

Constructing Arts-based Literacy Practices through Kwame Alexander's *The Playbook*

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Abstract. Teacher education candidates collaborated with local middle school students in order to cultivate reading comprehension, creative expression, and critical discussion skills through a visual literacy lens. Collaboration through a visual literacy lens is defined as a practice which invites students to construct meaning through images and text curated to express individual artistic expression. Undergraduate College of Education students enrolled in a Living-Learning Community “Investigating Contemporary Issues in Education” course exchanged pen-pal letters and created mini-lessons for middle school students around issues presented in Kwame Alexander’s *The Playbook: 52 Rules to Aim, Shoot, and Score in This Game Called Life* (2017) over the course of a semester. These students visited the school on several occasions to work with their pen-pals. Pairs conversed about life lessons and autobiographies of athletes presented in the book as well as how the text (varying font sizes and colors, layouts, and the use of photographs and illustrations) affects the reader. They completed interactive activities guided by post-it note prompts and worked collaboratively to answer the prompts. The college students also worked with the middle school students to construct book-inspired arts-based text and image collages to represent their personal life philosophies. The question that this service-based research project seeks to answer is: “Would the use of targeted reading, writing, discussion, and arts-based literacy projects with public middle school students improve pre-service educators’ commitment to their field and expand their learning?”

Keywords: adolescent literacy, arts-based literacy practices, community collaboration, engagement, motivation, university-school partnership

For faculty to be effective in supporting pre-service educators’ learning, they must ensure that students have “knowledge of multiple literacies and the processes and phases of literacy and language development” (Risko & Reid, 2019, p.424). Baugh (2017) notes that a “comprehensive reading program incorporates effective instruction, multiple resources, and a wide variety of experiences to help each student achieve optimal reading progress every year” (p.229-30). Education students in a Southeastern United States public university enrolled in a Living-Learning Community “Investigating Contemporary Issues in Education” course exchanged penpal letters and created mini-lessons for middle school students around issues presented in Kwame Alexander’s *The Playbook: 52 Rules to Aim, Shoot, and Score in this Game Called Life* (2017) over the course of a semester.

The project overview, pre-service educators’ online preparation for the collaboration, a penpal dialogue, details of college student visits to the middle school, and strategies for building upon the text through arts-based collages will be discussed throughout the chapter.

The chapter will begin by sharing the theoretical framework for this work in terms of how images lend themselves to the construction of meaning. It will proceed to describe project participants (College of Education pre-service educators enrolled in a hybrid course and middle school student literacy leaders in an urban school in the Southeastern United States). Project details will then be explored, with an emphasis on cultivating reading comprehension, creative expression, and critical discussion skills through a visual literacy lens in order to best meet students’ multimodal

learning needs. Finally, results and patterns that emerged from the partnership will be shared as its scholarly significance is discussed.

This arts-based literacy initiative helped participating middle school students develop valuable literacy skills and hone their creative expression. Afflerbach and Harrison (2017) note that “positive motivation leads to increased engagement, increased engagement leads to continuing reading success, and this ongoing reading success leads to increased motivation ... a key to students’ reading achievement is creation of classroom environments in which motivation and engagement thrive” (p.218). The middle school students participated in activities such as crafting collages that cultivated comprehension skills, connected them together as a community of readers, and inspired their peers to participate in literacy endeavors.

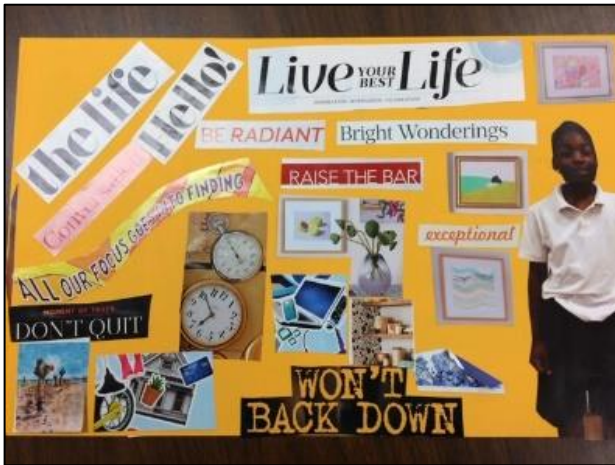


Figure 1. Middle school student autobiographical visual collage from *Living my Best Life* (2018).

