools. Furthermore, it has been noted that these skills can promote effective ways to handle difficult social situations (Eisenberg, Murphy, & Shepard, 1997).

### After-school program as the context of the study

Early adolescence is an important and often fragile period characterized by physical and socio-emotional growth, increased independence, making sense of differences, and facing new choices (Berk, 2012). For many youth, this is a time marked by tensions and challenges. The National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2010) asserted that one key to successfully educating young adolescents is creating a school environment they perceive as being inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all students. Miller (2003) argued that after-school programs could help create such an environment by providing middle school students with personal attention from adults, a positive peer group, activities that could hold their interests, opportunities that promote student engagement in learning, and tools to improve their academic performance and promote healthy development. The research project discussed in this article was situated in an after-school program in a middle school in the southeastern United States.

### Research context, methods, and data analysis

The participants in this study were members of the Theater Club offered in an after-school program in a middle school in the southeastern United States. The school was identified as a Title I school. At the time of data generation the school had not made Adequate Yearly Progress and was on a “needs improvement” list. The gifted services collaborator and the school counselor both suggested names of those sixth- and seventh-grade students who had an interest in joining an after-school Theater Club. In addition to student interest, these professionals also took into consideration student vulnerability and their experiences with bullying. We (the collaborator, counselor, and I) met with the students to provide an overview of the after-school Theater Club. An information letter and consent form were sent home for parental/guardian approval. Students and their parent/guardian consent were requirements for participation. Thirteen students agreed to join the Theater Club. Student vulnerability and experiences with bullying were not criteria used for inclusion. The participating students were linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse. For example, one student identified herself as Gothic (she preferred to dress in black, listen to Gothic music), one student was a recent immigrant to the U.S. from India who attended the ESL program, and one male student was more effeminate than the typical middle school male stereotype. Many of them had some form of experience with bullying—with being a bully, being a victim, or being a bystander.

The Theater Club met once per week for a period of 90 minutes. In total, the group met for 10 sessions over the course of the spring semester. The theater activities were facilitated by Robert Smith (pseudonym) a graduate student pursuing his doctoral degree in education at a nearby university. Robert, who was an elementary school teacher prior to beginning his doctoral program, had experience working with Freire’s problem-posing approach to education and had some familiarity with facilitating Boalian Theater activities. Prior to this research, I participated in Theater of the Oppressed workshops, and we read articles and books to further familiarize ourselves with the pedagogy. Robert and I co-planned the Boalian activities. He took the lead in facilitating the activities with the students. I collected and analyzed the data for this project.

Each session began with warm-up activities, theater games, and Image Theater. In Image Theater the participants are given a prompt and invited to create a frozen image by molding their body as if they were clay. The participants are then invited to name their image and reflect on the images created (Boal, 2003). In our context, we invited the students to form images to convey their perceptions of school. The prompts we used were as follows:

- “Create an image of a good day in school.”
- “Create an image of a bad day in school.”
- “Create an image of what you do at _____ (time) in school (for example, 9 am).”
- “Create an image of what you do at ____ (place) in school (for example, the hallway).”

In response to the prompt, “Create an image of what you do in the hallway,” Marsha walked towards the wall in the classroom where there were lockers. She stood there with her back to the lockers, her hands and feet extended, as
invited them to participate in a theatrical discussion that examined the issues of bullying. Together the students generated possibilities and rehearsed actions that could help create a more humane environment.

The data collected included field notes, two transcribed in-depth interviews with students, and photographs and/or videotaped sessions. One of the interviews, facilitated towards the end of the project, was a photo-elicited recall in which participants were shown photographs of their participation and the images they created in the sessions as well as the images created by their peers. The participants were asked to reflect on what they noticed in the photos; what they or their peer(s) were doing in the images; and what they learned about themselves, their peers, bullying, and the purpose of the TO activity. When looking at the pictures of “Columbian Hypnosis,” a theater game, participants talked about their insights and the value of the activity from their perspective. For example, Sam said:

You need to follow people and be aware of them, see them in order to move. It is hard to keep up. Marsha was moving too fast. Later she began to slow down, so it was easier then. I preferred to lead.

While Tamara shared:

The [Columbian Hypnosis activity] helps to trust people – to know that they are not going to let you fall and you need to trust them. It is pretty much that you are following their hand, so you need to be able to trust them. I liked to follow, if I could trust.”

Thus, photo-elicitation helped participants to reflect, remember, and elaborate on specific moments in the sessions that seemed poignant and critical for them.

The constant comparative method was used to analyze data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used line-by-line coding to create properties, categories, and themes. Further analysis was done by creating axial codes. Axial coding helped to specify the properties and dimensions of the categories that were constructed through line-by-line coding. Furthermore, axial coding allowed me to sort, synthesize, and organize data that could be used in explaining the relationships between categories more fully.

Findings and discussion

This portion of the article is divided into four sections. In the first section, I discuss the participants’ responses to the various Image Theater activities facilitated. The
second section describes the participants’ perspectives and their experiences with using Forum Theater activities to understand bullying. The third section throws light on what students revealed about their bullying experiences through Forum Theater. The last section includes the participants’ insights about ways to address bullying in their school.

Participants’ expressions in image theater
A Theater of the Oppressed activity we initiated in our meetings was Image Theater. In Image Theater, participants were given a prompt and invited to create an image by molding their body as if they were made of clay. The students were then invited to name their image and later were asked to reflect on the image. During our meetings, we asked the students to sculpt images of a good day in school and a bad day in school.

Images of a good day in school. In general, images of a good day included open, expansive postures, maintaining eye contact, and smiles. In their reflections, students attributed their happiness to their experiences in school, which could be categorized as academic, social, and/or disciplinary experiences. Academically, doing well meant “getting good grades,” “completing homework,” “not messing up in band practice,” and “focusing and being awake in class.” Students also reported that they had a good day in school when their social needs were met. For example, some felt happy when they were able to “help someone,” “spend time with friends,” “make new friends,” or “have good relations with my teachers.” For others, a good day in school meant having a day without any disciplinary problems. Participants expressed this as “staying out of trouble,” “going through routines without any trouble,” “not being sent to the office,” and “being allowed to go out and play/have a recess.”

Images of a bad day in school. When asked to sculpt images of a bad day in school, in contrast, participants created images that were constrictive and stiff, with their hands drawn in toward their body, their heads looking down or away, their eyes averted, and little or no smile. Participants reported that a bad day in school made them feel unhappy, embarrassed, and unmotivated, and made them dislike school. The reasons students listed for having a bad day in school included poor physical health, trouble with being bullied, inability to meet academic expectations, and disciplinary problems.

Participants who attributed their bad day in school to the bullying situations they experienced labeled their images as “being beaten up,” “being cut in line in the cafeteria,” “being pushed against a locker,” “getting in trouble while using lockers in between classes,” “difficulty in passing through busy hallways between classes,” “being cursed at,” “being labeled,” “being forced by peers to engage in a daring act,” and “other students boosting a fight.”

Participants who attributed their bad day to academic factors labeled their images as “getting punished for not doing homework,” “difficulty with math,” “disliking writing,” “computers freezing in between work,” “flunking a test,” “getting poor grades,” and “teachers giving too much work.” In addition, bad days also resulted from students getting in trouble with teachers for behavioral reasons or being called to the office for getting in trouble.

The visual images they created enabled the students to convey their day-to-day experiences of a good day and a bad day in school. The students created the images by reaching into their embodied experiences in school, bringing to life their tacit thoughts and feelings. Boal (2003) argues that oppression is embodied; an oppression like bullying is experienced intellectually, physically, and emotionally. Therefore, in working with bullying it is necessary to create embodied experiences. Edgar (2004) argues that images are a mediator between the unconscious and the conscious levels and help in releasing the embodied thoughts and feelings held. In this case, the images become vehicles for communicating significant human experiences and actively involving the students in naming school experiences that evoke positive and negative feelings.

Participants’ perspectives on their experiences with using forum theater to understand bullying
In the context of this study, the students agreed that bullying was a common concern, and all the participants reported that they had had some experience with bullying. The close personal connection with the topic helped in two ways. First, it helped the students identify with the issue and take ownership of it. Second, because students constructed the play from their personal experiences, they felt they could play a major role in generating the content, rather than relying only on an adult to tell them what to do.
What Forum Theater revealed about the students’ experiences with bullying. On the day of the Forum Theater enactment, the participants presented their role-play to a sixth grade class. Two participants played the role of the Joker during the Forum Theater. Fundamental to Augusto Boal’s theatrical process, the Joker is a facilitator, someone who keeps things moving (Schutzman, 2006). Just like the Joker in a deck of cards, a Theater of the Oppressed Joker can also assume a role as needed, “sometimes director, sometimes referee, sometimes facilitator, sometimes leader” (Linds, 2006, p. 122), and sometimes spect-actor, engaging in a discourse of posing questions, examining social structures, and generating possibilities (Boal 2003; Schutzman, 2006). In this role, the two students invited the audience members to view the play and then to problem-solve, and they also participated in generating possibilities.

