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Recommended Citation

N. Way and Joseph Derrick Nelson. (2018). "The Listening Project: Fostering Connection And Curiosity In Middle School Classrooms". *The Crisis Of Connection: Roots, Consequences, And Solutions*. 274-298.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-education/156>

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The Listening Project

Fostering Curiosity and Connection in Middle Schools

NIOBE WAY AND JOSEPH D. NELSON

Middle schools in the United States exhibit some of the most egregious signs of a “crisis of connection.” High rates of suspensions, detentions, stereotyping, bullying, and discrimination from peers and adults are typical, and have even become how American society characterizes the middle school years.¹ Students in middle schools are significantly more likely to be suspended for misconduct than high school students, and rates of bullying as well as physical and sexual assault peak during sixth through eighth grades.² A longitudinal study in New York City reveals that 55 percent of teachers who entered middle schools between 2002 and 2009 left these schools within three years.³ The responses to this crisis have included blaming students for not being interested in learning, or having low levels of motivation and/or grit; parents for not valuing education or providing enough structure at home or being involved in school; and teachers for being ineffective, particularly at classroom management.⁴ With its focus on changing individuals rather than contexts, educational reform has often overlooked the crisis of connection itself and thus, done little to address it.

As described in this volume, an emerging body of science provides vital insight into the roots of the crisis of connection, and underscores the importance of evidence-based efforts to address this crisis. Inclusive of a wide range of disciplines, the newly emerging science of human connection finds that humans are first and foremost social beings who need and want each other to thrive. Charles Darwin believed, in fact, that our social instincts were at the root of our survival as a species. Science has also underscored that we have extraordinary emotional and cognitive skills (e.g., empathy, curiosity) necessary for building relationships and

community. Yet we live in a modern society that privileges the self over relationships, individual success over the common good, thinking over feeling, and asking and answering other people's questions rather than our own.⁵ It is also a society that perpetuates dehumanizing stereotypes that divide humans into thinkers (e.g., Asian and White males) or feelers (e.g., females and people of color), but not thinkers *and* feelers.⁶ What this means for middle school students and teachers is that while they want to be connected to each other, and have the skills to do so, they often find themselves in a context that discourages the very qualities that make it possible.⁷ Similar to noted psychologist Jacquelynne Eccles's concept of *developmental mismatch*, there is often a mismatch between the needs of the people in middle schools and the culture of their schools.⁸ It is this disconnect that lies at the root of the crisis of connection in middle schools and beyond.

When schools have focused on building more caring communities, learning and academic achievement have flourished.⁹ The Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, and other "Promise Academies" in the United States, constitute remarkable examples of schools that have deliberately cultivated a caring climate in which building positive relationships across and among students, teachers, and parents, and challenging negative stereotypes, are critical parts of their efforts. Research has found that such caring schools effectively address the racial achievement gap.¹⁰ Research has also found that in schools that explicitly nurture curiosity not only in academic topics but also in the people around them, students are more engaged and perform better than those in schools in which such qualities are not actively fostered.¹¹

This chapter describes a project that we (Niobe Way and Joseph D. Nelson) have developed with middle school students at George Jackson Academy (GJA) and their English teacher, Ethan Podell, over the past three years. We sought explicitly to create a project that would be integrated into the language arts curriculum, and would address the crisis of connection evident in most middle schools. Rather than starting from the belief, evident in many middle schools, that education is about filling empty vessels (i.e., heads and/or brains) with information and then testing them to ascertain whether they have acquired or at least temporarily held knowledge or information deemed to be important by the teacher,¹² our project starts from a more expansive set of beliefs

that education should nurture our human capacity to listen, learn, ask questions, explore, discover, and engage, not only between students and teachers, but also among students, teachers, and other adults.¹³ The premise of our project is that education should aim to foster our human potential to thickly engage with, and ask and answer questions of, each other and the world, build strong communities, and contribute to it in meaningful ways. In order to achieve this goal, we have to move away from the empty vessel model and move toward the listen, ask and answer questions, learn, and engage model.

