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Using *Warriors Don’t Cry* in a Capstone Project to Combat Bullying

Two, four, six, eight, we ain’t gonna integrate!” my eighth-grade students shouted with gusto.

We were reading *Warriors Don’t Cry*, Melba Patillo Beals’s memoir about her experiences as one of the nine African American students who integrated Little Rock Central High School in 1957. Each time those hateful words uttered by segregationists appeared in the text—which they did frequently—students would cry out in unison. Not because they condoned such a concept, but rather because they were outraged. That outrage at the cruelty inflicted on the Little Rock Nine justified my choice of using this text as part of our interdisciplinary anti-bullying campaign.

**The Capstone Project**

In the 2010–11 school year, Memphis City Schools had decided to implement a Capstone Project in the eighth-grade curriculum, a project that had previously only been completed during the senior year. The Capstone Project is based on principles of service learning, acknowledging that not all learning can be measured by a standardized test. It combines community service with a thoughtful and reflective investigative learning process, allowing students to apply their knowledge and skills to a real-world setting. Program application benefits also include increasing student engagement and self-efficacy (Memphis City Schools 4).

According to the district, “the work of the Capstone Project consists of four major pillars: paper, product, portfolio, and presentation . . . [and] addresses a community or global issue/need” (Memphis City Schools 2). Suggested projects ranged from schoolwide recycling programs to providing community support through food or clothing drives. Prior to my joining the eighth-grade team in October, my colleagues had decided to work on an anti-bullying campaign for this inaugural Capstone Project. Students had self-identified bullying as a problem on a survey taken early in the school year. As teachers, we also recognized a need for a change in the school culture.

Joining the four eighth-grade teachers were representatives from Facing History and Ourselves. According to one of their publications, *Choosing to Participate*, Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit educational organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism in order to promote a more humane and informed citizenry. As the name Facing History and Ourselves implies, the organization helps teachers and their students make the essential connections between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives, and offers a framework and a vocabulary for analyzing the meaning and responsibility of citizenship and the tools to recognize bigotry and indifference in their own worlds.

Facing History’s mission aligned perfectly with what we were trying to accomplish with our students: promoting awareness that their choices had an influence on the world around them, particularly when dealing with the issue of bullying. Our partners proved to be invaluable resources as they shared multiple lesson ideas and activities, as well as provided endless support along our maiden
Prior to reading the book, the Language Arts portion of the Capstone had consisted of writing a research paper. After muddling through research papers when teaching juniors in the past, I was less than enthusiastic about the task, especially with less-experienced writers. To facilitate what I correctly assumed to be one of the first multi-source papers these eighth graders had tackled, I selected several articles and websites for them to choose from. However, many still tried to rely on the first website generated from a Google search, regardless of its usefulness. Stopbullying.gov, for instance, contains a good deal of information, written in kid-friendly language. But it also has several games that proved to be more appealing to eighth-grade boys.

Frustrated with the experience, I readily acknowledged shortcomings in my teaching and was disappointed, albeit not surprised, that the papers produced were jumbled at worst, generic at best. Even though students knew bullying and fighting were issues at school, they didn’t seem to be able to apply what they were researching to their own experiences. They knew bullying was bad and that

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In my history text, perhaps a paragraph at the most was devoted to the events in Little Rock. What those few sentences did not convey was the constant persecution faced by Beals and her classmates. Like many others, I assumed the story ended—and happily at that—when the nine courageous students were escorted into school by the 101st Airborne Division. As I read Warriors in preparation for teaching, I was continually shocked and embarrassed by the way the Little Rock Nine were treated by both students and adults alike.

The Little Rock Nine were bullied in the most blatant of ways. If students could connect this history to their own experiences, and consequently the Capstone Project, meaningful learning could occur.

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Members of the US Army’s 101st Airborne Division escort the Little Rock Nine inside Little Rock Central High School. (US Army photo)
it was OK, and often necessary, to involve adults. They said all the right things in class. But it wasn’t real. They would read and write about strategies to stop bullying in the classroom and then go into the hallway and do the opposite.

Combating Bullying

Fortunately no major bullying incidents had led to the inception of the project. However, it was the little instances—the teasing, the rudeness, and the “checking”—that pervaded the daily culture of the school, making the need for change great.

Fairview is a tiny middle school in the behemoth urban Memphis school system. In the 2010–11 school year, the entire eighth-grade consisted of approximately 65 students. The Title I school was 84% free and reduced-price lunch and 93% African American (“Student Teacher Ratio”). The neighborhood shaped the students’ worldview both positively and negatively. Changing students’ mentality about what was and was not acceptable at school was an uphill battle. For example, taking the time to calmly work out a problem verbally was viewed as a sign of weakness by the students.

