

# Personal-academic studies engage urban, seventh-grade students

A successful middle school team of teachers employed effective middle level philosophy to structure a curriculum around themes that were relevant, challenging, integrative, and engaging for their particular students and community.

*Jane Hansen*

Realizing that their young adolescents were involved in tough, delicate issues in their out-of-school lives, the seventh-grade cross-subject teachers featured in this article came together in true middle school fashion to respond to students' needs. The teachers opted to increase relevance for students through a curricular focus on the theme of "Perspective" in two classes (one English and one U.S. history), and as a result the teachers chose the subtopics of *conflict*, *change*, and *inner strength*. This conceptual focus seemed especially suited for young adolescents in the throes of significant physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development as *conflict* is usually a result of differing perspectives, *change* may lead to the resolution of *conflict*, and *inner strength* is needed to pursue *change*.

Their readings, writing, and discussions of *conflict* helped them to see they were not alone (Piazza, 2010). When violence is the norm in any location, it can influence persons' perspectives on their lives. The students desired *change*, and used their study of figures in history, literature, and their own lives as exemplars of possibilities. *Inner strength*, however, is a difficult, and needed tool if change is to occur, and the students learned about it as the key to their emerging possible identities.

Students' serious writing, thinking, and conversations about their own lives enables their engagement in studies of others' lives. During their studies of *conflict*, *change*, and *inner strength*, these students released themselves, which enabled their engagement (Jones, 2009).

The students attend a 7–8 public school with an enrollment of approximately 580 students. It is the only middle school in a small, southern city with a population of approximately 45,000. More than 50% of the students in the two classes were African Americans, and all belonged to a program for students identified by their sixth-grade teachers as talented and in need of support in order to succeed. No formal measures led to those teachers' judgments; they based their decisions on their overall knowledge of their students. After-school mentors, study periods, a contract system with families, and classroom policies in which the students were addressed as members of a highly capable group, all converged to enable the students to perform well.

As a professor in a nearby university, I study students as writers. In the case of this article, I did so by attending these English and U.S. history classes twice a week for two years; one of those years is featured here. While in the school setting, I observed the students, interacted with them whenever possible, recorded notes, and photocopied their work. Also, I talked with the teachers, in order to ensure that I understood their learning goals—and the students' accomplishments.

## Middle school relevance

Conflict exists. Often, in service to classroom management and/or control, our tendency as educators may be to ignore or squash it, but these students recognized it as

a concept that begged study. As Meyer (2011) writes, the current, corporate world of education creates an atmosphere of fear and competition, not inquiry or reflection. Teachers and students feel trapped in narrow curriculums, but students' lives often beg attention beyond standardized curriculums, and unless we address internal and external conflicts in middle school, students may become disillusioned and look forward only to the day they can drop out. Such a radical option is too often in their eyes the only way to give the time they need to the forces that place them in a constant state of conflict.

### Conflict in society

I entered English class as teacher Kristina Doubet introduced the topic of conflict. She briefly explained various types and kinds of conflict and then read "Mother to Son," by Langston Hughes. Ms. Doubet projected this line from it: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair," and the class talked with familiarity about Hughes's idea. Their lives ain't been easy.

The students moved into groups, each with a poem about conflict. The group I joined read "The Rival," by Sylvia Plath. One girl said, "They are taking the spotlight from the other." Another added, "They are both taking light back from the other." I noted the insights these young adolescents brought to what they read and wrote; a frequent source of conflict is situations where people take from, rather than give to others. Although this poem is technically "above grade level" for these students, their writing and contributions to discussions made it clear they were ready for such a challenge. They rose to the task.

Then Ms. Doubet asked the class to listen for examples of conflict in "Press On," a song by Mary J. Blige. With partners, the students talked about what they heard, and I sat with two boys. One of them said, "You *have* to make decisions, you can't just keep going on..." They ended by talking about not being able to avoid conflict. It is ever present; it merits study.

In the ensuing class discussion a student said it is often hard to know what to do, and referred to these lines in the song, "If your moves is right, then your dough is tight..." Ms. Doubet agreed and elaborated, "If you do the right thing, it doesn't always pay off." Others agreed, and Ms. Doubet asked, "Who makes these decisions difficult?" Class, "Society!"

### Conflict in their own lives

Ms. Doubet, shifted the talk more specifically to the students' lives. One girl spoke about a constant conflict in hers, "If your work is good, then it's trouble at home..." This turned out to be an issue that is common—especially in African American communities. To be a good student can be interpreted as trying to be white. These students, in a program designed to focus on academics, live in constant conflict between the merits and perils of doing good work.