The students reported that their participation in Forum Theater increased their awareness of their own roles as bullies, their experiences of being bullied, and the issue of bullying in school more broadly. The participants stated that they became aware of the various causes that triggered a fight, such as name-calling, pushing, gossiping, cursing, judging others, or lacking in empathy. They reported that bullying can lead to a fighting spectacle, and they became aware of their own style of responding to a bullying situation. For example, Sam realized that when pushed in the hallway, he walked away, saying to himself, “[so and so] must have had a bad day. I do not need to waste my time. I need to move on.” Carl learned that he typically walked away while apologizing. Tamara, on the other hand, realized that in a fighting situation she ran away as fast as she could, but was often caught in the end. Sam, Carl, and Tamara reflected on their ways of approaching when confronted with a bullying situation. Because of their participation, students also learned other ways of approaching a bullying situation. The alternative responses the spect-actors suggested during Forum Theater included apologizing, talking things over, avoiding the situation by taking a different route, and becoming more aggressive. Some of the responses were humane, while some responses were not. In their interviews, students critically thought about these responses and talked about why some responses were humane and why some were not.

Students also noted how bullying often escalated in the presence of observers. For example, Marsha came to understand how a group of people watching a fight can motivate those involved to continue fighting. In her interview she observed:

People get entertained. It is like watching a TV show; everybody wants to see it. It is like watching American Idol. Everybody wants to see it. It is so cool and then you can say – he cannot fight. It is like you fight or you cannot fight. You just get humiliated. So people don’t have much choice.

Students continue to fight, Marsha noted, not because they want to fight but because they fear humiliation. Peer pressure and peer acceptance are important influences for middle school students. A few participants became aware of the ways in which their actions added fuel to a fight. This self-awareness helped them to see that if their actions could initiate or maintain a fight, their actions could also prevent or stop a fight.

Furthermore, I noticed that the students often portrayed the teacher as passive or as ignoring the bullying situation during their enactments. In presenting alternatives, some students expressed a desire to have more teacher intervention to prevent bullying. Thus students enacted solutions that involved action being taken by their teachers as well as by themselves.

In addition to generating strategies for intervention, some students also became aware of the negative consequences of bullying. Carl, who perceived bullying to be a possible reason that students drop out of school, said: “Sometimes in school there are lots of bullies. People will try to bully you around. You don’t want to come back to school because of the fights. This means that grades drop and students drop out of school.”

Role-play and simulation have been used as learning techniques in education (Crawford, 2004). Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2011), defines role-play as “pretending to be someone else, especially as part of learning a new skill.” Role-play has been used within teaching, training, and therapeutic settings. It is used to teach and learn a variety of skills and competencies including the ability to empathize with the feelings and beliefs of others (Poorman, 2002). As noted here, the Boalian Theater approach takes the role-play experience a step further. In this approach, the audience is invited to interrupt and intervene in the role-play to influence the outcomes (Boal, 2003). Here, spect-actors have opportunities to imagine what it is like to be in someone else’s shoes. By empathizing or being someone else, the spect-actors learn to engage in perspective-taking and at the same
time learn about self—one’s habits of mind and how one interprets the world.

Boal (2003), Greene (1995), and Oldfather et al. (1999) note that when students are engaged in a dialogic exchange they are more likely to take ownership and actively participate in interrogating the taken-for-granted; they are also more likely to create different visions of their social, cognitive, and physical life worlds. We saw this process start to take place in our group.

By engaging in perspective-taking and empathy, the participants came to understand their responses to bullying, the negative consequences of their actions, and their felt powerlessness, while at the same time learning that through their actions they could take steps towards building a more humane world.

For example, Desiree noted that her attitude changed as a result of her participation in Forum Theater. Her feeling of transformation and empowerment came with the insight that she could make friends by talking to others and helping others with their problems. Desiree described the effects of her participation in Boalian Theater:

[It] helped me to solve my problems with other people. It helped me to make new friends. I learned to get along with people. [I learned to] get along with others by helping them and becoming their friend. When I understood how fights take place and learned that I can stop fights, I learned to say sorry and prevent a fight from taking place. I learned to apologize. First I did not have any friends; now I have some.

Participants’ insights about solutions in the school.

When asked how they would like the issue of bullying to be addressed in their school and how to build safe environments, participants suggested increasing the number of police officers on campus, creating awareness about the consequences of bullying, creating awareness that bullying does not solve problems, and encouraging teachers to intervene more frequently. Research findings have shown that bullying tends to affect far more children at school than educators or parents realize (Suddermann, Schieck, & Jaffe, 1996), and therefore educators and administrators must be proactive in addressing issues of bullying in order to prevent its negative consequences.

Listening to and honoring students’ voices in matters that concern them at school may engage students in thinking critically and empathically (Lincoln, 1995). Further, inviting students to examine why bullying occurs and to consider possible interventions may help students perceive themselves as having agency. As seen in this research study, young adolescents may begin to see themselves as capable of making a difference in their world and of taking steps to prevent bullying and protect themselves from being bullied.

**Implications**

The middle school students in this study were actively engaged in making sense of their experiences with bullying, understanding the roots of conflicts with peers by engaging in perspective-taking, becoming sensitized to feelings, and generating possibilities for addressing conflict situations. Including space in the after-school program for students to participate in theatrical conversations about issues that matter to them could provide valuable support for middle school students and opportunities for them to reflect and learn together.

Boal’s work is primarily concerned with oppression, which he regards as fundamentally unjust. He asserts that oppression is embodied. It is experienced with our mind and body—that is, intellectually, physically, and emotionally. Therefore, the struggle to overcome oppression must also include approaches that engage the participants with the embodied. Art forms along with theatrical experiences have the capacity to do this (Boal, 2006). Therefore, while there are many programs available for bully prevention and intervention, a Boalian approach provides a relatively safe aesthetic space where students can dramatize their fears, give shape to their thoughts/perceptions, and rehearse their actions.

By exploring empathy and perspective-taking through Boalian theater activities, the middle school students in this study examined the tensions and conflicts they experienced in their school that often resulted in seeing others as being “different.” Boalian theater offered a safe space for students to share their experiences, rehearse responses to the day-to-day dilemmas they grappled with, and reflect on their role as bystanders with the ability to create a more humane learning environment. The challenges these students explored during Boalian Theater were grounded in their lives and contextualized within their everyday school experiences.

Furthermore, in a Boalian approach, the process of student engagement is more dialogic, where students participate in critical conversations around issues that
matter the most to them, and where they learn through reflection and taking embodied actions rather than being “told” or being expected to conform to the school norms under strict disciplinary policies and police surveillance.

Educators who value humane learning environments are more likely to model care and empathy for their students (for example, Charney, 2002; Noddings, 1992). By incorporating Boalian Theater as an ongoing component of the classroom experience, educators can engage students in a theatrical conversation that promotes empathy and perspective-taking, helping them make sense of differences and address issues of bullying. During these dramatic experiences, human interactions provide an outlet for expression that allows participants to gain knowledge of themselves, their peers, and their environment (Bhukhanwala, 2007; Boal, 2003, 2006; Schutzman, 2006). A humane community begins to exist (Bhukhanwala, 2012) where members are more likely to express concern, solidarity, and support and are less likely to engage in bullying behaviors (Blum, 1999).

*All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms.*

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**References**


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Creating the cougar watch: Learning to be proactive against bullying in schools.

Despite reticence from the central office, strong middle level teacher leaders worked together to develop an effective anti-bullying program that addresses a significant need for safety and inclusion for all middle school students.

Robert W. Smith & Kayce Smith

This we believe: The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.

According to a nationally representative survey conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 2001), approximately 30 percent of American school children in grades 6 through 10 have been bullied or have bullied other children "sometimes" or more often within a semester.

These data are supported by a more recent study in 2010 by Clemson University in which 17% of K–12 students indicated that they had been bullied with some frequency (2–3 times /month) and 10% of students indicated that they had bullied others with a similar frequency. Increased awareness of the problems of bullying in our schools has led most states to introduce new laws regarding bullying. A primary goal for schools in many states is the provision of a safe, secure, and orderly school. However, even with requirements to provide a safe and orderly school, and with new laws about bullying, schools and school districts are often unsure how to take action. Some school communities, especially schools of academic distinction or who have a good reputation in their community, may believe that their schools are safe and that bullying is not a problem. Principals and teachers might not question whether they have effective policies in place for dealing with bullying.

While some schools are safe, principals may more easily assume that their schools are safe places than to have to deal with any negative publicity related to uncovered incidents of bullying. Moreover, some bullying incidences are microcosms of greater societal issues that certain parents and citizens may view as “controversial” or even justified because some groups “deserve it.” Such possible controversy makes the challenge for how schools respond even greater. This article describes how one teacher’s concerns changed her school’s attitude with regard to bullying from assuming that “bullying is not a major problem at our school” to “bullying is a priority issue included in the school improvement plan with a school-wide program to address bullying.”

As we explored the complex topic of bullying, we pondered a statement from This We Believe, which states, "The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all,” (NMSA, 2010). The most obvious connection is the need for schools, and middle schools in particular, to provide a safe environment for all students whose emerging identities often include significant vulnerability. We contend that bullying reaches to the heart of the school culture and specifically the extent to which middle school environments support the physiological, emotional, social, and academic development of adolescents (Scales, 2003). The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly National Middle School Association (2010), provides a good description of this preferred environment: “A successful school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive, and safe place - a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students’
physical and emotional well-being. Students and teachers understand they are part of a community where differences are respected and celebrated...the safe and supportive environment, students are encouraged to take intellectual risks, to be bold with their expectations, and to explore new challenges” (pp.33–34). This description conveys the multiple ways in which school culture impacts student development, especially since young adolescents often spend as much or more time with teachers and peers as with parents or guardians.

