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### **"I Don't Mind This Actually. It's Kind Of Fun To Work On": Project Based Assessment Following An Inquiry Based Unit In A Modern Middle School Classroom**

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#### **Recommended Citation**

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“I Don’t Mind This Actually. It’s Kind Of Fun To Work On”:  
Project Based Assessment Following An Inquiry Based Unit In A Modern Middle School  
Classroom

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Buffalo State College  
ENG 695 Master’s Thesis Research Paper  
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May 14, 2024

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on one teacher's action-research project examining inquiry-based teaching and project-based assessment in the middle school English classroom. The study focused on the inquiry-based instructional strategies used during a Young Adult Literature unit for seventh grade English Language Arts. The unit concluded with project-based assessments for all students. Results showed that levels of engagement rose with instructional strategies focused on inquiry and project-based assessments. Implications for middle school ELA teachers show that while project-based assessments and inquiry-based learning are effective for engagement, they are not without their challenges. Navigating department culture, limited resources, and other challenges are discussed.

## Snapshot

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. The clock seems to be moving at a snail's pace in Mr. Radeen's 7th grade English class. I sat there pinching my leg through my pants trying to force my eyes not to close. Listening to my classmates read *Twelve Angry Men* by stumbling over and mispronouncing every other word made each line sound like a jumbled mess and left me retaining nothing. I used to watch the clock in disbelief that these 40 minutes went by at a slower pace than all of the other 40 minute periods. It felt remarkable that students around me could be falling asleep yet Mr. Radeen just kept going as if there was nothing that could possibly prevent every 13 year old nodding off into dreamland. I didn't care about what the jury decided in the play because the only time I understood the play was when Mr. Radeen gave us the answers at the end of each period like clockwork. I didn't care about the sentence structure used or the grammar errors I should be looking for because I knew my word document would help me out for all assignments anyway. It was never about what appeals to 13 year olds and there certainly was no effort made to try to connect the texts to us. What if Mr. Radeen had asked us about our lives and what mattered to us? I wouldn't have been drinking full water bottles in an attempt to stay upright. Being in 7th grade, I didn't know much about other ways to approach learning or teaching so I was just thankful when Mr. Radeen had a substitute teacher.

When I got to college, I started in the early education program hoping to make a difference in young people's lives and teach them to love learning by approaching it

differently. I couldn't wait to be paired with a passionate teacher who could help me grow. I was told I'd be observing a teacher in Kenmore and he was the opposite of everything I hoped he would be. He told me to get out while I could and that he just wanted to get through each day so he could get home. I cried in my car hoping the rest of my observations would go better. They went the exact same as the first time. Wasn't there anyone out there who wanted to change kid's experiences in schools and help them see the personal and worldly connection available to them in classrooms?

I changed my major to public relations and advertising and graduated ready to take on the sports advertising world. Then, a pandemic struck the world and my cousin who worked in sports advertising told me that without any sports being played, it might be a while until I see many job postings. He was right. I struggled through COVID as everyone else did and one day I went to the beach and sat on a towel six feet away from my friends. Someone named Carmelo who I had met for the first time that day said, "Are you a teacher? You look like a teacher." When I said that I wanted to be originally but wasn't after changing courses, I felt an overwhelming sadness that lingered longer than I would've liked. The world was shut down so if there was ever a time to give it another shot, it seemed like now.

I called the local college I attended for undergraduate studies and asked about their post-baccalaureate program for English teaching. They put me in contact with Dr. Kayprus, even over the phone, it felt like sunshine. She warmly validated my feelings and expressed how being an English teacher is such an incredible job. She was

genuine and I could tell she meant every word and wasn't overselling me on the program. She had the passion I was searching for when I started at college four years prior.

I began taking the entry level courses and felt the enthusiasm for this profession ooze out of all of the teachers and students around me. When it came time to observe a different teacher, I was so nervous I'd get someone like I did the first time who told me "at this point, you just have to do it for the paycheck." I nervously went into the classroom hoping all of the students wouldn't be sitting, falling asleep like I did in Mr. Radeen's class. The teacher I was observing made me feel like I was home from the very start. She had her students up and moving. She had her 8th graders making meaningful conversations and connections based on a text instead of making them do comprehension questions. She involved what mattered to her kids. The smiles, laughter and genuine passion I saw in this teacher inspired me to pursue this career even more passionately. She lit a candle that had worn down over time and put the spark back when I was most nervous about the choice I made to go back.

The classes I was taking at college were affirming every thought I'd had about how to make the students enjoy learning more. I didn't realize it had a formal name but when I was given the tools to name it, I was able to see that inquiry based learning with project assessments was the kind of learning I yearned for as a child. Giving students projects they feel passionate about completing instead of test after test is the kind of teaching the inspiring woman I was observing with, did for her 8th graders. Inquiry

based learning with meaningful projects used to assess learning is exactly the kind of teaching I wanted to do so none of my students would have to pinch themselves to avoid falling asleep in 7th grade English class. Although my research directly reflects my teaching, all names used are pseudonyms.

## **Introduction**

Student engagement is an essential part of learning and if the students do not understand why they should care, they will not buy in and learn as much as they could if they see the value in it. I wanted to explore specifically how teaching a novel as an inquiry based unit impacted student engagement in a middle school classroom. Taking my experience in 7th grade and giving my current 7th graders a different experience with a class text is the poetic justice I wanted to serve for my former self. My classes are reading *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. This is the first year my school district is teaching this book so there is a lot of wiggle room for implementing new ideas since everything is all brand new to both us teachers and the students. The overarching inquiry questions my students are focusing on are, “What are some of the unspoken and spoken rules we live by? How do the rules we live by impact the choices we make? How do the choices we make impact our experiences in life?” At the end of the unit, students will create a podcast sharing their rules, choices, and experiences.

This led me to researching the following questions:

- How can project based assessments be used in middle school classrooms?

- How does project based assessments engage students versus other types of assessment?
- What do middle school students say about their experience creating project based assessments?
- How can we identify learning in project based assessments?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Critical Pedagogy***

Theorist Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy has inspired the work in this study and the teacher I am today. Freire pushed back against traditional banking models in education that showcase the teacher as the oppressor and the students as sponges who need to sit down, soak up what their oppressor is saying, be quiet and leave. Freire believed the banking model was the downfall of critical thinking and saw students as passive recipients of information instead of active analysers. "For Freire, the banking model of education should be seen as a microcosm of society, in that this model exists to serve the oppressor within that society. The classroom mirrors the political structure of contemporary society, with the teacher being the oppressor and the student being the oppressed" (Govender, N. 2020, p. 209). Freire argues that students need to understand the significance of what they are being taught in schools otherwise the students that enter life after school will not challenge the world around them since they have been taught to sit and listen without asking why. The classroom



can directly relate to society in that if students do not voice their opinions, concerns and questions, they will remain listening to the orders of the person in charge well into adulthood. Students need to know that their teacher's words are not law and they can and should wonder about the reason behind what they are learning. When a teacher teaches their student facts about the world, the student records, memorizes and repeats the fact without perceiving the true significance of what they just learned (Freire, 2000). Students need to create their knowledge through their own lived experiences and then develop their own ideas and beliefs based on learning through the scope of their own lives. . "They (teachers) must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. "Problem-posing" education, responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—rejects communiques and embodies communication" (Freire, 2000, p.79).

### ***The Importance of Education Being An Experience***

There are many common complaints among the teaching community and so often it is about students not being engaged in the learning process. Engaging students in the classroom can be a challenge that is handled with making education an experience. John Dewey argues that, "The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process" (Dewey, 1938, p.58). The social environment students find themselves in within their

schools impacts every aspect of their day. Their social emotional needs must be met in schools as it is a building they sometimes spend more time in than at home. If students are not able to thrive socially, it directly affects their education. Similarly to Paolo Freire, John Dewey believed that the teacher is not the all knowing being in charge of dictating the moves of all students in the room. Instead, the teacher is a group leader and plays a role in a healthy class community. While it can be challenging to find the right experiences for each class and each individual student within each class, it is important work that should, at the very least, be attempted by the educator. The middle school English classroom needs to be a community of learners since 12 year olds are socially motivated and inspired by each other's words and ideas constantly. Cultivating a welcoming environment helps promote social well being and therefore, safer feelings when taking risks in the classroom. Classroom communities do not form overnight but consistently working on them everyday helps the social process of learning run smoothly.

Dewey also believed that taking advantage of "teachable moments" can lead to the best learning experiences since they happen naturally and at the point of need. Leaning into the questions and statements of the students despite it messing up the timeline of the lesson allows students to feel more agency in their learning and validation that their words and wonderings matter more than the deadline. Students must be able to take what they have learned through experience and apply to new situations in the world around them. Learning to regurgitate facts does not aid the

students in real life situations but experiencing and learning by doing can allow new knowledge to cross over into life beyond school. “It is not the case that certain subjects or books are universally good or bad. What matters most is the quality of the interaction that a teacher facilitates between her students and the entire learning environment” (Frank, 2019, p. 68). The teacher plays a crucial role in being a leader of learning. Finding ways to positively interact with students and students between themselves is essential for real moral and intellectual growth. Dewey argues that students must connect with the world in order to learn in a meaningful way. “instead of school being a place where a student’s present state of growth and interest were engaged and developed, students either learned to play the game of school and comply, had difficulty learning that game, or actively resisted it and so saw school as an inauthentic or inhospitable place” (Frank, 2019, p.62). Students realize that school can be played like a board game but if we are asking students to personally connect and actively participate by analyzing their worlds, there is no set of game instructions because it is authentic, individualized learning.

### ***A Space for Adolescent’s Reflection and Connection***

Children are impacted by the social aspects of life and yet aren’t always necessarily given the time and space to explore what that truly means. Helping students develop projects that allow them to explore what everything that has happened at home, at school and in other settings means to their development is incredibly important. The structure of the learning in the classrooms students sit in

leaves a huge impact on their learning. James Paul Gee believes that learning does not happen in formal environments where people are forced to follow traditional learning roles but instead real learning happens in affinity spaces. Affinity spaces can be defined as loosely organized social and cultural settings in which the work of teaching tends to be shared by many people, in many locations, who are connected by a shared interest or passion (Gee, 2007). In order for children to learn, the formal space must be reframed as a team or shared space that is a safe zone for sharing vulnerable thoughts about their interests and passions. Creating a classroom that is a true affinity space aids in the student's social emotional development, and creates authentic learning about what truly matters to the children. In this space, students will be able to connect to what actually goes on in their lives and reflect on how these connections impact what they are going to do with their lives outside of school.