We know intuitively, as well as from decades of educational research, that we cannot educate through teaching to the test, disciplining students to foster compliance and conformity, and perpetuating divisive stereotypes that undermine individual growth and community building.¹⁴ It is equally important to avoid blaming students, parents, or teachers for the problems that may plague their schools, as that also prevents thriving at the individual or community level. We also know that we *can* encourage listening, connection, exploration, curiosity, and engagement by valuing these qualities in the first place and embedding them into our academic curriculum. While such qualities and capacities have, at times, been downplayed in educational reform strategies, research suggests that they should, in fact, be key components.¹⁵ Thus, the question becomes not who is to blame for the crisis of connection in middle schools, but how we can *effectively* nurture our human capacities to listen, ask and answer questions, and engage with each other to create more caring and connected, as well as more academically successful, middle schools.

As we have discovered in our research and partnerships in public and private schools, the first step in answering this question is to acknowledge, as we often do with teachers but not with students and their parents, how much students, teachers, and the parents of students can learn from one another. Teachers can teach students and each other about what they know about the topic that they teach, and the world, as well as about the joys of figuring out the answers to one's own questions or helping others answer their own questions. Teachers can teach students, parents, and other teachers about the importance of perspective taking and how it is linked to both individual and collective success. They

can also partner with the parents of students to better nurture children's own curiosity and their social and emotional skills. Students can teach their teachers and their own parents the importance of listening to what they have to say even when it challenges mainstream ways of thinking and doing it. Students can also remind teachers and their parents of the critical questions that adults have yet to answer (e.g., "Why do we believe in things that we know are not true?") and what it means to have relationships that are grounded in genuine curiosity.¹⁶ In addition, they can also answer questions that teachers and parents have about them and the larger world.¹⁷ Parents of students can teach teachers what strategies of engagement work best for their children and how to support their children. They can also teach teachers about the worlds that they live in, which are often different from those of the teachers. Once students, teachers, and parents remember that they have much to learn from each other, they begin to see themselves in the other, recognize their common humanity, and question the stereotypes that led them to disconnect from each other in the first place. By focusing on what we can learn from each other, we implicitly and explicitly address the harmful stereotypes that get in the way of our ability to build healthy relationships and communities.

The science of human connection consistently reveals that it is our stereotypes of each other, and our lack of curiosity in each other, that lead us to believe that we have nothing to learn from one another.¹⁸ According to research, stereotypes of children and adolescents across race, gender, class, sexuality, and religious identification are often not reflective of who they are or what they want and need to thrive.¹⁹ These stereotypes lead schools to treat children as if their identities can be separated from their relationships, their minds from their hearts and bodies, and their learning from their contexts, cultures, and communities. When we see children and adolescents only through a stereotypic lens, and fail to ask real questions, we do not see the possibilities of learning *from* them and thus lose sight of their full humanity.

Our Listening Project approach entails training teachers and students in a method that we refer to as "transformative interviewing," in which students learn how to listen to each other and ask questions that reveal their capacities to think and feel and express what is most meaningful

to them. As part of the training, students interview each other as well as their teachers and family members. They are asked to generate their own questions for their interview protocol. They are also asked to focus on one particular person, “whom they love but would like to know more about,” and write a short biographical essay based on their multiple interviews with the person. Finally, the students present their biographies in public venues and/or spaces so that they share what they learned about another person when they followed their own curiosity in their transformative interviews.

Informed by the social science method of semi-structured interviewing and drawing explicitly from the science of human connection, transformative interviewing aims to disrupt stereotypes by fostering curiosity and connection.²⁰ Once we begin asking and answering questions with each other, stereotypes are exposed as false and connections are enhanced. Transformative interviewing asks the interviewer (e.g., the student) to start from the place that all human beings think and feel—regardless of gender, race, social class, and other social categories—and thus the task is to understand those thoughts and feelings and ways of seeing the world curated by the curiosity of the interviewer.