Another perspective identifies the importance of this period for student identity development (Anfara, Mertens & Caskey, 2007). The authors state that questions of identity are of great importance to young adolescents. The authors describe that the search for identity and self-discovery can “lead young adolescents to be easily offended and be sensitive to criticism of personal shortcomings” (p. xx). Identity can be affected by “questions about physical changes, relationships with peer and adults, one’s place in the world, and global issues (e.g., poverty, racism, and wealth distribution) [which] help shape what adolescents are interested in and how they view the world” (Brinthaupt, Lipka & Wallace, 2007, p. 207). Lane (2005) in her study of girls and aggression notes, “Middle level students’ primary concerns are focused on their peers and what others think of them. It is a time of tremendous insecurity for both boys and girls, and most of them experience some kind of rejection or exclusion exactly when being included is of utmost importance” (p. 42).

Finally, Pollock (2006) identifies the challenges faced by adolescents with regard to sexuality: “Adolescents have many issues surrounding their emerging identities, sexual drives and sexual orientation” (p. 31). She notes that too often these are forbidden topics in school. Fostering greater understanding among educators and the community about the emotional needs and identity crises that some students are going through is exactly what influenced us to explore the topic at the school where one author teaches.

Southeastern Middle School

Southeastern Middle School (a pseudonym) is a fairly large middle school with just over 800 students that serves a largely suburban and rural district in southeastern North Carolina. The school population is predominantly white; 13% of students are of color. About 54% of the students receive free and reduced lunch. As one of five middle schools in its district, Southeastern serves students from two feeder elementary schools. During the previous year, a low incidence of crime was reported at the school. For the last five years the school has been classified as a school of distinction by the state. Finally, Southeastern Middle has a relatively low teacher turnover rate, and teacher working conditions surveys suggest the school receives high support from teachers.

All seasoned teachers at the school agree that in comparison to other school settings, students at this school show a high level of respect toward adults in the building; students get along reasonably well with one another. In fact, little evidence of gang or group hostility asserts itself. Southeastern Middle is, in general, an excellent place to teach. However, during Kayce’s fourth year as a teacher of grades 6–8 at Southeastern Middle, she started to pay more attention to incidents of bullying that were occurring in the hallways and occasionally in her own classroom. She and other teachers would hear students use negative terms in referring to other students, but they would not always know an appropriate or affirming, impactful way to respond. While some teachers talked often about cultural differences in the curriculum and opposed discrimination against marginalized people, these were individual decisions and were not part of a larger school-wide discussion. Further, while many students and schools have accepted that discrimination based on race or ability, for example, is unacceptable, other groups too often lack such strong support. Students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), overweight, and students of lower socioeconomic status are especially and emphatically among those groups who receive little support. So even though Southeastern Middle School has a reputation as being a good and safe school, Kayce wanted to find out about students’ experience with bullying, how they felt about their safety at school, and how they perceived teachers’ responses to bullying. After all, the research shows that a student’s safety and emotional comfort play a huge role in her/his overall progress and development in other areas of middle school life and beyond. Thus Kayce was able to conduct the present study of bullying at her school as part of an independent study toward a graduate degree. Robert Smith, co-author, served as a resource, helped to guide the study, and provided a knowledgeable perspective from outside our school and district. Kayce and Robert worked together to compile the relevant literature and to evaluate the data from surveys at the school.
Research on bullying

Bullying generally is defined as aggressive behavior or intentional harm by an individual or group repeated over time that involves an imbalance of power (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2007). Further, bullying is viewed as falling into three different types of aggression: physical aggression, which includes hitting, kicking, or pushing; verbal aggression, which includes name calling, teasing, or abusive language; and relational aggression, which consists of spreading rumors and social exclusion (Varjas, Henrich, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009). A 2013 Department of Education report on bullying in West Virginia found that students are most likely to be bullied in middle school with middle school students accounting for 56% of all reported incidents of bullying K–12 (Eyre, 2013). In a study of students in grades 7 and 8 in urban, suburban and rural schools, 24% reported either bullying or being bullied; 14% of students reported being called mean names and others reported being hit or kicked, being teased or being threatened (Seals & Young, 2003). In a separate study of students in grades 7 and 8 at three middle schools that differed significantly by race, socioeconomic status, and urbanicity, “being overweight” and “not dressing right” were the most common reasons that identified why a student might be bullied (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). The second most common reason, identified at two of the three schools, was being perceived as gay. Based on student responses, one of the main conclusions from the study was that “most students want adults to see what is going on in their world and respond to bullying in caring, effective, and firm ways” (p. 35).

Kayce’s initial questions for students revolved around their perceptions of how much bullying occurs at Southeastern Middle, which types of students are bullied, where bullying is occurring, and what support the school is viewed as offering in preventing and responding to bullying. Olweus (1999), who is widely considered the pioneer in bullying research, describes conducting a needs assessment as a way to gather data and inform the process. This approach, which also included focus groups with students, was successfully implemented in a study of bullying at an elementary school (Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003). Surveys concerning student and teacher perceptions regarding bullying have also been used (Beale & Scott, 2001). Based on the different responses to bullying from their study of students at three middle schools, San Antonio and Salzfass (2007) argue that a needs assessment is an important starting point. Their findings coincide with the various researchers who claim that multiple types of reporting and surveying are necessary when diagnosing a school’s need for an anti-bullying program (Bowlan, 2011; Varjas, Henrich, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009).

Surveying students and teachers

Kayce read several articles on bullying and searched for existing surveys that would provide greater reliability and address questions with regard to bullying than might have otherwise been considered. In developing questions for the student survey, Kayce was aware of the rural community surrounding the school that might lead to complaints from community members if too much positive attention was focused on gay identifying students. While the building principal was supportive of such a project, this was also his first year and he wanted to make sure that student surveys had the support of the local school district. The district reviewed the survey and replied that, as it involved student’s beliefs, the survey would have to be approved prior to the start of the school year, per a school board policy. The district also suggested that the wording of some of the questions revealed bias. The district’s response initially confirmed our fears that bullying can be a politically sensitive topic and school officials would prefer not to have certain controversial aspects of this issue examined.

This response appeared to end the project, at least for that year. However, after further thought we disagreed with the district’s interpretation that the survey questions asked about student’s beliefs rather than their opinions and observations about bullying and whether bullying occurred at the school. We decided to submit a revised survey, changing the wording of some questions, and we replied that we did not view this as asking about students’ beliefs but about students’ observations in regard to their daily experience. At this point, district officials said that the decision ultimately remained with the principal. We realized then that a better way to begin data collection on this topic would be to survey the teachers rather than the students. We suspected that the responses from the teachers might help pave the way to survey the students.

The teacher survey included questions about the frequency with which they observed bullying, the locations on campus where bullying occurs in any capacity, and the extent to which they address bullying
with their students both formally and informally. Open-ended questions probed teachers’ comfort levels with responding to bullying incidences as well as their opinion on whether the school should be doing more to combat bullying. An impressive return rate resulted, with 48 of the school’s 55 teachers responding to the survey; 79% of respondents stated that they observed bullying incidences between one and three times per week. In response to questions about the frequency with which particular groups of students were bullied, most answers reported that many of the groups were bullied at a lower frequency of “sometimes.” However, six groups had frequency for being bullied with the highest number of respondents who chose “frequently” or “constantly.” These included students “with few or no friends” (35%); students who are “overweight” (33%); students who are “poor or perceived to be impoverished” (21%); students “who are gay or rumored to be homosexual” (23%); and students “who act like the opposite gender” (25%). Although 77% of teachers said they were confident in responding to incidences of bullying, 44% of teachers indicated that they would like to receive additional resources or guidance on how to respond to bullying. Finally, 65% of teachers agreed that the school should be doing more to reduce incidences of bullying.

**Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force**

Teachers’ responses indicated both that bullying is an important issue and that the school could be doing more to address bullying. Their responses also supported the need for further investigation. In completing the online survey, teachers could indicate if they were interested in being part of a solution to bullying at Southeastern. Four teachers and the two school counselors volunteered and formed the Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force (the nickname was a student’s idea and coincides with the acronym for the school’s name). The task force quickly recruited a parent, six students, and two members of our three-member administration to join in our review of the data from the teacher responses and in our discussions to consider our next step(s). At the task force meetings, small groups were created to examine possible solutions to specific problems that emerged from teacher responses. Very quickly the group identified the need for data from students, which could be compared with the teachers’ responses. A student survey was created that modeled the survey given to teachers. It included additional questions that were created based on the input of the students on the task force. Four months after the teacher survey was administered, the student survey was completed by 620 students out of a total of 810 students, with a similar number of responses received from all three grade levels. Student responses indicated that approximately one third of students had been bullied, with 13% indicating they were unsure about whether they had been bullied. Eight percent of students (58 total students) indicated they were bullied daily and seven percent (49 students) said they were bullied 2–3 times a week. Eighty percent of students reported that they see bullying occurring at the school, and 18% stated that they see bullying more than once a day. In response to which groups of students experience the most bullying, the following four groups had the highest percentages of students who are frequently or constantly bullied: students who are gay or rumored to be gay (53%), students who are overweight (50%), students with few or no friends (43%), and students who act like the opposite gender (34%). In response to the question asking students if they have a trusted adult at the school that they can talk to about bullying and other problems they might be experiencing, 57% said “yes,” 28% said “no,” and 14% indicated “unsure”; this large majority view reveals a powerful indicator of the strength of the ideal middle school model’s presence at the school. Finally, only 33% of respondents agreed with the statement that “when my teachers respond to bullying, it helps make the situation better.”