### ***Developmental Exploration in School***

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory involves, "believing that parents, teachers, peers, caregivers, and society at large influences an individual's cognitive development. Learning at its root involves interacting with others around you" (*Sociocultural theory of cognitive development*. 2022, p. 1). Vygotsky believed that people played a huge role in how children develop. All the higher level thinking and analytical skills that people possess are a direct result of the relationships they have with others. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development teaches that children are capable of comprehending and achieving more when guided by a teacher or more

capable classmate. Looking at students as developing individuals, it is imperative that educators leave the space for working together in meaningful spaces and leading students as they explore content with their peers. The goal of the final project based assessment in this unit is to explore how the rules children live by impact their lives at school, at home and how that connects to the rules of the world around them, a character in our class text and the relationship between space and societal rules.

### **Literature Review**

The body of research I have taken a thorough look at provides insights for me to analyze as I prepare to conduct my own research. There are a range of studies and articles written about inquiry and project based assessment across content areas. When looking specifically at middle school and the English curriculum, there are more gaps to be filled as many inquiry-based learning and project based learning articles seem to focus on 8-12th graders at the secondary level and my focus is 7th graders. Currently, there is plenty of data showing positive reactions from students, parents and community members who have experienced inquiry-based learning which makes me all the more excited to conduct my own inquiry-based learning unit for this study.

### ***Inquiry***

Bonner (2023) explores the power inquiry based learning has in the middle school English classroom. The project started by asking students to photojournal signs in and around their communities. This is an easy idea that could be implemented in more ways than just signs. One student, Amelia, brought her idea of inclusivity in spaces to

her school by photographing the gray tile in the hallway. She took so much pride in this project that she “worked with a local architect and our building’s social work team to design several concepts for rethinking space for comfort and inclusivity in our junior high. She felt empowered to make change because she was invited to get curious, ask questions, and take action on something that mattered to her as a student” The article later lists 3 rather generic ways to approach inquiry and the first two are kind of no-brainers in my opinion but the third resonates with me. The third one states, “Don’t do inquiry for inquiry’s sake.” This is the part of that section that made me stop and think. “So many of our learning standards are making the change to incorporate inquiry into our middle school subject areas, but that goal can often get mistranslated and watered down. Think about how you can engage students in authentic inquiry experiences that matter to them as intellectuals and community members.” We are pushed to involve students in meaningful ways but it is always within certain limitations it seems. There is still a very classroom feel to what we are being asked to do rather than truly but students in the driver's seat of their own research. Those who wish to only check the inquiry box are not seeing the power in letting students have total choice. This is what the article means by not doing the watered down version. This article informs readers of the depths inquiry needs to go to in order to be authentic instead of watered down versions of school suggested inquiry projects.

Ginsberg and Coke (2019) come on strong by calling school a creativity killer and place of boredom. “Genius Hour is dedicated classroom time and space each

week devoted to students' questions and curiosities in the form of a substantial project students design with the support of the classroom teacher" (Juliani, 2014). Whether it be fifteen minutes each day or an entire class period each week, we use different approaches each year to devote 20 percent of our class time to allowing our students to develop these passion projects" (Ginsberg & Coke, 2013, p. 17). There is value in fluidity as we can be the best planned educator of all time but then a snow day or emergency gets thrown in the mix and all of the sudden, those plans need adjusting. The fact that this article lends itself to "Genius Hour" or time for students to explore inquiry based learning as a fluctuating amount of time each week makes it feel a lot more approachable to teachers. The three approaches they are talking about, are supported with real examples. In March, students are asked to fill out a bracket like they would if they follow college basketball for March Madness. Students in this example filled out their brackets based on questions regarding what they are good at, what they do when no one is watching, etc. The final four being what the students focus on during genius hour is such a unique way to get to that point. The three approaches are Independent, Student-Selected Inquiry, Small-Group or Whole-Class Designed Inquiry, and Curricular Project or Book-Based Inquiry. Something important about this article is that it offers a range of ways to look at inquiry and how it can lend itself to the student who wants to research ramen noodles, and the student who wants to explore PSA's on suicide prevention.

### ***Novel Study and Inquiry***

Seglem and Bonner (2016) explore a student-led blog while reading Walter Dean Myers's novel, *Monster*. Students were split up and completed anchor activities before discussing in a Socratic seminar. "We reasoned that since our students lived in a fairly insulated rural community, they would have little personal knowledge of the experiences Steve, the protagonist, was facing in the book" (Seglem & Bonner, 2016, p. 22). This is exactly the type of disconnected lives I imagine between my students and our class text protagonist, Will, in *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds! "While gang life may not be a prominent social issue within this small, rural community, the novelty of Steve's experiences in *Monster* intrigued them, prompting them to want to learn more about what motivates people to join gangs" (Seglem & Bonner, 2016, p. 25). Students reflected that they learned about time management, loosening the reins if they were a bossy group member and being more engaged. They made ads with the digital art skills they had under the catchphrase "You Choose" with the "oo" being turned into an infinity sign. What an awesome multistep inquiry project. "In addition to strengthening the skills identified within ELA standards, students also developed skills that cannot be captured and measured by content area standards: autonomy, self-confidence, and flexibility" (Seglem & Bonner, 2016, p. 26). The thorough section on challenges is reflective and can prevent mistakes in other teacher's inquiry units. Students realized the workload to go from literal to critical thinking would be intense and asked for work sheets because it was what they were used to and easy. Eventually, after grunting and groaning, they came to love the project. Some students



were very out of their element with this book and this inquiry approach to teaching it which is important to remember as far as getting discouraged in our own research and with our own studies of students. “Inquiry and project-based learning demonstrate a mindset change. The empowerment we afforded our students throughout the duration of this project allowed students to develop ownership of their learning” (Seglem & Bonner, 2016, p. 29).

Herrmann and Gallo (2023) state, “Letting your students lead doesn’t only mean letting them select a topic they are interested in; it also means trusting that their interest and engagement in the inquiry process will support them in using their literacy skills” (Herman & Gallo, 2023, p. 32). Letting go of so much control in order to do meaningful inquiry is scary as a teacher who is also trying to do right by the district’s higher ups and their chain of requests. “Knowing they would be sharing their work publicly meant that students continually thought about their potential audience and became more invested in the research they were conducting” (Herman & Gallo, 2023, p. 32). This article offers a table of texts teachers used in order to form a meaningful inquiry unit validating where they got a lot of their information from. “When teachers use an open inquiry process and allow their students to choose the format and audience of their public sharing, they also provide opportunities for students to draw upon their individual identities” (Herman & Gallo, 2023, p. 33). As far as reading novels and students choosing their novels, they found that when the 8th graders were engaged in the topics they were learning about in class, they went to choose novels

that were more challenging and difficult than the ones in class because they enjoyed learning about the topic. “They reread, ask questions, and sometimes even devise their own guides and notes to help make sense of books that are important to them” (Herman & Gallo, 2023, p. 24). Students can and will reach new heights when given the opportunity if teachers put in the work to make even the oldest of topics matter to the students.

“Teachers were able to let the students lead, provide opportunities for students to share their work with real audiences, and allow students' identities to shine in the projects. Through these approaches to inquiry, the teachers helped students develop agency, build their identities, and gain confidence” (Herman & Gallo, 2023, p. 33). Even the teachers who were apprehensive about inquiry said that after they went through the process, they were able to see the value in all of the amazing comprehension, and engagement students were a part of because of inquiry.

### ***Inquiry in the ELA Classroom and the Challenge of Teaching***

Inquiry based learning is learning that students look forward to rather than dread because they decided it was something they wanted to focus on and research. Zenkov, et al. (2011) highlight, “Rather than telling young adults why our English class tasks should matter, we began to engage them with our assignments and classes by asking them to show us, their classmates, and the broader public what they believed about the institution of school—in ways beyond what existing research methods, teacher roles, and pedagogies allow” (p. 371). This sentence encapsulates inquiry-based

learning so well because it gives the students the voice and audience to show what they think about a topic. This can take root in real classrooms by allowing students the opportunity to choose the questions they want to explore further in the beginning of the year and then continue working on it as it ties into their curriculum moving forward.

Giving students agency is essential and stems from the personal connections they make to the work they are doing. In *Making It Matter Through the Power of Inquiry* (2007), Wilhelm and Smith write, “Our work shows us that kids need to find both personal connection and social significance in the units and texts we offer them” (p. 233). Planning for this social significance becomes essential then, especially if we are going to help our students develop essential critical thinking skills.

In *Reading writing reciprocity: Inquiry in the classroom* (2015) Daniels, Hamby, and Chen echo this, arguing that there is “a shared concern that too many middle school students are not learning to think critically about what they read, write and experience. Nor do they have the opportunity to ask questions about and engage deeply with topics that matter to them” (9). The development of these critical thinking and reading skills are tied directly to the work we ask students to do around inquiry. As Wilhelm and Smith note, “Though some teachers might think such a unit too time-consuming, we’ve found that combining skills to be taught- essay writing, grammar lessons, and finding themes- allows teachers to accomplish a lot all under the heading of a single inquiry unit” (p. 235).

Of course adopting this model can be daunting for teachers, new ones especially (Smagorinsky, Rhym, Moore, 2013). Sometimes new teachers can find themselves teetering between wanting to please ELA teammates at their school, and straying to do more inquiry work. Some departments can be more traditional and the common curriculum often teaches directly to the test. New teachers don't want to ruffle too many feathers. They must also work to navigate their peers so that they can create meaningful units for their students. This means looking for ways to present more inquiry work to their department and showcasing inquiry-based student work when possible. Not every unit can be an inquiry unit right off the bat but teachers need to try incorporating it where they can and understand that teaching is also a growing and learning process for them as well.

Whitney (2011) develops this idea, stating, “We must always be impatient about achieving our dream and helping students achieve theirs. Yet if we and our students push too hard and too fast for our dreams, we may destroy them. Thus, we must be patiently impatient...I consider it an important quality or virtue to understand the impossible separation of teaching and learning. Teachers should be conscious every day that they are coming to school to learn and not just to teach” (16).

It can be daunting to let students have so much choice because the fear that we are not experts on that topic is present and hungry. However, we are able to grow together and put the “we” back in learning by leveling with our students and being upfront and honest with them. In, Brown (2004) states, “Little did I know that this

process of conducting my own research and facilitating that of the students would challenge my view of teaching by allowing me to stop resisting, to let go of the notion that I needed to be an expert on everything, and to embrace the idea that I could learn with the students. By researching together, we learned more than I ever expected” (p. 44). Giving students the opportunity to teach what they have researched reaffirms the work they did is worth hearing. Teaching is inquiry for the teacher as well.

