

R.A.P.

Reaching Adolescent Potential

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“Given that we know children in low-income areas have the *potential* to achieve at the same level as children in high-income areas, tolerance for unequal achievement is unacceptable. If we really believe that children in low-income areas have the potential to achieve at high levels, then we have the responsibility for providing them with the opportunity to do so, which means more than providing them with equal resources, it means doing whatever it takes to ensure that they are really achieving.”

Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach For America

I listened to Wendy speak these words in Houston, Texas. Throughout my first year of teaching, they resonated and distilled as I began to understand that education is a “whatever it takes” effort. My energy went out to eighth grade students in Raymondville, Texas, guiding and developing their expressions in the language arts, the means we all use to communicate across the separation. Most are second or third generation Mexican-Americans, all ninety enlivened with potential. In late May of that first year, I packed up room 27 with a small idea called “R.A.P.” in my head. Two weeks later, I sealed an envelope enclosing a Jordan Fundamentals Grant application. It was mailed on an acronym, an idea, and the wondrous possibility of *potential*.

October 2000

A check for \$2,500 arrived from Nike and my idea took its first, deep breath. Quietly I had planned the school year with the grant money and could now begin the good work. I purchased a printer and scanner creating an in-class workspace and drafted a survey to send out to Teach For America cohorts in other regions of the nation. The survey would gather a glimpse of teen lifestyles for my students to consider, allowing them to understand national themes within the adolescent experience and provoke thought and questions. We had already completed two projects focusing on the each student’s history and pathways leading them to eighth grade, and they were ready to start exploring relationships with other teens. The results would be published in the final section of the manual . . . “Uh, excuse me, Todd, what manual?”

November 2000

Until the end of October, I was working with the idea of a manual for early adolescents (ages 13-15) and described it the grant application as “a twenty

page expository piece explaining how to face challenges and possibilities.” Calling it a manual revealed its practical nature and this is essential because adolescence is evolution and revolution, a salad of green feelings and yellow words. Teens do not need more imperatives; they need consciousness in the moment of decision. Myriad decisions riddle their lives everyday, thus everyday has the potential to develop their character. Let them read about other teens’ choices and lives and ponder the karmic outcomes, vicariously experiencing what may well befall them later that day. From two years around tables at St. John’s College discussing the great books of the western canon, I knew well the radical reshaping of perspective that is possible from understanding life through fiction. Shakespeare challenged my jealousy in *Othello* while Faulkner deepened my experience of masculinity in “The Bear.” Gritty and simple fiction about being a teen could be an attempt by my students that would offer others potential guidance, could begin to positively transform their perspectives and beliefs about living humanely. I replaced expository writing with fiction; a manual of stories had potential.

“Stories, read or told, have always been among the favorite teaching instruments of the world’s great moral educators. Stories teach by attraction rather than compulsion; they invite rather than impose. They capture the imagination and touch the heart. All of us have experienced the power of a good story to stir strong feelings. That’s why storytelling is such a natural way to engage and develop the emotional side of a child’s character.”

Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*

I entitled it a R.A.P. Manual. My students would write fictional stories about experiences that are common to adolescence: peer conflicts/pressure, academics, drugs and alcohol, and family. Writing R.A.P. stories offered my students a meaningful, compassionate purpose as authors and time to research and examine the stage of life enveloping them. Reading R.A.P. stories would be a small fictional journey through a possible life scenario created by a peer and not an all-knowing adult. Readings are followed by a discussion of choices, outcomes, and practical application of new knowledge to the reader’s own experiences. I entitled the reading and discussion a RAP Session.

I could envision everything except a theme for the manual . . . then, a conceptual flash: teen radio. We did not have a tower or a station, but we had small money and big imagination. “For the next two months, we will become a collection of teen radio stations with a mission to help other teens in America! As you know, adolescence can be a struggle, yet let us attempt to use our knowledge of writing and living to help teens make positive choices when faced with tough issues or conflicts.” Students smiled, slightly bewildered, and then began to write.

Each DJ wrote a myth creating his or her on-air persona, followed by a station “creation” myth written collaboratively by the station’s members. The myth writing served as an introduction to fiction and these weeks before Thanksgiving were truly a practice session for the writers. I observed the groups carefully and gathered ideas that would make manual writing creative, fluid, and efficient. “When you return from Thanksgiving break, you all will begin the most important work of your writing career.”

Late November 2000

When students returned to room 27, they walked into a makeshift mother station (82.7 WRAP). I put up a large poster of “R.A.P.” above the work station, an antenna, and some records. I mounted the station’s posters on the wall which included DJ and station myths, radio call letters and numbers, and musical groups that their stations would play with the stories (I should mention that the stations beam out music and stories—a hip version of NPR).

Along with the visuals, I began the heart of the project with a week devoted to character. I re-explained the acronym “R.A.P.” and added another meaning to teen radio and potential: dialogue. Using short stories from *Chicken Noodle Soup for the Teenage Soul*, I explained a RAP Session. I wrote two to three questions on the board about a story’s theme and its relation to student lives, read the story, and then discussed the story using the structure of the questions. Students immediately loved this. From our first story, “I Kiss like a Horse,” students began to understand the transformational power of a story. After three RAP Sessions, they were ready to begin their own stories.