Students from the task-force met three times with Kayce and the two counselors in a focus group format to review the results. The students provided valuable feedback in understanding some of the responses, and they also brainstormed various short- and long-term goals for our school and group. One of these goals was similar to a strategy that other researchers have described in the creation of a student-run watch group (Crothers, Kolbert & Walker, 2006). This group, which would later be named “Cougar Watch,” would be responsible for monitoring bullying and reporting incidences to teachers. Around the same time this student-led brainstorming was happening, the school faculty learned about the most significant results from the student survey, especially those that differed from their own perceptions. This knowledge of students’ experience and perspective undoubtedly fostered greater interest and concern on the part of teachers to learn more about what was
happening and the different ways they could respond. This is significantly relevant for this middle school as it shows a genuine desire on the part of adults to be a part of a school community where student differences are celebrated and respected (NMSA, 2010).

Creating the cougar watch student group

Equally important to having mechanisms in place in the school community for students’ healthy emotional growth is the need for similar strategies that foster their ability to contribute as democratic citizens both in their school and in their future (NMSA, 2010). The formation of the student-run Cougar Watch group coincides with the AMLE proclamation that developmentally responsive middle schools “will promote the growth of young adolescents as scholars, democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient young people” (NMSA, 1995, p. 10). Students in grades 6–8 who submitted applications to participate in Cougar Watch had to receive parent permission as well as teacher recommendations.

This application process served several goals: (1) it informed parents that we were taking steps to do something about bullying at our school, (2) it ensured that teachers were able to provide confidential input as to the character of these applicants, and (3) it let students know that the role was a serious responsibility and an opportunity for leadership. With backing from our principal and assistant principal, we planned training sessions for our 32 new Cougar Watch members. The training focused on being able to clearly define the three different types of bullying and being able to identify whether or not situations are bullying. These students practiced identifying bullying throughout the school for about two weeks by simply observing and recording their observations in a journal. During this time the two counselors, two teacher members of the task force, the school resource officer, and Kayce met with the 32 Cougar Watch members a total of five times.

In small groups, the adults facilitated the discussions in which students shared what they observed and tried to identify as a group whether or not these should be considered bullying. Out of this training experience we drafted and finalized a bullying reporting form that would be available for use during the following school year. The form incorporates student-friendly language and has a checklist format that helps students determine if what they are reporting is indeed bullying.

Planning our approach to bullying prevention

After this training experience and before departing for the summer, the core group of adults from the task force met for a long brainstorming session with the principal. We determined that the best use of the Cougar Watch reporting forms might be to make them available to all students in the school. This decision resulted from the need to protect Cougar Watch members from becoming targets themselves, but it also is consistent with other bullying prevention programs that stress the importance of a whole-school response particularly involving all students (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007; Brewster & Railsback, 2001)². We also intend to incorporate the Cougar Watch members’ responsibilities as well as the data from the reporting forms to help inform the implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) at our school over the next few years. Next, we decided that since our budget ruled out the opportunity to invite an outside expert to train our teachers, this same core group who trained the students would use similar content with modified methods to train the adults in our building. While possibly missing some of the expertise of an outside trainer, benefits accrue from having the adults and students within our school community find answers to our school’s challenges.

One of the reasons bullying is such a complex issue is because people have different ideas as to what constitutes bullying. Hence, we knew we needed a clear definition of bullying that could be communicated to all stakeholders in our school community. We established our school’s definition—Bullying: (1) is harming another person intentionally, (2) is repeated, (3) involves a power imbalance—based on the multiple but similar definitions provided by different experts, and made it student-friendly with cartoon-like depictions to help clarify. This clear and shared definition has been communicated to staff during their training. It was also professionally printed on posters that are in all teachers’ classrooms and throughout the building, and it was shared with parents at the first Open House night of the school year. During this four-hour Open House, teacher and student volunteers offered descriptions of the main types of bullying, shared with parents the school’s official definition, and provided them with a pamphlet that included resources on bullying available on the Internet.
Broader connections of bullying

In less than one school year, the topic of bullying at our school has gone from the status of a “non-issue” to being a real priority with strategies included in next year’s school improvement plan. Further, one of the district-determined goals for all School Improvement Plans, which coincides with the AMLE stance on positive school culture, is to have a “safe and nurturing school for all students.” Our Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force is a perfect strategy to accomplish this goal. Ideally, after some time is spent raising awareness about bullying and learning how to respond to it better, the approach to dealing with bullying at the school will shift to more of a preventative nature. This should be made easier with the implementation of a school-wide PBIS program. PBIS focuses on bringing a culture shift into a school by modeling positive behavior in school-wide routines and explanations and then rewarding subsequent positive behavior. The district has chosen PBIS as a tool to be utilized by all schools in our county, so the work of the Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force should provide a helpful segue from simply reporting and disciplining bullying to changing the school’s culture in general on various behaviors including bullying. For more information on PBIS, see http://www.pbis.org/.

Remarkable changes have occurred at Southeastern Middle School in one year. We now have a much better understanding of the groups of students at the school who have been targets of bullying. We have developed widespread interest and support with the teachers and administration, an action plan for creating awareness about bullying among the students and parents, and a visual representation of the different strategies that are available at the school to respond to bullying and bullying-victim behavior.

As we pursued this study, our understanding of bullying also evolved from seeing bullying as a separate problem, to recognizing that it is deeply connected to the whole school culture and draws upon nearly all 16 characteristics identified as keys to educating young adolescents (NMSA, 2010). In seeking to create a school culture that supports the diversity of our students and in which all students feel valued for who they are, we have had to engage our teachers and administration. We have also realized the importance of listening to our students and involving them in helping create a supportive school culture (Lipka & Roney, 2013). Additionally, we have had to involve our students’ parents and families so that they too are included in supporting the changes in school culture. There likely will still be difficult issues to respond to, but we are starting the school year informed of the problem and no longer assuming that “bullying is not a problem at our school.”

Key points for teacher led change to address bullying

Based on our experience as well as the literature we read about bullying, we offer the following six key points when considering a grassroots approach to raising awareness about bullying at any school:

- Be aware that some bullying incidences are microcosms of greater societal issues that some parents and citizens may view as “controversial.” However, do not be deterred by initial responses that may not be supportive, e.g., “we have a safe school,” or “bullying is not a problem at our school.” Use data to prove objectively why those controversial issues need to be addressed at the middle school age level.

- Find other colleagues within the school, at other schools, and/or in organizations concerned with bullying who are either interested in helping form a group at the school or who can help serve as a resource for you or the group. A group provides a stronger voice than one individual teacher. Also, invite a broad base of representation on the group, e.g., teacher, student, counselor, parent, and administrator.

- Collect student data on their experience and perceptions of bullying at your school. Students know firsthand what is happening with bullying. Include students in any group created to make recommendations on bullying. School-wide action plans should include all students and teachers.

- Be patient. Just when you think you have made changes and done extensive work, you will realize the road is a long one. Eliminating or reducing bullying is not something that happens in one year. No matter what community you are in, it is an ongoing effort and programs or strategies should be continually assessed for their effectiveness.

- Remind your principals that increased reporting will occur when you start to tackle the issue of bullying. This is positive and means people are paying attention.
It will be extra work upfront for the principals, but if the school’s action plan is successful and effective, these reports should decrease over time.

- Once you determine through your needs assessment that some type of program or plan is necessary at your school, you will likely find that a clear definition of what your school considers as bullying is a great place to start. It gets everyone (students, teachers, parents, and administrators) on the same page when discussing the issue and formulating plans.

- Remind yourself that efforts to eliminate bullying get to the heart of creating a successful middle school. Don’t give up!

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1 Author’s update on the Cougar Watch and reporting forms: In the following school year, the adult task force determined that allowing students to serve as “bullying police” via the Cougar Watch may not be the most effective use of the student run group. Additionally, there was a concern that there would not be sufficient adult human power to monitor, investigate, and respond to the reporting forms if they were completed by all students in the school. Since then, the group’s focus has turned more toward awareness for the school and community at large. They meet as an academic club 1-2 times a month, are well-versed in the school’s definition of bullying and process for reporting bullying, and are making plans to lead assemblies for each grade level in which they engage students around the definition of bullying, how to respond to it, and how to report it at our school.

1
Realizing that their young adolescents were involved in tough, delicate issues in their out-of-school lives, the seventh-grade cross-subject teachers featured in this article came together in true middle school fashion to respond to students’ needs. The teachers opted to increase relevance for students through a curricular focus on the theme of “Perspective” in two classes (one English and one U.S. history), and as a result the teachers chose the subtopics of conflict, change, and inner strength. This conceptual focus seemed especially suited for young adolescents in the throes of significant physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development as conflict is usually a result of differing perspectives, change may lead to the resolution of conflict, and inner strength is needed to pursue change.

Their readings, writing, and discussions of conflict helped them to see they were not alone (Piazza, 2010). When violence is the norm in any location, it can influence persons’ perspectives on their lives. The students desired change, and used their study of figures in history, literature, and their own lives as exemplars of possibilities. Inner strength, however, is a difficult, and needed tool if change is to occur, and the students learned about it as the key to their emerging possible identities.

Students’ serious writing, thinking, and conversations about their own lives enables their engagement in studies of others’ lives. During their studies of conflict, change, and inner strength, these students released themselves, which enabled their engagement (Jones, 2009).