Toughness was revered, and defiance of authority was admired. Furthermore, like most adolescents, Fairview students were constantly aware of outward appearances and how they were perceived by their classmates. One way to deflect unwanted attention from themselves and onto others was the common practice of “checking.”

At Fairview, checking was a form of verbal teasing that seems to have derived from “‘the Dozens’ . . . or the act of trading insults back and forth . . . a black oral tradition that dates back to slavery.” Originally, “it is believed that [it] developed as an outlet for slaves’ depression [and a way to] display aggression towards one another” (Lehman) since showing aggression against one’s oppressors was taboo. The tradition has evolved into “a contest of wit, mental agility, verbal ability, and self-control” (Lehman). Trading “yo’ mama” jokes is one example of this type of banter.

When both parties are acting in jest, community is built and no one is hurt. However, eighth graders do not always possess the ability to discern who it is OK to tease and who should be left alone. To further complicate the issue, the same student can fall into either category on any given day. And often, those who initiate the checking are ill-prepared to be checked in return.

As teachers and role models, our first step was to help the students realize that unwelcome checking is indeed bullying. This is especially difficult when checking is an accepted part of relationships in the family, the community, and the media. Calling into question these actions and attitudes was a delicate matter, but necessary for students to recognize the consequences of their words. After this recognition, our next goal was to encourage students to stop checking.

To do this, we introduced Facing History’s term upstanders. An upstander is “someone who has taken action on behalf of others” (“Upstander Society”). Bystanders stand by while upstanders stand up. Whereas the actual percentage of bullies and instigators is quite low, those who stand by and do nothing are the largest contributors to the problem of bullying, enabling the bully to continue his or her persecution of others.

Few students could be considered chronic checkers, but most students would laugh when a classmate was checked. Few engaged in physical fights, but most dropped everything and ran to watch the moment someone yelled “Fight!” It was indeed a proud moment at the end of the year when on one such occasion several students refused to follow the crowd and one actually intervened, stepping in between the two combatants, reminding them of the consequences if they continued the altercation.

Making Connections with Warriors Don’t Cry

The students hadn’t been making the connection between their online research and what was happening in their own school. However, the Facing History activities and Beals’s story in Warriors began to breach the gulf. Rather than reading about some abstract strategies of dealing with bullies or some testimonials of students in far away places, students were able to make concrete connections with Beals and the Little Rock Nine.

First of all, Little Rock was a real place to my students. A quick two hours due west of Mem-
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... students and I discussed why the Little Rock Nine did not retaliate with violence and how the decision to be an upstander was a difficult choice, yet ultimately the right one.

In *Warriors*, Beals’s grandmother encouraged her to turn the tables on her tormentors by thanking them for blocking her way or holding the door shut in her face. Rather than fighting back or getting upset, Beals’s grandmother suggested that she “change the rules of the game” because what the bullies “want is for you to be unhappy. That’s how they get pleasure.” When Beals protested “that would be letting them win,” echoing the exact sentiments of students, her grandmother answered wisely, “Not exactly. Maybe it would defeat their purpose. They win when you respond the way they expect you to” (165). This advice on dealing with bullies had much more of an impact on students than anything I could have said and prompted a meaningful discussion on ways to “change the rules of the game.”

Facing History generously shared their copies of *Warriors* with us, but as it was a class set, it was impossible to require out-of-class reading. And due to time constraints and the ever-looming state assessment, we simply couldn’t read the whole book. For these reasons we read selections that were both high interest and would generate the most discussion. My goal was not to provide a complete history lesson or to test students’ comprehension on every detail in the book. I wanted them to be able to connect what we were reading to the larger Capstone Project and reading excerpted “scenes” accomplished this task.

As a result, the majority of students remained engaged in the story and several even checked out a copy to read over the spring break holiday because they wanted to find out what they missed. Students often have short attention spans, so by teaching only selected passages, I didn’t have to try to convince anyone that the story “will get better” after the necessary introduction. In fact, I began with a brief, intense scene involving attempts to set Beals on fire in the bathroom (119–20). Little encouragement was needed to get students prepared to read after that; they were hooked.
As part of our study of *Warriors*, we completed several other activities, including responding in writing to historical pictures and watching video clips from the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*. I admit I readily took advantage of students’ initial outrage and consequent engagement by showing them pictures and videos of persecution and bullying of the Little Rock Nine and other African Americans during the civil rights era. As they looked at carefully selected pictures from the Library of Congress’s American Memory collection, students reflected orally and in writing. These reflections revealed that they were relating the not-so-distant past to their own present. When they saw a photo of white teenagers dumping food and condiments on black students at a lunch counter, they were thinking about how they themselves would have felt in that situation.