Ms. Doubet eventually moved the conversation forward by saying to the class, "Now you name a song for us to talk about." Someone suggested, "Bittersweet Symphony": "Life has its good points, but it's horrible at the same time." Their conversation about conflicts in their lives continued, and then they wrote in-class essays about those trials.

Volunteers read their essays to the class during our next session, and Tiffany (all students' names are pseudonyms) began:

*Conflict, conflict, conflict people saying  
this and that. Always talking.*

*Girls arguing over boys who aren't worth your  
time, please be for real you don't need him.*

*Too much stress. Family problems. No one to talk to all  
your problems bottled up inside. Where do you run to when  
there is no where to go. Knowing right from wrong but not  
always doing what you know is right and wanting to do  
what is wrong. ... Asking yourself why the world seems so  
wrong. Why everything is upside down, why can't I turn  
it all around. Conflict, Conflict, Conflict please go away  
you turn everyone against everything and everything  
against everyone. You are Dismissed. Good bye ... I hope.*

The conflicted emotions of adolescence reign in her essay. Much is unfair, many experiences do not make sense, and the students talked about their hopes for peace.

In a few minutes Brandon read his essay, which brought us back to the conflict the students experience when they do well on their schoolwork. Brandon, however, is white; this turned out to be a somewhat universal conflict. He read, in part: *Do I let people know how smart I am, or do I hide myself?* One student tried to convince Brandon to not hide, "You're smart. If people tease you, they're the kind of people who would tease you if you didn't do well." So, he'll be teased, regardless, not unlike historical figures who faced conflicts.

## Conflict in English and social studies

Ms. Doubet told about Frederick Douglas, “When he was a boy he was a slave, and a woman was teaching him to read. Her owner came in and said, ‘Don’t,’ but Frederick Douglas knew that, somehow, he had to continue to learn to read. It would be his key to freedom.” One student jumped in with this thought, “Because that’s where he comes from, but that’s not who he is.” I was impressed. This student knew the underpinnings of the *conflict* Frederick Douglas chose to live in, so this study of *conflict* helped these young adolescents take a closer look at themselves, as they reflected on others’ lives.

In U.S. history, their study of westward expansion highlighted the unattained peace between the pioneers and the Indian nations. Chris VanSlooten (Mr. V), their U.S. history teacher, showed primary documents such as a photo of smiling Apaches arriving at a U.S. Government School established for them, and another of the same Apaches four months later—straight-faced, hair hacked off, and wearing stiff, school uniforms. The students also viewed a video and studied additional art.

As individuals or with partners, they wrote in-class essays, poems, or songs and read or performed them, and their creations showed these young adolescents’ insights into the *conflicts* our Westward Expansion created. Lorri and David wrote and read this poem to the class:

### *Crying for Peace*

*Migration turned Westward.  
America Grew. Getting bigger  
every day. More anger and fighting  
all the time. Watering the earth  
with the tears the Indians  
cried.*

*Migration turned westward.  
More settlers came. Taking  
land. Making Indians furious.  
Fighting and taking life away  
from man after man.*

*Crying for mercy,  
The Indians do. Waiting  
for war to end.  
New technology, as more  
men died. Still watering  
the earth with the tears  
children cry.*

The class first responded with quiet appreciation, then with applause, and finally with comments.

Soon, someone segued the conversation into another composition and the sharing continued as the students relived the *conflict* of our nation’s westward expansion, and wondered if the aftereffects will ever be resolved.

Ms. Doubet and Mr. V, these students’ teachers, in order to bring the students into the above classroom experiences—in order for the students to become engaged—brought compelling literature and artifacts for discussion, and the teachers did not lecture on the merits of those materials. They used the materials to open a discussion among the students in which the teachers carefully listened to the students’ words, nodded, and looked around for other comments. Students were involved in these considerations of *conflict*. They were not bored—they appreciated opportunities to bring their own lives into their classrooms (Hansen, 2012), and they became engaged in their academic content.

## Developing a focus on students' lives

Typically, when students study literature they note *changes* in the perspectives of various characters. The young adolescents in these classes did this as well, and they talked about situations in their own lives as they considered the complicated nature of *change*—as a way to address *conflict*. Sometimes they and/or family members realized they could take steps to initiate alterations in their situations.