Daniels, Hamby, and Chen (2015) comment, "Middle school students often disengage from school because the dissonance between their needs and the realities of the context for learning is so extreme. They crave clear and specific instructions from teachers, knowledge that their teachers care deeply about them as individuals, and the belief that they can do what is asked" (9). There is something special about knowing your teacher genuinely cares about you because it makes you respect them and want to do well for them.

This caring attitude can also impact how we design units with students in mind. Zenkov et al. (2011) expands on this idea by saying, "This project has given me a deeper perspective on my students and the lives they lead. Through my five years of teaching, I have caught myself “blaming” students because they have failed to reach the high expectations I had set for them. Through this project, however, I have opened a dialogue with my students and been exposed to their realities beyond the school boundaries. In this way, I have become more open-minded as a teacher and have been motivated to find new methods and approaches to motivate these students” (376-377).

***Discussion and Inquiry***

Another important aspect of inquiry-based teaching that teachers may feel uncomfortable with is open discussions. Johannessen and Kahn (2005) posit, “When a teacher throws out an open-ended question with the hope of creating authentic discussion, students may not understand the expectations—they may see it instead as a question to test their knowledge” (p. 102). Students are so used to fast paced educational environments that check for the correct answer and move on. Slowing down and giving time to really develop their answers to an open ended question is not something that they are used to. What power the students must feel when they are encouraged to expand on their thoughts beyond correct and incorrect answers. When hosting socratic circles and discussion circles, for example, students can be timid at first to speak because they don’t want to be shut down or told they are being too chatty because the expectation for them is often not to speak so freely.

Johannessen and Kahn further state “some students felt short-changed when their peers, instead of the teacher, were doing most of the talking because they felt the teacher’s knowledge and comments would be more “educational” than their peers” (p. 75). There are many times a student can say something that changes or helps other students and the teacher see things differently. In ELA classes, students are able to have these discussions if it is welcomed by the teacher and fostered with uptake, which the authors state “involves restating a student response or turning it into a

question in order to encourage further elaboration” (page 106). These tools are effective and can provide support to both students and teachers alike.

### ***Engagement***

Lattimer and Riordan (2011) inform the reader about the pitfalls of project based learning off the bat. “Projects that come at the end of a unit of study, are peripheral to core concepts, or are intended to demonstrate what has been learned rather than actively engage students in new learning might all be characterized as “hands-on without being minds-on and fall outside the realm of what is considered to be PBL” (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011, p. 18). How do the projects use a real-world context and address issues that matter to the students? Students are able to incorporate being active which is so often what middle school students request more of during the school day through project based learning. Students from High Tech Middle created a to scale gaga ball pit through using project based learning in the classroom. They were able to get outside of the classroom to investigate local water issues and draft audits which made it important to them since these were issues within their community. “There are certainly projects that do not go according to plan and work that fails to live up to expectations, but students at HTM perceive their classroom experiences to be meaningful. This is consistently evident in students' written project reflections as well as their comments to teachers, parents, and community members” (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011, p. 22).

Reid-Griffin, Sterrett and Stanback (2020) follow about 500 middle school students for two years to see how project based learning impacts their engagement and self efficacy. Some important things to note in order to familiarize oneself with the data is that year 1 of this study was done with 6th graders and year 2 was conducted with the same students who are now 7th graders and the new 6th grade class. Each homeroom at this school was assigned a specific rainforest to “save.” There was also a space project program students were introduced to in homeroom. Students were able to go into each core content area class and learn about what that content area had to do with the challenges they were given in homeroom. Would the buy-in across content areas be achievable in other schools? This seems like a pie in the sky dream as it can be hard to get a group of teachers on board to teach the same things or be “teamed.” Student interviews, self efficacy grading scales and student work were collected in order to analyze the results of this study. After the first year was up, students were showing more self-efficacy, positive social interactions, and positive feelings about project based learning. “Overall findings suggest students' attitudes and perceptions, for both grade levels, were positively influenced by the increased collaborative interactions supported by PjBL implementations” (Griffin, Sterrett, Stanback, 2020, p. 17).

Between both articles, students were not only proud of their work but also engaged to the point where they had positive things to say about project based



learning and their perceptions of self which can be really challenging for students in middle school to speak positively about school and self.

### ***Project- Based Approach and Social Emotional Learning***

“The PBL approach is a typical form of cooperative and research-based learning technique, characterized by active student engagement and comparative learning” (Almulla). In a 2020 study, researchers found that most teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that project based learning had a positive impact on students' collaborative learning and social emotional learning. Giving the students projects that matter to them and the time and space to work through their ideas with their teachers led to more positive feelings about maintaining good relations with students and teachers alike. When students are given the time to work through their thoughts with a teacher who is willing to give them that space to grow, they are able to grow both their view of relationships and the world around them. “One’s experiences in life greatly influence the way one views the world around him; this most likely limits one’s understanding of a piece of literature” (Appleman, 2020, p. 145). In expanding what the students are able to do in the classroom, they are also expanding their views on the world and people around them.

### ***Project Based Learning and Motivation***

Students in grades 6-8 participated in a study in 2018 and whether they learned science curriculum through project based learning or direct instruction, all depended on who their science teacher for the year was (Carrabba, C., & Farmer, A.). In

southwest Tennessee, 631 middle school students were studied to see if they were more or less motivated through project based learning or direction instruction. The first notable finding was that, “students who received direct instruction were less motivated after instruction than they were before instruction” (Carrabba, C., & Farmer, A. 2018, p. 167). When students are forced to follow a more traditional type of learning, it can become stale leading to the decrease in motivation after being lectured at. The research later goes on to state that the “motivational decrease after direct instruction could be attributed to a lack of relatedness between the lessons and students’ lives (Carrabba, C., & Farmer, A. 2018, p. 171). The students who were given the ability to have control over their learning in the project based approach showed both higher motivation and engagement than their peers who did not. Students who were able to feel ownership of their learning and collaborate with their peers were more likely to be engaged throughout the project than their peers who were not given the same autonomy.

This reminds me of the 7th grade social studies class that felt deeply moved by the children in Syria being displaced into refugee camps so they decided to start a fundraiser weaving bracelets to raise money for them (Daniels, H., & Ahmed, S. K.). Students were able to brainstorm fundraising ideas and choose one that interested them most. They also created this project for themselves because of their interest in what they were seeing on the news. Students felt engaged and motivated because this project based approach to learning gave them total control and say in what they spent

their time on in school. It was something that not only interested them but also allowed them to give back to a cause they were passionate about. As far as aligning with curriculum goals, or common core goals, the teacher was able to align it with their unit on “unpacking challenging nonfiction texts on a variety of topics.” The teacher credits all of the amazing results to giving students the time and place to be curious, and work on what genuinely engages them due to their interests.

### ***Replacing Exams with Project Based Assessments***

In a study conducted at Griffith University, researchers compared exams and project based learning in a soil mechanics class. From 2015-2017, students enrolled in soil mechanics took a mid-semester and final exam while students enrolled in soil mechanics from 2018-2022 were assessed by project 1 and project 2 instead. I immediately wondered why the amount of years conducting the study was doubled for the project based assessments but later learned that the data can further be divided into before and during / after COVID. The overall findings conclude that students achieved more during the projects as opposed to the exams. “The literature suggests that students generally perform better in project-based assignments because they have more time to work on them, which also reduces student stress and anxiety” (Gratchev I. 2023, p. 7). Student feedback was not mandatory regarding the switch from exams to projects but students voluntarily gave positive feedback about why moving to project based learning was beneficial to them. Students felt better prepared for their life after college since they were given time to execute the theories they

learned about before graduation. Other students felt more likely to pursue a career in this specific field when asked about life after university. Students felt the project was meaningful and memorable in a way that exams fail to be. Students recall the memories of working on their projects while admitting if there had been an exam, the information would be out of their heads within the next week. The teachers in this study note how much more work this is for them to ensure the students are learning and no cheating is taking place. The importance of meeting with students regularly and differentiating each project is something the teacher stresses. While the exams are less work on the educator, the projects are more meaningful for the students and educator. Connecting this study back to the ELA classroom, it would be much easier to give a google form, auto-graded quiz instead of meaningful project work but it is at the expense of a meaningful experience for all of the kids. Teachers are given the opportunity to create their own assignments to assess students and it is a treasured chance to do something special that sticks with students for years to come. "Through innovation, teachers can create authentic learning experiences for students. As educators demonstrate their own innovations, they expand their students' horizons as innovative thinkers themselves" (Gibbins, Zac, 2020, p. 6).

### ***Teachers and Project Based Learning***

The implementation of project based learning helps teachers to reinvent the way they teach by forcing them to put in the time to create meaningful projects alongside their students. In a study that looked at seven teachers using project based learning in

their high school English classes, teachers were able to embrace their authentic selves while teaching, incorporate student collaboration, bridge connections between students and the community around them and connect with teachers across content areas to align their projects. (A. Seidel Potvin, A. Boardman, K. Stamatis, 2021). The teachers in this study saw success in their new way of teaching and even claimed that it reframed and transformed some of their classrooms. One teacher, Ms. Howell said that PBL was working to some degree but not as well as it could have due to the lack of classroom community. It's interesting that the community created by teacher and student is one that can make or break the success of a PBL unit. Ms. Howell eventually worked at building stronger relationships with her students and by the fourth year of the study was a different teacher. She was a more joyful educator, spoke less about controlling the classroom and focused heavily on student choice as she finally saw her students as valuable community members. Some other teachers involved in the study, Ms. Davis and Mr. Grand were excited by the leadership role they could play when involving PBL in their classrooms. Whether the teachers were excited to be leaders or work on building the classroom community, "it is noteworthy that all seven teachers discovered aspects of PBL that were authentic to them, and in doing so, expressed feeling reinvigorated and excited about teaching" (A. Seidel Potvin, A. Boardman, K. Stamatis, 2021).

### **Researching My Teaching**

As I am getting ready to embark on my classroom research journey, I am hoping to fill some of the gaps I see in research that already exists. There are many articles about project based learning in science, social studies, math and skills classes but not as many with ELA. Similarly, when there are articles specifically about ELA project based learning, they are mostly at the high school level or in some cases, the elementary level. Middle school is a sweet spot in the middle that often gets overlooked as being the awkward years you just have to get through but I would argue that these formative years are some of the most important for students. When middle schoolers are given the safe space to explore their passions and learn through projects instead of tests, they are figuring more out about who they want to be, and the world around them.

### **Origin of Question**

This is the first year my district is teaching *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. I am excited, nervous and everything in between. Any time we talk about inquiry based units or using inquiry to drive the teaching of a text, I love all of the supplemental materials, connections and ideas that come from it. While I have used inquiry in my classroom, I have not studied my use of inquiry in the classroom before to see what can be improved on. I want to learn from this experience and grow my skills / how comfortable I am heading an inquiry based unit on a brand new text. Two texts that were foundational in my thinking about my research questions are *Upstanders: How to Engage Middle School Hearts and Minds with Inquiry* by Harvey Daniels and Sara K.

