

# A University Literacy Festival

## Connecting Authors & Students From Title I Schools

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Sharon G. Flake, Sherri Winston, & Edward Bloor**

Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give*, notes, “It’s important to have diverse characters in books because books give kids mirrors and windows. Books create empathy. If we don’t have diversity, if we’re only showing things from one perspective, how are we creating empathy?” (Penn, 2017)

### The Evolution of a University Literacy Festival

Teacher candidates in a literacy course in the College of Education (COE) at a university in southwestern Florida, while out in the field at various public middle schools in the local five counties, discovered that among teachers and students from Title I schools there was a need for students to interact with authors to help engage them in reading and to see themselves as writers.

After conversing with the teachers and students, the COE teacher candidates also realized that several students’ parents had not attended college, and an abundant number of the students had never set foot on a college campus. The idea of a university literacy festival was conceived to connect students from these Title I schools with young adult authors who focus their writing on diverse characters.

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The goal was to allow students to see themselves reflected in stories and to grant access for them to explore a university in their own backyard. The hope was to provide a forum for students to embrace differences and identify commonalities with others.

Rallying together, a committee consisting of five teacher educators, two staff members, and several teacher candidate representatives from the university’s COE gathered to establish an annual COE Literacy Festival. Obligations of the committee involved communicating with Title I schools in the five local districts, attending meetings, attaining internal and external funding, researching local and national children’s literature authors in order to invite them, organizing the schedule and activities, traveling to numerous Title I schools to deliver books to children who would attend the literacy festival, and organizing COE teacher candidates to visit with the participating students and teachers to familiarize them with the featured authors and their books.

### Seeing Themselves in Books

To become readers, children need to see themselves in books—books can portray mirrors where children can reflect on their own lives; they are also windows where children can learn about the lives of others (Persaud, 2013). To increase a sense of self-worth in students, a sense of empowerment, and the ability to work in harmony with others, children’s and young adult authors who write about strong, diverse characters were invited to participate in the university literacy festival.

The ratio of books per child in middle-income families is 13 to 1, compared to low-income families, where the ratio is one age-appropriate book for every 300

children (Neuman & Dickinson, 2006). Findings from the IEA Reading Literacy Study (“Reading Literacy,” 1996) indicate that a staggering 61% of low-income families have no books at all for children in their homes.

The committee agreed early on that each student attending the university literacy festival would receive a free book from the authors who would participate in the event. The books were delivered to each school before the festival to give students time to read the books and to allow teacher candidates to visit classrooms to talk about the authors and their literary craft.

The first annual university literacy festival invited eight children’s and young adult authors and more than 900 students from Title I schools in the five local school districts. By attaining additional funding, the second annual university literacy festival was able to grow in size to invite 17 children’s and young adult authors and more than 1,800 students from the Title I schools in those five local school districts—and students still received a free book by one of the participating authors.

The festivals involved a variety of activities for students, including author book signings, interactive workshops, literacy gaming, and read-alouds and hands-on activities offered by more than 120 COE teacher candidates.

The events were held on the main lawn area of the campus, where authors signed books at their tables and where a few authors presented in a pavilion to a crowd of students sitting on the lawn. The lawn also provided ample space for COE teacher candidates to spread around for their read-alouds and disciplinary literacy activities. The campus’s buildings surrounding the main lawn area were also utilized for authors’ workshops. This enabled students to explore the university while visiting with

the authors and COE teacher candidates. Owing to the popularity of literacy gaming the first year, digital literacy with 3D pens and iPad literacy apps to expand on the books students received was added to the schedule of activities the second year.

### Authors' Perspectives and Impact

Sharon G. Flake, Sherri Winston, and Edward Bloor, three young adult authors participating in the university literacy festival, have shared through video interviews their perspectives on the impact their books had on students from Title I schools and the benefits of participating in a university literacy festival.

Flake, author of *Unstoppable Octobia May* (2015), *The Skin I'm In* (2017), *Money Hungry* (2007), and many other books, conveyed the following:

Langston Hughes was the first author to tell me it was OK to be a little Black girl from the inner city. The food his characters ate, the stoops they sat on, and the community that supported them were familiar to me. For centuries, the media had painted Black kids like me as troublemakers, ne'er-do-wells, and drains on society. I knew better. My folks and neighbors did as well. Langston confirmed what we all knew—our world was rich and full with streams of possibilities. I am an author now. Like Langston, my work is a mirror reflecting the truth of the human condition. My books are doors, as well, that swing wide and welcome all who draw near. Inside the pages, readers often recognize themselves and empathize with others. It's what well-written books do. It's what Langston did for me. It's what the young people at this festival experienced

as well: doors wide enough for them to walk through; mirrors where they could see themselves shining bright and taking on the world.

Winston is the author of *President of the Whole Sixth Grade*, (2016a), *The Kayla Chronicles* (2018), and *The Sweetest Sound* (2016b). She described why she writes her books and the benefits of participating in a university literacy festival in this way:

When I was a kid we did not have the representation of Color that is growing now. I remember being in second grade reading stories about African American characters that were heartbreaking and downtrodden. I asked my mom, why are all the books with Black kids in them about this type of sadness? My mom's reaction to me was if you want to see a book about something else, you ought to write it. She said it like a challenge. That always motivated me. Aspirational writing motivated me. All of my books are about identity, who you are and who you want to be. It is a pervasive theme of mine because it's a challenge that I face and that most of us face on a regular basis. It doesn't end.