The students attend a 7–8 public school with an enrollment of approximately 580 students. It is the only middle school in a small, southern city with a population of approximately 45,000. More than 50% of the students in the two classes were African Americans, and all belonged to a program for students identified by their sixth-grade teachers as talented and in need of support in order to succeed. No formal measures led to those teachers’ judgments; they based their decisions on their overall knowledge of their students. After-school mentors, study periods, a contract system with families, and classroom policies in which the students were addressed as members of a highly capable group, all converged to enable the students to perform well.

As a professor in a nearby university, I study students as writers. In the case of this article, I did so by attending these English and U.S. history classes twice a week for two years; one of those years is featured here. While in the school setting, I observed the students, interacted with them whenever possible, recorded notes, and photocopied their work. Also, I talked with the teachers, in order to ensure that I understood their learning goals—and the students’ accomplishments.

Middle school relevance

Conflict exists. Often, in service to classroom management and/or control, our tendency as educators may be to ignore or squash it, but these students recognized it as
a concept that begged study. As Meyer (2011) writes, the current, corporate world of education creates an atmosphere of fear and competition, not inquiry or reflection. Teachers and students feel trapped in narrow curriculums, but students’ lives often beg attention beyond standardized curriculums, and unless we address internal and external conflicts in middle school, students may become disillusioned and look forward only to the day they can drop out. Such a radical option is too often in their eyes the only way to give the time they need to the forces that place them in a constant state of conflict.

Conflict in society

I entered English class as teacher Kristina Doubet introduced the topic of conflict. She briefly explained various types and kinds of conflict and then read “Mother to Son,” by Langston Hughes. Ms. Doubet projected this line from it: “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,” and the class talked with familiarity about Hughes’s idea. Their lives ain’t been easy.

The students moved into groups, each with a poem about conflict. The group I joined read “The Rival,” by Sylvia Plath. One girl said, “They are taking the spotlight from the other.” Another added, “They are both taking light back from the other.” I noted the insights these young adolescents brought to what they read and wrote; a frequent source of conflict is situations where people take from, rather than give to others. Although this poem is technically “above grade level” for these students, their writing and contributions to discussions made it clear they were ready for such a challenge. They rose to the task.

Then Ms. Doubet asked the class to listen for examples of conflict in “Press On,” a song by Mary J. Blige. With partners, the students talked about what they heard, and I sat with two boys. One of them said, “You have to make decisions, you can’t just keep going on…..” They ended by talking about not being able to avoid conflict. It is ever present; it merits study.

In the ensuing class discussion a student said it is often hard to know what to do, and referred to these lines in the song, “If your moves is right, then your dough is tight…..” Ms. Doubet agreed and elaborated, “If you do the right thing, it doesn’t always pay off.” Others agreed, and Ms. Doubet asked, “Who makes these decisions difficult?” Class, “Society!”

Conflict in their own lives

Ms. Doubet, shifted the talk more specifically to the students’ lives. One girl spoke about a constant conflict in hers, “If your work is good, then it’s trouble at home….” This turned out to be an issue that is common—especially in African American communities. To be a good student can be interpreted as trying to be white. These students, in a program designed to focus on academics, live in constant conflict between the merits and perils of doing good work.

Ms. Doubet eventually moved the conversation forward by saying to the class, “Now you name a song for us to talk about.” Someone suggested, “Bittersweet Symphony”: “Life has its good points, but it’s horrible at the same time.” Their conversation about conflicts in their lives continued, and then they wrote in-class essays about those trials.

Volunteers read their essays to the class during our next session, and Tiffany (all students’ names are pseudonyms) began:

"Conflict, conflict, conflict people saying this and that. Always talking. Girls arguing over boys who aren’t worth your time, please be for real you don’t need him. Too much stress. Family problems. No one to talk to all your problems bottled up inside. Where do you run to when there is no where to go. Knowing right from wrong but not always doing what you know is right and wanting to do what is wrong. … Asking yourself why the world seems so wrong. Why everything is upside down, why can’t I turn it all around. Conflict, Conflict, Conflict please go away you turn everyone against everything and everything against everyone. You are Dismissed. Good bye … I hope. The conflicted emotions of adolescence reign in her essay. Much is unfair, many experiences do not make sense, and the students talked about their hopes for peace.

In a few minutes Brandon read his essay, which brought us back to the conflict the students experience when they do well on their schoolwork. Brandon, however, is white; this turned out to be a somewhat universal conflict. He read, in part: Do I let people know how smart I am, or do I hide myself? One student tried to convince Brandon to not hide, “You’re smart. If people tease you, they’re the kind of people who would tease you if you didn’t do well.” So, he’ll be teased, regardless, not unlike historical figures who faced conflicts.
Conflict in English and social studies

Ms. Doubet told about Frederick Douglas, “When he was a boy he was a slave, and a woman was teaching him to read. Her owner came in and said, ‘Don’t,’ but Frederick Douglas knew that, somehow, he had to continue to learn to read. It would be his key to freedom.” One student jumped in with this thought, “Because that’s where he comes from, but that’s not who he is.” I was impressed. This student knew the underpinnings of the conflict Frederick Douglas chose to live in, so this study of conflict helped these young adolescents take a closer look at themselves, as they reflected on others’ lives.

In U.S. history, their study of westward expansion highlighted the unattained peace between the pioneers and the Indian nations. Chris VanSlooten (Mr. V), their U.S. history teacher, showed primary documents such as a photo of smiling Apaches arriving at a U.S. Government School established for them, and another of the same Apaches four months later—straight-faced, hair hacked off, and wearing stiff, school uniforms. The students also viewed a video and studied additional art.

As individuals or with partners, they wrote in-class essays, poems, or songs and read or performed them, and their creations showed these young adolescents’ insights into the conflicts our Westward Expansion created. Lorri and David wrote and read this poem to the class:

_Crying for Peace_

Migration turned Westward.  
America grew. Getting bigger  
every day. More anger and fighting  
all the time. Watering the earth  
with the tears the Indians  
cried.

Migration turned westward.  
More settlers came. Taking  
land. Making Indians furious.  
Fighting and taking life away  
from man after man.

_Crying for mercy,  
The Indians do. Waiting  
for war to end.  
New technology, as more  
men died. Still watering  
the earth with the tears  
children cry.

The class first responded with quiet appreciation, then with applause, and finally with comments.

Soon, someone segued the conversation into another composition and the sharing continued as the students relived the conflict of our nation’s westward expansion, and wondered if the aftereffects will ever be resolved.

Ms. Doubet and Mr. V, these students’ teachers, in order to bring the students into the above classroom experiences—in order for the students to become engaged—brought compelling literature and artifacts for discussion, and the teachers did not lecture on the merits of those materials. They used the materials to open a discussion among the students in which the teachers carefully listened to the students’ words, nodded, and looked around for other comments. Students were involved in these considerations of conflict. They were not bored—they appreciated opportunities to bring their own lives into their classrooms (Hansen, 2012), and they became engaged in their academic content.

Developing a focus on students’ lives

Typically, when students study literature they note changes in the perspectives of various characters. The young adolescents in these classes did this as well, and they talked about situations in their own lives as they considered the complicated nature of change—as a way to address conflict. Sometimes they and/or family members realized they could take steps to initiate alterations in their situations.

Change in their own lives

Their English class studied _The Taming of the Shrew_, and the students loved Kate, the shrew whose husband supposedly tamed her. Maybe she resisted—successfully. One day during class the students wrote about situations in their own lives when a change occurred. This was Stareen’s draft:

_My Perspective!_

_There once was a time in my life when my Aunt Sara changed my perspective of her. My original view of her was that she was an angel and could do no wrong. She used to take me places and give me toys. I thought she … didn’t have a mean bone in her body. Boy was I wrong about her! As I got older I started to realize that she was very bitter toward my older cousin Mark; she was his step-parent…. Sometimes she hit him, and worked him like a slave while her two daughters sat on their bums all day…. My new view of her is that she is a two-faced mean old witch. I learned that people are not always what they seem. No one is perfect and sometimes they take their anger and depression out on other people._

_I also learned that some people just can’t be changed._
This was tough, real, and heartfelt. The students, in general, were hopeful for changes in their relatives, Indian nations, and themselves, but Stareen believed her aunt couldn’t be changed. Held up alongside *The Taming of the Shrew* and essays written by other students, Stareen’s essay begged the questions *What or Who brings about change?*

As it turned out, Stareen’s cousin initiated *change*; he intentionally threw rocks through the windows of Aunt Sara’s house, hoping to be placed in a “home,” and did move in with a loving foster family who will support him through college. Aunt Sara did not *change*, but others didn’t take on her ways.

The students thought about themselves. They are the ones to determine who they are, and they had become hooked on the idea of *change*. To address *conflict*, they considered *change* in their own lives—and became engaged in a study of the larger picture of what others had done in the name of *change*.

**Change in a larger setting**

For his project for National History Day (NHD), Jonathan researched George Creel, the creator, during WWI, of our government’s official propaganda machine. Most citizens of the U.S. did not support WWI, so Congress created the Committee on Public Information; Creel headed it, and the agency persuaded U.S. citizens to *change* their perspective.

