Using Service Learning to Teach The Other Wes Moore: The Importance of Teaching Nonfiction as Critical Literacy

Our bus pulled up to its destination and unloaded its garrulous group of sophomores, each carrying a cluster of books, some art supplies, an abundance of snacks, but little anticipation for what we would encounter that day. I had assigned The Other Wes Moore as part of our department’s interest in promoting more nonfiction titles on our syllabi, and we were four chapters into its rather compelling tale of two men with the same name who each experienced a vastly different path in life. I had also assigned a research paper that asked students to analyze an issue they wanted to know more about as they continued their reading. Both of these assignments, though fulfilling the Common Core State Standards as well as my department’s curriculum goals, did little to alter the students’ perception of the truth within their study; neither did they spark any curiosity about how nonfiction speaks to those human questions we continually encounter in our English classrooms. It was only with the third assignment as part of this unit—a service learning project working with students just 30 minutes away, and yet in many respects, a lifetime apart—that I not only saw that spark as they reentered the bus at the end of the day, but could watch how those embers of research and reading nonfiction ignited into a passion for understanding in their own lives the terrible injustice Wes Moore describes.

For service learning to be effective, research indicates that it must have authentic learning goals, respond to community needs, and use both student leadership and analytic reflection (Kwak and Shen 190). Too often, that authentic learning goal is a substitution for eliciting pity rather than prompting empathy for a disenfranchised group, especially when the preparation for that service learning experience does not provide students the tools necessary to discuss disparities between groups. And, unfortunately, too often teachers view service learning as charity rather than as a collective effort that challenges systems of oppression through compassion and concern (Subhani). In our study of The Other Wes Moore, I discovered an authentic author’s voice who was speaking to needs in our inner-city communities. I also discovered how my students rose to the challenge of being student leaders through service learning.

The Other Wes Moore is a 183-page nonfiction New York Times bestseller published in 2010 that chronicles the true story of two African American men with the same name who grew up not far from each other but whose path in life differed dramatically. The author earned a Rhodes scholarship, spoke at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, and became a motivational speaker reaching thousands every year. The “other” Wes Moore, however, is currently serving a life sentence for murder. Wes Moore indicates the difference between both men with the same name when he writes: “The real discovery was that our two stories together helped me to untangle some of the larger story of our generation of young men, boys who came of age during a historically chaotic and violent time and emerged to succeed and fail in unprecedented ways” (xiii). Indeed, the book’s coming-of-age story for each man is imbued with critical arguments critiquing our country’s views of racial equality, gang violence,
police brutality, and other vital, contemporary, headline issues.

The Service Learning Experience

My assignment asked that our high school students provide a day of service focusing on literacy skills for an elementary school different from their own background. I divided the class into service groups, allowing each to meet several times before our departure. The “games” group debated indoor versus outdoor options, the “snacks” group researched healthy choices (and learned about the federal subsidized lunch program in the process), the “crafts” group explored age-appropriate activities, and our “writing” group decided which prompts might work best to help guide an elementary audience. Each student also brought a book to share with her assigned “buddy,” a term we used to identify the elementary student who would be paired for the day with the high school student. Many of my students bought a new book to share with their buddy and left it behind as a donation to supplement the school’s struggling library. Honestly, these initial motivations probably reflected pity on my students’ part. Quickly, though, their actual experience that day as well as their reflection afterward demonstrated something entirely different.

As the day unfolded, the rawness of emotion that Wes Moore intoned immediately became real for my students. What had begun as a highly engaging text suddenly became quite personal. Although not entirely the same experience as Wes Moore’s description in the book, my students had never known the similar atmosphere and challenges of teaching and learning with large class sizes, struggling readers, hungry students, and poorly empowered teachers. Some of our elementary buddies could not read in the third grade. Some wanted to talk more about missing relatives due to gang violence rather than hear a tale about Peter Rabbit. Some wanted to write letters to Santa asking for iPads so that they could play some video games. Some put their snacks away so they could share it with family at home. Many could not write a sentence. And most of our buddies wanted to hold hands rather than participate in a normal game of tag, for reasons in our short time together we would never know. So we held hands and ran around together on a barren, vacant lot that was their playground.