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides a useful lens to evaluate the value of this research and situate it within literature on metacognition and learning strategies, progressive teaching, and visual literacy. These frameworks are important to reference in order to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the scope of research.

Metacognition. The process of reflection upon one’s own thinking contributes to a

constructivist understanding of how to facilitate more effective reading comprehension among students. Research on the topic of metacognition was prompted by Durkin’s (1978-1979) work. She stated that the technique teachers most often used to develop reading comprehension, the directed reading lesson, is not effective in promoting students’ ability to independently comprehend text. Teachers introduce a text to students, guide them through the reading, and discuss the text. This instructional format places students in a teacher-dependent state, devoid of tools that they can utilize to facilitate their own reading comprehension.

In response to these findings, researchers began searching for alternatives to the directed reading lesson format, facilitating more independent reading comprehension among students (Duffy, 2002). The study of metacognition was an outgrowth of this research. It was found that proficient readers employ a number of metacognitive strategies during reading to assist them in comprehending the text (Pressley, 2000). These include being cognizant of whether or not they comprehend what they are reading, and employing strategies such as rereading, slowing down, or looking up word meanings when comprehension fails to occur. Skilled readers also engage in goal setting, self-questioning, summarizing, and visualizing during the reading experience (Brown, 2002; El-Dinary, 2002). Pressley (2000) noted that proficient readers intuitively become “aware of their purpose in reading ... overviewing the text ... reading selectively ... making associations to ideas presented ... and revising prior knowledge that is inconsistent with ideas presented in the text” (p.550). More recently, Cervetti and Hiebert (2019) noted that “readers use their knowledge to fill out meaning and make connections in a text, and these connections help readers form local and global understandings about the text” (p.499).

Learning strategies to facilitate reading comprehension. Teachers benefit from “carefully planned and mentored opportunities during preparation for debriefing and reconciling prior beliefs with new knowledge and theories about pedagogy” (Risko & Reid, 2019, p.425). The RAND study group (Snow, 2002) explained

reading comprehension as consisting of three elements: the “reader who is doing the comprehending, the text that is to be comprehended, and the activity in which the comprehension is a part” (p.11). The importance of the teacher guiding the student and structuring the ex-change between the reader, text, and activity is emphasized. The reader must possess a range of abilities and skills in order to comprehend. These constructs include an ability to decode the printed text, consisting of phonemic aware-ness, phonics, the alphabetic principle, vocabulary, and the ability to read in a fluent manner. In addition, cognitive skills, such as attention, memory, and the ability to analyze and draw inferences, are important components that contribute to comprehension. The motivational elements (interest in the text, a purpose for reading, self-efficacy as a reader) must be considered. Finally, the reader must possess background knowledge and sufficient vocabulary knowledge to understand what is being read. I incorporated the RAND study’s framework for the elements of quality reading comprehension instruction into the study’s design, in addition to consideration of component skills and abilities that influence the students’ understanding.

The constructivist nature of reading was illustrated by Pressley and Afflerbach (1995). The skilled reader approaches a text seeking main ideas, or the construction of macro-propositions, as termed by Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983). Additionally, the background knowledge a person brings to the text is a factor in hypothesis generation and text comprehension. Cervetti and Hiebert (2019) describe how “helping students bring relevant background knowledge to the foreground makes it more likely that they will use that knowledge to understand the text” (p.500). Constructivism notes that learning often results from a hypothesis-testing experience by the individual and views learning as a natural and ongoing state of mind (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

Anderson and Pearson (1984) describe the application of schema theory to the reading process by explaining that readers possess schemas for content, reading processes, and different types of text structures. According to schema theory, individuals organize their know-

ledge into schemas, or knowledge structures. People possess schemas for all aspects of their lives, including people, places, things, language, processes, and skills. It is important to note that readers’ schemas are individualized depending upon background knowledge and interest. Schema theory implies that the more elaborate an individual’s schema is for a given topic, the more easily they will be able to acquire new information in that topic. Without existing schema, it can be more difficult to learn new information on that subject. Cervetti and Hiebert (2019) explain that research has demonstrated that different kinds of knowledge has a positive impact on comprehension, from “knowledge of the topic of the text ... to knowledge of the broader domain ... to cultural knowledge and general world knowledge” (p.499).

