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Shattering, Healing and Dreaming: Lessons from Middle-Grade Literacies and Lives

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Shattering, Healing, and Dreaming: Lessons from Middle-Grade Literacies and Lives

Carla España

Listening to these mentors,
I feel like I can prove the negative stereotypes about girls like me wrong.
That I can and will do more, be more.
But when I leave? It happens again. The shattering.
And this makes me wonder if a black girl's life is only about being stitched together and coming undone, being stitched together and coming undone.
I wonder if there's ever a way for a girl like me to feel whole.
Wonder if any of these women can answer that.
(Watson, 2017, p. 86)

How can schools be a place where make Black and Brown children can feel whole? How can we create learning spaces that honor the humanity of Black and Brown children? In preparation for a summer enrichment program, I sought the wisdom of Black women authors to teach English Language Arts with seventh and eighth graders. Engaging with Renée Watson (2017), Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018), Jacqueline Woodson (2014), and Nikki Grimes (2017) helped ground the conversations in students' lives and in stories and poems crafted by these Black women.

We practiced the skills work of author's craft analysis, including investigating such character and theme development, imagery, point of view, and word choice. This was accompanied by an analysis of identity and a critical approach to texts and our lives, considering issues of power, privilege and oppression, as Gholdy Muhammad (2020) compels us to do in her "Equity Framework" (pp. 12, 57-58). Students discussed how they positioned themselves at that particular moment in time, how they navigated issues at the intersections of race, class, and gender, the role of art in healing, and how power, inequity, and resilience were all present in their lives.

The Gathering Academy (TGA)¹ is an independent, non-sectarian middle school (grades 6 through 8) that provides opportunities for children from low-income families. Students of color comprise 96 percent of the population at TGA. All TGA students receive financial aid. Students commute to their school from all over New York City, including Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and the neighboring state of New Jersey. Besides English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies classes, TGA students participate in electives and extracurricular activities that include drama, art, and piano. All students are expected to participate in some kind of summer enrichment experience, at TGA or outside of TGA. Some students participate in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) summer courses at nearby schools while others attend the Language Arts (LA) and Math summer enrichment courses offered by TGA.

As a teacher educator and former middle-grade teacher at a New York City public school now teaching in the summer TGA program, I shared my own journey, identity development, and my connections with the themes that came up in the lessons. Some of the students' journeys reminded me of my own, taking the 6 train downtown to my middle school, being a first-generation student and processing the pressures and pride that accompanied my studies, especially as a Latina who didn't quite fit in with the narrow definitions or expectations people had of me.

1 School and student names are all pseudonyms.

I came to the United States as an undocumented immigrant and was labeled an English Language Learner, pulled from my classes for English language support, while also attending Saturday School in Spanish at La Escuela Argentina in Queens, New York. I too felt the pressures to fit in, to make my immigrant parents proud, and to keep an eye out for the company I kept. As my mom would often say, “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres” (Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are).

Although there were commonalities across our experiences, there were several places where I needed to do some deep listening. As a white-presenting Latina, I do not experience the same discrimination that the Black and Brown students shared. Also, I had attended a public middle school and high school, so the world of independent schools was a new one for me. Our class text, *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson, was a window into this other kind of schooling, and hearing students’ concerns about how their lives would change if they went to a predominantly white school opened conversations on how racially, ethnically, and linguistically minoritized children navigate such spaces.

The overall goal of the LA programming across seventh and eighth grade was to use texts to support students’ identity development, to engage in author’s craft analysis, and to process issues of injustice in the texts and in our lives. The seventh-grade teacher facilitated the students’ design of protest posters and poems, while in the eighth grade, I facilitated the students’ literary response notebook pages, essays, and poems. We met over four weeks during the summer of 2018 for a total of 15 class sessions, each 80 minutes in length.