## Change in their own lives

Their English class studied *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the students loved Kate, the shrew whose husband supposedly tamed her. Maybe she resisted—successfully. One day during class the students wrote about situations in their own lives when a *change* occurred. This was Stareen’s draft:

### *My Perspective!*

*There once was a time in my life when my Aunt Sara changed my perspective of her. My original view of her was that she was an angel and could do no wrong. She used to take me places and give me toys. I thought she ... didn't have a mean bone in her body. Boy was I wrong about her! As I got older I started to realize that she was very bitter toward my older cousin Mark; she was his step-parent.... Sometimes she hit him, and worked him like a slave while her two daughters sat on their bums all day....*

*My new view of her is that she is a two-faced mean old witch. I learned that people are not always what they seem. No one is perfect and sometimes they take their anger and depression out on other people.*

*I also learned that some people just can't be changed.*

This was tough, real, and heartfelt. The students, in general, were hopeful for changes in their relatives, Indian nations, and themselves, but Stareen believed her aunt couldn't be changed. Held up alongside *The Taming of the Shrew* and essays written by other students, Stareen's essay begged the questions *What or Who brings about change?*

As it turned out, Stareen's cousin initiated *change*; he intentionally threw rocks through the windows of Aunt Sara's house, hoping to be placed in a "home," and did move in with a loving foster family who will support him through college. Aunt Sara did not *change*, but others didn't take on her ways.

The students thought about themselves. They are the ones to determine who they are, and they had become hooked on the idea of *change*. To address *conflict*, they considered *change* in their own lives—and became engaged in a study of the larger picture of what others had done in the name of *change*.

## Change in a larger setting

For his project for National History Day (NHD), Jonathan researched George Creel, the creator, during WWI, of our government's official propaganda machine. Most citizens of the U.S. did not support WWI, so Congress created the Committee on Public Information; Creel headed it, and the agency persuaded U.S. citizens to *change* their perspective.

As the students worked on their NHD projects, Mr. V conferred with them on at least three drafts. For their first draft, he read, mainly, to find out what they were learning about their topic. This is the end of Jonathan's draft:

... *George Creel recruited from everywhere: businesses, universities, newspapers, magazines, artists, filmmakers, and community organizations. There were 19 subdivisions of the CPI, and each one focused on a different type of propaganda... The Division of News sent out more than 6,000 press releases during the war. The Division of Pictorial Publicity used professional advertising illustrators and cartoonists to create images for posters, billboards, and newspaper ads. The Division of Films made movies with titles like The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin and To Hell With the Kaiser.*

George Creel believed that people can *change*, and his agency successfully influenced many minds with emotion-filled propaganda. Jonathan started to realize how scary this program of our government was, and how important it is to be wary.

For draft three, Mr. V mainly read to hear the students' own perspectives within their drafts. What, to them, made their project significant? Here is a portion of Jonathan's third draft about George Creel.

... *The work of the CPI marked a turning point in the history of the United States. It was the first systematic, deliberate attempt by our government to manipulate how the American people thought about a political issue so they would support the government's policies. Largely because of the CPI, the majority of Americans went from opposing American involvement in World War I to support. The techniques of propaganda that the CPI pioneered have been used in political campaigns and the U.S. government ever since.*

When I listened to Jonathan talk about his project, I learned that the aspect of it that impressed him the most was the tie to the present. To know that our government engages in the production of propaganda made an impression on him. His classmates, in discussing this, also gained insight into our government.

These seventh graders started to recognize propaganda as a way of life—a version of daily situations when they might try to *change* someone, or someone might try to *change* them. They recognized the possible influence of others that they may want to resist. Importantly, they realized that a carefully crafted message or action could bring about change.

Overall, the study of *conflict* had led them to pause, think, and consider *changes* in their thinking. Their study of *change* led the adolescents to a greater appreciation of the *inner strength* often required of them.

## Embracing and honoring diversity

Of great importance to many of the students was their identity as African Americans. In U. S. history Mr. V included the contributions of African Americans throughout their topics of study, and students often chose to focus on them when they were given choices for writing topics. One of the girls chose to focus on Martin Luther King, Jr.—a man with tremendous *inner strength*—for her NHD essay.

## The inner strength of others

For draft one, when Cherise wrote about why her topic is important, we heard these words:

*I selected this project by thinking of what has happened to this country to all the people in the past. A good thing that has happened to this country. This project will*

*hopefully put an impact on black and white people to get along better and put all the negative things in the past.*

Cherise was hopeful, and had confidence in her ability to accomplish something. It impressed me to hear the students use history as a springboard from which they could look ahead—to consider ways to strengthen the lives of others and their own. They could link the worlds of school and their own to move their thinking forward (Boyd & Moore, 2011).

Cherise continued to learn about the Civil Rights Movement, and eventually wrote her third draft, in which we heard these words:

*Dr. King wasn't for violence he was for peace. He wanted to get this out to everyone. He spoke to the public, had marches and so on to get this across the world....*

From a man who remained true to his stance in the midst of conflict, Cherise learned about the extent to which he worked to convey his message. His strength impressed her as he became a man she “knew,” rather than a name she had heard for years. Her teacher promoted this when he insisted that each student devote time researching various individuals before they each chose one to study for NHD.

