# "It Just Gives You Another Look on Things": Using Adolescent Literature to Construct Inquiry and Deconstruct Social Stereotyping

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## Abstract

In the current climate of standardization, areas such as social justice are often overlooked as the pressures of covering the learning standards increase. Within today's classrooms, it is imperative that teachers encourage curiosity, creativity, and student voice. Using a blend of both traditional literacy and new literacies, students in a rural junior high setting worked to establish a classroom environment dedicated to critical thinking and debunking social conventions related to both the prison system and gang life. This social justice exploration allowed students to be immersed in a variety of texts that empowered them to discuss and question a system that faces them currently. By providing a platform of inquiry, students cultivated their own understandings related to social justice and formulated new meanings that led to the dissemination of topic-related stereotypes.

## INTRODUCTION

The 21st century classroom presents exciting opportunities for educators as we explore advances in technology, develop new strategies for learning, and challenge our students to think critically about the world. The adolescent stage is a pivotal step in forming personal beliefs and core values as the world continues to unfold with each discovery formed; therefore, it is evident that educators play an influential role in this development. In the classroom, we have a responsibility to create a series of positive experiences for our students that not only demonstrate a landscape of learning, but also provide the freedom and exploration students need to shape their personal viewpoints. The youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner, child education advocate and teenager, Malala Yousafzai, stated in her acclaimed memoir, "One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world." Her inspirational words define the spirit of the responsibility teachers have in relation to presenting a student-centered learning space. It is imperative that our future generations be empowered with knowledge through self-discovery. For this reason, we developed a project that combines social justice concepts with the creativity, tenacity, and curiosity of middle school students. Within this project, eighth-grade students used traditional fiction text to generate a student-driven research inquiry that introduced them to social justice themes, particularly the role stereotyping plays in constructing individuals' realities.

In considering the social justice themes that permeate this project, it is important to first consider how we frame social justice pedagogy. While there are many ways to approach teaching students through a social justice lens, most theorists agree with Mirra, Filipiak, and Garcia (2015) that "schools are

no longer isolated from the world that exists beyond our classroom walls" (p. 54). To this end, we sought to leverage the digital tools we had at our fingertips to teach students about issues that are larger than their small, rural community. Within a social justice framework, teachers work with students to develop a sense of self-agency and social responsibility toward others, including larger society (Bell, 2007). This means teachers pay special attention to balancing students' emotional needs with their cognitive ones, acknowledging and supporting students' personal experiences while introducing them to larger systemic issues, tending to group dynamics, seeking out opportunities for reflection, and appreciating the role of "awareness, personal growth, and change" in the learning process (Adams, 2007, p. 33).

One way to approach these elements in the classroom is through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). According to Mirra and colleagues (2015), YPAR "offers the chance for us educators to give our students more credit to tackle the issues of the day, and in the process, to make research a more generous and humanizing process" (p. 55). YPAR empowers students to tap into their own experiences and develop their own questions, making them active collaborators in the research process (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013; McIntyre, 2000). But how does this process play out in the classroom? Mirra et al. suggest the following principles: 1) Find curricular connections; 2) Harness community resources; and 3) Listen patiently to your students (p. 55). This article will describe how we integrated these suggestions, as well as other elements of social justice pedagogy into one eight-week project.

**Finding Curricular Connections through Literature**

When we embarked upon this project, we were initially interested in creating a unit that would allow for an intersection between traditional and digital literacies. However, as we began planning, we recognized an opportunity to develop a project that would expose students to viewpoints outside of their immediate surroundings. Recognizing these opportunities represents a critical attribute of teaching for social justice. Social justice should not be an extra box to check; rather, it should be a natural extension of good teaching practices (Dell'Angelo, 2014). In efforts to begin this learning journey with students, we specifically chose the novel *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers due to its connections with social justice issues related to the prison system. Teaching in a rural, midwestern junior high school, we felt that it was vital to choose a text that supported a topic that would be unfamiliar to many of the students. In this way, we could introduce a systemic issue that is a part of the larger world students live in. *Monster* shined light on gang and prison culture as 16-year old Steve Harmon – the book's leading character – is a black male held in a detention setting awaiting his trial after being accused of being an accomplice to murder. Students ventured through a story that, although they were fictional characters, brought light to a very realistic system. From the inner thoughts of a teenage inmate to those who played roles in the judicial systems, students reading this text gained a wide range of perspective in relation to this subject (Dell'Angelo).

