How to Inspire Student Social Justice Leaders With One Fictional Story at A Time

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There are many traditional approaches for inspiring students to become leaders while still in elementary and middle school classrooms. Among these are starting an afterschool or lunch leadership club with school administration approved community projects or fundraising drives to do. A second one involves recruiting students already interested in being student leaders now by having them do research projects about active youth leaders in their community or internationally recognized ones such as Malala, Greta, Jazz Jennings, Sophie Cruz, Zulaikha Patel and Bana Alabed. While the above are traditional, tried, true and proven approaches for passionate adults to instruct and to inspire student leaders, it certainly seems that this top-down adult owned training, the most widely used, is antithetical to the concept of student leaders as “leading” with their own ideas and projects. But how, other than these two approaches for inspiring student leaders, can students ages 8-13 be immersed in attainable doable leadership projects in their school and community?

The answer lies in middle school fiction stories. Yes, fiction stories, not digital texts or print informational texts or good to go templates for leadership developed by adults. Are there writers in the juvenile fictional literature genre writing about student leadership in the context of engaging stories that can inspire middle school students with potential leadership powers to be real leaders right away? There is actually a slew of them, many celebrated as award winning fiction writers, whose works if introduced by educators with leaders in their classroom can “inculcate” students in the activities and habits of highly effective peer leaders. As a bonus, this happens while the students are engaged in story and learning communication, collaboration, text annotation, analyzing quotes, author craft, argument and reader reflections. All these rigorous reading and critical thinking skills are of course part of informed leadership as well.

So how can teachers use middle school fiction for student owned leadership training?

Let’s look at two truly delightful, short and accessible books by the sister author-illustrator team of Kate Klise and M. Sarah Klise. The two works from these prolific authors are *Regarding the Fountain – A tale in Letters, of Liars and Leaks* (Avon Books, 1998), and *Don’t Check Out This Banned Book!* (Workman Publishing, 2020).

*Regarding the Fountain* immediately connects with a universal gathering spot in any school which is the focus of hydration, socialization, getting out of class and complaints. Ironically just this past year, the water fountains in our Brooklyn middle school (Ditmas IS 62) have been replaced as a direct result of the new Student Leadership Council complaints.

*Don’t Check Out This Banned Book* has an evocative, exceedingly provocative, alluring cover design (created by M. Sarah Klise, the illustrator of the team) clearly labeled with its green dotted sticker “Banned Book” invites the already eager reader to grab the story. What teacher or parent does not know the infinite persuasiveness of forbidding an action and its force to compel the child to of course “do it” despite, or in spite of, the warning?

Obviously yes, raising money for school improvements and sensitizing students to the fact that in some districts and in certain school libraries and classrooms, beloved books with awards and recognition can still be banned, are topics and opportunities for training students to be active citizen leaders and advocates. But why use fiction to accomplish this training?

Because in entering these key topics externally from a student reading and talking about a fictional story, the student, as that reader, navigates the delightful fictional devices of the Klise sister team and is focused on the actual middle school hero involved in the plot first. Among these in both stories are the fact that the Klise sister team uses the genre of epistolary fiction –letter writing – to tell these narratives. The letters are not only handwritten ones, but also involve emails, telegrams, newsletters, business letters, invoices, bills, court documents, warrants, restaurant checks, graphic narrative speech and thought bubbles, faxes, official school and company letterheads and beyond. These easily readable letters present authentic issues for budding school leaders but make the exploration of these issues easy to accomplish in class group discussions. Better yet, the author and illustrator fill their deliberately concise and well told narrative to the brim with puns and wordplay. Among these deliberately obvious and begging to be illustrated devices in *Regarding the Fountain* are: the characters of Sally Mander (think salamander), Walter Russ (think walrus), Sam N., Florence Waters, and Goldie Fisch. Of course, these names just beg for appropriate illustrations some of which M. Sarah Klise provides. *Don’t Check Out This Book* uses word play as well in an even more deliberately satiric verbal punch by naming the students – fifth graders investigating school board crimes – with names such as Reid Dunn, Ben Thinken, Sarah Bellum and the librarian who gives out Green Dot books, Rita B. Danjerous. This narrative exposes – wait for this – the corruption of a Picklegate scandal wherein pickles are sold to the students for profit by the very moral School Board President. Yes, the puns and the author’s purpose in using them are accessible and easy so as to make the reader an insider to the author’s craft.

So far, these books with their student leader school improvement projects and library book access plots, seem to be more suitable for say a civic minded English Language Arts teacher or Librarian, than for a Social Studies student leadership educator.