Ahmed, and *Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* by D. Appleman. I feel vulnerable in this research because of how new this text, unit, and all of these ideas are but everything I have read about research, inquiry and meaningful teaching has taught me that the things that are worth doing, come with a little bit of risk and vulnerability. Specifically, the assessment part of an inquiry based unit is where I am going to focus my research. When it comes to assessing students in the English classroom, what are culminating projects leaving with students versus tests and quizzes?

Student engagement is critical when it comes to students learning and remembering content beyond that day in the classroom. I am in my second year of teaching at Britanni Middle School in Britanni, NY where students are at varying reading comprehension levels. We use STAR assessment data to look at where students are in terms of grade level reading ability. The range in my 7th grade ELA classroom stretches from my lowest students sitting at a third grade reading level and my highest at a 10th grade reading level. Getting students to actively engage is challenging for a number of reasons but looking at how engaged students are in classrooms with project based assessment versus more traditional assessments could lend useful information to winning students attention back. I will use research, a unit plan I have created for the book *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, observations, surveys, interviews, journaling, reflection, and assessments to investigate how project based learning and assessment impacts how engaged a student is. I will research what data exists so far

on project based assessment in middle school classrooms. I will ask students to participate in a variety of projects as we navigate the text, *Long Way Down* in class. Students will reflect on their engagement during this unit versus other units where project based assessments were not used. I will research how we can identify growth and learning in project based assessments. I will interview both students and teachers on their experiences with and feelings toward project based learning. Students will be asked to create a podcast about the choices they have to make and the rules they have to live by based on their community, family, and school rules. The main character in *Long Way Down* lives by 3 rules and is faced with a choice which many people in his life are sharing their opinion on. Students will look at how the people in their lives influence their choices as well. Students will have the opportunity to reflect on the book and connect to their lives through a culminating project based assessment.

### ***Research Questions***

The area of research that I will focus on is middle school students' engagement in project based assessments.

Questions worth examining include:

- What research exists on project based middle school classrooms?
- How can project based assessments be used in middle school classrooms?
- How does project based assessments engage students versus other types of assessment?



- What do middle school students say about their experience creating project based assessments?

The students completing the project will reflect on how engaged they are during the creation process. I will ask the students to reflect on how they felt during our philanthropy project which was a project based assessment they completed in December 2023 versus tests and quizzes we have done throughout the year as well.

### **The Study**

As a second year classroom ELA teacher, I am curious about the difference between project based assessment and traditional assessment. How many classes do the students at Brittani Middle School get to take that truly put inquiry at the heart of the classroom? As a newer, non-tenure teacher, I am aware that the risks I take could have harsher consequences for me as opposed to a tenured teacher. Since I am studying my own teaching, I am part of the research myself. While keeping diligent notes, I find it important to note that every educator will teach an inquiry-based project assessment differently and I wonder how me as the teacher in this study impacts how much students are getting out of this.

### ***Timeline for Study***

I will be doing some activities with my students regarding Jason Reynolds before we dive into the text so they can understand a bit more about him. We will start this on February 15, 2024. Some of the pre-novel activities include, reading the poem,

“Your Dream Is” by Jason Reynolds and then creating our own poems called “My Dream Is.” Then we will watch a short interview twice. Once just taking notes. The second time talking about questions about what Trevor Noah was asking Jason Reynolds. Next, we will begin the text! All students will keep a “The Rules” notebook where they will look at the unspoken rules in the world around them. We will start with something light like the unspoken rules of the school bathroom, and cafeteria. Next, we will look at the unspoken rules of the school and certain classes. Students will eventually look at the rules they live by at home, in their friend groups, etc. and what caused those rules to form. They will be adding to the rules notebooks throughout the reading of the text and then creating their own podcasts using WeVideo to talk about their rules, and Will’s rules. The study will conclude on Thursday April 11, 2024.

## **Method**

### ***Setting and Participants***

Britanni Middle School is a place where beliefs run strong and wild. There are “Make America Great ” shirts and “Get rid of sleepy Joe Biden ” sweatshirts worn by many of the 7th and 8th grade students. When asking students about why they wear those shirts, I have received every answer from “Trump 2024” to “My parents just don’t like Joe Biden.” To give more context outside of the political realm, recently, a bible study group that meets every Wednesday morning at school made shirts about how important it is to live in Christ Jesus. This is a public middle school but nothing is challenged when it comes to being a devout follower of Christ. However, when there

are “All are welcome” rainbows on the walls or gay straight alliance posters in the cafeteria, they are always mysteriously vandalized. The most disheartening moment I can recall from last pride month was when a teacher made fun of other teachers for putting up “Safe Space” rainbow banners in their classrooms by creating his own that said “Safe Space Bar ” and had a picture of a keyboard. The students that identified as members of the LBTQIA+ community felt very uncomfortable in his class knowing that he openly mocked anyone who doesn’t fit traditional gender roles. Another community aspect worth mentioning is that our “Mom’s for Liberty” group is very active on social media and at board meetings. One mother, who has a daughter I am currently teaching, got up at a board meeting and accused our middle school librarian of having child pornography in the school library. The book in question mentioned a 3 year old boy who was nude in the bathroom while potty training. There was nothing sexual or explicit. Other mothers in this group have praised the school for having a bible study group so their child’s beliefs and identities are validated while in the same breath, bashing the gay straight alliance for doing the same exact thing. While all of these aspects of the community can make teaching certain texts and teaching certain topics challenging, this is also the community that needs it most.

While Brittani certainly has some passionate school community members, there are also very highly spirited individuals in this space that make it a truly joyful place to work. There is a lot of structural freedom which allows me to construct lessons and change them on the fly without having to worry about following any script or curriculum

map of the day. Being able to change lessons when I know my students aren't in the right headspace for something allows me to meet my students where they are every single day. There is a push from administration to align more closely with the other teachers in each grade level, content area so we all try to adopt some of what the others do so no one is completely conforming. This unit was the first one of the year that I did not have to dull my shine in the name of alignment.

Another important factor of Brittani Middle School is that these 7th and 8th graders bring an energy and enthusiasm that cannot be compared to higher level grades. These students are balls of caffeine buzzing from one thing to the next while showing a range of maturity. The students are excited about small things and overjoyed any time I tell them they can get up and move around.

### ***The New York State Report Card for Brittani Middle School***

The 2022-2023 report card shows that Brittani Middle School is made up of 430 males and 442 females. Of the 872 students in the building, 784 of them are white, 33 are Hispanic or Latino, 30 are multiracial, 14 are Asian or Native Hawaiian, 11 are African American and 1 is American Indian / Alaska Native. The students are split almost evenly between 7th and 8th grade students. The number of economically disadvantaged students is higher than I would have expected at 238. There are 167 students with disabilities, and 7 English Language Learners. The chronic absenteeism percentage is 18.1% which checks out as there are multiple students whom I have this

year that are missing more than 40 school days. The staff is made up of 73 teachers and 3 of those are considered inexperienced teachers according to the report card. Something I found especially interesting was the number of students who opted out of the ELA 7 NYS test last year. There were 121 students who were not tested and 316 who were. Of the 316 who were, 127 students fell into the proficient category.

### ***A Community (Classroom 100)***

There is a bustling corner on the first floor of the middle school. There are fights on this corner at least twice a year, the gym is right next door so there is always noise seeping through the nearby walls and a staircase right in the back of this corner. Naturally, being a new teacher I was put on this corner so the tenured teacher no longer had to endure the common corner crossroads. I was never nervous about being in this hotspot classroom. In fact, I was excited to get classroom 100. I took this as an exciting opportunity to make my classroom a place to stop. The 8th graders who I had the year before are able to visit at all times since they all have to pass my room to get to gym, lunch or the bus. Students who I never had but have felt comfortable to accompany their friends who were visiting are now the students whose games I attend and art work I hang. The walls of my classroom are lined with notes, photos, and artwork from students. There are over 30 student made book projects that look so incredible, one might think they are just part of the classroom decor. There is a drawer filled with fruit snacks for when kids forget breakfast or lunch and jolly ranchers to give out just because. There are different sports balls for games, community and

conversation. Sometimes students come down just to throw a ball around between periods because they are so tired of being still all day.

***Miss McTigue (Miss McTiggles, Miss McTiger, McTigeeee, MckyTee)***

There is a lot that has gone into shaping my philosophy of education and how I approach each day as an educator. Mostly, my professors and students. Dr. Mincrow inspired me to remember, “If they are not laughing they are not learning” and I have held that at the core of my teaching. Trying to engage students is crucial in getting them to keep coming to class, stay awake, care about the work we are doing, and retain information. When I started at Brittani Middle School in the fall of 2021 as a student teacher, I came in with all of these ideas from the post-baccalaureate program and met the most amazing cooperating teacher who is best described as sunshine in human form. She taught me that taking the time to play a game 3-5 times a week is going to help form those bonds with even the most tough-to-crack students. I took this piece of advice and ran with it. As a substitute teacher immediately following student teaching, I was quickly encouraged to apply for a long term substitute position in the building and finished the year teaching 8th grade. I taught summer school and was hired for a full time, tenure track position starting August 2022. The director of secondary education in the Brittani Central School District told me the community that is cultivated in my classroom by viewing them as individuals with their own needs and interests made me stand out against the other 81 applicants. This year, he asked me to start the process of becoming a teacher leader in the building which is something only

tenure teachers are allowed to apply for but in his words, “this building needs more sunshine.”

The students are the best and brightest part of every single day. The nicknames listed in this subheading are from the kids I never thought I’d be close with. Some of which I never taught but they kept coming by just to talk or be in a classroom they felt seen and heard even if only during passing time.

