Chapter 17

Facilitating Meaningful Reading and Writing Practices in Urban Schools through Student-Generated Literacy Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

The Teens for Literacy program at a Title I school in downtown Savannah provides a forum for students to empower their peers and their community regarding the importance of literacy. Over the past four years, the author has had the honor of serving as faculty advisor for the project, which is a partnership between the university and school. The author collaborates with school counselors, the librarian, the Instructional Coordinator, and the principal to facilitate the initiative. A leadership team of thirteen middle school students in grades 6-8 generates ideas for promoting literacy among their peers. Student leaders have produced multiple editions of school-wide newspapers with topics they have selected; composed play vignettes spotlighting the importance of reading and writing; launched a blog with book reviews to promote summer reading among the student body; introduced a local Children’s Book Festival author to the school community; established a pen pal exchange with students in Haiti; and inaugurated a school-wide poetry initiative, among other initiatives. As the year evolves, university undergraduate and graduate students are invited to serve as volunteers/mentors for various literacy projects. A Shadowing Day is held on the college campus each spring to introduce students to collegiate life.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent literacy is about complicated relationships between emotional- and social-driven adolescents and their visual and verbal-rich environments. Engagement and achievement decline at about the time that many students transition to middle school (Malaspina & Rimm-Kauffman, 2008). Motivation, or lack thereof, is a primary factor in adolescent learning and achievement (Daniels & Steres, 2011).

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Teaching practices most effective in encouraging students’ literacy achievement draw upon the power of social relationships (Knoester, 2010) and the creation of motivating learning environments. Strategies for fostering genuine engagement of adolescents in meaningful literacy tasks prompt the need to rethink our work as educators in some fundamental ways.

Current literacy assessment results reveal that students at this Title I school in downtown Savannah have yet to realize their fullest potential academically. However, the principal welcomes innovative ways to improve instructional materials, methods, and curriculum and expressed enthusiastic support of the project to promote the school’s literacy initiatives. Wilcox and Angelis (2012) describe how teachers and administrators in schools that are higher-performing—regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds—credited their relationships within the broader community as being very important. This includes trust, respect, a shared responsibility for performance, encouragement of initiative taking, and professional opportunities beyond the classroom. With this project, I took strides towards building upon this relationship with the school community while cultivating an authentic university collaboration.

The Teens for Literacy program model provides a forum for students to empower their peers and their community regarding the importance and value of literacy. The initiative also encourages students to consider postsecondary education and their future careers. Over the past three years, I have had the honor of serving as faculty advisor for the project, which is a partnership between Armstrong State University and a local K-8 urban public school. I collaborate with school counselors, the librarian, the Instructional Coordinator, and the principal to facilitate the initiative. A leadership team of thirteen middle school students in grades 6-8 generates ideas for promoting literacy among their peers. While the students are the architects of the program, I guide our brainstorming and work sessions to propel their ideas into action. As the year evolves, university undergraduate and graduate students are invited to serve as volunteers/mentors for various literacy projects.

The objective of this chapter is to describe these student-generated literacy initiatives. Throughout the 2012-2016 school years, Teens for Literacy student leaders have produced multiple editions of school-wide newspapers with topics they selected. In addition, the students launched a blog with book reviews to promote summer reading among the student body and researched/introduced select Savannah Children’s Book Festival authors to their school community. They also established a pen pal exchange with students in Haiti through an author connection, participated in guided writing workshops with a local author, and inaugurated a school-wide poetry initiative, culminating in “Poem in Your Pocket Day,” held during National Poetry Month. Kentner (2015) states that “maybe it’s time we rethink the image of our students reading into something that better fits the world they live in” (p. 640).

BACKGROUND

History of “Teens for Literacy”

Dr. Allen Berger began Teens for Literacy in 1989 when he was on the faculty of Miami University of Ohio. He began with three inner-city schools. At each school, Berger met with the principals. The program, he told them, had two main purposes: to encourage a team of teens to figure out what to do to improve reading and writing in their school, and to encourage the students to graduate high school and go to college, the workforce, or the military. In each school, the principal asked someone to oversee the program. That person, either a teacher or counselor, invited about ten students to form a team. The main