I designed the LA curriculum for seventh and eighth grade around the following objectives:

1. Students will develop their reader and writer identities.
2. Students will develop their literary analysis.
3. Students will analyze issues from their lives at the intersection of race, class, and gender through the reading of the novels *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker-Rhodes (2018) (7th grade), *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson (2017) (8th grade), poems from *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson (2014) (7th & 8th grade), and poems from *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance* by Nikki Grimes (2017) (7th and 8th grade).
4. Students will engage in conversations about the class texts and their lives with family and friends.
5. Students will write poems and literary responses to share with their learning community.

My planning was informed by culturally sustaining pedagogies (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017) and critical bilingual literacies (España & Herrera, 2020). With this approach I sought to center the experiences of the students of color, particularly focusing on writing by Black women. The seventh-grade summer program teacher was a teacher at TGA during the school year and had shared the need for more readings by Black authors and identity development work for my rising eighth-grade students.

From Identity Texts to Poetry

Before unpacking the identity work in our class text, I asked students to share some of the most prominent identity markers in their lives, using identity webs (a way of documenting the ways students’ self-identified, the groups they belong to, and identity markers that others might impose on them). I began working with identity webs over a decade ago when Yvonne de Gaetano, a professor in my teacher education program and now one of my mentors, engaged us pre-service teachers in processing how our identities were interpreted in our schools and communities.

In the TGA program, I shared my own identity web first and talked through two moments that impacted my life and perspective: my journey as an undocumented immigrant, and attending Saturday School in New York City where instruction was in Spanish (see Figure 1). I shared the experience of my mom and I being lost a few weeks after arriving from Chile. We stood crying on Queens Boulevard in New York City, afraid to ask for help, and afraid that we would be separated from my dad again. Around the same time, our neighbor, who I now call tía Isabel because she became family, told us about a Saturday school that was all in Spanish. I told students about walking to La Escuela Argentina, and how much I looked forward to Saturdays, how smart I felt, and how I wished I could feel the same at my elementary school in English Mondays through Fridays.

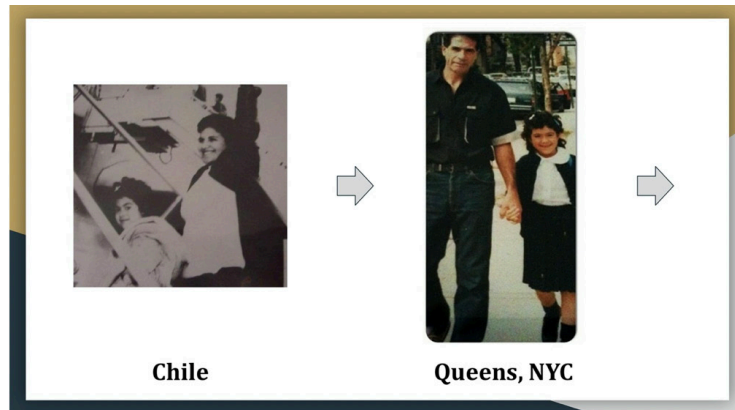


Figure 1. Teacher's Revealing Moments

I connected those two moments to larger social issues that impact many children: immigration policy and bilingual education. It was important to make that connection (and not to remain at the level of identity markers) when creating an identity web. As an immigrant “with documents” and an instructor in a teacher education program in Bilingual Education, I recognize my privilege and find it important to name the systems that oppress and privilege certain groups (Cuauhtin, 2018). These also helped as entry points for discussions on the social issues in our lives and in texts, especially when we considered how we navigate spaces where our full humanity is not welcomed. I followed Sara Ahmed’s recommendation on identity webs to “revisit them as a touchstone text to do the work of social comprehension” (2018, p. 28).

From students’ identity webs I learned about the central role that neighborhoods play in their lives, especially the pride of those who grew up in the Bronx, as expressed in their reading response notebooks and in their “BX” shouts when we shared identity markers. “Lots of people can’t find beauty in my neighborhood, but I can,” says Jade, the protagonist in *Piecing Me Together* (Watson, 2017, p. 10) and this is how the students talked about their communities. It was crucial for me to listen because adults in the book and adults in these children’s lives often think of their homes and neighborhoods from a deficit perspective, and these interpretations reveal how language practices, ways of dressing, and ways of knowing are racialized (Rosa, 2019).