[A university literacy festival] is just wonderful! . . . I had never done anything like this for the young kids at a university. So this is really cool, and I think the benefit is that not only do they get to come out to talk to the authors, they get to have that access, but these are kids who may never have thought about college being accessible to them who actually have their feet on a college campus. I know from growing up in one of those neighborhoods where 95% of kids thought that going to college was like going to Mars. It just isn't done. I know the impact it can have when they see it is a real, actual place and it is attainable.



Author Sherri Winston speaks to students at university literacy festival.

Bloor, known for *Tangerine* (1997), is also the author of *London Calling* (2011), *Taken* (2009), and other novels. He hopes that his books have made an impact on his readers. He shared the following:

I write from my own experience as a middle school teacher and as a parent with two kids who went through middle school. I hope kids from Title I schools will see themselves in my books because one theme that runs through all of them is the growing income inequality in America; the differences between the haves and the have-nots.

In *Tangerine* there are two schools, Tangerine Middle, which is the poor kids' school, and Lake Windsor Downs, which is the rich kids' school. I always ask kids when I visit . . . which school are you? Are you Tangerine Middle or Lake Windsor Downs? They always know the answer, and they are proud of their school either way. The hero in *Tangerine*, Paul Fisher, even though he is bullied and faces some menacing situations, handles things in a nonviolent way. He stands up for what is right and is not afraid. I try to impress on students that Paul's approach will eventually win the day.



Author Sharon G. Flake interacts with student at university literacy festival.

## Students' Perceptions and Impressions

Students who participated in the festivals revealed their perceptions about their interactions with the authors during workshops and book signings after the festival through the use of surveys and quick-writes.

Rodrigo was an eighth-grade student in a Title I school. He enjoyed playing basketball with his siblings. When asked about his favorite subject in school, he quickly answered "gym"; however, he claimed that science ranked pretty high on his list as well. Rodrigo described reading as "boring" and "something that takes up time." Rodrigo's class received Flake's novel *The Skin I'm In*, where the main character, Maleeka, with her own insecurities, is distressed when a new teacher, who is tough and is an advocate for her students, comes to her inner-city school. After reading and partaking in class discussions over the novel and visiting with Flake at the university literacy festival, Rodrigo wrote,

I did not know what to think when my class was going to visit Sharon Flake. I knew that her book was real . . . not the characters, even though they seem real. What I mean is she must have lived the way I live because her book got it right! [At the literacy festival] she told us about when she was little and the hard times she went through. I really don't like reading but she makes me want to read her other books. Our teacher is going to read *Unstoppable Octobia May* to us next.



Author Edward Bloor is shown in a selfie taken at university literacy festival.

Luciana, a sixth-grade student, read *The President of the Whole Sixth Grade* by Winston, a novel about Brianna who navigates the ins and outs of middle school as she attempts to raise money for her class trip to Washington, D.C. Luciana shared that even though her teacher was reading the novel aloud to the class, she couldn't help but read ahead. She shared the following:

This book made me LOL [laugh out loud]! My teacher read this book to us, but I had to read it at night after my parents went to bed. I even stayed up very late reading! Sherri Winston told us that she never gave up and that is why she is an author today. She wants us to see ourselves in her books and how people have more in common than we think. I could see Brianna [the main character] being my best friend because no matter what happens she is determined to make things work and go her way. This is the first book I ever read by myself!

Dylan, a ninth-grade student, read *London Calling*, a historical fiction novel about heroes and scapegoats. *London Calling* follows a character named Martin back through time to the London Blitz during World War II. He travels with a young English boy named Jimmy, who may or may not be real. Dylan enjoys history class and anything that deals with war. He expressed,

I couldn't put this book down! It is full of action. It also had some mystery in it. But I really liked that Martin starts out self-centered and focused on the wrong things in his life. After trying to help Jimmy during the London Blitz, he realizes he can change his own life and even help others. Martin wants to be a better person. I met with Mr. Bloor [during his workshop at the literacy festival] and he told our class that we must stand up for what is right in life, no matter what the price. We will be winners if we do. I like that.

## Conclusion

The goal of the university literacy festival was to invite authors whose writing would represent strong, diverse characters that would allow students from Title I schools to see themselves and their culture through literature on a deeper level. When students are given the opportunity to meet the authors of books they read at a university literacy festival, it ignites imaginations and enables them to experience "story" in a real and immediate way.

Students had the opportunity to ask questions that personalized the story and writing process for them. When students

learn the ideas behind books, they are instantly drawn to them. They identify with the struggles and celebrations of the writing process because they hear about it directly from the author.

Through our festivals, authors become real to students, opening up relationships with the books they read. Students start recognizing choices made by authors of the books they read, which helps them develop the ability to make predictions, inferences, and connections and other traits of good readers. Through the process of engaging with young adult authors, students will come to see themselves as writers and express a desire to share their thoughts and enthusiasm with others, which has been shown to foster a lifetime of reading (Clark & Douglas, 2011).

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