Evidence of reader construction of meaning is situationally determined (Jenkins, 1979). Cognitive processes are dependent upon four variables in interaction. Initially, the subjects’ characteristics (knowledge, short-term memory capacity, spatial ability, age, motivation) must be considered. Secondly, orienting tasks provided to the subject (instruction, reading goal, modality) merits examination. Thirdly, the materials being processed (genre, length, difficulty, topic) are important. Lastly, the task assigned to the subject (free recall, recognition, question answering, summarization, etc.) deserves consideration. The reader uses his/her “knowledge of purpose to build a frame in which efforts and resources can be used efficiently” (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995, p.33).

Freire’s model of learning. This learning model serves as a powerful vehicle through which students can explore, discuss, and reflect on the sports-based life lessons presented throughout the book, deconstructing the text and creating meaning. Paulo Freire (1993) described a progressive teacher as “one whose dreams are fundamentally about rebuilding of society...whose dreams are dreams of changing the world to create a less ugly society” (Wink, 2005, p.86). Freire (1993) states that progressive teachers are always evolving. This lens reflects the instructional model that was established with the college students/pre-service educators in this initiative. It requires the teacher to take a step back, establish the

learning conditions for the curriculum to develop, and intercede when teachable moments arise. It recognizes that learning is a process and that there are multiple paths to knowledge.

Freire (1993) reminds teachers that when students come to school, they already possess a body of knowledge, or know how to “read the world” (Wink, 2005, p.87). It is critical for teachers to acknowledge and celebrate students’ prior knowledge and experiences, ensuring that it is a valuable component of the classroom community. When students discuss the text and relate it to their prior world knowledge, teachers are providing an important learning space for students to bring their real concerns to the table. Freire also speaks of the significance of teachers learning alongside with students. He discusses the importance of students knowing, rather than memorizing. Freire views knowing as “a reinvention of the object ... a recreation ... a mutual process of teaching and learning” (Wink, 2005, p.87). The teaching model presented in this chapter reflects such teaching and learning, as the pre-service educator supports a process of exploration, practice, and discovery in text.

Visual Literacy

Traditional literacy instruction has focused upon written forms of language, particularly print-based reading. The multiliteracies theory, coined by the New London Group (2000), supports an expanded vision of literacy practices and ways of creating meaning as a result of the new communications environment of the twenty-first century (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This theory states that today’s students need to become adept in creating meaning through a variety of modalities and a range of technologies, including sound, written language, and images (still and moving). As students increasingly participate in online technologies, both in and out of school, their orientations towards texts, literacy, and pedagogy are being transformed (New London Group, 2000). Modes of meaning-making have been redefined to include written language, oral language, visual representation, tactile

representation, gestural representation, and spatial representation.

The project sought to increase students’ ability to construct meaning from images and written text throughout the course of the project. As Bishop and Counihan (2019) note, teachers are “more prepared for incorporating art-making than we might think. Common writing strategies can be leveraged in art-making and their impact can be profound, amplifying the intentionality and communicative nature of art” (p.35). While serving as the guide or facilitator, students were provided with a flexible curriculum that was both practical and useful in content. The vibrant graphics were used as a medium through which pre-service educators scaffolded understanding of the text. Pre-service educators served as “change agents” in “helping to prepare students to be active and successful participants in the image- and media-saturated twenty-first-century world” (Bishop & Counihan, 2018, p.35).

Much of an individual’s everyday experience is intrinsically multimodal (Kalantzis, Cope, & Cloonan, 2010). The authors explain how “gestures may come with sounds; images and text sit side by side on pages ...” (p. 67). Written text is closely connected to visuals in terms of spacing, layout, and typography. Spoken language is related to the audio mode in terms of intonation, pitch, and pauses. However, these modes are not parallel, as some learners may be more comfortable communicating ideas via one mode rather than another. For example, students may be more comfortable constructing meaning through visual rather than written means. It is important for educators to consider in which mode students can “best express the world to themselves and themselves to the world” (p.68). In this way, teachers can scaffold students towards meaning-making and create powerful learning experiences that reflect an individual’s preferred mode of representation.

Kalantzis et al. (2010) note that children have natural synesthetic abilities — the process of “shifting between modes and representing one thing from one mode to another” (p.67). A visual grammar explains how images have the power to work as language. Traditional school literacy separates literacy and art as two distinct disciplines, rather than uniting these disciplines in order to build upon childrens’ innate

synesthetic capabilities. Connections between written language and visual imagery as well as spoken language and audio representations need to be recognized. Different ways of knowing and making meaning from the world around us is central to a multimodal vision of learning.