As the students worked on their NHD projects, Mr. V conferred with them on at least three drafts. For their first draft, he read, mainly, to find out what they were learning about their topic. This is the end of Jonathan’s draft:

> … George Creel recruited from everywhere: businesses, universities, newspapers, magazines, artists, filmmakers, and community organizations. There were 19 subdivisions of the CPI, and each one focused on a different type of propaganda… The Division of News sent out more than 6,000 press releases during the war. The Division of Pictorial Publicity used professional advertising illustrators and cartoonists to create images for posters, billboards, and newspaper ads. The Division of Films made movies with titles like The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin and To Hell With the Kaiser.

George Creel believed that people can *change*, and his agency successfully influenced many minds with emotion-filled propaganda. Jonathan started to realize how scary this program of our government was, and how important it is to be wary.

For draft three, Mr. V mainly read to hear the students’ own perspectives within their drafts. What, to them, made their project significant? Here is a portion of Jonathan’s third draft about George Creel.

> … The work of the CPI marked a turning point in the history of the United States. It was the first systematic, deliberate attempt by our government to manipulate how the American people thought about a political issue so they would support the government’s policies. Largely because of the CPI, the majority of Americans went from opposing American involvement in World War I to support. The techniques of propaganda that the CPI pioneered have been used in political campaigns and the U.S. government ever since.

When I listened to Jonathan talk about his project, I learned that the aspect of it that impressed him the most was the tie to the present. To know that our government engages in the production of propaganda made an impression on him. His classmates, in discussing this, also gained insight into our government.

These seventh graders started to recognize propaganda as a way of life—a version of daily situations when they might try to *change* someone, or someone might try to *change* them. They recognized the possible influence of others that they may want to resist. Importantly, they realized that a carefully crafted message or action could bring about change.

Overall, the study of *conflict* had led them to pause, think, and consider *changes* in their thinking. Their study of *change* led the adolescents to a greater appreciation of the *inner strength* often required of them.

**Embracing and honoring diversity**

Of great importance to many of the students was their identity as African Americans. In U.S. history Mr. V included the contributions of African Americans throughout their topics of study, and students often chose to focus on them when they were given choices for writing topics. One of the girls chose to focus on Martin Luther King, Jr.—a man with tremendous *inner strength*—for her NHD essay.

**The inner strength of others**

For draft one, Cherise wrote about why her topic is important, we heard these words:

> I selected this project by thinking of what has happened to this country to all the people in the past. A good thing that has happened to this country. This project will
hopefully put an impact on black and white people to get along better and put all the negative things in the past.

Cherise was hopeful, and had confidence in her ability to accomplish something. It impressed me to hear the students use history as a springboard from which they could look ahead—to consider ways to strengthen the lives of others and their own. They could link the worlds of school and their own to move their thinking forward (Boyd & Moore, 2011).

Cherise continued to learn about the Civil Rights Movement, and eventually wrote her third draft, in which we heard these words:

Dr. King wasn’t for violence he was for peace. He wanted to get this out to everyone. He spoke to the public, had marches and so on to get this across the world…. From a man who remained true to his stance in the midst of conflict, Cherise learned about the extent to which he worked to convey his message. His strength impressed her as he became a man she “knew,” rather than a name she had heard for years. Her teacher promoted this when he insisted that each student devote time researching various individuals before they each chose one to study for NHD.

Student choice, in general, promotes engagement. Cherise, already a strong girl, chose King, and her study encouraged her to remain a person who speaks her mind.

Their own inner strength

A poetry unit in English class provided these students with opportunities to become increasingly aware of their own inner strength. Ms. Doubet began this focus by reading the familiar George Ella Lyon poem, “Where I am From.” Then she moved to the overhead projector and started to write and talk about where she comes from, “I loved my room … orange carpet … it was sooo ugly, I now know … I hated Brussels sprouts … I liked to roam … rode my bike in the cemetery.” The students thought about where they are from, offered comments such as, “Stupid stuff me and my brother did,” and wrote poems about their roots. One girl penned herself toward a greater appreciation of her past:

I remember the smell of flowers and mac and cheese and the wonderful scent of the fresh morning breeze. But I also remember dog breath and underarms and herding my little cousins around like cattle on a farm…. I remember dreaming – having wishes galore! But now I realize I couldn’t have wanted more.

For another session Ms. Doubet encouraged the students to delve into the present, “Describe yourself in detail … such things as … what makes you comfortable … what makes you mad … happy … what people think about you that might not be true.” The students wrote quickly. One boy penned several short lines, some of which are:

I act retarded
I’m really smart
Good sense of humor
Athletic
Good friend
Luv attention …

People think I’m dumb
I look like a smurf
I am smart
Have a lot of freckles
Baseball player
Have red hair
Slow
Good at math

Volunteers read their drafts to the class—much to everyone’s enjoyment and appreciation.

Then, Ms. Doubet opened a discussion about the inner strengths they had written about and shared. Ultimately, she wanted these students’ work to enrich their lives (Kirkland, 2013); she wanted them to see their possibilities. Ms. Doubet began with a metaphor about herself, “I am the weather.” In the ensuing talk one girl offered, “I always change,” and, Kendall said, “That’s my mom.”

To the next class, Kendall brought the following, in which this African-American girl analyzed the conflicts within herself—and the emergence of her inner strength.

What am I?
I am a powder keg
My anger builds up & up
until someone makes it explode.
I am a dog
loyal and friendly to those I love
I am an eraser
Eliminating all the bad thoughts from my head
I am nothing
No one can see me
I am something
A brilliant and intelligent person

Who am I?
I am Kendall R. Tucker
A powder keg, dog, eraser,
I said, “It sounds like you’re a combination of many people.”
Kendall replied,

All the time. I’m a powder keg and I hold my anger. I’m a dog; if you tell me a secret, I’d never tell – I’m loyal. I’m nice to people, to everyone. I’m an eraser; I erase bad thoughts from when I was little. Some people look down on me, talk about me; they’re jealous, I guess. I say I’m nothing; when I talk in my house, no one hears me. I say, ‘Forget it.’ In school I know the stuff; I’m in high classes.

I commented on the difference between who she is at home and in school. Kendall nodded, and I continued, “Sounds a bit like me.” Kendall wondered what I meant, and I told her a bit about my growing up years, including information about my three siblings, my decision to go to college, and my dad’s response that I should work for high grades so I could receive a scholarship.

Kendall continued,

My sister was going to college, but she’s pregnant, so she’ll go next year. I have another sister who’s a junior – she was held back, a brother who’s a sophomore – he was held back – he’s very smart, a brother in grade nine, and I’m in grade seven. We all live with my mom. I don’t know my dad.

As we concluded our conference, Kendall smiled and said,

I’m brilliant, intelligent ... I get good grades on some tests ... in grade six I got As and Bs ... I changed What am I to Who am I ... I told them what I was. Now I tell them who I am.

Kendall used her writing to wrestle with her thoughts and to strengthen her resolve. The overall classroom context included the sharing by adults, which helped the students feel validated (Fletcher, 2013). Plus, Kendall’s writing empowered her. When the students entered into their academic tasks without reserve, by using their accumulated knowledge of themselves to their advantage (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011), their engagement encouraged them to become someone. Kendall realized that to pull all of her selves together may save her—and she started to accomplish that.

Concluding thoughts
In the above classrooms, teachers invited students into the curriculum, and the students found a place for themselves therein. The teachers did not preach, lecture, or critique. True to the middle school ideal focused on the whole adolescent, the teachers tried to honor and expand the seventh graders’ interests. The students, rather than act passively, participated in an active, democratic fashion, asking questions and making connections to their lives beyond the classroom.

References

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100 words: Becoming an advocate one essay at a time

This article highlights how implementing a particular writing experience fosters the development of relationships between students and teachers.

Cory A. Bennett

Being an advocate for young adolescents is as critical now as when This We Believe was first published. Being an advocate means actively keeping students’ best interests in mind, building strong and positive relationships, and then creating supportive and caring learning environments for all students. Much attention over the last decade has emphasized the need for rigorous and relevant curriculum for adolescents (Caskey, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011). However, relationships, the third “R” in this group, remains one of the most critical components when advocating for adolescents (Beatty-O’Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010; Mo & Singh, 2008).

Despite the focus on implementing rigorous content standards, building relationships with students cannot be overlooked or set aside in planning and developing instruction (Klem & Connell, 2004). Teachers need to understand students in a more personal way than just as learners of content in order to develop meaningful relationships with students. This means deeply understanding the typical and enduring needs of adolescents, and the specific needs of students. In essence, advocating for students means understanding them as individuals, how they see the world, how to help them develop strong and positive self-concepts, and then using these understandings to improve learning experiences in the classroom (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Parker, 2010).

However, understanding what it means to be a young adolescent becomes increasingly more difficult as social, societal, political, and environmental factors change in our world. The challenges facing adolescents today are not the same challenges that most educators faced when they were adolescents. The ubiquitous access to technology and social media is but one example. Understanding students as individuals within the classroom may help with planning and instruction, but it also may help teachers better understand students’ families and communities (Eccles, & Harold, 1996). Thus, educators need to be continually aware of the unique and localized needs of adolescents in their classrooms. In doing so they may more effectively create safe and supportive learning environments, better support students as individuals, and attend to the unique cultural differences (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Reflection in 100 words

Gaining a deeper understanding of my students as individuals, as members of various groups, and their cultural ties seemed overwhelming at first. Yet, with the use of a simple and short essay, I was able to quickly understand how they viewed the world around them and their role within it. I decided to ask my advisory class, students I saw for two 30-minute periods each day, to respond to the following prompt: Describe in 100 words, what is it like to be your age? This prompt was given only once within the first couple of months of school after several weeks of working closely with these students and developing their trust and respect, though it could be repeated throughout the school year. I told them that I...
wanted to better understand what life was like for them so that I could learn to be a better teacher.