Allowing literature to guide social justice curriculum within the classroom setting enabled our project to flourish in several directions. Literature permitted students to initially question a fictional set of characters,

motives, and events. As a group, we became invested in the likeness or unlikeness of the elements within the text without holding any personal, realistic attachments. On a fictional level, students began connecting to the text using assumptions they might have gained through experiences, lack of experience/knowledge or media. As these assumptions emerged, we noticed students making supportive comments toward their claims that generalized stereotypes of an event or a group of people without knowing any further information. For example, many students initially did not trust the lawyers in the text simply because stereotypically, lawyers can be portrayed as untrustworthy.

In order to break down the barriers of stereotyping, we felt it was essential to provide a safe environment for students to explore why their initial connections needed further study. We started this process by valuing students' voices and thought processes as they related to the text and topic. But, as we added more 'voices' (supplemental text, interviews with real-life community members, and blogging) to the literature, students were not just reading a piece of text anymore; they were living the text as real life connections started to present themselves.

Throughout the first three weeks of the project, students explored the novel for comprehension and extension by participating in a series of anchor activities (activities constructed before direct instruction occurs), book discussions, mini lessons, reader responses, and a summative Socratic seminar. The anchor activities enabled students to venture through the text using various lenses: 1) creating and posting blog entries about the text; 2) researching/reading/presenting non-fiction connections to significant pieces of the original class text; and 3) preparing and conducting interviews with community members interconnected to the content of the literature.

The first two anchor activities sought to integrate more traditional literacy skills with activities that would also prompt them to begin to discuss and reflect upon the themes emerging from the novel. When blogging, students selected aspects of the book that interested them and generated a channel of discussion that revolved around specific characters or events and addressed student-generated questions. Blogging created a safe haven for students to openly express their initial connections and thoughts with the text on a surface level. Knowing that discussion and inquiry could grow from these student-generated thoughts, we were able to use student examples to dismantle assumptions. For example, John focused his conversation on the courtroom setting within the text. He became particularly interested in the defense and prosecuting roles. As he made comparisons to the prosecutor in the novel to the experience he had in interviewing a local prosecutor (discussed in the next section), he posed questions to the class that related to how these roles influence and shape the courtroom culture. One student commented on his blog, stating:

> So, if you were a prosecutor, you would probably have to view a criminal in your mind as a jerk. I mean, you are prosecuting them – trying to get them a jail or prison sentence, or sent to prison for life.

Although this seemed like logical reasoning to this student commenter, it created a threshold of discussion as we compared it to reality. John countered this response by referencing the local prosecutor and making

a point that in reality, lawyers must be "respectful and show respect to the profession and those in the courtroom." Fostering this kind of discussion throughout the project empowered students not only to share their surface understanding of real-world events – such as the court system – but to also question and explore various truths that critical thinkers encounter on a daily basis. In this way, we were able use the students' worldviews as entry points for expanding their awareness of issues in the social world (Adams, 2007).

The second anchor activity asked students to locate nonfiction texts that connected to the underlining themes of the fictional text. For this, we wanted students to experience finding credible sources, determining connections, and thinking about the text critically and thematically. As students initially blended assumptions with their comprehension of the text, we reasoned that reading nonfiction pieces that connected to the intricacies of the fictional text would not only advance student thinking and, perhaps, counter stereotypes, but also generate additional inquiry about the book's events and characters. One group decided to explore an article entitled "Juvenile Justice." The article speaks to the life of a juvenile inmate who had committed the same crime twice. His first time, he served a brief jail sentence along with probation. However, the second time he was convicted of the same crime, it had been documented that he was fleeing the scene to avoid similar consequence as the previous experience. Due to the second conviction, he was sentenced to life in prison.

This presented a very interesting discussion among the group. At first, students were convinced that the person within the nonfiction article was guilty because he had been convicted twice. However, mindsets began to change when they discovered the context of this person's experience with the judicial system and the judge's ruling. They concluded that the sentence was unconstitutional because although this person was convicted a second time, he was only trying to flee the scene and life in prison was a punishment that did not fit the crime.

Upon further consideration, the group was able to use this article to develop a deeper understanding of the novel. The cover of the fictional text features the main character in a mugshot and is black and orange, conveying the message that the main character is jail-ridden and guilty. After discussing the nonfiction text, they realized that context was important in understanding everything from the text to the web of the judicial system. This group constructed conclusions that would ultimately play out in their questioning as the project continued.

**Harnessing Community Resources to Create a Deeper Understanding of the Novel**

In our third anchor activity, we wanted to give students the experience to "live" within the text and listen to the real-world voices from this fictionalized context. In doing this, we also provided students with concrete examples that allowed students to learn more about the system they live within, an important aspect of social justice education (Adams, 2007). We invited a series of community members to the classroom to speak about their experiences and answer student-generated questions. Community members including the local state's attorney, members of the local police force, and professionals within social services and counseling fields participated in this collection of voices.

