creating *engaged citizens*

Using Young Adult Novels and Thematic Units to Encourage Democratic Action

by Mary Cipollone

Franklin D. Roosevelt noted, "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education" (quoted in Beilenson & Beilenson, 1982, p. 29). Thus, a foundational principle of U.S. society is that educators must equip our young with the knowledge and skills to be active participants in our democracy. Countless educators and political theorists have espoused the belief that citizens are not born but must be created (Dewey, 1916/2004; Goodland, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Conscious, creative educational efforts can help to develop informed young citizens who will be able to lead us toward a just world.

People who read become absorbed in a process of discovery about the world around them; books open doors to otherwise inaccessible places and introduce readers to profound new ideas. A wide body of young adult literature creatively blends fictional stories with nonfictional settings in a way that exposes young people to important historical and contemporary issues. When children are given a safe and enjoyable forum in which they can freely explore and expand on the new ideas they encounter in books, they are positioned to benefit from their experience of a text. They relate to the novels' young protagonists and become curious about the situations of the protagonists' lives. They can learn about their poten-

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tial impact on society when educators guide them to relate the books' themes to their own lives.

The StreetSquash Book Club encourages young people to become active, engaged citizens by means of thematic units that use young adult novels as entry points for discussion, games, community interaction, and civil activism. The multifaceted and engaging approach of the StreetSquash Book Club not only instills a love of reading and writing in students but also pushes them to comprehend and employ the awesome powers they possess as citizens of a democracy.

Program Background

Approximately 15 seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade members of the StreetSquash Book Club meet on Friday afternoons to read, write, and discuss topics inspired by their reading. All of the students attend public schools in Harlem and are African American or Hispanic; most are female. Participation in the program is completely optional; members tend to be self-selected by the title of the program and by the daunting commitment of spending the first afternoon of weekend freedom in the school building. Most already have an interest in reading and are looking for a safe space to explore their passion. They tend to be excited to get their hands on new reading materials and are enthusiastic about the projects and discussions. Students receive reading assignments to complete between meetings. The Friday afternoon activities are designed to supplement this reading and to augment the students' knowledge of each unit's theme.

This paper will explore two of the book club's thematic units: the civil rights movement and the presidential election of 2004. The club focused on the civil rights movement for five weeks during the spring of 2004, coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. We investigated the presidential election for six weeks during the campaign season of Fall 2004.

Understanding Our History

In *Civic Education*, political scientists Niemi and Junn (1998) examine the civic awareness of American students, analyze the gaps in students' knowledge, and suggest ways that educators can better prepare students to make effective contributions to their democratic society. Consideration of racial and ethnic differences in performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment reveals that Hispanic and African-American students consistently perform lower than their Caucasian counterparts (Niemi & Junn, 1998). Niemi and Junn attribute this discrepancy not to a lack of intelligence or interest on the part of minority students, but to the fact that the civics material being taught to these students and tested on the NAEP is less relevant to minority students than to white students. The fact that African-American students performed with greater parity on questions about the civil rights movement and other topics of black history supports this explanation (Niemi & Junn, 1998). To the end of developing a democracy in which citizens from all backgrounds have equal preparation for and access to participation, Niemi and Junn suggest that educators should not avoid controversial subjects, but rather should help students realistically examine the complex issues of past and present racial discrimination.

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To that end, the StreetSquash Book Club delved into the history of the civil rights movement using a set of engaging, hands-on activities built around a young adult novel and other texts. My experience with youth has taught me that children love to learn, as long as the learning is engaging and relevant to their lives. Students do not want to sit and listen to a lecture—certainly not after school, and especially not on a Friday! Dewey (1916/2004) writes that using playful activities in the classroom provides "magnets for gathering and retaining an indefinitely wide scope of intellectual consideration" (p. 199). Students become more inquisitive and retain more information if lessons are interactive. Hence, my rules of thumb for designing the book club curriculum are to make every lesson into a game, incorporate physical activity whenever possible, use video and audio clips to draw the students in, and find ways to relate the topics to their lives. To plunge into the civil rights movement, we not only read texts but also played Civil Rights Movement Jeopardy, listened to the period's inspiring music, and engaged in the activities described below.