Students were also able to watch actual news footage of the scene outside Central High School on the first day of school. They reacted to the angry white mob and the quiet dignity of the Little Rock Nine with much more passion because they could see and hear the events unfolding before their eyes and ears. Fiction is certainly transformative, but the knowledge that these events actually occurred made a huge difference to my students. Students demonstrated empathy for those being bullied, which in turn caused them to think of those being bullied in their own homes, neighborhood, and school.

In Facing History’s curriculum guide, several extension activities allowed students to think more deeply about the choices various individuals made. Yes, students readily put themselves in the shoes of Beals and the rest of the Little Rock Nine, but they also learned about the perspectives of white students, both bystanders and upstanders alike. One of these students, Robin Woods, made a “gut level decision” to share a textbook with her new black classmate. This choice to be an upstander resulted in her and her family’s harassment for the rest of the year (Goldstein 37). Would students have been able to make a similar choice if they had been in Woods’s shoes? Students began to think critically about issues like these.

As reinforcement, students wrote reflection pieces from the perspectives of several individuals, including students, teachers, and parents. Following the RAFT (role, audience, format, and topic) writing strategy, students wrote letters, articles, and diary entries. For instance, one prompt asked students to write from the viewpoint of a Little Rock Nine parent, addressing a letter to a son or daughter that would give that child the necessary courage to continue attending Central High School. Another prompt invited students to take on the role of a white student at Central High and write a letter to the editor of the school newspaper about how she or he felt about having black students at the school.

As the project progressed into the spring, the eighth grade participated in two exciting endeavors. First, we were able to take a group of students to Little Rock to see Central High School, and secondly, we were able to present our Capstone Program to the entire school. Little Rock Central High School is now a National Historic Site, so even though it is still an operating public school, visitors can tour limited areas inside. Our often rambunctious students were in awe from the moment the impressive façade came into view and listened in rapt attention to the ranger. Once they entered the visitor center, they could not get enough. As my teammates and I strolled about, our deeply engaged students fell over themselves telling us what they had learned through the interactive exhibit. They were extending the knowledge that *Warriors* had piqued.

The bright red T-shirts they wore that day with the words “Stand Up! Stand Out!” contained not just a catchy phrase. Slowly, students began looking for ways to stand up and stand out in a positive way throughout the remainder of the school year. Unfortunately, too often it is the negative behaviors that consume so much of our energy as teachers. It was nice to be consciously on the lookout for those students making a difference positively. And more and more, we were able to recognize those positive choices.

For the final pillar of the Capstone Project—presentation—the students were able to share with the rest of the school and members of the community what they had learned throughout the year. Part public service announcement and part variety show, the program featured speakers, songs, and a skit—a rousing dramatization of “the chili incident,” a scene from *Warriors* (Beals 148–50) in which a fed-up Minnijean Brown “accidentally” dumps a bowl of chili on two of her tormentors.
This particular incident had produced good discussions in the classroom about why Brown made the choice she did and other possible ways she could have acted. Plus, the student portraying Brown had the pleasure of dumping “chili” (confetti) on her classmates in front of the whole school.

It is difficult to gauge whether our Bullying Capstone Project was successful in terms of reducing bullying incidents, as it is such a complex, looming problem in schools today. Changing the culture of a building is often a long process with the lasting results not evident for years. I can say with confidence, however, that students’ experiences reading *Warriors* and learning about the Little Rock Nine in a variety of formats enabled them to connect the issue of bullying with what was occurring in classrooms and hallways on a daily basis in a way that they couldn’t with a traditional research paper. Finally, it was real. The more upset and empathetic they got at the injustices of others, the prouder their teachers became.

Note

1. The Working Group, which is affiliated with Facing History, has produced a very effective, three-minute video, entitled “Stand Up, Stand Out: No Checking, No Capping, No Bullying.” The video, which includes many middle school students speaking out against bullying behaviors, may be found at http://www.niot.org/nios-video/stand-stand/out-no-checking-no-capping-no-bullying.

**Works Cited**


*Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, Episode 2: Fighting Back (1957–1962)*. PBS. Film.


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**READWRI THE THINK CONNECTION**

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“Using the RAFT Writing Strategy” introduces the RAFT technique and offers practical ideas for using it to teach students to experiment with various perspectives in their writing. http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-raft-writing-strategy-30625.html

There is also a RAFT Writing Template, which students can use to organize their writing as they learn to use the RAFT strategy. This printout enables students to clearly define their role, audience, format, and topic for writing. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/printouts/raft-writing-template-30633.html