Listening in transformative interviewing is not a passive process but a responsive one in which the interviewer asks open-ended questions, offering a way into the hearts and minds of the interviewees rather than simply confirming what the interviewer assumes to be true of the interviewee. Instead of asking close-ended questions such as “Are you close to that friend?” open-ended questions and prompts are employed: “How would you describe your friendship?” “What do you like about him or her and why?” “Tell me about a time in which you trusted him.” The aim here is not to simply gather information, but to understand how the interviewee experiences the world. The interviewer asks “thick” questions—rooted in Geertz’s distinction between “thick” and “thin” interpretations²¹—that get at the nuances and details of an experience rather than a surface-level report of an experience. By focusing on open-ended questions and asking for stories, the interviewer begins to see the interviewee as more than simply a sum of stereotyped parts. They see themselves in the interviewees and thus experience a sense of shared

humanity.²² As a result of being closely listened to, interviewees are also transformed in this process as they begin to see themselves and the interviewer in new ways. The overarching goal of transformative interviewing is to tap into our natural capacity to listen, ask and answer questions, explore, understand, respond, and engage with each other so that we see beyond our gender, racial, and class stereotypes, and find the relationships and the community that we want and need to thrive in and out of school.

Our method of transformative interviewing initially grew out of learning about The Listening Guide—a relational method of analysis with narrative data created by the Harvard Project on Girls and Women.²³ We brought the method into our teaching of interviewing skills with doctoral students at New York University. Niobe Way has taught this doctoral class over the past two decades, and Joseph D. Nelson has taught it over the past five years. Teaching together for four years, we developed a technique of conducting semi-structured interviews that focuses on learning something new about one's own questions rather than simply testing hypotheses or gathering information. As a result of our method of interviewing, our doctoral students have reported that they see themselves and each other with more openness, empathy, and understanding. They also report being “better listeners” and “better thinkers” as they have learned to listen more closely to themselves (e.g., their own questions) and to each other. They also report being more aware of their own stereotypes and assumptions about themselves and others, and using their feelings to think more sharply and rigorously about the meaning of words and actions. As teachers, we have also seen through narrative essay writing that students' perspective taking and analytic skills improve from the beginning to the end of class, as does their ability to see themselves in others.

Following our experience teaching the interview method course together, we took our approach to a middle school for boys on the Lower East Side of New York City. Over the past four years, we have developed our transformative interviewing techniques with the seventh graders and their teacher. The boys have interviewed peers, teachers, and family members, produced biographical essays from their interviews, and presented these essays to their peers in school and at a conference held

at New York University. Boys at the school reported an extraordinary transformation in how they see themselves and those around them. They disclosed, for example, feeling more connected to peers, teachers, and family members and becoming more interested in relationships and feelings. In addition, they described feeling more confident about how to make and maintain friendships as well as how to connect to others. Finally, they reported that their biographies and the public speaking events made them more confident in their writing and oral communication skills. Their English teacher also detailed to us that the Listening Project was highly effective in making a forceful life-to-literature connection. By focusing students' attention on the authentic, often vulnerable moments in the interviewee's life, the students are relearning from a different perspective what character and conflict mean and why these are such important elements of first-rate literature. Students, the teacher noted, often ask why they should read literature: "How is this book, and the story in it, going to be useful to me in life?" The Listening Project, according to the teacher, "is a compelling answer to this utilitarian question, as it subtly dismantles the wall that prevents some from seeing the strong, 'thick' connection between understanding literature and leading a rich and thoughtful life."

As a result of a generous grant from the Spencer Foundation, we have recently expanded our listening project to eight middle schools in New York City in order to more systematically assess its impact on students and teachers. Preliminary results from two additional middle schools suggest it has a transformative effect not only on students and teachers but also on others in the school and on those who are interviewed outside of the school. Participants (e.g., students, teachers, parents, principals, school staff) report that their relationships with their interviewers and interviewees have deepened and that they have begun to see themselves and others as having qualities of which they were unaware. In other words, stereotypes have been disrupted and relationships have been strengthened.

By sharing our experiences and approach in this chapter, we hope to inspire teachers and others who work with middle schools students and teachers to create their own versions of the Listening Project to nourish their natural curiosity and their capacity and desire to

build stronger relationships and more inclusive and connected school communities.