It is important to consider how a visual grammar represents images as a language (Kalantzis et al., 2010). Actions that are expressed by verbs in sentences can be represented in illustrations as a vector, or artwork in which shapes, such as lines or curves, are placed to form an illustration. Prepositions in language can be represented through foregrounding or backgrounding of images. The sizing and placement of images on a page can reference comparatives in language. These examples show how representations in words through pictures merit consideration. Bishop and Counihan (2018) note that in a world where images “play such an important role in clarifying, specifying, and communicating a message ... (it is important to) use these tools to deliberately teach students how to craft images that matter” (p.38).

It is significant to consider how written language and image convey meaning through individual means. Writing “sequences elements in time and favors the genre of narrative” (Kalantzis et al., 2010, p.68) as the text proceeds from sentences to paragraphs to pages. However, images develop meanings through a display of colors, forms, background, style, and layout, among other design elements. Written language encourages the reader to visualize possible illustrations or create a mental image in one’s mind while reading. Visual images require the viewer to arrange elements and create order by establishing a purpose and considering the effect of the illustration on the meaning. Different kinds of imagination and skills are required in order to analyze how images lend themselves to the construction of meaning.

There are five dimensions of making meaning in a multimodal metalanguage (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). These include representational meaning, social meaning, organizational meaning, contextual meaning, and ideological meaning. Representational

meaning relates to who and what the design stands for. Social meaning considers the way meaning connects to the creator and the recipient. Organizational meaning explores the cohesion and communication of meanings. Contextual meaning de-scribes how meanings fit into the larger dis-course and frame of reference for the content. Ideological meaning explores the motivations of the creator and the positioning of the recipient. These tools represent strategies that learners can utilize in order to interpret and create meaning from images.

In today’s increasingly visual world, analytical perspectives need to be considered in order to broaden the framework that students bring to illustrations and visual images that they encounter in the classroom and in daily life. These perspectives include the perceptual, structural, and ideological. A perceptual analytical perspective focuses on the more literal aspects of an image, particularly design elements (such as borders or font), visual displays, and other graphic design elements. Berger (1972) describes how an individual’s perceptions of text are influenced by prior knowledge, personal experience, and socio-cultural contexts. A structural analytical perspective examines narrative representations, framing, composition, color, and position of images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). An ideo-logical analytical perspective examines how our perception of the images and the design elements are interpreted within a social context. These lenses encourage students to expand their interpretation of visual images in order to increase their comprehension repertoire.

Project Participants

Kwame Alexander’s *The Playbook: 52 Rules to Aim, Shoot, and Score in This Game Called Life* (2017) served as a mentor text for the community literacy collaboration. It provided a framework for both groups of participants to gain a deeper understanding of issues facing the world around them — and invited them to consider how to create and critically discuss

ideas and content presented in the text through a visual literacy lens.

A group of middle school students are chosen each year by the school counselor to serve as a literacy leadership team at an urban K-8 public school. The students participate in a variety of literacy-focused activities, such as a Banned Book Week field trip to the local public library, in which they research and read excerpts from once censored literature to library patrons. Other projects include the creation of video book trailers and introduction of local children's book authors to the school community. Middle school students have strengthened their literacy skills and displayed growth as leaders, creative thinkers, and public speakers as a result of participating in the program. As the year evolves, college students are invited to serve as volunteers for literacy initiatives, as demonstrated in Figure 2, where pre-service educators are leading discussion prompts and arts-based literacy activities with middle school students around *The Playbook: 52 Rules to Aim, Shoot, and Score in This Game Called Life* (Alexander, 2017).



Figure 2. Pre-service educators leading discussion prompts and arts-based literacy activities with middle school students by A. Katz (2018).

In a Living-Learning Community (LLC), college students with similar interests and goals have the opportunity to live together and study together in the context of university housing. The College of Education LLC is designed especially for students who are interested in becoming teachers or have career goals that

involve working with children. As a component of the university's orientation sessions, students are provided with information about the LLC and can register for a special section titled Investigating Critical & Contemporary Issues in Education. This course presents an overview of issues facing the field of professional educators. Typically, no field experience is required for this course. A fellow professor in the College of Education taught this course during the same term.

