

Empowering Teens through Critical Reading and Discussion

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INTRODUCTION

In late 2018, University of Pittsburgh librarians Robin Kear and Tyrica Terry Kapral received a USD \$1,200 grant and books through the American Library Association Great Stories Club program. The Great Stories Club series on Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation is a book club for teens to read and discuss stories that explore race, equity, identity, history, institutional change and social justice.

Logistics:

- 10 participants from Pittsburgh Public Schools
- 7 one-hour gatherings at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh – Homewood
- Each participant received a copy of each book, a certification of achievement, and a gift card of USD \$75-100

CONCEPTS

Readings, activities, and discussions...

- Founded on the concept of empathy as a mode for overcoming hate, social injustice, and institutional oppression.
- Encouraged participants to view identity as both an individual and a social project that is constructed (rather than naturally occurring), contextualized (in space and time), and changing (rather than static)
- Spoke to the interrelatedness of the past and the present, the self and the other
- Addressed themes in the books, including race, racism, systemic oppression, the black body, fear, father-son relationships, the American Dream, the search for identity, education, myths and history, and justice

The participants had insightful comments about...

- Their experience in the high school education curriculum (who is represented and how and who creates the content)
- Widening their experiences (as Coates went to college and abroad)
- The effectiveness of peaceful protest (Martin Luther King Jr.) versus aggressive protest (Malcolm X)
- Participating in memorials to friends they have lost

COLLABORATORS

Working with community partners was essential to the success of this project as with any community-based program.

- Librarians Denise Graham and Andrea McNeil of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh – Homewood (CLP – Homewood) graciously allowed us to use their Teen Spaces for sessions and helped to design promotion and recruitment strategies.
- The Program Director (Esohe Osai) and Program Manager (Grace Oxley) of the Pitt-Assisted Community & Schools provided us with insight on offering after school programs: when to schedule them, where might be the most accessible in the neighborhood, and how to reach our audience.
- Lorena Amos, the local leader of the Black Stories Book Club (for adults), promoted the program to her network, from which we recruited several participants.
- Daren Ellerbee, the Director of the University of Pittsburgh Homewood Community Engagement Center (CEC) was very supportive in promoting and scheduling the sessions that were initially to take place at the CEC.

BOOKS

The theme for the book club was “Deeper than Our Skins: The Present Is a Conversation with the Past.”

The books included:

- *Mother of the Sea* by Zetta Elliott
- *The Shadow Hero* by Gene Luen Yang; Sonny Liew (Illustrator)
- *Dreaming in Indian* by Lisa Charleyboy (Editor); Mary Beth Leatherdale (Editor)
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates



SESSIONS

In each session, we...

- Began with optional racial healing prompts provided by the TRHT, which allowed participants to discuss personal stories at their discretion.
- Asked participants, "What was the most impactful part of the book to you?" This kind of open question gave them the freedom to lead the discussion before we get into the guiding questions we had prepared.
- Closed with time for participants to complete reflections about their experiences and what they learned, which enabled them to reflect on their own experiences and share them.



ORGANIZATIONS & PROGRAMS

Great Stories Club

Since 2006, the American Library Association's Great Stories Club has helped libraries engage young adults with accessible, thought-provoking literature. The current series is part of the Kellogg Foundation's Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation efforts, a comprehensive, national and community-based process to plan for and bring about transformational and sustainable change, and to address the historic and contemporary effects of racism.

Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation, Kellogg Foundation

Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) is a comprehensive, national and community-based process to plan for and bring about transformational and sustainable change, and to address the historic and contemporary effects of racism. For more information, visit healourcommunities.org.



GOALS

We strove to increase participants' understanding of the possibilities of self-expression, structural change, and social justice. Using our skills as librarians we aimed to enable participants to apply information literacy and critical thinking skills to engaging with social justice issues that they observe in literature and in their personal lives.

Some of our specific goals included:

- Increased comfortability and capability with expressing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a variety of forms
- Increased ability in and enjoyment of reading literature closely and critically
- Greater understanding of diversity/inclusion, social (in)justice, and equity in our country

CHALLENGES & SUCCESSES

Participant Recruitment & Attendance

- Barriers:
 - Difficulty finding appropriate avenues for recruitment
 - Low engagement during initial recruitment period
- Strategies:
 - Sought advice from others experienced with running afterschool programs
 - Changed location of sessions to neighborhood public library, where teen events were already being held successfully
 - Offered incentives (e.g., monetary compensation, food and refreshments)
- Successes:
 - At least 8 of the participants attended 5 or more sessions
 - 5 of the participants attended all 7 sessions

Participant Engagement

- Barriers:
 - Participants were sometimes distracted by their classmates/friends (e.g., joking and horse playing)
- Strategies:
 - Created ground rules with the participants
- Success:
 - Participants were, for the most part, engaged in the discussions and contributed substantively

ASSESSMENT

Pre- and post-program assessments for participants:

- “Who are you today?”
- Favorite book?
- Participants indicated gaining new perspectives about themselves and other groups in America, specifically indigenous populations.
- Helped to determine if their perspectives changed over the course of the program.

End-of-session reflections for participants:

- Favorite part of the session?
- Least favorite part?
- “What did you learn that you can use in your life?”
- Participants noted that they learned communication and social skills, having courage and bravery, applying literary concepts to their own writing, new perspectives on other groups of people, new vocabulary, ‘a better understanding of my race’, concepts like intersectionalism, ways to find solutions, to ‘always speak [their] mind’, to find positivity, and more.

End-of-session reflections for facilitators:

- What went well
- What did not go well
- “Wow” moments