The Listening Project at George Jackson Academy

We chose George Jackson Academy, an independent private school serving middle- and low-income boys in fourth through eighth grades, because it was already nourishing boys' curiosity and connection through various school-based initiatives. Thus it was an ideal school context in which to pilot our transformative interviewing strategies as part of our Listening Project.²⁴ We (Niobe Way and Joseph D. Nelson) partnered with the English teacher to develop and administer a fourteen-session training program with approximately thirty-five seventh graders each year. The training also involved two to three NYU students each year who had already been trained in the method. Founded in 2003, the school's stated mission centers on "helping boys recognize their abundant gifts within a learning environment designed to cultivate the widest sense of possibility in boys' lives."²⁵ Through its policies, practices, and traditions (e.g., advisory program, peer-to-peer mentoring, "gifted and talented" academics, and seventh and eighth grade retreats), the school embraces a fundamental commitment to providing boys with a rich intellectual life, infused with joy, gratitude, and love, where boys are instilled with a pride in who they are and a sense of brotherhood, and are encouraged to become community leaders. The institution's approach to educating boys is decidedly asset-based, or focused on promoting the strengths of the students, which makes it an ideal context for our project centered on transformative interviewing.

There are approximately one hundred and thirty boys enrolled, with twenty to thirty-six students per grade (i.e., two classes per grade). The overall student population is predominantly boys of color: Black (85 percent), Latino (10 percent), Asian (2 percent), Multicultural (e.g., Biracial; 2 percent), and White (1 percent), and 51 percent of boys are first-generation immigrants. The New York City boroughs of residence for boys are the Bronx (64 percent), Manhattan (17 percent), Brooklyn (10 percent), and Queens (9 percent). While the values of brotherhood, care, support, and respect make up the core values of GJA's learning

community, boys in the school struggle at times with seeing themselves outside of racial and gender stereotypes.²⁶ Thus the Listening Project was welcomed by the school administration.

Transformative Interviewing in Fourteen Sessions

Within this school context, we (Niobe, Joseph, and Ethan) trained seventh grade boys in transformative interviewing, over fourteen sessions across four years, with four cohorts of seventh graders. Here, we describe session goals and guiding questions, and offer descriptions of each session with instructional strategies employed. The goal here is not to provide specific lesson plans but to offer ideas that can be adapted to meet the needs of a specific classroom or school environment.

Sessions 1 to 4: Learning about Interviewing

During the first two training sessions, we raise the following questions with the students: “Why conduct interviews?” “What could one learn from an interview?” We ask them to respond to our questions using their intuition and guide them with our follow-up questions (e.g., “Why do you think that is true?”). For example, we give the students the definition of semi-structured interviews and ask them to tell us why they think a semi-structured interview might be better than a structured interview for getting one’s questions answered and understanding the interviewee’s experiences.²⁷ With each question, we make sure to get at the students’ views first before answering our own questions. We also discuss with the students how to create an environment in which their interviewees will openly share their experiences. From the very start of the training, the trainers are encouraging students to activate their natural curiosity and empathy as well as their capacity to ask and answer their own questions.

During the first and second sessions, the students collectively begin to use such skills by interviewing a trainer (e.g., someone unknown to them) or their teacher (e.g., someone known to them), both with the assistance of a trainer who is not being interviewed. These interviews are deliberate efforts to model engaged curiosity by an interviewer (e.g., asking for stories, examples, and other follow-up questions) and open

and honest responses by an interviewee. The trainer or teacher being interviewed has been primed to be as forthright and open as possible so that the students can understand what type of responses they are seeking from their interviewees and the questions that will likely elicit such open responses (e.g., “Tell me a story about . . .”). While being interviewed by the students, the trainer guiding them in these interviews encourages the students to ask questions that allow for stories of both challenges and happiness in their lives. Telling stories only of challenges or happiness provides too limited an understanding of the interviewees’ experiences. This component of the training is a conscious effort by the trainers to challenge stereotypes that pathologize groups of people (based on race, class, immigrant status, etc.) by suggesting that they have only suffered in life rather than also experienced joy.²⁸ Having the interviewees describe a wide range of experiences with the entire class encourages the students to seek such breadth in their own independent interviews.