### ***Focal Class Period***

All five of the English Language Arts 7 classes I teach are participating in the surveys and reflections that go along with the unit and project at the heart of this study. My focal class period is period six which consists of thirteen female and nine male students. Twenty-one of the twenty-two students in this class are white. This period is the only class that I have a push-in special education teacher for. Her name is Mrs. Pasky and she is very on top of her students, the material and always willing to lend anyone a helping hand. In period six, Mrs. Pasky regularly pulls her students for test read accommodations or meets with them in the hall to check in. Mrs. Pasky has six students in that class period who also meet with her everyday second period in a support class. These students have gone through a lot of change this year as the teacher they started the year with left in November so a long term substitute was with them for two months before Mrs. Pasky was able to take over. All of the students in period six know they can see Mrs. Pasky or I for any questions or concerns. Two of the students who are in support class with Mrs. Pasky are reading at a fourth grade

reading level and were close to failing one quarter this school year. The range in personalities, maturity levels, work ethic, and grades in period 6 is the largest range among my five classes this year. Despite this, they are also the most participatory class with ten or more students constantly raising their hands to help read the board or answer questions. This class period consists of musical theater kids, star football players, starting basketball players, dungeons and dragons club leaders and more yet their sense of community is arguably the strongest. One student, Nina (all names are pseudonyms) , is hard of hearing and sometimes feels isolated or embarrassed by needing a hearing aid. She doesn't like to advocate for herself unless it is in an email so she can come off as very shy and quiet. No matter what size group work we are doing, I have seen multiple different girls in the class approach **Nina** and ask her to join their group which always brings the biggest smile to her face. This class also has some very critical thinkers who are passionate about everything they say regardless of the topic. This class period often receives the lesson the best out of the five class periods and leaves me in awe of how well such a ragtag group can gel when the expectations are set high and with their interests in mind. While the focus of this study is on the instructional strategies I employed to engage my students in inquiry and project based assessments, I will share some of what my students had to say about this unit throughout. In these cases all names are pseudonyms.

***Samuel Chapman***



Samuel is 4'11" with the personality and confidence of a grown man who knows exactly what he wants out of life. Samuel achieves high grades across content areas through hard work. He genuinely tries his hardest on all assignments and has been very honest in saying that ELA is challenging for him so he has to put in extra time to prepare for tests, quizzes and projects. He is averaging a 90 overall in ELA this year and told me even though it is his lowest grade, he has never enjoyed ELA more than he is this year. Samuel enjoys spending time in my classroom and comes down for lunch, study hall, after school and other passing times throughout the school day. He and his friend group of 5 boys try to have lunch with me every single day. One of those 5 is Cullen Derin.

### ***Cullen Derin***

If someone were to look up the middle school stereotype of braces, swoopy 2011 Justin Bieber hair, high ankle Nike socks, and trying to be funny to fit in, they would see a picture of Cullen Derin as the first example. Cullen is a naturally high achieving student who is vocal about being "good" at school. Cullen doesn't put in much extra effort yet gets straight As across all content areas because "school just comes easy to me." He is savvy and very clearly embodies a motto of "work smarter, not harder." Cullen is a 3 sport athlete, frequent vacationer during the school year with his family, and would much rather be doing anything but school work. When I recently asked him to use the class book, he questioned why he would use that when google has all the answers more directly. He is a sweet kid who uses his manners to win his

way into his teacher's hearts and thinks school can take a back seat to his social life. I've overheard his friends, Samuel included, express their frustration about Cullen achieving As seemingly effortlessly.

### ***Cassandra Newbury***

Cassandra is concerned with how her hair looks, what her brother is getting into, and how many hours she has dance that evening. She is organized, kind and doesn't ever have a shortage of stories to tell. She loves her family, her social plans, and boys. Cassandra was frustrated at the labels placed on her by teachers who had her older brother who gets in trouble almost every day. She opened up about this early in the school year which started our daily conversations. Cassandra vulnerably told me she has never enjoyed ELA, failed it last school year and would probably fail certain tests and quizzes in my class this year. She has failed two exams despite our one on one preparation. She told me sometimes her test anxiety gets the best of her and that is why she is so glad we do projects often so she can show her knowledge that way. She is averaging an 82 overall in my class between the first three marking periods. She said she is not happy with this low grade but happy it is higher than it has ever been before.

### ***Data Collection***

Throughout the study, a variety of different data was collected. From February 15 - April 11, data was constantly being collected in classes. Three surveys, six interviews, reflections, discussions, free writes, notes and over one hundred incredible student projects were collected during this time period. All of my students took

surveys, wrote about project based assessments reflecting on the work they had just completed, and worked on the final culminating project to round out the unit. There are also audio recordings of my class during sixth period, a teacher journal I kept to reflect on the lessons, focal student interviews, and student project examples.

### ***Data Analysis***

While studying my classroom, students, and teaching I collected qualitative data that I used multiple types of coding to evaluate. Through descriptive coding I was able to pull certain larger ideas by focusing on descriptive language in transcripts of my interviews and student survey results. This helped me narrow my focus as I navigated through what larger categories were present. “In Vivo” coding was also a helpful tool when wading through endless data. My students' voice and participation was key to my study so “in vivo” coding was the best fit considering it is, “appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, and studies that prioritize and honor participant’s voice.” (2012, 65).

Much of what I saw in my interviews was students being very vulnerable about their experiences in school both positive and negative surrounding inquiry, projects, and more. I looked at the language my students used trying to pick out repeated phrases or similar patterns that lead me to common ideas and themes throughout.

### ***Results***

On Thursday, February 15, 2024 all participants read “Your Dream Is” by Jason Reynolds and analyzed what this meant. Students took a look at the way Reynolds describes the things that make us uniquely wonderful.

“Your dream is the mole

behind your ear,

that chip in your

front tooth,

your freckles.

It's the thing that makes

you special,

but not the thing that makes

you great.

The courage in trying,

the passion in living,

and the acknowledgement

and appreciation of

the beauty happening around

you does that.”

Students discussed the importance of who we are as people on the inside. One student in period 6 said, “So, he’s basically saying we should focus on who we are, not what we look like?” I expressed my excitement when this student expressed her thoughts because she isn’t someone who generally speaks up in class. We began looking at the things that make us unique and brainstormed how we could write our own versions of this poem. How are we special on the outside but most importantly, what makes us great in the way we act and live? We took a look at how Jason Reynold’s poem could be applied to ourselves and how we see the world around us. We looked at how our view of ourselves fits into how we see the world. After peer editing and looking at what things we appreciate that might go unnoticed like the sound of our dog’s paws on the floor, our coach telling us good game, and our love of the colors of nature, we felt ready to share with our tables. Students shared with their group of four and snapped when each person was done sharing. The same student who doesn’t usually speak up submitted her version of the poem and it was far more detailed than the work she had submitted previously this school year.

“My dream is the way my green  
eyes light up in the sun,  
the part on my stomach where  
my skin changes color,  
and my double jointed elbows.

These are the things  
that make me special,  
but they do not define me.

The courage in playing the  
older girls in tournaments,  
the **passion** for my grades,  
and the acknowledgement  
and appreciation of **rain**  
that does that.”

When we started reading on Tuesday, February 27, 2024 something very important happened as far as broadening the scope of the student’s minds. We read the first 36 pages of *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. We started by listening to Jason Reynolds read it himself and then I read the last 12 pages. I asked students if there is a noticeable difference between Jason Reynolds reading it vs. me reading it to them. The students very candidly told me they think Reynolds reads it better than me and I excitedly asked why that might be. Students said his voice fits the slang better than when I read it. One boy said, “No offense but you don’t sound right when you’re reading the swear words.” We got into a discussion about the importance of Jason

Reynolds, a black man, reading his novel instead of me based on the difference in experiences we have. The students presumed my upbringing and Reynolds' upbringing were quite different. They were right to assume that and connect that to the impact it has on the voice reading the story. Since this is a text that has some heavier topics and strong language, I asked each class to put their heads down, no peeking, and get ready for two questions. The first one was "Do you feel at all uncomfortable while reading and discussing this material?" To my surprise and delight, no one raised their hand. The next question asked while all eyes are closed and heads are down is "Do you think you will like this book?" Every single hand is raised.

We continued to read the novel and began discussing the obvious pattern of nicknames that come up early in the book. Students were asked a series of questions; What nicknames do you have? Who calls you this? Each individual made a chart of nicknames they are called at home, at school, with friends, and in their clubs or activities. After ample writing time, everyone chose a partner they trusted and discussed their nicknames. After a lot of giggles and stories were told, one girl said, "My nickname is 'bean' which sounds weird but it's what my mom was called when she was little so now she calls me it just like her mom did." This was the perfect segway into how nicknames can show the love in our relationships, or the family traditions in this specific case. A different girl mentioned how her friends call her "Slimy" and that she wasn't bothered by it because it comes from an inside joke when they were all in fourth grade and obsessed with making slime. This led to us to

highlight the point that sometimes our nicknames stem from inside jokes, random moments, and happen because of the relationships we foster throughout our lives.

### ***Exploring New Worlds***

As we continued reading the book together, Colton said, “Dude this might be the best book I have ever read, ever.” Some students were really gravitating towards the conversations we were having around this book because it was always connecting back to them. Other students were still focused on the characters and keeping everyone straight. We set up a character chart to help the students who either were absent continually or needed the extra reminder of a character chart. Instead of solely stating facts about characters, we also looked at how Dani, Buck and Uncle Mark from the book might be similar and different to us. Continuing the text, students are learning about how different neighborhoods can cause a different set of rules. Many students are confused as to what turning rocks into bands means because that is not lingo they hear in their community. They are being exposed to and questioning worlds very different from their own. “Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Freire, 2000, p. 85). While a heavy quote, a factual statement on the power of using inquiry and letting students be individuals who are critically thinking about everything.

### ***Community Inquiries in 7th Grade ELA***



On Tuesday, March 12, 2024, we start to look at the rules we live by. This starts off lightly and with lots of laughter when I ask what the unspoken rules of the school bathroom are. One very outspoken boy says, “You cannot pee next to somebody when there’s an open urinal on the end.” The whole class laughs and appears shocked when I applaud this student as that is a perfect example of an unspoken rule. When we move on to the unspoken rules of the cafeteria, there are honest responses such as, “don’t make eye contact with the lunch ladies if you were just on your phone because you’ll look guilty” and “don’t snitch on your friend when they ask who launched a carrot across the room.” Then, students make a chart of rules they must follow at home, at school, and in their friend groups. The responses are a range of serious and silly which is very par for the course of middle school. One student stated her at home rules are “no slamming doors, only swear in front of your siblings, and if you want to go somewhere you have to call, text or ask.” Another noted his home rules are “don’t break stuff, don’t be annoying, don’t cuss, and play outside when you can.” While a third student wrote his home rules are “be nice, clean up, and stay chill.”

I asked these students, “What is your experience with inquiry based learning? Learning that is based on what you want to know about the world and yourself?” After rewording and explaining the question again, Samuel said, “Stuff I learn in school doesn’t apply to the world and me. In ELA there’s some stuff I can connect to when we read.” Cullen said “I think that we do a lot of that (IBL) and it helps me out a lot because when we’re reading the book one of the characters has his own rules on his

life and I think that really just, like, opened my eyes about how other people's lives are."

This is important because the town where this school is located can sometimes be called a bubble town where everything stays within the town lines. Exposing students to the world outside of this small town is imperative to getting them to inquiry about their lives and their roles in the world.