Bringing History to Life

On an early Saturday morning in May 2004, the StreetSquash Book Club departed from our ordinary Friday afternoon schedule to host a joint session with an adult book club from Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Abyssinian is an African-American community church that sees Thurgood Marshall Academy, the school that most book club students attend, as its partner school. On the agenda was discussion of *The Watsons Go to*

Birmingham, Christopher Paul Curtis's 1995 historical novel for young adults set during the civil rights movement. The novel's beginning as a light, humorous family story eases readers into the violence and tension of the period as the family travels south to Alabama. The young protagonist's experiences personalized the period's racial violence for StreetSquash students, becoming their entry point into what might otherwise have seemed like a distant time in history. The students had also prepared interviews for the Abyssinian elders as part of an oral history project about the civil rights movement.

After introductions, we had a lively discussion about *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. The students impressed me with their candid answers to questions I posed to the group and with their lack of intimidation in a setting where adults were the majority. The presence of the adults provided a unique opportunity for the students to hear the perspective of older community members who had done the same reading. The students had their insights validated by the fact that the adults had some of the same responses and questions as they did.

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Discussing the book's conclusion, in which the Watson family witnesses the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, provided a segue to the next item on our agenda: watching a clip from Spike Lee's 1997 documentary *4 Little Girls*. The film segment we watched recounts events of that tragic Sunday morning from the viewpoints of family members and friends of the four young girls who were killed. It is a powerful clip, with emotional commentary from the deceased girls' families and some graphic photos of the fatally injured girls. When I turned the film off, the room was silent. Several adults and students had been moved to tears. I allowed a few moments for everyone to silently process the violence they had just seen before beginning the discussion.

The intensity of the footage evoked emotional responses that stimulated honest and meaningful conversation. As the discussion delved into the very heart of the issues surrounding the civil rights movement, the students sat on the edges of their seats, listening to their elders tell stories of segregation, racism, and hate. A community member shared her memory of a department store on 125th Street—the heart of historically African-American Harlem—that was open only to white patrons. During a student-led interview, one church member told of being covered with a blanket in the back of a car so that her progressive white neighbors could sneak her into a drive-in movie. She also shared her memory of blacks and whites sitting in separate areas at movie theaters because "the whites didn't want you in the same space as them" (student-led interview, May 15, 2004).

The students were engaged; history was coming alive before them. No longer was the civil rights movement a flat and boring event from history textbooks. It became an essential struggle of recent history, one in which real people were involved and by which they were deeply affected. During an interview a year after the meeting, one book club student expressed this exact sentiment: "I already knew about racism and discrimination, but listening to the community members' stories made me realize even more that it was really real" (interview, May 13, 2005). As James W. Loewen (1995) so aptly states, "Emotion is the glue that causes history to stick" (p. 300). The personal and emotional stories of members of the students' own community would certainly echo in their heads far longer than the definitions they had copied out of their history textbooks.

Our conversation gradually shifted to include more recent stories of ignorance and hatred. Tears streamed down one participant's cheeks as she recounted the discriminatory treatment she and her African-American husband had received in a restaurant because they were a racially mixed couple. It was clear to everyone in the room that, despite all the successes of the civil rights movement, racism is an issue we still confront today.

However, the mood in the room was not defeatist. The church elders encouraged the children to see that they too had an important role to play in the struggle for a more just world. Someone noted that simply discussing the injustices of the past and the present was productive and would help further the cause of equality. The intergenerational meeting gave the students a precious opportunity to recognize a potent aspect of history: its relation to the present. As John Dewey (1916/2004) states in *Democracy and Education,* "The segregation which kills the vitality of history is divorce from present modes and concerns of social life" (p. 205). Listening to their elders made history personal for the book club members and gave them a greater sense of responsibility in the battle to

create a more just world. I could say of the book club students what Wigginton (1985) said of his students who documented life in Appalachia: Interacting with community elders gave each student a chance to understand "who I am and where I'm from and the fact that I'm part of a long continuum of hope and prayer and celebration of life that I must carry forward" (p. 75).