The trainers make explicit to the students during the practice interviewing process that the goal is to get “gold nuggets” that reflect who the interviewees are and how they see the world. Gold nuggets are defined as stories that reveal emotional complexity, depth, and vivid detail so that the interviewer can visualize the experience. They also entail self-reflection and vulnerability by the interviewees and thus foster empathy for them. A story of being a bully, for example, would be a gold nugget only if the interviewees reflected on the reasons for their actions and what they learned from it about themselves. Such nuggets are distinguished from bronze or silver nuggets that may have potential for gold but don’t have much detail, repeat stereotypes or clichés, or are generalized responses that don’t give a sense of what the interviewee thought and felt in that particular moment. For example, if an interviewee reports that his or her mother died, that information by itself would only be a potential gold nugget. It would not become a gold nugget, however, until the interviewee describes the impact and meaning of the loss of his or her mother to the interviewer. The student trainees in the classroom often enjoy this process of trying to get the gold in their interviewees. They begin, after the first classroom-based practice interview, to offer tips to each other on how to ask questions that allow for people to express gold nugget stories.

When the students asked Joseph, for example, in a training session about a “challenging” and a “favorite” childhood memory, he first told them the story of feeling lonely and isolated as a child because he wore “thick glasses” that prevented him from playing with his older brother and friends in his neighborhood growing up. As a result of the students’ repeated questions, Joseph provided much vivid detail to the story so they and the adults in the room could visualize his story. Answering their second question about a favorite childhood memory, Joseph then told a joyful story of the strong relationships he developed with the other boys of color at a predominantly White high school he attended in his hometown in the Midwest. As part of his story, Joseph described his feelings of social anxiety in such a context and the relief provided by the other boys of color in his school. When the boys of color in the classroom heard such stories, they learned not only about the effectiveness of their own questions but also something meaningful about another person that had resonance to their own self-understanding. These practice interviews not only help the students with their listening skills, but also model the ways in which open-ended questions and the expression of vulnerability lead to greater understanding of oneself and others. When Ethan, the teacher, was asked by one of the students about a meaningful childhood memory and responded by describing being bullied, one of the students said: “I understand you; I see where you are coming from. I’ve been there.” In response to a question about friendships, Niobe revealed in her interview feeling insecure with her friends; a boy in the classroom piped up and said, “Me too!” These moments in the classroom underscore a common humanity between and among the students, teacher, and trainers and are a critical part of the training of transformative interviewing.

In the third and fourth sessions, students are asked to pick two people in the school with whom to conduct their own independent interviews to practice their interviewing skills. Specifically, they are asked to pick someone they don’t know very well in the school and someone they know pretty well but would like to know more about. The objective of these interviews is to help the students not only practice their skills but also use their curiosity about other people in the school to connect more deeply with them and thus feel more connected to school. The adults

who get interviewed as part of these practice interviews are happy for the chance to share their stories with the students. The students also report enjoying this process that is often the first time they have been in this position of directing the topic of an interview, and they report feeling a newfound sense of independence and confidence.

Following each of these practice interviews, the students discuss in class how their first interviews went and get feedback from the trainer, the teacher, and the other students. The feedback is focused on their notes from the practice interviews and discussing whether they got gold nuggets. The students typically come back to the classroom feeling like they didn't do as good a job as they had hoped, and are eager to try again. Students also report genuinely liking this part of the training as they get to ask their own questions of people whom they never had a chance to talk to but have an interest in learning more about.

In these first sessions, a reciprocal process of learning is occurring, where the trainers and teacher are teaching and learning from the students, and the students are learning and teaching the trainers and the teachers about what they know about how to get their own questions answered, and understand another person's experience.