When the time came to assign the essay, I informed the class that their responses would not be shared with anyone they might know—parents, classmates, or other adults at school. As such, in order to continue to respect this anonymity, students are not referred to by name in any of the responses below. I shared my belief that sometimes adults do not understand what teenagers experience in life and school, and that by better understanding their perspectives, I could then make better decisions on how to meet their needs as their teacher. Needless to say, their initial responses and reactions included many rolling eyes and groans, yet students quickly began writing. I had expected to get no more than half-hearted responses with only momentary glimpses to the answer of the question I was trying to understand. What I got in return was an insight into their lives; so full of honesty, joy, sorrow, wonders, and heartbreak that it changed my approach to teaching.

Even though I gave this assignment to my advisory classes over the course of several years, 15 essays have been purposefully chosen to share as they were richer and more vivid in content and displayed a greater depth of internal reflection. This is not to say that the other essays are unimportant. In fact, every essay helped me understand individual students better, but the portions shared represented common themes across most essays. Furthermore, for some students, this essay was more of a task than an opportunity to share their personal beliefs and perceptions, and their responses often lacked details or insights to support me in the goal of the essay.

**Student responses**

While each student’s essay clearly voiced his/her own experiences and perceptions of being a young adolescent, there were several common themes. These themes dealt with relationships, identity, and an awareness of their changing selves, transitions to adulthood and life beyond school, and an optimistic hope for the future. What follows is a summary of each of these themes, including actual text from their essays, followed by a discussion of how understanding these essays informed my teaching.

**Relationships**

Relationships are paramount in the lives of adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Within the essays, students often wrote about three kinds of relationships; those within peer groups, intimate couples, and with their parent or family. Each of these seemed to play a unique role, and while not every student wrote about all of these types of relationships, at least one was mentioned in each essay highlighting the importance of relationships across their lives.

**Peer groups**

Many students highlighted the roles and influence that their peers had in their life, “You have a reputation at this school and your actions can improve that or kick you.” Feeling a sense of belonging with particular groups was often a thread running throughout their responses. One student wrote:

> Trying to get into the ‘in’ group isn’t really worth it and as long as you have friends (true friends) around it is ok, after figuring it out for like a year. We have to be careful of what friends we have and if they’re worth being friends with.

Finding “true” friends was a tremendous concern for many. Another student wrote:

> My friends always help me but I’m not sure how many best friends I really have. I mean, I talk to people but I always wonder how they view me. I kinda don’t think that’ll happen so I call it the impossible wish.

For each of these students peer relationships were important yet their uncertainties about finding and maintaining positive and supportive relationships were equally apparent.

However, within this struggle to find acceptance came “choke drama,” the local vernacular meaning a lot of problems and pressures from their peers. “People arguing, getting into fights, and losing friends. Most of that is caused by the stupid things you do. Like teasing or making fun of people or making trouble for no reason. I wish we would stop doing this.” Many students wrote about feeling unsure how to handle and deal with the pressures from their friends. This uncertainty led many of them to try things that they may not have otherwise tried under different circumstances. “You’ll come face-to-face with obstacles that you may not know how to handle, sometimes there’s more pressure on you to do certain things to make you fit in.” For example, “you get pressured too much to smoke, drink, and a lot of other things.” In these responses it is apparent that peer
groups have led some students to “choose” unhealthy and potentially damaging lifestyles. The first time I read these 100 word essays, I was unaware that these issues were so prevalent in so many of my students’ lives.

Many of these students were aware that their choices within their peer groups may not have been the best choices. But they often felt confused on how to deal with these situations and thus kept things “bottled up” or “buried inside” for fear that others might judge them in a negative light and thus lose these relationships. For example, one male wrote about feeling confused on the choices he should make. He said:

I don’t want to tell anyone how I really feel but I want to be popular; so you fight, act all cool, and do drugs. And there are times when you feel sad but you don’t want anybody to know so you just cry when you’re alone, so they would think he’s a tough guy who doesn’t cry.

Pressures from peers also impact identity as is clearly indicated in this passage. This male seems to indicate that he has made choices that he is not exactly happy with but did so because they were part of the social norm within this peer group. It seems likely that under different circumstances, and with different peer groups, different choices may have been made. As indicated in the responses above, the influence of peers groups cannot be understated.

**Couples**

Peer groups also influenced the types of relationships students maintained. Specifically, there was a clear sense that more intimate couple (i.e., boyfriend or girlfriend) relationships were expected even though they may not have been welcomed. One female indicated, almost as an afterthought on the subject, “Oh! And another thing I have to make sure I have time for a boyfriend.” Many students casually talked about boyfriends and girlfriends as being a natural part of middle school, but some clearly were unhappy with the imposed “need” for such relationships. As one student stated, “Everyone always judges you with the person you are going out with. It’s irritating, I know.” Some even indicated that the stress and pressure from these types of relationships caused depression and stress leading to thoughts of personal harm or the need to find some other means to remove themselves from the situation. This idea was reflected by a student who wrote, “I have heard that some 13-year-old girls cut themselves just because they have boyfriend problems. I do not know if this is true but it is scary. Some 13-year-olds even run away from home.” Reading this was initially troubling and I did share this with the school counselor who then followed up with the student. However, knowing the seriousness to which students felt about relationships of this nature, I soon began paying closer attention to relationships between couples. If it was clear that there was trouble in a relationship and a student was withdrawing from the class that day I would talk with them to let them know it was fine not to participate at that moment but also encouraged him/her to come in and get additional assistance later on, which was frequently done. I also informed the school counselor of the situation. Respecting students’ wishes to not participate and working closely with the counselor helped immensely during these rare but serious instances.

The underlying notion with couple relationships was that there was a direct expectation from some peer groups to be involved in this type of relationship, but the implications extend beyond just immediate peer groups. Adolescents are very adept at paying attention to peer norms. Thus, even if a student’s peer group does not convey such an expectation, the norm within the larger school context is still clearly conveyed.

**Family relationships**

Even though peer relationships were discussed in essays, many of the students also wrote about the strenuous relationships they often had with parents or other adult family members. One student wrote about the pressures felt from the expectations and norms established at home:

My parents are extremely overprotective and they want to kinda plan my future. They tell me things like, ‘I’m too young, no relationships, no F’s;’ and I’m fine but it gets on my nerves when they repeat it over and over. I get really annoyed because they have such high expectations for me.

This student seems to understand the expectations of the family but a greater sense of autonomy is also present. It is as if the student is saying, “I get it. Just let me take care of things.” One male wrote about the frustration he felt from his relationship with his parents and feeling inadequate as a result of the message he felt was being conveyed by his parents. He wrote, “They’re always putting me down; calling me a failure. Growing up in the ‘wrong path.’ They don’t understand I try so hard...
to make them proud and impress them.” This student was one of the higher achieving students that year in all of his classes yet he felt as though he was not doing well enough. Supporting parents and families as they help their students navigate adolescence matters greatly (Epstein, 1995; NMSA, 2010) but this might also mean that teachers take a complementary role in helping students understand the larger picture in school. Such helpful teachers assist young adolescents separate grades from future potential, thereby not confusing or inflating these two very different measures.

Developing identity

Adolescence is a critical time when many struggle to develop a strong sense of identity (Jackson & Davis, 2001; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010) and begin to critically think about life beyond school. Many of my students wrote about the social process of learning about themselves; hanging out with different groups of people and trying to understand their role within these groups. One student wrote, “Loners, nerds, populars, geeks, backstabbers, *@?&, etc. labels are put to everyone and I don’t know yet, but I hope it isn’t like that at high school.” The frustration of thinking that he has to belong to only one of these groups is evident in this male. While in others, the frustration has led some to give up on even trying, “After a year of finding where I belong I don’t bother any more I just go with the flow.” The extent to which they actually “go with the flow” or not is uncertain but the recognition of this fact suggests much about their growing acceptance of their own identity. Another male, a quiet student who only seemed to associate with a few other male students, wrote that “We worry about our looks. We always want to look okay.” While many young adolescents feel as though everyone is watching and critiquing their every move, some students do not outwardly show this. By reading this reflection I am able to further understand this student who rarely said more than a couple of sentences to me at any given time.

Perhaps the response that resonated the strongest with me came from a student who outwardly appeared the most secure, resilient, and comfortable in her own skin. Her revelations, however, helped me to begin to understand the internal struggles that she was experiencing, just like many of her peers. She wrote, “I feel like I have a lot of ‘faces.’ I think I’m trying to find my real ‘face’ but I guess for the mean time I’ll keep switching.” Of all my students that year, she was the one that I thought had a strong sense of self.

At the same time however, the newness of these biological changes forced them to consider and/or reconsider actual and possible identities past, present, and future. Other students were keenly aware of their developing bodies. They recognized the physical ends to their childhood. At the same time however, the newness of these biological changes forced them to consider and/or reconsider actual and possible identities past, present, and future. One boy wrote, “It feels weird because when you turn 13 it feels like you are still 12. Then when you go through puberty and you feel really weird because you get hair in places, you feel taller and stronger.” Another student seemed to capture the fluctuating emotions associated with adolescence. She commented:

Being 13 could be fun and kind of rotten...it’s exciting at first but then it turns on you. You feel so much older but then what sucks is that we are going through stages. At this age we’re young adults or should I say young adolescents...idk [I don’t know].