After our day of service, my students spent time debriefing, sharing thoughts and insights about their assigned elementary student. During these discussions on the remaining chapters of the book, we consistently made references comparing our school to others, how educational funding works, how the lives my students encountered, even for a day, left my students curious about issues Wes Moore explores in his narrative: the impact of fatherless children in at-risk homes, lack of employment opportunities for urban youth, the hopeless spiral of defeat in the drug culture. The personal interaction between high school and elementary student became the catalyst for better understanding the book. A typical lesson might quickly turn into, “My buddy, Jaylen, her grandma is so similar to Wes’ grandmother,” or “Evan, my buddy, didn’t have any after school programs for him either.” As most advocates of service learning will explain, we weren’t there to do charity; we learned more from the experience than our partners we were serving. In fact, my students quickly made distinctions with Wes Moore’s experience, avoiding the stereotype, resisting the single narrative that we all too often use to establish disparities between groups. I became convinced after this experience that doing a service learning project enabled us to avoid the stereotyping that often stems from reading nonfiction. Moore himself criticizes the pity associated with this type of reading, especially from those who wanted to know the “secret” to his success: “There is no one thing that leads people to move in one direction or another. I think the best we can do is give our young people a chance to make the best decisions possible by providing them with the information and the tools and the support they need” (179). Service learning became that tool for understanding our schools’ differences and for better understanding the nuances of each man’s journey in the book.

The Importance of Reading Nonfiction

Sharon Benge Kletzien and Mariam Jean Dreher as well as Regie Routman note that reading nonfiction can lead to higher reading scores. Other studies have found the inverse to be true: a lack of experience reading nonfiction can lead to failure for students in addressing essential comprehension questions on standardized tests such as identifying the main idea of a passage or isolating key rhetorical strategies
used to support an argument (Lamb; Stoodt-Hill and Amspaugh-Corson). After teaching *The Other Wes Moore*, I have realized that we too often approach nonfiction as a type of textbook devoid of voice and passion, our purpose to teach information and test preparation rather than life transformation. As I have done in my own practice, we frequently allow nonfiction to become subservient to the fiction novel and relegate its use to an independent reading project rarely discussed in class (most likely to fulfill a departmental obligation!). But as Ed Sullivan continuously reminds us, “The truth is that for many young adult readers nonfiction serves the same purpose as fiction does for other readers: it entertains, provides escape, sparks the imagination, and indulges curiosity” (44). I had never considered teaching a nonfiction text in this unit where I ask the essential question, “What is Justice?” Instead, as always, I elevated the fictionalized *Lord of the Flies* to discuss issues of modern-day injustice, believing that the parallels between a *New York Times* editorial, for example, and the dehumanizing atrocity of killing Piggy, were part and parcel of how to effectively scaffold its instruction.

Once I began teaching *The Other Wes Moore* as the primary focus for the unit, I knew exactly what Sullivan and others meant— the curiosity of a real-life world of injustice where a child is a victim of police brutality, or where the innocent is a target of a hate crime (both of which happen to Wes Moore)— immediately thrust the discussion in my classroom to the practical, not theoretical, implications of our essential question. Jennifer Ansbach explores this difference between reading for understanding and understanding why we read: “Cognitive empathy, or the ability to understand or identify what someone else is feeling, differs from affective empathy . . . [which] increases the likelihood that the person experiencing the empathetic reaction will do something to relieve the circumstances of the other” (88). And though using an editorial on the events in Ferguson, Missouri, was still an excellent supplement to our study of *The Other Wes Moore*, students read the supplemental material with an authoritative position after first having a human connection through this man’s personal account of racism in the United States. Jeffrey Kaplan summarizes the importance I learned in valuing the real-life narrative: “Good nonfiction works can improve students’ civic awareness, strengthen their crucial thinking skills, increase students’ appreciation for factual detail, motivate students’ love for learning, and impress upon students the artistry of beautifully designed informational texts” (92). When my students later read *Lord of the Flies* at the end of our unit we had an entirely different focus and, dare I say, “real-world” perspective on what savagery looks like when school districts are perpetually underfunded simply because of geography, when heartache has a name not so metaphorical as a rotund British boy with glasses.

**Nonfiction as Critical Literacy**

In the process of understanding the impact this service learning project has had on my students (see Figure 1), I also discovered why good nonfiction material ought to raise important questions about how literacy itself can disenfranchise so many. This awareness of critical literacy is not new; Bakhtin indicates how meaning construction of any novel is itself a dialogue between different discourses infused with sociocultural significance, how an authoritative voice is created in part because of privilege (272, 276). I was reminded of these issues of power again a few days after our service learning experience when my students researched drop-out rates between our two districts. While 99 percent of my students will enter college, fewer than half of our buddies will graduate. While less than 1 percent of my students have free or reduced-price lunches, more than 95 percent of our buddies did. And while my students must now buy an iPad in addition to their textbooks, they quickly realized that only Santa could equip their buddies with such precious technology. Grace Enriquez and Amira Shulman-Kumin emphasize how we must not read a text with a disinterested view of privilege: “Literacy is not just about decoding and comprehending texts for academic or professional gain, as it is often touted in popular and
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**FIGURE 1.**