### ***What Matters to You***

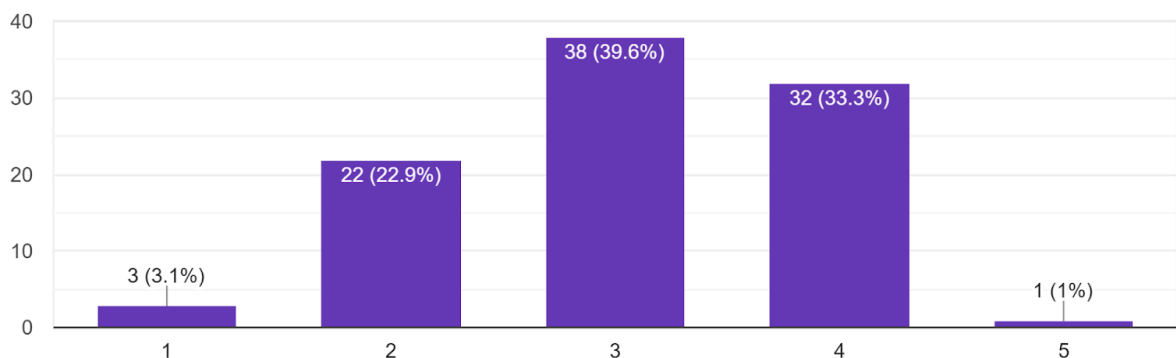
When I gave all of my students a survey on inquiry based learning, the results that came back showed exactly what I had feared. Students do not feel they get to question the world around them, and apply content to their lives in school. The question "How often do you feel you get to learn about things that matter to you?" was met with the following results:

Figure #1

Question #2 on Inquiry Based Learning Survey

How often do you feel you get to learn about things that matter to you?

96 responses



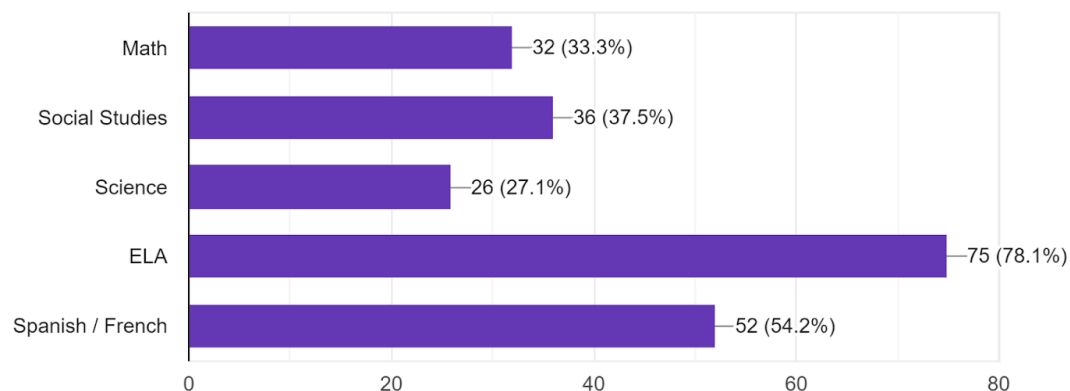
The 1 stands for “Never” while the 5 stands for “All the time.” Most students landed somewhere in the middle which is better than learning towards 1-2 but could be improved through more connected materials. A later question in the same survey asked which classes connect to your family life friend groups, world around you, etc. and the results are as follows:

Figure #2

### Question #3 on Inquiry Based Learning Survey

Which classes connect to your family life, friend groups, world around you, etc.?

96 responses



Many students felt that multiple classes connected the content back to them and the world around them which was surprising compared to the complaints that are overheard from time to time about how teachers do not make things relatable. Another question in the survey asked students, “Inquiry based learning is learning in a way that engages you by connecting to your life, and the world around you. How have you experienced this in school?” 66 of the 96 responses to this question were positive

responses about ways that they have experienced IBL in school while the other 30 either didn't understand the question, said they did not know or said they cannot think of an experience like that in school.

### ***Amplifying Middle School Voices***

On Wednesday, March 13, 2024 each class began looking at former student examples of the rules former students felt they lived by. We listened to former student's podcasts and talked about how our rules were similar or different to their rules. We also looked at the strengths and weaknesses of these podcasts. Students were excited to hear that they would be doing a project instead of a test for a culminating assessment at the end of the *Long Way Down* unit. When asked why this was better, Samuel said "I have like a billion tests. I want something different." This led to the creation of the following interview questions: What is your experience with projects in school? How often are they? What is your experience with tests in school? How often are they? Which do you prefer and WHY? Which do you learn more from and WHY? Cassandra was very vocal in saying she has only done 2 projects outside of ELA this whole year. She went on to share that she experiences tests and quizzes 2-3 times a week depending on the time in the quarter.

Miss McTigue: Which do you prefer, projects, tests or quizzes?

Cassandra Newbury: Projects. Because you can show how much you understood the assignment and show whether you understand it well or you didn't at all.

Miss McTigue: Which do you feel you learn more from tests or projects? Why?

Cassandra Newbury: Probably projects because it takes you more time to focus on where tests you can get rushed through. Projects can actually test you because you can run through and not comprehend but then you can go back in the book and read and figure out this is like the theme, and this is what the **connection** is like. With tests, you don't really have to read or apply anything. You just go through really fast and it's over no matter what.

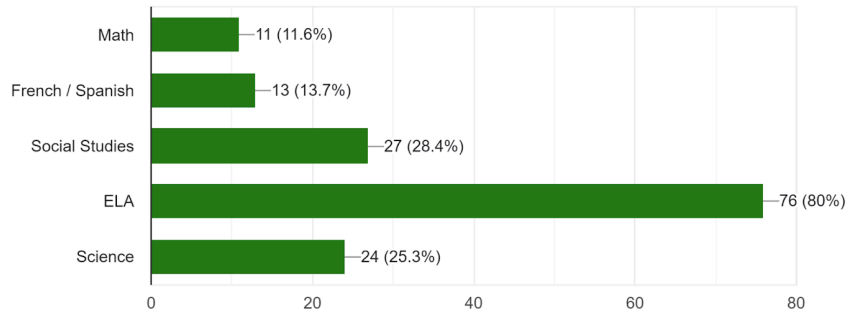
It's interesting that Cassandra was looking to connect when it came to a project but rush through and be done with a test. Cullen Derin's response to the same question was of a similar theme. He said, "I like projects because I can show what I am thinking and put my own spin on it." This want to be creative and use of the word "show" tells me that students are interested in being pushed to do something more if it means they can connect to the material and show what they know in a creative way. When Samuel Chapman was asked about what meaningful projects he has created in school, he said he has done a lot of color by number sheets in math. This is problematic because meaningful projects should not evoke memories of coloring with corresponding numbers. The graphic below shows the results from asking students "In which classes do you complete projects rather than formal tests / essays?" The fact that 78 students selected ELA class tells me I am doing something right as an inquiry based teacher and also makes me wonder how the other subject areas could incorporate more inquiry based projects.

Figure #3

### Question #3 on End of Unit Survey

In which classes do you complete projects rather than formal tests / essays?

95 responses



On Monday, March 18, we finished the class text together and reflected on the ending which many students felt upset about. The students wanted a clear cut answer as to what the protagonist decides to do with his life which led to a critical discussion on how we write our own endings to all of the chapters of our lives. Cassandra said, “I kind of hate that I don’t get to just know what’s going to happen.... To Will and to me I guess.” We had a lot of organic discussions while reading together that allowed students to think critically about their place in the world, their surroundings and neighborhoods / communities around them. “Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers” (Freire, 2000, p. 83). With inquiry based learning, students are able to show their growth and knowledge in a dialogic way that improves this irreplaceable skill of developing thoughts verbally.

On Wednesday, March 20, 2024 students wrote book reviews where many of them continued to state that without the unclear ending the book would have been 5/5 stars but with the ending it loses some of its praise. We listened to an additional two former student's podcasts and looked at the guiding questions for the podcasts we would create about the rules we live by and how our backgrounds formed these rules. Students began brainstorming what they wanted to say in response to the following questions which we have plenty of ideas for as we talked about Will's rules and our rules throughout our class reading of *Long Way Down*.

**What are the rules you live by?**

**Talk about an example of you following the rules.**

**How does your background impact the rules you grow up following?**

**What has happened that has formed these rules?**

**List some examples of the rules mentioned in our class text, *Long Way Down*.**

**How are Will's rules similar to rules you live by?**

**How are Will's rules different from your rules?**

On Monday, March 25, all classes met in the library to learn WeVideo, our podcast editing software. One boy says "I have no idea how to make a podcast. I'm nervous." By the end of the period that same student says, "OK, I got this. I'm actually excited now." This student went on to choose to complete the extra credit opportunity of creating a second podcast in which they interview someone in their life who they want to ask about the rules they live by, AND how their background growing up has

influenced their rules. Giving the students a way to complete a project that was meaningful to them since they are all into podcasts made a student who was nervous about this complete two podcasts because of the medium and the topic being important to them. When the students were recording their scripts in quiet areas around the school, some students asked if they could record at home since they didn't like that the background noise of Brittani Middle School was in the background of their audio. Once again, students who did not usually choose to complete school work were electing to take great care of their podcast and record it in the privacy of their rooms to get the clearest audio possible even if that meant having homework.

After the scheduled week and a half break, students returned to school and everyone was editing, and peer editing with a trusted friend in class. One student says to her partner, "Oh my gosh! If you started a podcast I'd actually listen." Another student says, "I know that mine isn't good but just wait until tomorrow." His friend says, "I don't mind this actually. It's kind of fun to work on." Fun and work being put in the same sentence for a middle school student is a huge accomplishment and important to share when these same students once complained about having to write three sentences.

On Thursday, April 11, 2024, Students shared their podcasts with the class on a volunteer basis. This can be intimidating so the immediate reward for their bravery was that they were entered into the "podcast awards" for extra credit. Students received a sticker, and a piece of candy for sharing with the class. Then, at the end of the period,



the class votes with their heads down and eyes closed for the best podcast. First, second and third place receive plastic medals that one would think were real gold based on the middle schoolers reactions and 2 points of extra credit!

Students participated in an important end of unit reflection. First a free write about what they felt during this process of creating. Then, how it felt to connect thoughtfully to school, home and more throughout the unit. I then administered a survey with questions that produced answers I wasn't fully expecting.