Upon interviewing the detective, students were inclined to embrace the idea of throwing the book at criminals – not giving an inch, not believing in rehabilitation. This speaker held a prominent position in the community and spoke passionately about the job and the law, inspiring students to believe in the detective's message. However, when students spoke to a parole officer, they heard a viewpoint that posited a people first mentality. This perspective urged the students to see criminals as people who make mistakes and deserve a chance to be educated and rehabilitated.

Students were presented with an extreme difference of opinion, creating a crossroad for students that came down to the idea of 'what do you believe in?' Students challenged their belief system throughout this project with the help of external voices related to fictional context. In essence, we were providing students with multiple perspectives about an issue they had never given much thought, prompting them separate the facts from multiple opinions and synthesizing various viewpoints in order to arrive at their own truths (Dell'Angelo, 2014).

**Listening to the Perspectives of Our Students**

The last principle suggested by Mirra, Filipiak, and Garcia (2015) is listening patiently to your students. This, we believe, is the most essential piece of YPAR because this is where students are given "opportunities to study social problems that affect their lives" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2). In fact, the larger questions that were derived from the novel study were the ones that prompted the action research process to take shape in our classroom. We began the process by giving them a forum for asking questions through a Socratic discussion. Even though students had participated in other seminar-like discussions, this particular text discussion generated a new sense of ownership. It became apparent that students had formulated a deeper understanding of the issue presented in the novel. This was first noted when John made it a point to talk about the prosecutor in the text calling Steve a "monster." John explained his previous misconception:

> I thought that was pretty normal – I mean, television does that, so I didn't think anything about it, but when I interviewed our State's Attorney, he said he would never call anybody that…that they weren't there to call people names.

As we listened to John formulate his synthesis of fiction versus reality, it became evident that he was beginning to explore the concept and impact of stereotyping.

Charlotte approached the topic from a different direction, speaking about the notion of trust. A biracial student, she shared that she "wasn't comfortable in her skin" and that she would be interested in knowing how many other classmates had been "followed by store clerks in the mall." She continued to voice her opinion about trust by pointing to how words and actions send very clear messages: "Whether you're being called 'monster' or you've been asked to leave because you're not buying anything, it's hard to trust anybody because you think they want go after you, you know what I mean?" It was eye opening to see the continued reaction of the students involved in this discussion after Charlotte spoke about her experiences. Some students commented on how they could connect with her message – not in terms of racial related stereotyping – but, they spoke about their age and how adults often

demonstrate a reluctance toward trusting teens. Other students simply did not communicate at all. This unspoken message weighed heavily in the discussion because Charlotte was bringing light to a world many students do not know about or understand. Charlotte was a trusted figure in the classroom, so this observation prompted many students to confront their prior beliefs that racial stereotyping was a figment and that it only existed in areas outside their own community.

The Socratic seminar not only solidified an overall understanding of the class text, but it also generated a curiosity about gang life that students were eager to explore. Embracing their curiosity, we allowed them the time and space to pose questions and research answers, giving them agency over their learning. Due to their limited knowledge of gang life, the outside world might consider the questions asked throughout this inquiry to be inappropriate; however, we wanted to create a safe learning space for our students so that they could not only openly ask these curiosity-driven questions, but also participate in discussions that would promote an environment that embraces differences. If teachers want to facilitate rich discussion related to social justice, this permission needs to be present within the classroom. As we validate student voice, we open a new door of discussion that bring new perspectives and connections to the current mindset.

As students produced questions, we challenged students to categorize the questions so that the inquiry could develop an outline formation. From the outline, students grouped according to interest within the outline to collect research from credible sources to support their chosen aspect. Students used the class-generated outline on gang life to construct and collect research that supports the various specificities of the outline. As students collaboratively gathered information, we threaded mini lessons on credible sources, text questioning, summarizing, connecting, inferring, and general research navigation (databases, etc.) throughout the process. In addition to information synthesizing, students determined there was a need to communicate their understanding of their analysis by creating a campaign that publicly educated the community about gang life. As a group, the students decided on a campaign slogan of "You Choose" with the double 'o' being an infinity symbol to represent that choices (words, actions, decisions) would affect someone for a lifetime. "You Ch∞se" became the heart of the inquiry experience because it represented a new level of learning that the students gained throughout this timeframe. Many of the students who made assumptions during the project's initial exploration greatly changed their perspectives and understandings as they became immersed in other sources. The idea behind this student-created slogan was to not only promote an open communication about the choices one has in relation to actions, but also the choices one has in relation to the context of a situation. Rather than choosing to assume characteristics about people, students orchestrated a voice that nurtured the value of perspective. These perspectives and this collective learning became the heart of our class-created campaign.