University students gained the added benefit of applying the literacy instructional theory that they were learning about in the course to practice in the middle school setting. This foundation course provides an introduction to the use of research to support practice through an investigation of current educational issues. Students connect these studies to reflections on their own practice as they develop skills of analysis and argumentation. This section is a hybrid, flipped classroom format and included those with an interest in Early Childhood, Middle Grades, and Health and Physical Education.

As students are developing their individual teacher literacy identities through a visual literacy lens, this collaboration empowered teacher candidates to apply their content knowledge while building valuable connections with community members. Students were invited to consider the role that teachers "play in facilitating productive discussions that simultaneously serve students' learning needs and content acquisition while also developing their literacy knowledge and skill" (Ford-Connors & Robert-son, 2017, p.131).

Data Sources, Evidence, Objects, and Materials

Overview

This project involved university students exchanging letters and participating in interactive discussions/activities with middle school students around issues presented in the book over the course of a semester, providing authentic training in community-based literacy learning context. University students designed

and implemented a semester-long teaching-learning initiative with middle school students while reading, writing about, and discussing insights about school, reading, writing, college, and sports-based life lessons presented in *The Playbook: 52 Rules to Aim, Shoot, and Score in This Game Called Life* (2017). Issues surrounding the topics of respect, resilience, dedication, hard work, team work, sports heroes, and literacy heroes were content for the discussion. Students completed interactive activities guided by post-it note prompts. Together, they worked in small groups to answer the prompts. This collaborative work was displayed for the school community in order to generate conversation in conjunction with a display of the book and additional related texts.

Preparation

In a flipped classroom format, university pre-service educators began the semester by participating in online modules to prepare them for this community literacy work. By incorporating real-world applications of the content into pedagogy, the professor is connecting with students to utilize their education to inspire growth — both in themselves and among their middle school student population. Students were asked to provide responses to the following prompting questions:

- What kind of books and reading materials were read to you? Please be specific.
- What feelings do you associate with the experience?
- What key people influenced your opinions about reading?
- Where or how did you acquire books?

A student noted the following:

I don't remember anyone read to me when I was very young. After my third grade teacher taught me the love of reading, I was always looking for books to read. I read textbooks as I didn't have other books. In my middle school years, I rented comic books which were my

source of reading. I started reading real literature in high school, books by Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Korean authors. I found treasures in my grandmother's storage room, where she stacked my uncles' books from their college years. She was the first one in the village to send two sons to college at the time. Whenever I spent summers with my grandmother, I was buried in them, reading and dreaming. Like Kwame Alexander, I discovered treasures in books.

The key people who influenced in my opinions about reading were my father, grandmother, and my teacher. My father taught me Korean alphabet and my grandmother always voiced the value of being educated. My teacher provided real books that I could borrow from him, mostly folklore. We didn't have TV and most people didn't read newspapers in the countryside at that time. I was lucky to be able to read about the outside world other than my immediate surroundings.

Responses allowed students to share and reflection upon personal insights on this topic, setting the tone for the community literacy partnership. Pre-service educators initially outlined their literate identity. Another student noted the following:

I identify as a student. Through research with scholarly articles, books, and lecture notes, I learn more and more each and every day. My values have changed when it comes to education throughout my time in school. I value the relationships I have with my teachers. I usually do a lot better when I have a positive relationship with them. This is what inspired me to become a teacher. I had a bond with my art teacher in high school that will live on! I value success, which is what I hope to gain at the end of these next four years.

Through networking, I hope to gain success. I hope to grow as a student.

Students also learned about the “Teens for Literacy” program by reviewing links regarding the program and articles that have been published on previous initiatives. A pre-service educator described her insights:

After going through this site, I realized how important my contribution has been with Teens for Literacy. It has helped me become even more of a leader. Even though we have only visited the middle school once so far, I feel as if I am more grounded when it comes to taking charge in certain situations. This program is creating a foundation for the rest of my college career.

It is important to offer a range of opportunities for learners to discuss, evaluate, and synthesize information and to “think creatively about your content” (Christopher, 2015, p.168). An interactive instructional style combined with meaningful assessment practices will allow faculty to better prepare students for the demands of twenty-first century teaching through a visual literacy lens. As teacher educators, it becomes our responsibility to design learning experiences that support this ongoing transformation of teacher identity through a visual literacy approach.

