

## **Stand Up for Justice Through a Whole School Read**

### **Precipitating Event**

Lorenzo Walker Technical High School has always prided itself on providing an environment which encourages a feeling of belonging and connection. With a focus of Social Emotional Learning last year, we were surprised when our Student Panorama results indicated that many of our students felt disconnected with one another. Students expressed a lack of connection with students on different grade levels or in different technical areas. Through this data, we saw an opportunity for the Whole School Read to build relationships and break down barriers between students.

### **Lessons and Activities**

The Whole School Read is based on the book, Letters to the Lost, by Brigid Kemmerer. In the book, the main characters start exchanging letters at a graveyard, where the female character had been leaving letters for her recently deceased mother. When the male character starts writing back, a friendship begins, even though they don't know who each other are. When the 2 characters realize that they've been writing to someone that they normally wouldn't talk to in school, they change their minds about the stereotypes they had in their heads.

For our project at Lorenzo, we started with our own letter-writing project to mirror the experience in the book. Students were paired up with a student in a different grade level as pen pals. Before they knew the identity of this other student, pen pals wrote back and forth with the younger grade levels asking older grade levels advice as well as sharing first week nerves and worries. Older students wrote back with reassurance and the letter writing continued a couple more times before pen pals finally got to meet each other. Students were excited to finally put a face and name to their letters and make a new friend. Once students had met their pen pals, they received their books and began reading them in their English Language Arts classes.

### **Teaching Respect for Others**

Through our discussions and activities, the themes that were repeated reflected the book: how we present to the outside world versus our inner self, breaking down stereotypes, and reaching out in friendship to deal with difficult things like grief. Although race and religion are not directly addressed, students are consistently talking about and actively respecting each other no matter what differences exist between them. After the penpal meeting, friendships were encouraged, but all students remarked that their penpal was respectful and vice versa. If anything, they would like more time to get to know their penpal during the school year.

### **Countering Bigotry and Bullying**

Our students were able to express their creativity as well as talking about prejudice by participating in a photography exhibit as well as various classroom discussions about judging someone based on a stereotype. In *Letters to the Lost*, the main character and her mother are photographers and descriptions of photos help tell the story as well as question the story. As one of the characters questions "Are we all trapped in a single photograph that doesn't tell the whole story?" Other classroom

lessons that resulted ranged from debating the issues of stereotypes and prejudice in the book, analyzing photos mentioned in the book, creating storyboards and comic strips from key scenes, analyzing the development of characters, and creating masks as a reflection of how characters had a different outside projection than their true inner thoughts and feelings.

### **Student Work- Podcasts**

These podcasts are just one example of student work that came from the Whole School Read. I chose these 2 particular podcasts as it highlights the friendships that were made during the penpal letter-exchange project. The penpal part had the most impact on students as they made connections with the book about overcoming stereotypes of each other and respecting students that are different than themselves.

Podcast 1: <https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/a64cb740-3f1a-4a96-a0ab-307dde30fc53>

Podcast 2: <https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/9036d6c8-0717-41f9-80a6-dfbed25556c0>

### **Student Work- Letters**

Below are pictures of some of the penpal letters, as well as a close-up of one. I am also attaching a PDF of the letter. This particular letter is an excellent example of the purpose, which is to break down barriers between people and have students get to know someone before they judge others.



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Hello,  
I understand how you're feeling. Everything right now might seem like, it's all coming at you. I was in similar position years ago, just like you I closed off from everyone, I enjoyed the space away, from those around me. Maybe it was due not wanting to let people in, so they wouldn't judge me. Sometimes we build these walls to protect us. In turn they can do alot of harm. The time you spend in this kind of isolation, can affect your own judgement, you will place alot on yourself to help yourself. It can be hard to open up to others, a good place to start is to let your guard down, and grow to trust those around. Break those walls you have placed. It's okay, to want to talk to others, and it's okay to have someone to talk too. Sometimes things may seem like they can't get better, but in all this time we have, it's hard to say things won't look up. This is yours to create and you have so much time to do it. Life always will, have its low points. The beauty of this is that the low points will make us appreciate the high points so much more. Whatever you are going through right now will pass, and you will be okay.

Cordially, Pen Pal.