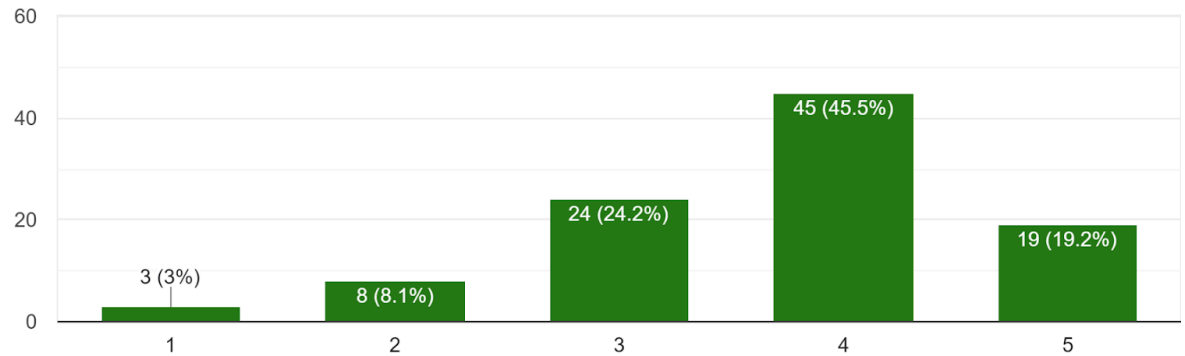
As students have voiced to me in the past, projects can be daunting and a lot of work compared to a quiz or test that they can take that day and move on from. Yet when asked how they felt about doing a project to learn 45.5% of surveyed students landed at a four on a scale of one to five with one being "I hate it" and five being "I love it!"

Figure #4

Question #4 on End of Unit Survey

How do you feel about doing project based learning?

99 responses



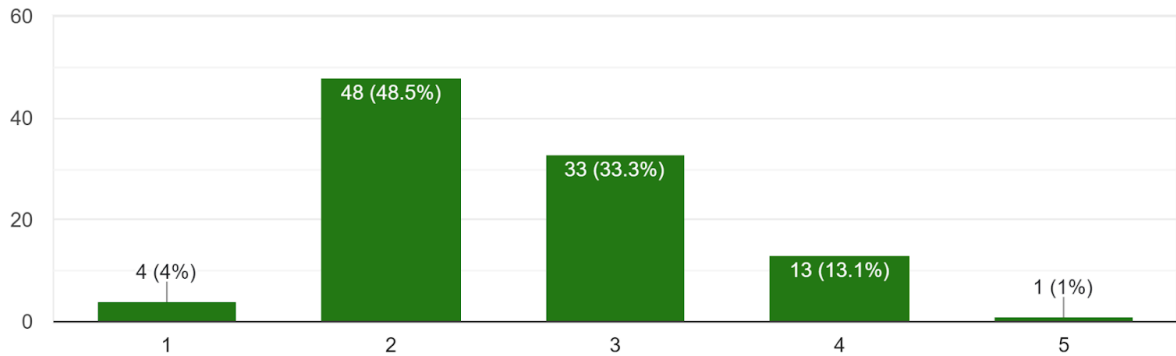
Despite so many students genuinely enjoying project based learning, their responses on how often they get to participate in it is lower than I expected. On a scale of one to five with one being never and five being very often, 48.5% of students responded that they felt their experience with project based learning fell at the two mark.

Figure #5

Question #5 on End of Unit Survey

How often do you get to experience project based learning in school?

99 responses



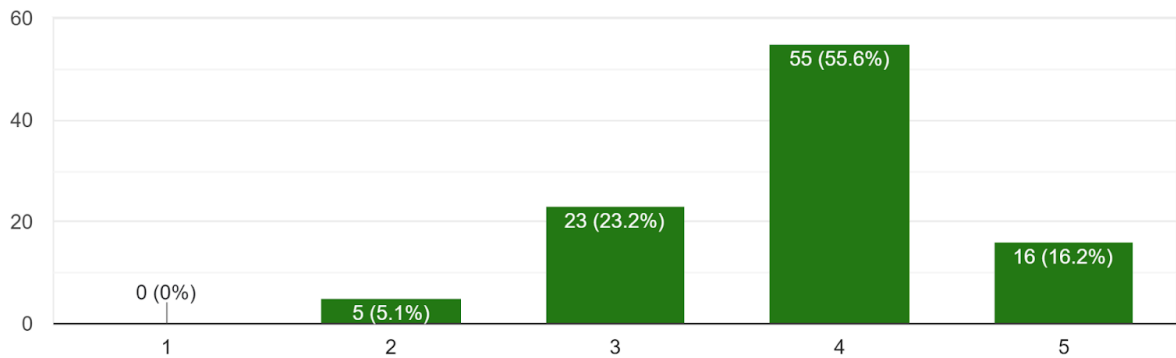
With so many students replying with positive feelings towards project based learning, it is disheartening that the type of learning almost half of students enjoy is a rarity. I knew the results of this question would lead me to wonder how much my students viewed the amount of project based learning they do in my class and I am proudly reporting the findings below.

Figure #6

Question #6 on End of Unit Survey

How often do you get to experience project based learning in ELA?

99 responses



Not a single student of the 99 surveyed felt that they never experienced project based learning in ELA. It was very validating to read that 55.6% of the students surveyed felt that our ELA class fell at a four on a scale of one being never, and five being very often when asked how often they experience project based learning in our classroom.

I also wondered what students considered project based learning. Focal student Samuel Chapman was interviewed and asked, “What is your experience with projects in school? How often do you have them? What classes?” Samuel replied, “It's usually just in math and ELA. I don't enjoy making a 3D project (in ELA) but I like to create simple stuff. And then in math, it's coloring and stuff.” The fact that when asked about completing projects in school Samuel could only think of ELA class and then, color by number sheets in math shows the lack of projects that are made available to them.

A later question asked students to consider what they felt they did better on, tests or quizzes and why. I noticed the themes of stress, fun, and time coming up in

many of the 99 written responses. One specific student response that is worth noting is, "Projects because I do not have to worry about perfection, because everybody's project will be different, so I spend less time stressing and more time working." This student is aware that time will be spent either stressing or working and the fact that projects allowing creative liberty causes less stress for this student does wonders for that person's mental health. Staying with the themes of stress and time, these two student responses are very telling of the high stress and low amount of time middle schoolers experience, "I feel like I do better on projects because each time I do a project I feel like it's easier for me because I have less stress and pressure on me, which causes me to be more confident for the project. But on tests and essays I feel really stressed and forced to get a high grade but if I have one little mistake that's already one point off." The second quote reads "Projects. They are easier than tests and they don't have to be completed in one day so I don't feel rushed. Students also bring up the aspect of projects being fun. School work can be considered fun by real middle school students compared to other types of school work like tests. Why would any human being, especially one who devoted their careers to helping others learn, not want to make the learning process as enjoyable as possible? Some of the student responses about enjoying projects are:

"projects because when I do a project it makes me actually like learning rather than a long boring test."

“i think i do better on projects because with projects its not as stressful as a test or quiz because you can have fun while doing it”

“I think I do better on projects because I have lots of experience doing them and your only limit is your imagination.”

“I feel better on projects because I feel I take my time and take it more seriously, it's also a fun way of remembering the unit.”

Students, despite having very little time and experiencing high stress levels, would still rather put in the work to do a project and learn through project based learning than add to the endless quizzes and tests they are drowning in. No matter how much more time or effort it adds, students are begging for more creativity and expression of how they see the information applying to their lives and the world around them.

### ***Findings/Discussion***

#### ***From “Schoolishness” to “Problem-Posing”***

Just as Freire taught in his problem-posing inquiry, the participants in this study were able to take their schoolish content and question how that applies to them and how they fit into the world around them (Whitney, 2011, p. 1). “Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire, 2000, 81). The students involved in this study were able to connect to their own lives and look at what formed the rules they live by. Inquiry

based learning involves critical thinking about the individual and their place in the world which is exactly what was achieved through discussions, and questions around the inquiry unit title of “What are the rules we live by?” Students were able to see the reason behind why we were reading the book and how it connected to them. As shown in figure #1, oftentimes do not feel they are really learning about things that actually apply to and matter to them. In this study, students directly related back to self, world, and surroundings

### ***Middle School Inquiry as a Social Process***

As stated previously, learning is a social process so taking the time to brainstorm and discuss as a class led to better understanding of rules one must follow. Students were able to gain new ideas and challenge their original beliefs through partner discussion, table conversation and whole class discussion. Dewey taught about the importance of giving people social opportunities to grow and learn and that was executed throughout the unit, chapter by chapter. Eventually, the peer editing of the projects also allowed students to see what their peers were doing in order to tweak their own and offer tweaks to their friends. Through creating a safe classroom community, students were able to share comfortably with each other before sharing out with the class and also felt validated in their rules when their friends' rules proved to be similar. Through analyzing this study's data, a larger theme emerged of rooting inquiry deeply into social practices in the classroom. Although students were able to explore their own personal inquiry ideas, middle school inquiry practice needs

consistent collaborative learning opportunities across the experience. As noted, the class brainstorming and partner discussions were critical in allowing the deeper inquiry projects and analysis to happen. Students were able to create charts that listed their rules at home, in school and in their friend groups. All students listed a range of what is expected in these areas of their lives. One student noted that the rules they live by include always giving a family member a helping hand because that's what their grandma taught them before she passed away earlier this school year (Class Discussion on Tuesday, March 12, 2024). The vulnerability and courage it took to say this in front of the class is a testament to the community that was created through having important conversations throughout the unit.

### ***Engagement and Academic Success***

As a student mentioned, when the work teachers give students doesn't feel too academic because of the personal value in it, the students will not mind and could possibly enjoy completing it. Students who usually do not care to complete assignments or would rather take a zero, were asking questions about the book, sharing out and naturally making connections. One student who has been scoring below average all school year in most of his classes showed a complete change in work ethic when talking about this book. He couldn't put it down and actually physically sighed when we had to stop reading for the day. His grade went up tremendously but the biggest accomplishment was his engagement with a text. His parents emailed me about how he actually brought up this book at home and they



usually never get more than two words out of him when they ask how school is going. Making a text memorable for students so that they want to keep reading and talking about how they relate to it causes even the most unlikely students to tune in more than they would for a unit they see no connection to. Throughout the unit, one student who usually struggles in ELA achieved his highest grades of the school year and participated in discussions more than ever before. He raised his hand at least three times per class period and even vocalized complex ideas that other students missed in the text. For example, when the book talks about selling rocks and turning them into bands, many of my students were lost but this student, due to a different upbringing understood exactly what the author was saying.