Implementation

University students spent the semester exchanging pen pal letters with middle school student literacy leaders, sharing insights about school, reading, writing, college life and on issues presented in the text. College students began by participating in conversations to prepare them for this work. They initially outlined their impressions about the topics of sports-based life lessons as well as self-identity as a reader, learner, and athlete. An additional topic for discussion was how to discuss text and visual layouts with students in an analytic manner. Strategies for discussing the values of dedication, hard work, resilience, and problem-

solving with middle school students were considered as well.



Figure 3. Middle school students responding to penpal letters from college students by A. Katz (2018).

The exchange of several sets of pen-pal letters followed between the university students and the middle school students over the span of five weeks. This exchange is displayed in Figure 3, which depicts middle school students responding to pen-pal letters that they received from college students. One middle school student wrote the following:

“Today, we started to read Kwame Alexander’s book, *The Playbook*. From the warm-up section, I learned about how to use the rules of sports in everyday life. You should be able to learn to respect other people not just in the game, but also in regular life off of the court. You should also treat others fairly. I treat others like the treat me. I think that the book will teach me good life lessons. It may give me motivation to try new things and discover stuff about myself. It is teaching me not to be discouraged about certain things because the sports lessons relate to life too. It also may give me some inspiration and ideas to put into my own writing. I like how the book talks about

the author as an athlete and tells other athlete's stories."

A college student replied to the aforementioned letter, in part, by writing:

"It is wonderful that you are starting to read the book and enjoying it. I am finding it interesting as well. I wish that I had read something like this when I was in middle school. It's helpful to take a step back and read about athletes, what inspires them, and how hard work helps them succeed. Also, I think that many sports lessons apply to life in general.

I decided to research the author Kwame Alexander a little bit because that is a strategy that I use in college to learn more about their background and perspective. He is a poet, educator, and writer of 28 books. I want to hear more about your writing projects and how you are inspired by this work. Kwame Alexander has also organized led cultural exchange delegations to Brazil, Italy, Singapore, and Ghana, where he built a health clinic, as a part of LEAP for Ghana, an international literacy program he helped found. I would love to travel to some of these places one day. We can talk about this more when I come to visit your school."

The college students presented brief 3-2-1 mini-lessons on sections of the book throughout the course of the semester. In this format, they asked the middle school students to re-read a portion of the text and unpack 3 items they learned, 2 questions that they had regarding the material, and 1 action item that they can implement in their school or life in regards to the life lesson. This format enabled pre-service educators to design and facilitate mini-lessons on the topics covered in the book. It provided an accessible framework for discussion of the issues with the middle school student literacy leaders.

Teens for Literacy students were also asked to consider the following ideas that the pre-service educators created for them. Pairs sat

and conversed about issues presented in the book. They completed interactive activities guided by post-it note prompts. Together, they worked to answer the prompts. Below please find a sample of the prompts:

1. Why do most of the athletes quoted in the book emphasize the importance of preparation, discipline, determination, and perseverance? How does playing sports help you develop these traits?
2. Who is your sports hero? What qualities have made them successful in their careers?
3. Who is your literacy hero? (author, teacher, parent, friend, mentor, librarian, etc.)? Explain.
4. Let's talk about the following two rules from the book.
 - (a) "You turn the ball over? Let it go. You miss a big shot? Let it go. Learn from your mistakes. Move forward."
 - (b) Describe a time in your life where you have learned from your mistakes and moved forward.
5. "A loss is inevitable / like rain in spring. / True champions / learn / to dance / through / the storm." What do you think this piece of advice means in your own words?
6. "Be unselfish. Share the ball. Work together. Win together." How can you apply this advice to your life? Is there an area where you could work together with family, friends, teachers, and/or community members to make a positive change? Explain.
7. How does the text of the book (varying font sizes and colors

(black, white, or orange), layouts, and use of photographs and illustrations affect you as the reader? Please explain in your own words.

It is particularly interesting to deconstruct the students' response to question 7 posed above, with a focus on the visual elements of the book, as the students are noting in Figure 4. Middle school-college student team responses included noticing "how the author decided to make all of the rules in capital letters. This made me really pay attention to them as the reader. I never really thought about how authors have the power to do that to make the ideas stand out. That is interesting." Another pair wrote that, "I like how the different sections are a mixture of photographs and collage art along with quotes from real athletes. It mixes it up and makes it look like a magazine layout instead of a normal book that I read. It catches my interest and makes me feel creative." A third middle school-college student team described how "different font sizes and the orange and black font change your reaction as you read. It makes you feel like you are in a cartoon or a movie. Also, there is a combination of photographs, regular art, and images that all make us feel like we want to create something!"