Students’ identity webs showed complexity in self-identifiers and interests. Some highlighted race, ethnicity, nationality and language. Students separated different identifiers with bubbles around “Ecuadorian,” “Mexican,” and “American,” while others put them all together, such as the “Dominican & Salvadoran” bubble in another student’s identity web. “Bilingual,” “trilingual,” and “quadrilingual” came up across webs for these bi/multilingual students, who see their language practices as central to their identities (España & Herrera, 2020).

The students' interests ranged from sports-related (soccer and basketball the most popular) to artist identities, including those who played instruments, sang, and sketched. Some students highlighted aspirational identities, such as "aspiring civil rights activist." These webs were instrumental in setting up the students to think about their identities and how they change over time, especially at crucial moments of pressure and resistance. We compared their experiences to Jade's moments of tension in *Piecing Me Together*, helping us push the identity webs further to consider identities that are privileged compared to those that are oppressed (Cuauhtin, 2018).

We moved from identity webs to poetry as we considered the events that shape our identities and how we respond to such events. We read poems from the Harlem Renaissance and from Nikki Grimes' *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance* (2017), as well as a selection from Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). I selected four poems from Woodson's memoir to help us create community and prepare us for our analysis of texts and our lives:

1. "greenville, south carolina, 1963"
2. "the right way to speak"
3. "south carolina at war"
4. "the fabric store"

I used the poems as transitions into discussions of current issues. These ranged from issues happening in the lives of families or friends at the time we were born to issues of racism. Students interviewed family and friends to find out more and chose to write a poem about the events occurring around the time of their own birth, or of that of a family member or friend. It was important to give students these options because not all of them had access to their families.

Students arrived the next day in class excited to share what they had learned from family and/or friends. For many students, interviewing others and using their words to create their poem about a time removed from their present-day was a more accessible entry point to discuss issues such as (im)migration, racism, income inequality, gender discrimination, religious freedom, and what it means to be an American.

Although these seventh and eighth graders had already been together for at least a year in classes at TGA, I was a new instructor on the faculty and it was crucial to create a space where their stories would be welcome. Another space that welcomed the students and their poetry was the I, Too, Arts Collective in Harlem, New York City. Founded by Renée Watson, the author of our class text, I, Too leased Langston Hughes' former Harlem residence from 2016-2019.

In preparation for our visit, we read Hughes' "Mother to Son" (1994) and "Harlem" (1994) poems. Students were already familiar with "Dreams" (1994), which they sing every year for the graduating eighth-grade class.

At Hughes' home, students discussed their own poems in small groups and some read their poems in front of the class. The three students who shared their poems had never shared their poetry before. There were oohs and ahhs, finger snaps, and smiles. In one student's poem, his Black and Latino identity, as well as artistic identity, were all set to a rhythm, which served as a precursor to a culminating performance he'd also give later in our class and larger summer program celebration.

Grimes' *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance* (2017) offered students three ways of expressing the complexity of lived experiences: poetry from Black poets from the Harlem Renaissance, original poems

written by Nikki Grimes using the golden shovel method, and illustrations. Grimes took words or an entire poem by Black poets from the Harlem Renaissance to develop her own poems. *One Last Word* resonated with several students who had noted “artist” on their identity webs and wanted to experiment with illustrations, sketches, calligraphy, and memes to show their understanding of events in the lives of the characters in *Piecing Me Together* and in their own lives.

Reading, Living, and Writing at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender

And I realized how different I am from everyone else at St. Francis. Not only because I’m black and almost everyone is white, but because their mothers are the kind of people who hire housekeepers, and my mother is the kind of person who works as one.

(Watson, 2017, p. 5)

They all agree that the next girl is a seven, and just when my order is ready, I hear one of them say, “What about her?” I know he is pointing to me, which means they are all looking at me—from behind. Not good. The man at the counter calls my number and gives me my food. The boys behind me assess me. One of them says, “I give her a five.”