But these two books and others like them have more going for them than fun accessibility, word play, and letter driven shorter page length narratives. At the heart of each of these narratives are the young leaders as they get the fountain built and expose the adult economic, environmental, and community crimes. Not only are the heroes real fifth graders, but they are investigative journalists who use community based online and print newsletters to investigate their identified student owned issues, interview (including on site and by request) lead sources, and eventually publish their results. In the course of their independent research, they would, like their real-world peer counterparts, dig up local deeds, memos, photos, receipts, email exchanges, texts and other communications. They ask hard questions but do not go beyond the confines of the law – so even in *Don’t Check Out This Book* when they enter the principal’s office after hours, they do so because the administrative assistant Gladys Friday has the keys. This student-centered leadership is depicted in a real, doable, legitimate and possible model for student readers to reflect on and to emulate.

Given the above two samples and infinite others (a starter list is provided at the end), how would the educator desiring to inspire student leaders one literary work at a time, focus the students’ attention to the student owned leadership plots and purpose of a middle school work of fiction.

Use the following template to pre-discuss or introduce any of these works:

What aspects of our school and the way it operates are within your power as students –not those within the school staff’s power or the PTA’s power – but within your power? List them. Explain which are most important to you and why.

How, beyond making posters or emailing or talking to your immediate friends and family, can you alert others not in your class or reachable by email or text about what you are doing or researching or identifying as a leader? What media and resources are used by adult leaders which are also available to you as a student young citizen? Name them. How would you tap into them on your own?

As students are reading as a group in the class or after reading the works independently, challenge them to react to the following discussion questions.

Which of the plot or protagonist issues are “real” to you as middle school students? Explain why one or more issues in the fiction book are real to you.

In what ways do students in these fiction stories lead as social justice or community activists in resolving issues or making needed interventions? Explain what existing communication and publication resources they use in the stories.

Obviously, these books are deliberate and well written works of middle school fiction. As a middle school reader who is also a caring young citizen who is not waiting until you get the vote to improve your school and community, are there any strategies or ideas you can take from this story into your current citizen actions? List any doable strategies and explain how you, like the fictional peers in the book, could make positive change happen.

The two detailed examples that form delightful but deliberate fiction to inspire young readers to be student leaders while in middle school are just representative of so any middle school fictions that can support real student leadership. As stated at the start, the traditional way of nurturing middle student leaders lies in adults enrolling them in adult template community projects. The other approach is researching current student leaders. While these are tried, proven and field tested, in the very spirit of “leading” and “innovating”, teachers must do more to set the example of students owning their leadership in middle school. Why not strategically leverage these juvenile fictions to model real life middle school leaders? On a young adult level is that not what Harper Lee, Jason Reynolds, Elie Wiesel, Jasmine Warga, Elizabeth Acevedo, Walter Dean Myers, Angie Thomas, Gene Luen Yang, and Val Emmich are doing? How many teens realize how to lead proactively by reading these fictions? Just as these literary works inspire a generation of proactive student leaders, middle school leaders can lead by example from fictional stories.

**Middle School Fiction as inspiring examples for middle school student leadership:**

Beaty, Andrea. (2019 and ongoing). Beaty has a slew of fiction books, picture books, chapter books and beyond. Beaty encourages student leaders to use inquiry and child owned approaches to solve a range of student-centered issues such as helping others, parks as public spaces, inventions for disabled people, junk removal and beyond. Some of her fictional leaders include Rosie Revere who is an intrepid child engineer; Iggy Peck, who architects urban beautification and renewal; Ada Twist Scientist, who does experiments and solves for classroom changing results; and Aaron Slater, Illustrator. Her series is called the Questioneers, another way of saying young readers question and investigate to lead.

Behar, Ruthie. (2020). Letters from Cuba. Penguin.

Cisneros, Ernesto. (2019). Efren Divided. Harper Collins.

Erskine, Kathryn. (2012). The Absolute Value of Mike. Puffin Books.

Guadalupe Martinez, Claudia. (2014). Pig Park. Cinco Puntos Press.

Hentoff, Nat. (1983). The Day They Came to Arrest The Book. Laurel Leaf.

Hentoff, Nat. (1976). This School is Driving Me Crazy. Delacorte Press.

Korman, Gordon. (2021). Linked. Scholastic.

Klise, Kate and M. Sarah Klise. (2008). Regarding the Bathrooms. HMH Books.

 Ludwig, Trudy. (2005). My Secret Bully. Random House.

Ludwig, Trudy. (2012). Confessions of a Former Bully. Random House.

Ludwig, Trudy. (2014). Gifts from the Enemy. White Cloud Press.

Sachar, Louis. (2017). Fuzzy Mud. Random House.