To assist student writing, I offered stations graphic organizers to the plan the major fictional components. Upon my first perusal of their character and plot sketches, I was amazed at the array of themes. Stations dealt with all the major issues that I hoped for in the manual. Before the project, I considered assigning themes or having a list for stations to choose from, but I stepped back and trusted my students as emerging writers.

“I interrupt to bring you this important bulletin: As the stories became focused and outlined, their relation to student lives became apparent. Students revealed to me that their parents were selling drugs, that they had suffered child abuse, or that their friends were actively pressuring them to smoke. During these discussions, as an educator, I listened, and as an educator informed the counseling staff and set up appointments when necessary. I also let the storytelling have a role in giving a voice to the past and present confusion. Collaborative writing offered new outcomes to students whose hearts were embedded in the fabric of the fiction. The students learned about possibilities that did not exist before. And it was here, in class, that students were first helping one another as teens in Raymondville, Texas, before going nationwide. Now back to the . . .”

As students began to understand the concept of character, I introduced the good character box. Each time a student exemplified a good character trait, I would hand them a yellow note card. The student would write her/his name, date, and a synopsis of the act. I then collected the cards in a box and held them

for a drawing on December 21st. In my introduction to the project and character, I ensured that students understood the project as an opportunity to learn, practice, and soon exemplify good character to others. Practice is essential to character education. Once students experience actions affecting another's well being or actions that are inherently good (truthfulness, integrity), they can learn first hand the value of good character and thus begin to act from an internal desire for humanity. This process takes time and needs to be supported.

At the project's half-way point, I invited two local DJ's to the mother station to talk with students about the profession. B104 and KTEX brought in bumper stickers and cool stories. On the same day, I asked a juvenile counselor working in our county to explain the system and some of the challenges that teens face in south Texas. These presenters complemented one another, offering students information and inspiration.

After reading rough drafts and offering careful comments and suggestions, I handed stories back two weeks before Christmas break. On that Monday, I wore the black R.A.P. shirt that I printed with grant funds. Station members would receive a shirt upon handing-in an edited story ready for printing. The shirt served as a final source of inspiration for everyone and I received stories from all stations.

On December 21st, in room 27, we held the first annual R.A.P. Awards. I awarded a D.J. and station of the year award for each of the five writing classes based on merit. All students received t-shirts and those who earned a yellow card waited breathlessly while I drew names from the good character box. The reward for practicing positive character traits: maybe a CD or book, but truly, the beginning of a life of compassion and exemplification.

January – March 2002

When students returned, I handed them a copy of a R.A.P. Manual. Then, amidst a buzz of pride and excitement, we commenced with a RAP Session of our own. Something small spoke out to students that day, whispered out from twenty-seven pages of their creation, and what is possible, what is potentially possible, became more expansive to them all.

We sold three class sets in the first week to schools in Mississippi and Texas (twenty five dollars for a class set of twenty-five manuals). The mother station earned some money and I had another idea: The Wrap-up the R.A.P. Project. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills writing (TAAS) test was now before us and to prepare we needed to revisit our expository writing skills.

We decided to donate the first fifty dollars of R.A.P. money to two local non-profits that work with teens: The Willacy County Child Welfare Board and Communities Against Substance Abuse. To expand the donation, students crafted persuasive essays to local businesses describing the charities' efforts and past successes. Raymondville's Police Chief spent a day with students answering questions about both charities and child abuse. His insights and knowledge were a resource for students and they revised and wrote strong essays with a purpose beyond the classroom, one stemming into the realm of

humanity. The message was powerful from teen voices, and with the kindness of businesses in an impoverished community, we raised over \$500 dollars.

The classroom began to function like a symposium for service as we prepared for the TAAS test. Then, in mid February, we stopped our test prep for a Friday and I stood before students and conducted a RAP Session with a story about a girl named Deanna Maran. (I paraphrase here)

“In Santa Monica, on a Friday night, Deanna was involved in a minor conflict with a young woman who was damaging the house where a hundred or so high school teens were having a party. Katrina, the young woman’s older sister, arrived around 11 p.m. and joined the conflict. After some yelling, Katrina pulled out a knife and stabbed Deanna in the heart . . .”

Students sat stunned. Non-fiction. Then in the magical moments that followed, adolescents began to share ideas about what they could do, how they could help. These were the same students that asked me throughout the R.A.P. Project, “What do we get out of this?” I answered, “Wait and see.” Yes, these students began to collaborate compassionately and plan an event. On March first, R.A.P. students sponsored the R.A.P. Dance for Non-violence. On March eighth, we sent a \$400 check to the Deanna Maran Memorial Scholarship for Non-violence (www.maranfoundation.com).

After months of practice, students began to develop their own characters. After months involved in a project called R.A.P., students began to know themselves as advocates for other teens, humans who can stand beside others amongst the similarities of age and the differences of culture. In doing this, they began to reach their own potential in human relationships. I hoped for this when I held only an acronym and an idea in south Texas.

From the back of a R.A.P. Survey:

“I just want to say that I hope the drug and alcohol problems will stop. It is so hard to know that people are doing things like this. Where did this start? I believe that they really do drugs and alcohol just to look cool or to do things for their friends. They think they aren’t hurting anyone, but they are hurting themselves. If I could find a way to let teens know that what they are doing is wrong, I would make sure that I found it. So I hope that you all do a good job on your book and may God bless you.”

—a thirteen-year-old girl in Marks, Mississippi