(Watson, 2017, p. 93)

One class set of *Piecing Me Together* was shared across two sections of eighth graders, and it became apparent within the first week that students enjoyed leaving their notes for the other section’s reader or returned to the class over the lunch break to discuss the latest chapter.

I organized the summer program to build from an analysis of our own lives to character analysis with the text, back to reflections on our lives, and then to writing pieces that could be shared. A teacher guide for *Piecing Me Together* (Cappy & O’Brien, 2017) was one of my thought partners. The class sessions were structured to allow for students to read, process their reading in writing and conversation, and for me to share strategies to apply to other texts and situations.

Like Jade and her family, TGA students experience discrimination at the intersection of race, class, and gender, among other forms of difference. Because all the students were receiving financial support to attend TGA, and many would consider the issue of access to future high schools to be a concern, they connected with the instances where Jade experienced inequity in access to resources. For Jade, making collages and taking pictures were ways to process these situations.

Students talked about how they confront challenges in their lives, what kind of support systems they have or that are missing, and how they feel. The challenges they shared in small group discussions ranged from ruptures in relationships at home (e.g., children of divorced parents), to missing extended family (e.g., children with family in other countries), to the racism they experienced in their daily lives while commuting to school, shopping, or just spending time with friends.

Some students identified the ways they deal with stress. Sports were important for some students, but not for others, like the one who wrote “not a sports fan” on his identity web. Several students enjoyed some kind of art form as healing: calligraphy, singing, sketching, and painting. Music and memes also came up and students would share songs and create memes as they went back and forth between difficult moments in the book and in their lives.

As a new staff member, I was struck by how the school community was often referenced as a source of comfort and inspiration. Students mentioned the retreat (an annual overnight event that includes journaling, meditation, and playtime), debate team, music class, art class, and trips as instrumental in helping them process their feelings and nurture their friendships. Some students wrote poems about family members who provide a safe place, their trustworthy siblings or parents, the grandparent who makes them meals, and the extended family they miss who are in another country.

Students returned to key places in the text to understand Jade's life—the importance for her of artistic expression, the tension in friendships across neighborhoods and school settings, and the complex relationships with her family and her mentor. Students lingered on the details of the friendships between Jade and Lee Lee—two Black girls who grew up together but attend very different schools—and Jade and Sam, a white girl. Students compared the education that Jade was receiving in her predominantly white private school with Lee Lee's at her public school, attended mostly by students of color. They noted that Lee Lee's teacher was teaching beyond the textbook and highlighting the role of silenced voices in history. Students discussed the incident where Jade and Sam go shopping and Jade is treated differently from Sam.

Students expressed their rage when the same thing happened to one of their classmates. A group of them had gone shopping and while all of them were looking around, only the Black girl in the group was approached by a salesperson and asked to show the contents of her book bag. The rest of the friends, white and Asian American, were angry and joined the Black girl in asking the salesperson why they weren't suspected of stealing. They were visibly shaken by the incident when they described it in class. The rest of the class asked them how they felt (angry, confused, frustrated) and if they ever returned to the store (they didn't). We spent time discussing:

- How did this experience shape them?
- How did it shape their understanding of how racism works?
- How does it inform our understanding of the fallout in Jade and Sam's friendship?

Jade says "girls like me, with coal skin and hula-hoop hips, whose mommas barely make enough money to keep food in the house, have to take opportunities every chance we get" (Watson, 2017, pp. 6-7). What began as character analysis in the beginning chapters developed into understanding the many themes the book develops across relationships and incidents of racism that strike the heart of a community. "Jade," "Family," "Maxine," "Sam," and "Mentorship," the topics in our first small group meetings, grew into the following lines of inquiry:

- What role does art play in Jade's life?
- How does Jade's relationship with her mentor Maxine change?
- How can Jade be true to herself?
- How does Jade relate to her different family members?