Student choice, in general, promotes *engagement*. Cherise, already a strong girl, chose King, and her study encouraged her to remain a person who speaks her mind.

### **Their own inner strength**

A poetry unit in English class provided these students with opportunities to become increasingly aware of their own *inner strength*. Ms. Doubet began this focus by reading the familiar George Ella Lyon poem, “Where I am From.” Then she moved to the overhead projector and started to write and talk about where she comes from, “I loved my room ... orange carpet ... it was sooo ugly, I now know ... I hated Brussels sprouts ... I liked to roam ... rode my bike in the cemetery.” The students thought about where they are from, offered comments such as, “Stupid stuff me and my brother did,” and wrote poems about their roots. One girl penned herself toward a greater appreciation of her past:

*I remember the smell of flowers and mac and cheese  
and the wonderful scent of the fresh morning breeze.  
But I also remember dog breath and underarms and  
herding my little cousins around like cattle on a farm....  
I remember dreaming – having wishes galore!  
But now I realize I couldn't have wanted more.*

For another session Ms. Doubet encouraged the students to delve into the present, “Describe yourself in detail ... such things as ... what makes you comfortable ... what makes you mad ... happy ... what people think about you that might not be true.” The students wrote quickly. One boy penned several short lines, some of which are:

*I act retarded  
I'm really smart  
Good sense of humor  
Athletic  
Good friend  
Luv attention ...*

*People think I'm dumb  
I look like a smurf  
I am smart  
Have a lot of freckles  
Baseball player  
Have red hair  
Slow  
Good at math*

Volunteers read their drafts to the class—much to everyone’s enjoyment and appreciation.

Then, Ms. Doubet opened a discussion about the inner strengths they had written about and shared. Ultimately, she wanted these students’ work to enrich their lives (Kirkland, 2013); she wanted them to see their possibilities. Ms. Doubet began with a metaphor about herself, “I am the weather.” In the ensuing talk one girl offered, “I always change,” and, Kendall said, “That’s my mom.”

To the next class, Kendall brought the following, in which this African-American girl analyzed the conflicts within herself—and the emergence of her inner strength.

*What am I?  
I am a powder keg  
My anger builds up & up  
until someone makes it explode.  
I am a dog  
loyal and friendly to those I love  
I am an eraser  
Eliminating all the bad thoughts from my head  
I am nothing  
No one can see me  
I am something  
A brilliant and intelligent person*

*Who am I?  
I am Kendall R. Tucker  
A powder keg, dog, eraser,*

*and nothing, and something  
These are the things I think  
of in every day life  
I am me.*

I said, “It sounds like you’re a combination of many people.”

Kendall replied,

All the time. I’m a powder keg and I hold my anger. I’m a dog; if you tell me a secret, I’d never tell – I’m loyal. I’m nice to people, to everyone. I’m an eraser; I erase bad thoughts from when I was little. Some people look down on me, talk about me; they’re jealous, I guess. I say I’m nothing; when I talk in my house, no one hears me. I say, ‘Forget it.’ In school I know the stuff; I’m in high classes.

I commented on the difference between who she is at home and in school. Kendall nodded, and I continued, “Sounds a bit like me.” Kendall wondered what I meant, and I told her a bit about my growing up years, including information about my three siblings, my decision to go to college, and my dad’s response that I should work for high grades so I could receive a scholarship.

Kendall continued,

My sister was going to college, but she’s pregnant, so she’ll go next year. I have another sister who’s a junior – she was held back, a brother who’s a sophomore – he was held back – he’s very smart, a brother in grade nine, and I’m in grade seven. We all live with my mom. I don’t know my dad.

As we concluded our conference, Kendall smiled and said,

I’m brilliant, intelligent ... I get good grades on some tests ... in grade six I got As and Bs ... I changed *What am I* to *Who am I* ... I told them what I was. Now I tell them who I am.

Kendall used her writing to wrestle with her thoughts and to strengthen her resolve. The overall classroom context included the sharing by adults, which helped the students feel validated (Fletcher, 2013). Plus, Kendall’s writing empowered her. When the students entered

into their academic tasks without reserve, by using their accumulated knowledge of themselves to their advantage (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011), their engagement encouraged them to become someone. Kendall realized that to pull all of her selves together may save her—and she started to accomplish that.

## Concluding thoughts

In the above classrooms, teachers invited students into the curriculum, and the students found a place for themselves therein. The teachers did not preach, lecture, or critique. True to the middle school ideal focused on the whole adolescent, the teachers tried to honor and expand the seventh graders’ interests. The students, rather than act passively, participated in an active, democratic fashion, asking questions and making connections to their lives beyond the classroom.

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Jane Hansen is professor emerita at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. E-mail: jh5re@virginia.edu