

Diversity and Engagement in our 2020-2021 Whole School Read

Precipitating Event

In 2019-2020, Lorenzo Walker Technical High School introduced our first Whole School Read, *Letters to the Lost* by Brigid Kemmerer. The first year of our Whole School Read was precipitated by a surprising Student Panorama survey, which 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 and came up with the choice of *Letters to the Lost*. With that first success, we knew that in 2020-2021, we needed to bring wider cultural representation to our next Whole School Read while still focusing on our students' Social Emotional well-being. We decided on *Long Way Down*, by Jason Reynolds. Reynolds is the Library of Congress's Young Person Ambassador and he connects easily to students of all backgrounds through his charismatic and "real life" manner of speaking to them. *Long Way Down* was even more successful as a Whole School Read and we knew that we had to continue to find authors and books that represent diverse backgrounds.

Lessons and Activities

This year's Whole School Read is based on the book, *Long Way Down*, by Jason Reynolds. In the book, the main character, Will, tells us about the traumatic shooting and killing of his older brother, Shawn, in street violence. In Will's community, everyone lives by the 3 rules passed down to them: No Crying, No Snitching, and Always Get Revenge. The rest of the book is Will going down his apartment building's elevator and debating whether he should get revenge on his brother's murderer. At each landing, someone gets in the elevator from his past: people that have all died from street violence. Each person questions Will and gets him to thinking whether getting revenge is the right thing to do. The book ends with Will's brother getting into the elevator and never speaking to Will. Will is desperately seeking answers from his brother about whether he should get revenge and if he's doing the right thing. Will's brother only looks at him, a single tear going down his cheek. Finally, at the bottom, everyone steps off the elevator and his brother, Shawn, turns to Will and asks a single question, "Are you coming?" When our students get to the ending, there is a mix of strong feelings: anger, frustration, and surprise. Although students may be frustrated by the unclear ending, they can be heard debating what Will chose, what the right thing was to do, and how engaged they were in the story. Students are forced to think about unwritten rules and why we blindly follow these rules and how to think for themselves and question the cycle of violence.

Students participated in a variety of lessons and activities with the book in their English/Language Arts classes. Some of the activities included character analysis ("what character had the most impact on Will and his decision-making?"), an art and writing contest, anagram poems (anagrams are found throughout the novel), discussions on the end and lack of clear closure, discussion on how fiction can make you a "better person" through empathy, and more. Examples of student work can be found at the end of this document.

Teaching Respect for Others

Through our discussions and activities, the themes that were repeated reflected the book: why we blindly follow societal rules, how violence is a cycle, and dealing with trauma and grief. Although race is not directly addressed, Will is a young black male living in a tough urban environment. Although not all students can relate to his background or his environment, most students can relate to the themes of unwritten rules and thinking for yourself. What's more, the author Jason Reynolds makes it his mission to write engaging books that students can see themselves in. Many of our students can see themselves in Reynolds' writing or can learn to empathize with those that may look different than them or be raised in environments different than their own.

Countering Bigotry and Bullying

By reading the book, students talk about unwritten rules, the cycle of violence, and thinking for one's self. Although the book centers on a single traumatic incident of violence, it is clear that there have been many victims of violence in Will's life from this cycle. Students are able to engage in discussions about violence and revenge. In addition, by reading books that are from authors of color as well as about characters of color, students are seeing other cultures (other than white) represented in a positive fashion. It is clear throughout the book, that Will is questioning what he has been taught in the past and how he might be changing his mind about getting revenge.

Student Work

Analysis Project:

Emory Bianchi
Period 1/2 Simmons- Rosen

Long Way Down

Jason Reynolds

In this young adult fiction novel, Will has to travel down the elevator before he can carry out his mission to follow the rules and get revenge Shawn's murderer. On each floor, starting from 7, a ghost from his past comes into the elevator and changes the way he thinks. All of the floors did something to him, but which one impacted Will the most?



FLOOR 4
WILL HAD "BEEN WAITING/ FOR HIM SINCE/ [HE] WAS THREE. MIKEY HOLLOWAN" (REYNOLDS 196)
"MY FATHER" (REYNOLDS 197)



What is the impact on Will?



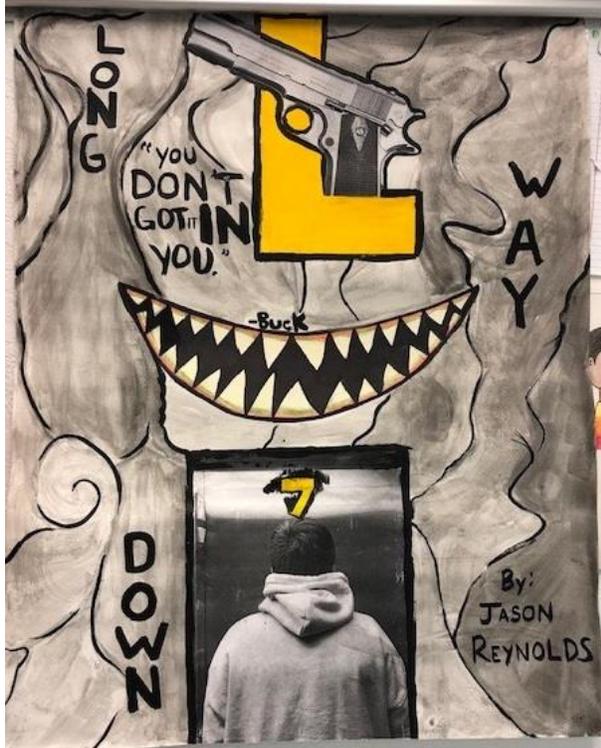
When Mikey Holloman gets on the elevator at floor 4, Will's father tells Will the story about how he was killed and why. Will had always been told by Shawn, his brother, that their dad had been shot at a payphone "for killing the man/ who killed [their] uncle" (Reynolds 203). At this point, his father tells him, "that he had killed/ the wrong guy" (Reynolds 218). Since he was three, Will had always looked up to his father, but when he learned this, he came to the realization that his father is not the man that he was thought to be. On page 221, it says, "Spent my whole... life/ missing a misser./ That disappointed me" (Reynolds). This also puts the idea in Will's mind that he could be wrong about who killed Shawn, but he is too intent on believing the shooter was Riggs that he didn't allow himself to think it could be anyone but Riggs.

After telling Will the story about how he had shot the wrong guy, Will's father takes the gun and holds it to Will's head, as if he is going to shoot his own son. "Pop stood over me,/ the gun pressed against/ the side of my face" (Reynolds 227). The father might be doing this to give Will the feeling of being afraid for his life, just like how someone else might feel before they get shot. When the gun was put down, Will's father might have been trying to make Will consider what it would feel like to the person he is planning on shooting, especially if it is the wrong one. Will's reaction on page 232 is not unlike what someone might feel like on the inside if they were shot because of a mistaken identity.



Hearing his father's story and being at the mercy of a gun makes Will realize that he could be wrong, and he keeps that in mind, but tries not to believe it. At the end of the story, he seems a lot more hesitant to follow the Rules, which is good because that means he is actually thinking through what he is about to do. "I stood alone/ in the empty box,.../a loaded gun/still tucked in my/waistband" (Reynolds 305).

Art/Writing Contest Submissions:



Anagram Poem:

Fear is a fare you must pay for love

Fear of abandonment

Fear of lies

Fear of failure

Failure= la fleur

Failure is a fare of fear

Fear that blossoms into une belle fleur.

Failure = la fleur = fear

= LOVE