The small group and whole class conversations, along with revisiting our identity webs and poems, helped students grow their ideas and questions (Figures 2, 3, and 4). The more they read and talked, the more they realized that their own lives were also complex and required care and processing.



Figure 2. Small Group Notes

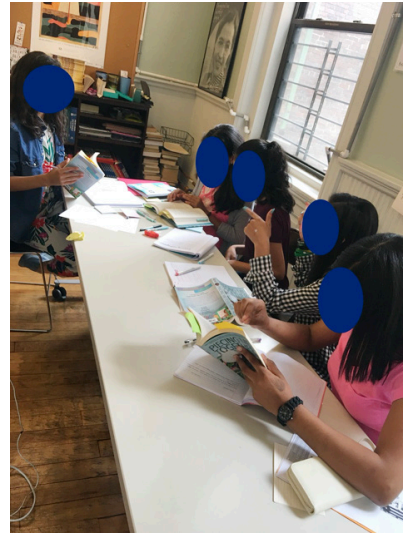


Figure 3. Small Group Conversation

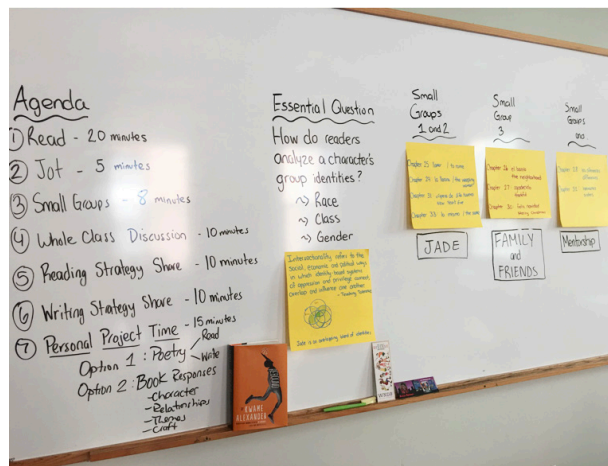


Figure 4. Class Session 6 Agenda and Small Groups

In three small group conversations, students chose to discuss the scene from the second of this section's opening quotes. Jade is in a Dairy Queen and the boys there judge her body, call out to her, and make her feel unsafe, uncomfortable, and sick. Every child in the three groups had some association with this scene, whether it was being the victim of this kind of behavior or a witness to it. "That happens to me on the subway too," commented a student when a classmate shared her frustration and fear. "We should meet up and take the train together," another classmate strategized.

They talked about the safest routes to school, how it would be better to travel as a group, and how to deal with harassment. They returned to the text and began to list Jade's challenges and her strength. These moves from text to life nurtured and reinforced their ability to recognize their inner strength, their friendships, their perceptiveness and resilience.

The quick notes students took in preparation for their conversations in small groups and with the whole class helped set them up for longer and more in-depth writing about their challenges and successes. Students had discussed several themes across three weeks and their notebook pages helped them select one that they most cared about. In *Piecing Me Together* the most common topic selected was "racism" and it was developed into theme statements such as "racism affects Black teens," "racism affects all aspects of your life

as a poor, Black girl” and “the master narrative is not the reality.” These theme statements were explained with examples from the book that included the shopping incident with Jade and Sam; Natasha, a victim of police brutality; and the study-abroad selection process when Jade was not considered for her dream opportunity.

Dreams on Paper and in Song

We celebrated our work and growth together at our fifteenth session, with the whole school. I had noticed that it was during the breaks between class sessions that students gathered to share their sketch notebooks, dance moves, and songs. I asked if they wanted to include these in our celebration. Students worked on sketches and paintings of the characters from *Piecing Me Together* while a group practiced singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (Johnson, J. W., & Johnson, J. R., 1899). Poems, essays, and art pieces were displayed on one side of the gathering space for the gallery walk part of the program (as seventh graders displayed their work on the other side). While one group sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing” a student (the same student who had shared his poem at the I, Too Arts Collective) delivered a spoken word poem. It was a creative, thoughtful, and powerful blend of *Piecing Me Together*, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance*, and TGA students’ lives.