Sessions 5 to 9: Preparing for the Interview

The fifth and sixth training sessions are devoted to helping the students select whom they want to interview for their biographical essay and to develop their interview protocols—the actual list of questions that students will ask during their interview. The process of selecting their interviewees for their biographical essay is carefully considered, where the students are asked to interview a person with whom they have a close relationship, but whose life story is at least partially unfamiliar to them. Most students choose family members such as “my mom,” “my grandma,” “my cousin,” “my dad,” or “my uncle,” but others choose teachers or administrators in the school building. The students are asked to focus on questions that might promote deep reflection by the interviewees about the significant events and experiences in their lives. The trainers and teacher also discuss at length the kinds of questions that may limit the possibilities of responses. For example, close-ended questions

such as yes/no questions (e.g., “Are you close with your best friend?”) provide a more limited type of response than open-ended questions or prompts (e.g., “Tell me about your friendship with your best friend.” or “What do you like about your friendship and why?”). The different types of responses one may get when asking an open-ended versus a close-ended question are discussed by the trainers. The students generate their own list of open-ended questions they have for their interviewees and give each other feedback, assessing the usefulness of different questions in light of the focus of their interview. The students are encouraged to focus on areas of interest for them, such as childhood memories, fears and desires, immigration experiences, and friendships and romantic relationships, so that the focus can be on depth rather than breadth. They are told to try to get at least two gold nuggets in their interviews.

While students may generate fairly superficial questions initially (“What is your favorite food?”), by the end of these sessions focused on their interview protocol they are generating deeper and more meaningful questions (e.g., “Why did you break up with that friend?”). Students are encouraged to ask for detailed stories from their interviewees so that they can understand more fully the meaning of the story for the interviewee himself or herself. They are also encouraged to ask questions that will allow them to learn something that they didn’t know before from their interviewee and not just focus on stories that they already know as confirming stereotypes or expectations. Middle school students possess a remarkable ability to follow their curiosity and ask questions that foster self-reflection on the part of the interviewee. The overarching goal of these sessions is to make sure the students focus on a set of questions that they are interested in and that allows them to come to know their interviewees on a deeper level.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth sessions are focused on processing the students’ interviews with their selected interviewees that have been conducted outside of class time, tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the student interviewer. With each interview they conduct, they receive extensive feedback from each other and from the trainer or teacher by sitting in small groups of three or four students with one trainer or teacher and listening to each other’s interviews on their phone or tape recorder (we provide tape recorders for those who don’t

have smart phones). The purpose of these feedback groups is to find out if there is information that they missed in the first and second rounds of their interviews that is necessary for them to have gold nuggets to include in their biographical essays. Usually missing from these initial interviews are details about the event or experience that allow the interviewer to visualize what the interviewees are saying and self-reflective comments by the interviewees that reveal why this memory or story is important to them. Rather than simply, for example, knowing that the interviewee immigrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic, students get details about how she immigrated, whom she was with, what her experience was leaving home, what it was like when she first arrived, how she found work, and other questions that allow the reader to understand the interviewee's experience. Students conduct their second and third interviews with their primary interviewees using the feedback from these small groups. This process of repeated interviews and feedback after each interview fosters the students' perspective taking, critical thinking, and curiosity, as well as their empathy and understanding.

Sessions 10 to 14: Biographical Essays and Public Presentations

The remaining sessions are dedicated to helping students review their transcripts of their interviewee to identify gold nugget stories to include in their biographical essay. During these sessions, the students have lively discussions with their classmates about what does and does not constitute a golden nugget in their interviews. Following the identification of such gold stories, the students focus on writing and rewriting their essay outside of class and getting detailed feedback on the quality of their writing from their peers, the trainers, and the teacher during class. They read the drafts of their essays aloud during class, and their classmates and teacher provide feedback on the quality of their thinking and writing. This component of the training is similar to a typical English class where they are being taught the skills of high-quality writing. It is in response, however, to the stories that they have collected from a person whom they know and wanted to know better.

In the final session, the students formally present their essays to the class and provide each other with feedback on the final product. Putting

the students in the position of giving each other feedback, in large and small groups, not only allows them to learn the skills of interviewing and writing and presenting their essays, but also enhances their listening capacities. At George Jackson Academy, samples of these essays have been published in the school's literary magazine and presented at a youth conference at New York University.²⁹

The transformative interviewing achieves its goal of nurturing curiosity, empathy, trust, perspective taking, and critical thinking skills by teaching the students how to listen closely and ask meaningful questions. The goal is to gain insight into another person and see her or him outside of the constraints of a stereotype. The students and teachers who have participated in our Listening Project report learning new things about themselves and each other that enhance their sense of connection to those in and outside of school.