Bringing History into the Present

As was made clear during the joint session with the adult book club, the dreams of the civil rights movement have not yet been fully realized. With their new understanding of the roots of the struggle for racial equality, the StreetSquash Book Club students could begin to understand their responsibility in the present. This unit was intended to help them envision African-Americans as a people who struggle for what is just, to give them a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of inequality, and to provide them with the skills necessary to be active and engaged citizens who strive for social justice.

Another activity brought home the lessons of the civil rights movement by demonstrating the inequalities that continue to pervade our education system. That same May was the 50th anniversary of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. I split the book clubbers into two teams and had each design its own classroom using a budget I gave them. What I did not reveal was that one team was given the budget of the average classroom in the affluent suburb of Manhasset, Long Island, while the other got the budget of the average classroom in the impoverished neighborhood of Mott Haven in the Bronx.

Each team received a list of items a classroom requires: a teacher, desks and basic supplies, transportation, books, teacher's manuals. Team members had to use their budget to decide what quantity and quality of each item to purchase. Should they hire a teacher with less than five years of experience for $40,000 or splurge on a more experienced teacher? Should they buy used and slightly out-of-date textbooks or the latest editions? Should each student have their own textbook or should the students share? Then there were optional extras if the budget allowed: teacher's aides, computers, sports teams, extracurricular activities, classroom decorations, field trips, and whatever the children's creative minds wanted to add.

During the students' planning process, I threw in some obstacles and bonuses. The Bronx team encountered a flood in its school building and had to pay for cleaning up and for replacing damaged books. In contrast, the Manhasset team was lucky enough to have a student's parent donate money for new athletic facilities and sports uniforms. The Bronx team quickly ran out of money while still providing for the basic needs of its students, while the suburban team had funding for parties, a variety of after-school activities, and a week-long field trip to Miami.

When the two teams shared their descriptions of the classrooms they had built, the Bronx team was infuriated by the inequality. They too wanted computers and sports teams. Why weren't they given enough money for the kinds of extras the Manhasset team enjoyed? As we compared the classrooms, all of the students agreed that the competition was completely unfair. We discussed how the differences at the two hypothetical schools would affect students in the long term: where—or whether—they would go to college, what jobs they would get, and what opportunities they would have.

And then I revealed the statistics: Over 98 percent of the students at the wealthier school were white, while over 99 percent of the students at the struggling school were African-American or Latino. We had a lengthy and vibrant discussion about the interaction between race and class in American society and how these issues affect our education system. We discussed the significance of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, but then looked around to see that our own group comprised entirely minority students. We realized that actual desegregation was not yet a reality. As we explored the legacy of *Brown,* the remaining educational inequality, and the complex social structures that cause such inequalities, students became aware of another arena in which the struggle for racial equality must still be fought.

At the end of the activity, the suburban team had a special announcement to make: Since it had so much extra money in its budget, it wanted to make a large donation to the Bronx classroom for computers and a special field trip. If only the magnanimous book clubbers were truly in control!

Giving Students a Voice

If the StreetSquash students were to continue the struggle for equality as the Abyssinian elders and the "unequal classrooms" activity encouraged them to do, they needed not only motivation but also tools. One such tool is effective communication; the ability to convey one's point of view is a fundamental part of being an active citizen in a democracy. So during the unit on the civil rights movement, I set out to develop the students' public speaking and persuasive writing abilities.

We began this process by watching clips of compelling civil rights orators, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and President John F. Kennedy, to observe their techniques. The students noted that the successful speakers projected their voices, spoke clearly and slowly, and used powerful body language to communicate their messages. Having made this analysis, the students were anxious to show that they could follow suit.

They began their performances by reading a speech that was very familiar and therefore accessible to them: Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream." Being on stage energized the students, and the room filled with excitement when we discovered the natural orator among us. What young Allegra lacked in size, she more than made up for in volume. While her booming voice had earned her plenty of admonishment in the classroom, it was suddenly winning her the respect and praise of her peers. Allegra's voice filled Dr. King's words with such passion and life that the other students hushed in awe of her power.