Two days prior to this celebration, speaker, author, and lifestyle coach Klay S. Williams visited the class as a guest speaker. Williams walked the students through creating vision boards with images and words that represented what they wanted for their lives in the near future. During this session students shared dreams, songs, and poetry. One student’s vision board had pictures of Janelle Monae and other Black artists, all surrounding a “#ME” in bold, black letters. Other students wrote phrases such as “I am beautiful” and “Tú sabes que puedes llegar bien lejos” (You know you can go far) front and center on their vision boards (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A TGA Student Shares their Vision Board with Guest Speaker Klay S. Williams

Nurturing My Growth as a Teacher

Students expressed growth in their understandings of self, society, schooling, and their role in nurturing positive relationships. Whether they wrote about this, discussed it in small groups, or expressed it through poetry and other art forms, we grew together as a learning community.

As I reflect on this teaching experience, I am preparing to teach another group of eighth graders at TGA, this time in 15 virtual sessions, during a global pandemic and the continuation of the struggle for Black liberation and racial justice. I think of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and so many beautiful Black and Brown children who are no longer with us. I think of the Black Lives Matter movement, started by three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. I think of the solidarity and resilience that my students have witnessed over the past few weeks of protests for racial justice. So, when tasked to (re)design this summer enrichment Language Arts course with a focus on narratives I plan to:

- Weave in excerpts from memoirs by Indigenous, Black and Brown authors, including:
 - *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
 - *Children of the Land* by Marcelo Hernandez Castillo
 - *I Was Their American Dream: A Graphic Memoir* by Malaka Gharib
 - *I Am Not a Number* by Jenny Kay Dupuis, Kathy Kacer, and Gillian Newland
 - *March Trilogy* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate Powell
 - *Becoming Maria: Love and Chaos in the South Bronx* by Sonia Manzano
 - *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* by Lila Quintero Weaver
 - *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi
 - *The Beloved World of Sonia Sotomayor* by Sonia Sotomayor
 - *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker
- Read stories of Black joy and daily life (Stone, 2020). This includes narratives from the *We Need Diverse Book Anthologies Fresh Ink* edited by Lamar Giles and *The Hero Next Door* edited by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich.
- Co-create text sets with students on issues they would like to process. As a class we could also read *This Book is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action, And Do the Work* by Tiffany Jewell and *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You* by Marley Dias. When I took the class to Langston Hughes' house in Harlem, the *I, Too, Arts Collective* was welcoming letters written to migrant children who had been separated from their families. Students wrote letters the morning of the trip. With more time and preparation on my part, students would have been better informed about the family separations, connecting this to their readings and studies of intersectionality. This would have been helpful not only for their letter writing but for those unfamiliar with the issue, supporting their understanding of how immigration policy impacts the lives of children.

I also hope to provide more theme-based “text club” (i.e., like book club) conversations to support students with topics, time to process with friends, and curate resources with them. Maybe this means embedding book talks, reading response pages and examples from their lives, and using all of these as “text evidence” for panel presentations on student-selected topics for the closing summer program celebration. It could involve creating text sets for future text clubs around specific topics: for example, pairing Jerry Craft’s

middle-grade graphic novel, *New Kid* (2019) with Watson's *Piecing Me Together* (2017) and having students discuss these topics across the lives of the protagonists in these texts.

The texts anchored our discussions and created entry points into tackling issues that matter to students. Most important, the decisions to delve into these issues came from the students as they chose whether to share, how to share, and for how long. Just as many wrote in their essays about Jade's changes and growth in confidence the students themselves developed their voices, amplified one another's dreams, and found different ways to process the challenges and resilience in their lives. We all learned a lot about ways to sustain our lives, our cultures, our languages, and our full humanity. My life is forever changed by these conversations, the thoughtful reading analysis, and life work. The ways middle-grade students navigate the different spaces and expectations in their lives, especially as Black and Brown children, provide lessons for us all.

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