The Listening Project in Middle Schools

Transformative interviewing is a democratic approach informed by methods of emancipatory inquiry that encourage both the listener (interviewer) and the speaker (interviewee) to transcend traditional divides in order to listen and connect from a place of openness and curiosity.³⁰ The direct engagement with each other, the disruption of stereotypes, and the recognition of both similarities and differences between interviewer and interviewee foster the necessary humility, empathy, curiosity, and mutual understanding that are critical for building trusting and supportive communities and for learning.³¹ Training students and teachers in the skills of transformative interviewing disrupts the dehumanization and stereotypes that lie at the root of the crisis of connection and fosters the types of community that we want for our children, for our students, and for ourselves.

The Listening Project reimagines both students and teachers in middle schools as humans who can contribute in significant ways to our understanding of the world. It also reimagines middle schools and education more generally. Rather than being a place simply of test taking and disciplinary action, it creates a place of active curiosity, exploration, understanding, and connection—a place in which students and adults are better equipped to build supportive communities and make the world a

better place. Noted educators Michael Dumas and Joseph D. Nelson call for a *reimagining of Black boyhood*:

Schools, community centers, neighborhoods, and families [become] places that are less concerned with, for instance, the discipline and control of Black male bodies, and more concerned with being places where Black boys can giggle, play, cry, pout, and be just as silly and frivolous as other children without these activities being perceived as an impediment to their educational attainment or a threat to the well-being of others.³²

Their vision is equally applicable to all students who suffer the consequences of living in a culture and a context that blames them, their parents, and their teachers for their woes and tells them to fix them without recognizing the impossibility of doing so in a context that doesn't recognize their shared humanity. Yet the implication of the call for a reimagining is more than simply about children, their parents, or their teachers. It is reimagining what we are doing as educators and what we should be doing to promote a more just and humane world. Our project asks us to start from a new place in our discussions of educational reform by moving away from an individually focused solution to one that focuses on the context and the human capacity to reach across the divides in a way that nourishes the souls of our students as well as ourselves.

Training students and teachers in the method of transformative interviewing, in particular, addresses the crisis of connection by reframing teaching and learning as a process of elucidating and enhancing our drive to listen, connect, know, and learn. The premise is that active listening and engagement around questions that underscore and evoke our common humanity are themselves an intervention that positively transforms individuals, relationships, and schools. With the Listening Project, we aim to create a paradigm shift in education, transferring the focus from interventions that supposedly address individual behaviors and learning deficits to curiosity and relationship building. And from disparities, bullying, and discrimination to a focus on listening, exploration, discovery, and, of course, connection across “difference” in America. This shift bridges cognitive, social, and emotional capacities and needs; it enables us to make an impact on educational transac-

tions by transforming the context in which they take place. The newly emerging science of human connection points to our common need for caring communities and to the integration of our cognitive, social, and emotional capacities and needs: teachers and students are more motivated, successful, and fulfilled when they feel listened to, when their natural curiosity about each other and their desires to learn are nourished, and when they are connected to each other and to their communities.³³ The Listening Project applies what we have learned from the science of human connection to transform our goals during the middle school years so that we underscore and nourish our common humanity, and thus foster our individual and collective potential to help make the world a more just and humane place.

Appendix: Biographical Essays

The Story of My Mother

My mother was born in Harlem of New York City in 1966. She went to Pre-K at the age of five at Public School Thirty-Six on 123rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue. She was shy and didn't say much when she was young which meant that she didn't have many friends. "I just didn't know how to talk to people. I was afraid to say the wrong thing to people." Yet in September about two weeks after the first day of 1st grade, a girl approached her and they made small talk. The girl's name was Brenda. My mom liked how Brenda was "simple in personality" and someone that she could trust with things such as gossip or secrets. Their relationship continued to grow throughout their school years. They ended up going to the same middle school, the Ascension School, and talked on the phone and played games such as jacks as they lived on the same street and could easily go to each other's houses. My mother and Brenda still live on the same street and Brenda is my godmother.