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After critiquing the performances first of the historical orators and then of their peers, the students analyzed the texts of the speeches and discussed what made them successful. They learned about parallelism, emotional appeal, and the use of extended metaphors. Then they began to use these techniques to write their own persuasive speeches. I gave several suggestions of topics—some light, some serious—but I also encouraged students to come up with their own ideas. I instructed them to write about something they were passionate about—something that made them incredibly happy or angry or sad. I gave the option of writing in pairs. One pair of students was excited to argue the case for not requiring uniforms in school. Another pair took on the more controversial issue of gay marriage. After several drafts, the students were ready to deliver their speeches to the group using their strongest voices and most convincing body language.

It was satisfying to see that even in the short time between reading "I Have a Dream" and performing their

own speeches, the students' persuasive abilities had improved. They were speaking clearly and looking directly at their audience. More importantly, they were clearly enjoying themselves while practicing skills vital to being active democratic citizens.

The StreetSquash Book Club unit on the civil rights movement began with a young adult novel that developed the students' curiosity. From this entry point, we were able to interact with community members to gain a more personal perspective on history and the applicability of history to our present lives. The activities and games ignited a passion for social change and empowered students with the tools necessary to fight for it.

Understanding Our Political Process

In *Civic Education*, Niemi and Junn (1998) restate the common belief that the success of a democracy rests on having "citizens who understand their own interests and are informed of their options" (p. 1). Unfortunately, many American citizens are incapable of clearly articulating their political beliefs. This disability contributes to the absence of the essential democratic element of intelligent debate among the populace. Niemi and Junn (1998) recommend that budding democratic citizens be taught more about the controversial nature of politics.

In a time of increasing youth apathy toward and disillusionment with the political system, young people need experiences that will bolster their participation in politics. Stolle and Hooghe (2002) note that people's approaches to politics are defined by early life experiences. My own experience of my mother getting dressed up and taking me to the polls on Election Day has instilled in me a sense of pride in the special power of U.S. citizens to choose our leaders. Stolle and Hooghe also assert that involvement in politics helps young people develop a sense that they can affect the political process. Just as exposure to books from a young age makes one more likely to read as an adult, students who have positive experiences with politics from a young age may be more likely to become active, voting citizens.

The 2004 U.S. presidential election provided the perfect opportunity to involve StreetSquash Book Club stu-

dents in the political process. The text that we used as an entry point was *Vote for Larry*, Janet Tashjian's 2004 novel about an eighteen-year-old social activist who runs for President of the United States. This book, combined with games, discussions, examples, and community interaction, contributed to the students' understanding of the political process and their potential involvement in it. The unit taught the students about the presidency, the process of selecting our President, and political campaigns. The students examined the social and economic issues that are raised (and not raised) during elections, began to discover which issues affect their lives, and learned to articulate why specific issues were important to them. They also spent a day experiencing their first taste of civil activism.

Developing a Vocabulary

Tackling the election meant introducing the students to a whole new world with its own words and concepts. Again my goal was to make this learning process interactive and enjoyable. Rather than listening to lectures on the political parties and their symbols, students used newspapers and magazines to complete an election scavenger hunt. To explore the campaign issues, we examined political cartoons.

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To explain the electoral college, I staged a mock election for President in which groups of students represented states. We held a popular vote and an electoral vote for the candidates, music artists Nelly and Li'l Fizz. When the winner of the electoral vote was not the candidate chosen by the popular vote, the students more easily grasped the complications of the 2000 presidential election. In fact, remembering this activity a year later, a book club student who said she had never heard about the electoral college prior to this activity was able to perfectly articulate both the way the college works and the relationship between our demonstration and the 2000 election (interview, May 13, 2005). The student discussed her "anticipation" in waiting for the outcome of our mock election and her excitement when her candidate won. "It made me think about how crazy it must feel to wait for votes to be counted in a real election" (interview, May 13, 2005).

Learning the Issues (Thanks to Larry)

The students had a great friend to help them broaden their knowledge about social policy and the presidential campaign. Larry is the progressive 18-year old protagonist of Janet Tashjian's 2004 novel *Vote for Larry*. His outrage at the state of social inequality in the U.S. inspires him to run for President.