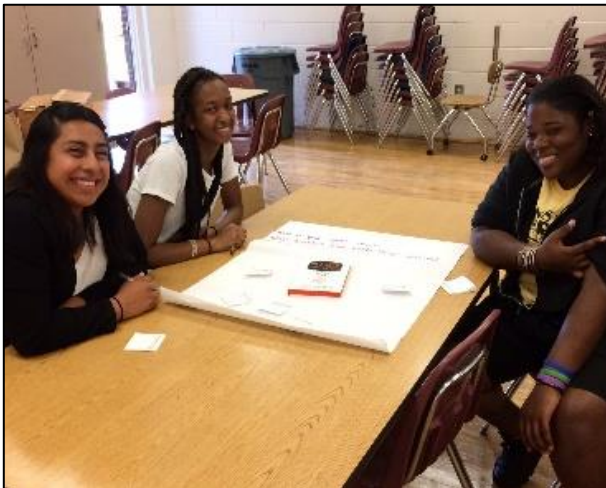


Figure 4. Collaborative discussion and writing in response to the prompts by A. Katz (2018).

Building upon the Text: Arts-based Collages and Writing

As an extension of this collaboration, middle school students were invited to reflect on a story that they would like their own collage creation to tell by locating words and images in magazines. Middle school students worked with pre-service educators to find material in a range of magazines that connected to their personal life philosophies. This was followed by "stretching the images" into phrases to create a written reflection of the collage. Finally, middle school students were asked to incorporate adjectives and verbs that bring the words to life and create a picture in the reader's head. *The Playbook* served as a mentor text, inviting students to match words to pictures as they created their own art and poetry-integrated creative work. New insights gained regarding the project's impact on students' identity were celebrated, as can be seen in Figure 5, as the student listed her handwritten accomplishments on the art piece.



Figure 5. Middle school student personal philosophy collage, From Start Simple (2018).

This student's collage in Figure 5 reflects a combination of handwritten reflections and magazine phrases with images interspersed on the page. On the left side of the page, she lists her favorite accomplishments, including "passing every grade, helping out my momma and daddy when they were sick, keeping the house clean and getting chores done" as well as earning honor roll. The phrases "the right stuff, inspire, adventure" are interspersed with "best

accomplishments.” A commitment to dedication and hard work are reflected in the phrase “make it happen” and “start simple.” On the right hand side of the page, activism is reflected in the statement “It’s nice to be part of a generation that is taking more of a vocal stance. I don’t think silence makes you safe.” The university students shared that the student described how “it’s important to stand up for everyone being treated fairly, and to not allow bullying” when she spoke about this portion of her collage. Images of multi-colored bowls are present on the page, which the student explained represented “coming together at the table with your family, and sharing your thoughts about the day over a nice, hot meal.” The juxtaposition of hand-selected phrases from the magazine and images that the student placed in between represents the visual literacy connection to the written representation of her collage.

Figure 6 depicts a student-made collage combining phrases and images from magazines as well as handwritten illustrations and onomatopoeia. Phrases selected from magazines allowed the middle school student to explain how the collage stands for “my desire to be a leader and know the path that I should follow in life ... I will inspire others to make good decisions.” A yellow soaring bird and blue-rimmed optimistic glasses were specifically selected from the magazine as well. A hand drawn rainbow (“that stands for a bright future”) and the word “boom” (“written like a cartoon ... shows that I have a bright personality and like adventure”) complete the collage. The text from the magazine in various fonts and sizes was carefully chosen by the student, representing the visual literacy curricular connection to the initiative, yielding greater impact to the students’ work than through standard text alone.

The student who created Figure 7 took a great deal of care to select words and images that reflected her value system. She focused on making connections with others, being kind, setting goals, listening to wise advice, and celebrating one’s self. Images of a watch, a side table with flowers, and a woman examining her reflection are visible. In regards to the phrase “the beat of your own drum,” the student told her university student partners that this meant “I have to find my own life path and be true to

myself. Sometimes this is difficult, but that’s the only real way to be happy. I figured this out while we were reading and discussing the book.”