### ***Student Interests and Pop Culture as Curriculum***

Creating a unit that was deeply individualized helped reduce any opt out of tag along with a group mentality and helped for authentic learning as the connections were personal. As Dewey noted, students are able to figure out how to play the game of school early on and the way teachers can avoid students seeing their classes as a part of the game, is to make the learning individualized and authentic. Students talking to one another, discussing what they just read and creating a list of rules for both shared spaces like school and private spaces like home leaves very little room for any generalized game to be played. Students want to participate when they see their interests incorporated into their learning. Creating podcasts was something new to students but they sunk their teeth into it right away since podcasts are a big part of

popular culture right now. Many podcasts exist covering all topics that middle school students are interested in from makeup, to football to Taylor Swift, there is a podcast out there for each student and many of them said that they listened to certain podcasts even before they knew they'd be creating their own. The things students choose to engage with outside of school can be brought into the classroom for a meaningful and exciting learning experience. Students were still able to align their work with the NYS Common Core standards by writing a thoughtful script, revising, editing and using speaking and listening skills. Students were able to use peer editing time to thoroughly grow their grammar, spelling and mechanics skills through giving and getting advice. In more than half of student's final podcasts, they chose to list more than the required three rules. Students wanted to expand and write more than the minimum. As students were writing, I noticed multiple pairs of peer edit partners mentioned they were saying certain words too often so they searched synonyms for words to make their writing less redundant. Even the most unlikely students who usually struggle to turn work in on time, chose to expand beyond the minimum requirement. These are the lessons and projects that will stay with students beyond one school year and form a memory that they can fondly look back on which might not be the case with any other school memories for some students. Each focal student said they enjoyed doing something different than what they think of when they hear the words, "school project." Every student created a podcast and based on the survey data, I'm so glad they were given this opportunity for an assessment as to another test which they are clearly tired of.

The grunts and groans that are emitted from students when any teacher says the word “test” is enough for me to want to do anything else that way the kids are excited about learning. Students were clearly engaged and enjoyed creating so that they could show what they learned as opposed to multiple choice guessing what they should pick to earn a test grade. I’m proud to be the class students feel they get to experience projects the most in as it is the most creative and meaningful of the options for assessment. Turning those words into something exciting is an uphill battle, but it is a battle that pays off for the student and teacher.

As I reflected on figures #5 and #6 above, I am saddened thinking about the fact that my students do not experience project based learning as often in their other classes. Traditional lecture, note taking and practice problems sound mind numbing and easily avoided with project based learning but based on what the students reported, they are used to the routine with little disruption that other classes present them and surprised when they get to do projects in any class because of it.

Finally, when students were asked about their experience creating projects throughout the year in ELA here are some of their responses:

“On our ELA projects we got to choose what we wanted to do with our projects so that everyone's was a little different, on tests everyone is given the same test and we don't get to express ourselves on the test.”

“I think these projects were great because we had so much time to complete them, and we got more involved in the process of doing it which made it more fun.”

“It's different from other pieces of homework from my other classes because you actually get graded and you really look at it but some of my other homework my teachers don't grade.”

“I feel as if they were more fun than other work I have done. I really enjoyed getting to create my own podcast and edit it. I thought that it was a very fun way to wrap up,

*Long Way Down.*”

“It's different because ms mctigue has us up and doing things rather than sitting in a classroom reesing buttons or tapping a keyboard.”

“It makes it different because in social studies we just do a big piece of cardboard while in ELA we do 3D projects and many more.”

“What makes them different is how we can be creative and everyone's projects are different. For other schoolwork, everyone usually has the same work and it is usually on paper or on our chromebooks which isn't as exciting to do.”

“Those ELA projects are more about your point of view. While other classes assign just any work.”

I find it important to include multiple quotes about project based learning here because students knew their survey results would not change anything about their grade, or how I view them, and yet every single response from all 99 students is positive.

Students enjoy doing projects for many reasons but mostly, the common theme that has emerged is that they want to be heard and given the opportunity to show their perspective in a way that isn't generalized. Project based learning is teaching students

as individuals and not planning all work for the middle of the pack but being intentional about giving students an outlet to show how they see themselves in the world.

### ***Implications***

As I reflect on this study, I am reminded of the challenges and the victories that would not have been possible without the positive attitudes of the students and support of the teacher community in the surrounding area. Researching my own students and my own teaching made me realize how important it is to show up consistently and to be present each and every day. Students were opening up about home life, friend situations and more deeply personal topics and the way I'd react to them as their teacher had the power to make them feel validated or dismissed. I was dealing with a six week infection of burning mouth syndrome during this study and I had to change and adapt lessons on the fly due to missing school for intense pain and endless appointments. Throughout this study I sought tirelessly for answers and a cure so I could be there to continue the work and show the students my best self that was fully committed to them despite the burning and swelling. In those six weeks I had one visit to urgent care, one to well now, one to my primary doctor, one to my dentist, one to a new gastroenterologist, one to an ear nose and throat specialist and one to my primary doctor's assistant. My tongue was swollen, I had blisters that stung with each breath, my gums were bleeding and my throat was constantly on fire. I couldn't eat much other than oatmeal and felt hopeless. The students had no idea what was going on but I felt horrible that I had to ration my words just to get through the day due to the

pain that came with talking. Taking 2.5 days off during this study was less than I probably should have but those days off allowed me to search for answers and I genuinely did not want to miss any of the important work the students were doing.

Another implication in this study was the difficulty we had using WeVideo. Some students had to use this software for music class and since it is a free version, they ran out of editing time. This proved challenging as they were not able to export their podcasts so we had to set up time before, after and during school where I could borrow their chromebooks to listen to their podcasts and grade on the spot. This was the situation for 20 of my 111 students so moving forward, I would ask the school about purchasing the premium version of WeVideo or using a different software to create podcasts. This suggests that teachers need institutional support from school districts to enact this pedagogy. Although I was able to make it work for this unit, reducing any barriers from the technology end will help make this work more accessible to both students and teachers.

### ***Complicating Alignment - Competing Centers of Gravity***

Brittani Middle School had a situation unfold about ten years ago where a mother made an uproar at how different her twin girl's middle school experiences were in the same exact school. The mother's outrage at the different ways her twin daughters experienced learning brought a lot of negative attention to the school as apparently other families shared her outrage. Other parents began to voice their concerns about how their older children experienced a different middle school than the

one their current 7th and 8th grade children were experiencing. This caused the district to create a new goal that they would stick to like glue; alignment. All teachers across all content areas were to meet with their content team and align what they were doing down to the day. If one teacher was giving a quiz that day, the other four content teachers in that grade level should also be giving that same quiz. If one teacher was reviewing for a test, the other four should be reviewing with the same materials and in the same format for the same test. If one teacher was reading chapter five of *The Outsiders*, the other four should be too.

The district began sending in administrators to double check that these new alignment goals were met. These goals were more like rules that teachers had to follow and also show proof of with a weekly write up of lesson plans for each of the content areas and their grade specific team of teachers. This forced all teachers to cut down their creative freedom as educators from 100% to 20% overnight. Each content area and grade level has five dedicated teachers who are all naturally very different from one another. Each teacher had to choose their most important 20% of ideas, lessons and assessments and label it as their must-do's for the entire team to now adopt too. With each teacher doing this, that meant that each individual educator was spending 80% of their instructional time teaching the other four teacher's must-do's. While it sounds bleak, the advantage is that the kids are able to discuss class with any of their friends instead of only the people who have that one specific teacher. The downsides seemed to outweigh that positive as teachers felt inauthentic in their classrooms, snubbed of

doing the lessons they really enjoy, and forced into checking boxes they didn't care to check in the first place.

Over time, the district slowly took their fingers off the pulse of each classroom and teachers were able to slide back into doing what they wanted to do. Teachers found ways around the alignment after the administrators stopped popping in as regularly. Teachers began writing curriculum maps that stretched the truth to allow the goal to be "met" in the district's eyes but also allowed teachers their creative liberties back. Today, each teacher in each grade specific content area must administer at least one common exam per quarter. This can sometimes be a thorn in our sides as we are all so different and finding ways to incorporate everyone's ideas on a common test while also not forcing anyone to teach something they don't want can prove challenging.

I knew that coming into this study, I'd have to go rogue. I laid out my study with enthusiasm and the vulnerability of admitting I'd be going against what the district asked of us. My team was so supportive, kind, and even kept up on my lessons to see how I was doing as the only island teacher. I am so thankful that my colleagues chose kindness because they could have very well shut down my idea to fly solo for this study or told administration I wasn't complying with their tasks but they were nothing short of stellar as I navigated my first full inquiry based unit. Being able to grab the steering wheel and fully commit to an intense inquiry based unit allowed me to use



everything I had learned in college while also feeling like my most true, authentic teacher-self.

What this study taught me about my teaching is that teachers are resilient in the face of unplanned battles and students are going to surprise you if you offer them the means to be creative and talk about themselves. It is not a secret that 12-14 year olds enjoy talking about themselves and this inquiry based unit with project based assessments, gave them the opportunity to learn and grow while applying each lesson to their lives. The findings of this study have already inspired my teaching of our next unit which will be on stereotypes in connection to *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. What this study means for my teaching in the decades to come is to serve as a reminder for when I feel like I have it figured out, to never stop learning. The connections and media used in this unit will not be relevant in five years let alone in decades. This study is a reminder to keep pushing myself to evolve and stay up to date on trends so that I can continue to make meaningful units for the youth even as mine slips away. Reframing my future units through inquiry and content creation will enable me to engage my students in meaningful work, something they consistently noted was rare in their middle school experiences.

The range of responses present in discussions, reflections, surveys and writing accurately encompasses the middle school student's range of maturity. Middle school is a pivotal time in student's lives where some are turning into mature young people and others are still figuring out how to properly tie their shoes without singing a song to

remind them of the steps. The filters in their brains are either allowing very little words to come out of their mouths or verbal diarrhea of every thought they'd ever had spilling out into the open whether it is appropriate or not. Sometimes I will walk in to two students wrestling for fun before the bell rings just because they wanted to practice before their match and other times students will be singing popular songs without a worry in the world and those things lead to the best sight; entering a classroom to every child laughing and looking genuinely happy to be there. They aren't too cool for school like the high schoolers and they might still accidentally call their teachers mom but they also grow up drastically year to year while they're in middle school and being a part of fostering that growth is rewarding beyond measure.

Reflecting on this all, the unique and special time of middle school comes through so powerfully. Middle school students deserve access to meaningful, challenging, and critical literacy experiences; moreover, they actually crave this work, too. Inquiry-based design provides an instructional model to bring this critical work to meet students where they are and create meaning in what they are asked to do. The middle school years are extremely important as our students are developing their own identities and core academic literacy skills. It is my hope that they not only come out of my classroom as stronger readers, writers, and thinkers--but also with an understanding that they have agency to make this world a better place.

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