Several chapters in the novel begin with a page of Larry's sticky notes on different topics such as "America's Youth," "The Environment," and the "Increasing Gap between the Rich and the Poor" (Tashjian, 2004). These notes contain informative statistics such as, "Every minute, a baby in the United States is born without health insurance," and "One in 3 U.S. children is poor at some point during childhood" (Tashjian, 2004, p. 66). Larry's statistics made these social issues accessible to the StreetSquash middle school students. While reading this text, students discussed the concrete implications of Larry's statistics and developed the ability to articulate what issues mattered to them. We connected different stances on these issues to those of the candidates in the 2004 election by watching debates, reading party platforms, and reading news articles. Students began by regurgitating what they had heard in their primarily Democratic, African-American homes. With encouragement, however, they were able to progress from "George Bush is wack" to "George Bush is wack because his educational policies have not provided adequate funding for public school students." I constantly reinforced the message that if they wanted to engage in intelligent debate, they needed facts to support their opinions. After the election, an eighth grader demonstrated her new ability to articulate her beliefs in a journal letter to newly reelected President Bush: "Please repair our relationships lost with other countries… And would you please consider stem cell research?" (student journal, November 12, 2004).

Larry also taught the students that only 32 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 25 voted in the 2000 presidential election (Tashjian, 2004). The middle school students were too young to vote themselves, but Larry's activism inspired us to make a contribution to the election.

Taking to the Streets of Harlem

The Friday before the election, the StreetSquash Book Club students set up a nonpartisan voter pledge table in front of their school. Their task was to approach community members and remind them about the upcoming election. The students then asked the potential voters to sign a pledge promising that they would go to the polls on Election Day. They also handed out fliers delineating

important voting information, such as the date of the election and how to find polling sites.

The students were initially wary about approaching strangers—not something one normally does on New York City streets. But with some encouragement and several hesitant trials, the students warmed up to the idea and began confidently encouraging their fellow Harlem residents to fulfill their civic duty. In keeping with my practice of making activities into a game, I divided the students into teams to see which could get the most pledges.

By the end of the afternoon, the StreetSquash Book Club had garnered 174 pledges to vote from community members. Considering that the 2000 presidential election was decided by just over 500 votes, the young activists' accomplishment was not insignificant. More important, these students had their first experience of civil activism. They engaged in productive work to contribute to the success of the election. They interacted with their community members to discuss the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy. "It was an experience to hear how people really felt about voting," explained one student who participated in the activity (interview, May 13, 2005).

Purpel and McLaurin (2004) assert that maintaining productive democracies depends not just on teaching "about democracy" but also teaching students "to do democracy" (p. 131). The book club unit on the presidential election went beyond classroom activities to engage the students in democratic action so that they would have a greater sense of their capacity and duty, even as citizens too young to vote, to contribute to the political process of their community. In a journal entry, an eighth grader said, "I think what I can do to have an impact on politics … is just speak up and let my voice be heard by speaking up" (student journal entry, November 5, 2004). This direct experience with democracy is what Dewey (1916/2004) so firmly believed would instill in our young the importance of being active citizens.

Building toward the Future

Both units, on the civil rights movement and on the 2004 presidential election, used a young adult novel as an entry point for StreetSquash students to explore a topic that may otherwise have seemed inaccessible to them. The experiences and actions of the novels' young protagonists allowed students to imagine, in the one case, their own place in the ongoing struggle for justice and, in the other, their own efficacy in the political arena. Through games, discussion, and community interaction, the students gained both knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in our democracy.

The task of building effective citizens is especially important in minority communities that historically have been disenfranchised and are overrepresented by the ranks of the poor. Educators must provide young minority students with the skills and knowledge necessary for active participation in our democracy. When we approach this responsibility with enthusiasm and creativity, we can inspire our youth to be passionate young citizens who will lead the movement toward greater social equality. Books, especially young adult novels that make significant historical and contemporary issues accessible, can help provide young people with the tools and the desire to fight for change.

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