Figure 6. A second middle school student personal philosophy collage from *In the Know* (2018).



Figure 7. A third middle school student personal philosophy collage from *Connections* (2018).

An objective for this project was to encourage participants’ creative expression through images and text in a meaningful way. An additional aim was to instill pride in students and their backgrounds. A final goal was to provide a forum for participants to view writing and collage-making as an authentic and meaningful experience for personal expression, hopefully inspiring a lifelong dedication to the craft. To encourage students to develop multiple perspectives, pre-service educators must consider both the method and content of their pedagogy. Hassett and Schiebe (2007)

explained the following: “finding space and time for the visual in K-12 literacy instruction is not only possible when new literacies and new texts can be used in the classroom without sacrificing curricular goals, it is also necessary in a world influenced by changing forms of communication, information, and mass media” (p.67).

It is important for students to move beyond the literal contents of an image. Results indicate that teachers should model how to draw inferences from both images and text. In addition, students should learn how to interpret images in relation to their own experiences. My results document the need for educators to expand their view of traditional literacy education. Teaching students how to visualize, summarize, and predict addresses only the written elements of the text that they encounter (Serafini, 2010). My results document how instruction in visual literacy yields a much richer interpretation of the material presented in the book than through print alone.

Conclusion

The community literacy collaboration was presented as a framework for implementation of research-based visual literacy strategies. This is defined as a practice which invites middle school students to construct meaning through images and text curated to express individual artistic expression. The sessions incorporated a range of objectives through the lens of visual literacy — to provide future educators with instructional activities to conduct an effective discussion around various text types; to provide university students with tools to excite their future students about reading, writing, and creative expression; and to provide middle school students with strategies to facilitate creative expression and meaningful literacy engagement. As images and texts are being combined in new ways, readers need to be skilled in visual literacy as well as print literacy. Educators can see greater comprehension and written expression skills evident in their students through the combined lenses of these modalities, as they work in unison to ensure that

individuals make connections that facilitate their understanding.

Sports-based life lessons as well as self-identity as a reader, learner, and athlete were explored. An additional area of focus was how to discuss text and visual layouts with students in an analytic manner through guided discussion. Furthermore, strategies for conversing about the values of dedication, hard work, resilience, and problem-solving with middle school students were implemented and unpacked by the pre-service educators engaged in this initiative.

Undergraduate students visited the school on several occasions to work with their pen-pals. Pairs spoke about life lessons and autobiographies of athletes presented in the book as well as how the text (varying font sizes and colors, layouts, and the use of photographs and illustrations) affects the reader. They completed interactive activities guided by post-it note prompts and worked collaboratively to answer the prompts. The college students also worked with the middle school students to construct book-inspired arts-based text and image collages to represent their personal life philosophies.

The collaboration provided teacher education candidates with a meaningful opportunity to interact with local public middle school students while cultivating reading comprehension, creative expression, and critical discussion skills through a visual literacy lens. Samples of university students’ quotes affirm the arts-based literacy workshop project’s positive impact, as follows:

- “I learned to prepare students with a range of comprehension strategies beyond more traditional prompts, including asking them about the author and photographer’s choices to format the page in certain ways, and to guide them in applying these to all types of text. This made them more thoughtful and critical readers.”
- “I want to enable students to learn from all types of text in a meaningful way, and include texts like this with a

visual bent to engage and motivate students.”

- “Integrating the arts into literacy instruction benefits students in multiple ways. It increases their motivation, critical thinking, confidence, self-expression, cross-cultural understanding, empathy, imagination, cooperation, and flexibility,” as demonstrated in Figure 8, where middle school students are displaying their final collages.



Figure 8. Middle school students displaying their collages by A. Katz (2018)

Educators who are dedicated to ensuring that their students fulfill their potential as readers, writers, and learners need to be equipped with a repertoire of strategies in order to empower them. The use of targeted reading, writing, discussion, and arts-based literacy projects with public middle school student literacy leaders improved pre-service educators' commitment to their field and expanded their learning. Kentner (2015) states that “maybe it’s time we rethink the image of our students reading into something that better fits the world they live in” (p.640). The visual literacy strategies presented in this chapter serve as powerful lenses to support educators as they strive to facilitate students’ personal and academic success. These insights facilitate the ability of education professionals to examine how to better prepare our students for the

demands of a twenty-first century world that rewards meaningful inquiry and an opportunity to practice close observation.

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