The students’ developing understandings and feelings about growing up are clearly evident. One comment by a very outgoing and energetic female, one who was active in a variety of after-school groups and openly talked about her youth group at church, wrote:

I like being a teenager, I have more responsibility and get to do more things but some things go wrong sometimes. We don’t even expect it. Girls getting stuffs boys don’t, having a boyfriend/girlfriend, breaking up, mood swings, having fights, even growing. Being me right now is...confusing.

Developing a healthy identity is critical for adolescents’ affective development (Erikson, 1968) and for many of my students I was not aware of the extent to which they struggled with this aspect of their lives. Or as one of my students put it, “finding out who is good to hang out with, and who’s not a good role model, and who you want to be, and who you’re going to be isn’t so easy.”
Transitioning to adulthood

For many students, the understanding that they would need to be more serious in making choices for life outside of school offset the excitement of being older and having more freedoms and responsibilities. Such uncertainty created anxiety, confusion, and frustration for many students. One female seemed to spin down the proverbial rabbit-hole thinking about life after school. She wrote about her confusion of still feeling like a child in some ways but understood that soon substantial decisions would need to be made:

I felt like I was the same girl (on the crazy world called earth) but to think that you are getting close to high school, college, getting a job, getting married, having kids and one day die. It makes you crazy to think what’s going to happen next.

One of the boys who displayed a “tough-guy” persona and acted as though school was the last place he wanted to be wrote that “When we are done with school we need to be thinking about getting a job, getting a home to live in, and you have to start a life with someone.” Even for this boy, he was aware that there were expectations of him; school may, or may not, have been a place he wanted to be but he realized that there were decisions that needed to be made and greater responsibility to take on after school.

Nearly every student talked about the stress they felt in life. While they often talked about the things that caused them stress (i.e. school, family, and relationships) many of them made a connection that stress was “a part of life” and that they “better learn to deal with it.” In essence, they were making a connection that part of transitioning into adulthood required them to deal with stressful situations on a regular basis. “I can’t name one person who has been in so much stress. Stress is part of life. Problems are part of life so I guess I have to get use to it.”

To feel so confused and emotionally drained yet to smile and exhibit resilience is powerful.

Often students talked about wanting to get support or guidance from family members or other adults, but they felt as though older generations did not understand them; this in turn caused a great deal of stress. One female who seemed to have a strong relationship with her parents—both frequently attended school events and often commented on how proud of their daughter they were—wrote that “everyone (as in adults) says ‘being a teenager is nothing to be worrying about,’ when a teenager tells them about a problem. But honestly, I don’t think they understand or care as much as we do.” While to me it was clear that her family was supporting her in many ways, to this female, adults in her life struggled to listen and to understand things from her perspective. This taught me that I needed to listen more to all of my students.

Other students seemed to clearly understand the importance of being a good student in middle school as it would help them be better prepared for their futures. With that said, they also thought that some of their teachers had a hard time understanding what it was like to be a student and this caused them a great deal of stress, too:

School is so stressful I know I need to stay in school for a good future but it’s a lot of work. Some teachers don’t even understand. A couple of times I broke down crying because of all the stress. This may sound dramatic but it is the truth!

Students who excelled academically as well as those who primarily only struggled made similar comments. One boy who continually struggled said, “School is so hard right now. It didn’t used to be so; I am worried about what is going to happen when I graduate. I don’t even know if I will graduate.” Another male also commented, “I just wish teachers knew how hard we work. Being a teenager is also a little challenging because you are not a kid anymore and you don’t want to ask stupid questions.” In both cases, my initial understandings about these students, before this assignment, were not accurate.

Hope for the future

Despite the confusion, uncertainty, and stress that students felt, there was also an overwhelming sense of something greater ahead for them. Their optimism, despite their occasional sense of feeling overwhelmed, left me inspired and in awe. To feel so confused and emotionally drained yet to smile and exhibit resilience is powerful. One female whose parents had just gone through a divorce, which was very difficult for her, wrote “I had a harsh past but things are getting better now…slowly, but it’s happening, I just know it.” Another student wrote about their emotional ebb and flow perspective about the future quite simply. “So I think to be 13 is to have lots of stress and responsibilities but being 13 is like a surprise every day! Exciting :) I can’t
wait to see what tomorrow brings.” One other boy simply commented, quite succinctly, “Life is what you make it. So I better make it good.”

**New learnings**

More than anything, these essays gave me an opportunity to better understand the lives of my students and allowed me to know them better as individuals within the larger classroom context. I learned that assumptions made about students in class were by no means accurate or complete. Each student faced different challenges and while some students were very open and forthcoming about the struggles in their lives, others were not.

After reading these essays I became more empathetic, patient, and learned to better listen to students; to listen to what they said and not just what I heard. I learned that even the toughest students had kind and gentle spirits within and that even the most organized and highest achievers longed to connect with others, including adults. More than anything, I learned that in order to be an advocate for each of my students, I needed to listen and learn from them about what it means to be an adolescent; I needed to understand what it was to see life through their eyes.

After learning about the stress and pressures they felt associated with school, both in terms of academic work and peer relationships, two major changes occurred. First, I developed a culture of collaboration regarding major assignments, deadlines, and group work to encourage participation as well as to help students feel less stressed. Second, our classroom became another place for students to interact in a socially safe environment during their free time to build positive relationships.

**Culture of collaboration**

The understandings gained from students also transformed my instructional practices. Several new classroom policies were adopted. One policy that students appreciated greatly was that quality work turned in late was better than “junk” on time. Knowing that students often felt substantial pressures from various sources such as home, after-school events, and school, I accepted late work if it demonstrated better learning. This does not necessarily mean that they could turn in work whenever they wanted, though; rather, “appointments” were scheduled at regular and weekly intervals to gauge their progress.

Students were also consulted on deadlines for projects. When it came time to work on a more extensive assignment or project, and after the guidelines and outcomes were shared with the students, we co-created a timeline of when different portions of the project would be due. Students also co-created the rubrics for these projects. In doing so, students were able to reference deadlines in other classes and help plan around these other obligations to reduce their stress. Using a collaborative learning approach (Horn, 2008; Reed & Groth, 2009) I was better able to create opportunities for success in mathematics.

Another change to my practice was the increase in small group and partner assessments (Roberts & Billings, 2009). Different partnering structures were used so that students would meaningfully interact with different students throughout the week, not just their closest peers. Even on quizzes, students had in-class opportunities to confer with a peer about the mathematics being assessed and make changes to their work before turning it in. In order to reduce the chance that students would simply copy answers from their peers, I adjusted the assessments to focus on mathematical process instead of just answers. That is, the rubrics were weighted to value reasoning, logic, and explanations. In essence, our work emphasized the process of learning, meeting student needs, and not decontextualized answers.

**Creating safe environments**

An “Open Door” policy was also implemented to create another setting on campus where students felt safe to express themselves, interact with others, and build positive relationships with their peers (Brinegar, 2010). Students were allowed to be in my classroom during any of their free time (i.e. recess and lunch). Students might come in to do school work but more often they would come in and talk, play games like chess, or do puzzles together; many students ended up becoming closer friends during this time. Even though I often had different things to do during this time, I made a point to say hello to each student who came in. On occasion, I would help with the puzzle or have the honor of losing a game of chess. True to the ideal middle school, I sought to create a safe and inviting space on campus that allowed students to connect and interact with their peers and adults.
Conclusion

There are many ways to advocate for adolescents and many ways to better understand how they view and make sense of the world. However, by using a short, yet powerful and insightful essay, educators may learn the nuanced and complex details of students and how they view themselves and the evolving world around them. By using the 100 Word essay experience/assignment, I was better able to understand my students and make several changes to the classroom structure, rules, and norms. One hundred words may not be much yet the power of these essays can help new and seasoned teachers alike become better advocates for their students.

References


Brinegar, K. (2010). “I Feel Like I’m Safe Again:” A Discussion of Middle Grades Organizational Structures from the Perspective of Immigrant Youth and Their Teachers. Research in Middle Level Education Online, 33(9).


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Call for Manuscripts

Cultural Respect: Beyond Compliance, Pleasantries, and Platitude

In an effort to recognize, analyze, and develop a deeper understanding of the complex forces that shape the lives—both visible and intangible—of middle school students, teachers, and communities, we seek manuscripts for a themed issue in the upcoming volume of Middle School Journal.

This theme arises out of a desire to capture aspects of middle level education that extend beyond standards, test scores, curriculum, and/or the classroom. This themed issue seeks exploration of the experiences and factors that contribute to the development of young adolescent respect for oneself, others, and the varied and sometimes disparate communities occupied during journeys toward adulthood. While we know that aversions may mark or even plague adolescents, we seek articles that help educators to better work toward guiding adolescents in building lives characterized by respect.

Recognizing one of our professional ideals as outlined in This We Believe, “The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all,” the articles in this themed issue should provide elaboration, analysis, and expanded understanding of this crucial concept.

Due Date: October 15, 2014. If you are submitting a manuscript for a themed issue, please specify the theme in your cover letter. As you prepare your manuscript, please consult our Editorial Policy & Guidelines for Authors located at: http://www.amle.org/MSJguidelines. Address inquiries to Editors Dan Bauer and Joanne Previts at jamleditors@gmail.com

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