**The Wes Moore Project**
Sophomore English

Each year, a number of sophomore English classes from our school will participate in a thankfulness-themed project by partnering with an area grade school, giving students from each school a chance to make connections with and learn from others from different backgrounds. This year my English classes will participate, and the work required by this project will be shared among all of us. Here are the details:

**Agenda:** The tentative plan for the day is as follows
8:45  Depart
9:00  Arrival
9:30–10:15  Story time. Our students will read a story book to a “buddy” assigned to them for the day. Our students will bring books. We may also do a “reader’s theater” in a larger group setting with one storybook
10:15–11:00  Healthy snack break
11:00–11:40  Craft time—a take home craft associated with Thanksgiving.
11:40–12:10  Game time
12:10–12:45  Lunch—Our students must bring their own lunch; they will eat in the cafeteria with their “buddies.”
12:45–1:30  Writing time. Students will dictate a letter to someone they are thankful for.
1:30  Return
2:10  Arrival

**Student Committees:** There is a bit of organizing, planning, and preparation that needs to go into this project, and we’ll all divide up those tasks, putting you in charge of most of them. We need to form several committees, and each committee will have a couple tasks.

- **Craft Committee:** This committee will plan a thankfulness-themed craft that the elementary students can complete with help from their high school partners. Things to think about: What can students make? What supplies are necessary? Where can those supplies be bought? And how much will they cost? The members of the committee will be responsible for purchasing necessary craft supplies with money donated by our class. (See the Budget section below.)

- **Snacks Committee:** This committee will plan a healthy snack for the elementary students to enjoy with their high school partners. Things to think about: What’s healthy? What can be easily transported? Are any “supplies” (napkins, plastic cutlery, plates, etc.) required? Where can snacks and supplies be bought? And how much will it cost? The members of this committee will be responsible for purchasing snacks and necessary supplies with money donated by our class. (See the Budget section below.)

- **Game Committee:** This committee will plan a fun, whole-class (or small group?) activity/game for the elementary students. Things to think about: What can second graders do? What’s fun for them? Are any supplies required? (If so, we must bring them.) How much time will the game take? (Check the schedule for planned time for this activity.)

**Books:** During story time, the goal is for each high school student to be able to read a story book to (or with) his or her buddy. In the past, different classes have handled this different ways:

- Some classes have decided that each high school student will bring a book for the event and leave it behind as a gift for the students/classroom they visit
- Other classes have decided to bring a favorite story book from home (or a sibling’s story book), read it for the event, and then bring it back home afterward
- Other classes have done a bit of both.

As a class, we should discuss and decide what we would like to do. If we decide to bring books and leave them as gifts, either new or gently used books would be acceptable.

**Budget:** This event will require students (and teachers) to pitch in a bit of money. In general, the goal has been for no student to have to contribute more than $5 total. Our Snack and Craft committees need to plan and coordinate their efforts with this budget in mind. (If books are bought to leave behind for the students, those would be “outside” this budgeted amount, which is why we should discuss the book thing as a class before we decide how we will handle it.)

**Reflection:** Events like this present a wonderful opportunity for us to contemplate real-world connections to the work we do every day in school. Concurrently with this project, we will be working in English class on a research-supported essay on the topic of success and its relationship to both internal and external factors—including economic factors. Our visit to this elementary school will provide the basis for a written reflection that will eventually become one element of the research-supported essay students write.

**Other Nonfiction Texts for Service Learning Projects**

*becoming Maria*, Scholastic, 2015. A coming-of-age memoir from Sesame Street actress Sonia Manzano that will lift spirits and help readers identify the secrets for resilience. Great opportunity for an educational/literacy service learning project similar to one described for Wes Moore.

*KIDS OF KABUL*, Groundwood, 2012. Deborah Ellis returns to the subject of Afghanistan after her critically acclaimed fictional *The Breadwinner*, to provide readers insight into how the children of war thrive despite their settings. Great potential for interdisciplinary service learning with international aid organizations.

*the Glass Castle*, Scribner, 2005. This now classic memoir from Jeannette Walls leaves readers stunned from the issue of homelessness and yet hopeful for how family can overcome the most difficult conditions. Great possibility for service learning with aid to shelters and neighborhood pantries.

*Ghosts of War*, Harper Collins, 2009. Ryan Smithson’s personal experience with how war affects family and community, issues often overlooked even with America’s longest war affecting so many. Great option for schools that may be near military installations to provide a service learning project for families.

*Start Something That Matters*, Spiegel and Grau, 2012. The founder of TOMS shoes, Blake Mycoskie, reveals how entrepreneurship can and should have a conscience. Great option for a classroom initiative that teaches both economic fundamentals while employing a service learning model.
political rhetoric; rather, social justice and literacy learning go hand in hand” (17).

Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn L. DeVoogd identify four dimensions of critical literacy: disrupting common understanding, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice (14). When I first read the Wes Moore text, I thought my primary goal would be to teach effective comparison and contrast. After all, the novel employs a structure of alternating views between both men (and I quickly learned to keep them separate by using the words “other” and “author” Wes Moore in our discussions). What I soon learned is that the real comparison and contrast was between my students’ world and the demographic not so many miles away. Reading the text only became appropriate when situated in the context for which we were reading and not for the benefit of my department or for the Common Core. I had to reimagine the purpose for teaching nonfiction and worry less about skills and more about affective empathy.

As Paulo Freire reminds us, “real literacy” aims to “affirm and allow oppressed people to re-create their history, culture, and language” (145). My students better understood their own position of power after witnessing one of the elementary teachers struggle to spell words correctly on the board for his students. At first we were appalled, but then later my students researched the national reasons for teacher burnout, the high turnover rate for teachers in this district, and why provisional certificates were being issued by the district to enthusiastic adults interested in investing their lives in these children. There was more to the “story” than just learning comparison and contrast. We learned of a retired Vietnam veteran whose large hands would clutch so many little ones in a big, warm embrace, even with a provisional certificate. We learned of a dual-language classroom where more than half of the students changed on a monthly basis as its teacher shook his head at where to begin. And we applied this knowledge to how Wes Moore argued the same premise, how easily we can overlook our own situation when comparing ourselves to others. Moore persuasively contends how he likely would have been in jail had it not been for a few people in his life willing to invest in him. There was no one “secret” to his success, but as my students discovered, the greatest tragedy of the book is how the other, imprisoned Wes Moore could have become an Oxford-educated author, if only someone had worried more about his “story.”

I do not know what will become of Jaylen and Evan and those buddies that we met and worked with during our service learning experience. But I do know that they had a profound effect on my students. In fact, as one of my students wrote about her encounter with Jaylen in contrast with her own experience:

Jaylen’s cousin had been stopped by the police for doing, as Jaylen said, “absolutely nuttin.” According to Jaylen, some police officers appear nice, while others scare her. “It’s all luck,” she muttered, “Andy my cousin had some bad luck.” Clearly, trust has been broken, and yet, where I live, the most recognition from a police officer I receive is a friendly wave. I now know that racial profiling does permanently scar some police departments. I now know after my research that Jaylen’s family is tired of being stalked. Tired of constant suspicion. The time has come to build trust, not bust it, because Jaylen doesn’t deserve to feel unsafe in the place she calls home.

And of Evan? Another one of my students wrote this about his encounter, even for one day, that dramatically altered his understanding of the issues he had been reading in the book:

Recently I spent a day with Evan, a third grader, and after we finished our reading, we began to write letters. When I asked him to whom he wanted to write, he quickly responded, “I want to write to you.” I was shocked. As we talked,
I learned that he lives with his seventeen-year-old brother who recently had his hand shot off in a gang encounter. My ears could not believe that such a young kid could endure so much. To my surprise, he struggled to write his own name without copying it from his nametag. By luncheon, he held my pinky finger with his whole hand. Since he didn’t have a lunch, I shared mine with him. Towards the end of the day, I began to realize that he and I shared many qualities. He likes sports, he doesn’t like school, and he wishes he could fly away. Because of limited budgets, many of these schools simply cannot provide after-school activities for so many students who need them. I wonder now after my research, who will hold Evan’s hand? Certainly not his brother, certainly not a world where kids are hungry just to be somebody.

The bus ride home is usually more raucous than its counterpart arrival. But on this day we sat in silence on our simple 30-minute drive. The principal had come out to thank us for our visit and to announce that the school would be closing, consolidating with another building farther up the road. One of my students wanted to know about the homeless student whose shelter was within walking distance, and he was assured that a taxi would come through in the future. I didn’t intentionally want that bus silenced, but the reality of the situation pained my students more than I had anticipated. Perhaps my students truly were too sheltered to realize the economic realities of public school funding. Perhaps they were too comfortable in their education to understand what a text like The Other Wes Moore says about opportunity or lack thereof. Perhaps we were all emotionally exhausted at feeling the weight of so many questions.

Wes Moore wrote his book not to suggest the reader can get direct information on how to be of service to others. Literally, one can’t finish the book unless one feels a call to action. I highly recommend The Other Wes Moore as a means for people to get involved in their communities, that reading nonfiction like this should never be done in isolation. After all, critical literacy depends on how a bus ride is just the beginning.

**Works Cited**