Students created print media, social media, websites/blogs, and a mural. These media forms were then displayed for the community – both school community and outside community – to cultivate awareness. When collaborating on this project, we could not predict how students would translate their newly derived inquiry information. Because

gangs are not a tangible entity within the community, this inquiry stemmed beyond what we thought might happen. With the campaign slogan of "You Choose," students applied their knowledge of gang life to the choices one makes in the world outside of school as well as the implications those choices have on themselves and others. What became an emerging theme across the "You Choose" campaign was the idea of de-bunking social stereotypes in relation to gang culture. As the project concluded, Stella reflected upon her learning:

> I didn't know much about gangs and what I did know was kind of stereotypical knowledge – but, when I really dug into it, I learned more. I learned how they're structured and how they work.

Stella's reflection describes the crux of the student epiphanies that occurred during this unit. It became evident at the beginning of this project that many students did not have empathy for the characters in the traditional text because of their relationship with gangs. But, after further study, many students – including Stella – concluded that this is a lifestyle that becomes more than just a collection of poor decision-making. For many, it's a family; it's a culture; it's a life sentence. Generally, for students within this rural community, gang mentality is disconnected from their schema simply because they are provided for. They have family structure, food, shelter, and safety, and they often take these things for granted.

Once again, Charlotte – the student who felt "uncomfortable in her skin" – took a different approach to stereotyping as she identified it to be an overall theme of the unit in her post-project interview. She stated, "I know that even when you're not stereotyping, you really are. It's hard not to 'cause that's just human knowledge. You were born to do it." Charlotte brought a powerful perspective to our project and her classmates due to her experiences as a biracial student in a predominantly white community who is being raised in a non-traditional household. Within this project, she illustrated the point that whether students mean it or not, stereotyping exists until one becomes educated enough to break it. In our Socratic seminar discussion, Charlotte used the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri as an example to help fuel her illustration. She discussed the idea that most people thought the citizens were in the "wrong" and that "'those' people were just hurting their town.'" Further within the discussion, she brought light to the struggles of those on the other side of the dispute saying "we don't know what they're going through" and that "we can't assume that this is a one sided fight." As we led students into the inquiry process, Charlotte's illustration resonated with many students as they researched multiple texts related to their specific inquiries. Instead of searching for the "right answers" that would support their initial thinking, students ventured through text with an open mind and began questioning the text as they encountered it. This questioning led to a series of perspectives that students were able to understand and apply not only to their overall thinking of the topic, but also question many of the author's intentions within the fictional class text.

We saw this shift in thinking by the conclusions our students cultivated. Upon the completion of the project, John stated, "We don't have to assume that everyone is guilty." John continued to synthesize his thoughts on assumptions. As a society, it's easier to assume than it is to learn. His learning was evident and has hopefully

inspired a new way of viewing the world. Toward the end of the unit, we noticed a culture change in our learning space that reflected on seeing people first rather than just seeing the act the person/people participated in.

## CONCLUSION

Rear Admiral Grace Hopper has been quoted as saying, "The most dangerous phrase in the language is: we've always done it this way." As teachers, it is imperative, more than ever, to cultivate a generation of critical thinkers that can fuel tolerance and break down barriers. As we illustrated above, fostering a classroom that embraces the principles of YPAR and social justice does not require us to step away from the skills we want to develop within our students. Social justice can only enhance the learning that takes place as it encourages critical thinking and empathy within our students. We have a moral responsibility toward our students when thinking about what we present in our curriculum and how our curriculum can help foster a student's view of the world. If we continue to replay the teaching methods of the past, then we are only asking for an ignorant future. There is no denying that the world is rapidly changing and our students will be faced with new issues as they evolve into adults. But, are we giving our students the right 'tools' to critically examine these new issues as our future continues to unfold?

The more voices, texts, discussions our students can participate in about social issues, the more versed they become. This project not only impacted student critical thinking positively, but it also impacted student maturity and responsibility. The ownership of this student-driven project along with the student-created products organically cultivated a new way of thinking for many. With the critical thinking that this project produced for students, it became a dynamic segue into our next classroom endeavor: 20% projects. One day a week, students dedicated their learning time to a project of their design and interest. Many of the students designed their projects around dismantling stereotypical thinking that had been present within the current school setting. The elements of YPAR that allowed them to tap into their own questions and direct their efforts towards finding solutions that benefitted the greater community became integral to their identities as students.

As this 20% project allowed students to develop ownership and responsibility, it became clear that the inquiry work from the *Monster* project laid some fundamental groundwork that students could connect to as they manipulated their own learning. Our project fostered a critical outlook into the world outside of school and perpetuated an ongoing analysis of what true learning should be. By giving students freedom, autonomy, and a platform to share their voices, it allowed students to reflect on how actions have long-term implications and generated new perspectives on how to view the world. ❖

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