My mother grew up in a three-person household that included her mother, her father, and her sister, who is three years older than her. The relationship with her sister was not always as loving as it is now. They used to fight over silly things such as the possession of candy or whose bed someone was going to sleep on. After years of tormenting each other, they learned to protect each other as they started to under-

stand that the fighting was taking a toll on them physically and they were really tired of it. My mother said:

It took time for the fighting to diminish and the healing process to occur. We started giving each other time to let our emotions out and hear each other out if we were angry. Counting to ten also helped. We were getting into a lot of trouble with our parents and they were telling us to stop. So we took the time to look at each other as human beings with emotions instead of as annoying pests. When we took this new approach during the end of middle school and the transition to high school, we learned new things about each other, like what our favorite thing to do on the weekend was or what books we enjoyed, and we slowly began to heal.

They became quite close to each other and remain close to this day. My mom's experience with her sister affects the way she parents her children. When she sees her children (my brother and me) fighting it reminds her of her relationship with her sister. She knows that in the future her children will need each other and thus she wants them to build a close relationship now: "I see it now, you and your brother were just like my sister and I growing up when we fought. You will need each other one day."

My mother knows all about the extent to which sisters and brothers need each other because recently her sister got liver cancer at the age of 50 and she is spending her time now taking care of her. She was terrified when she heard the news about her sister because their own mother, my grandmother, had died from breast cancer at the age of fifty-two: "The reason why I stress so much about my sister is because it scares me that the situation is playing out in the same way it did for our mother." My mother's sister helps her every day with cleaning her apartment, getting her medicine, or preparing the food that she is allowed to eat. In addition, on every other Saturday, she helps her sister go regularly to appointments at the hospital on 101st Street and Fifth Avenue. She is relieved that her sister is strong and is actively fighting cancer and surviving.

In addition to her sister, my mother also had a supportive relationship with her own mother before she died. Her mother was an English and Theater major at Hunter College in the early and mid 1950s. She said:

Whether it was with my homework or with dating advice, my mother was always there to help me whenever I needed it most. . . . I would ask if I did the right thing in that situation. For example, when I was seventeen and I had just finished my shift at Woolworths on 116th street and Broadway, a twenty-five-year-old man approached and asked me for my phone number. I declined his request and asked for his phone number because I never liked giving my phone number to people. It felt that a person who had my phone number knew something about me and that seemed weird to me. It turned out that he didn't have a phone and I knew that I didn't want to get involved with him, so I left the scene. When I got home, I talked to my mother about this situation and she said that I made the right move and what twenty-five-year-old doesn't have a phone at such a low price as they were back then. I became less naive as a result of this experience and I realized how valuable my mother's lessons were to me.

Only five years later, however, when my mom was only twenty-two years old in her sophomore year of college at Baruch College studying law, her mother died from breast cancer. Her mother's death was devastating as she lost an open and loving relationship: "My mom had cancer for about a year before she died and it ate me up inside to know that she was suffering. The rest of my family was struggling as well. We supported each other throughout, however, as we saw that each of us was struggling to keep our emotions intact." My mother was depressed for about a year after her own mother's death. It even affected her thoughts about having children: "For a long time I didn't want children because I was fearful of dying and my children feeling that loss of love and support. When you were a baby, I always wanted you to get close to your father so if I died you would have someone."

While she is still fearful of dying, my mother is now happy she had children and spends a lot of time with her children, or me and my brother, and "appreciates and loves [us] with all [her] heart."

Inside Out

My mother was born on July 14, 1978 in Venezuela. Her dad was a farmer and her mom was a nurse and there were six children in the household.

She is currently married, has two children, and is working as a maid throughout the five boroughs. She had a hard time growing up because in her country the military patrolled the streets.

Her family was not poor, but they couldn't buy many things. One time, her father wanted to buy a doll for each of his five daughters, but my mother knew that he couldn't afford it. She told him, "no, give it to the youngest first and then I can wait." Her father was impressed: "I am very proud of you. It is very hard for a nine-year-old to make such a mature decision, since most young children are always complaining about wanting more toys, but you were an exception." When her father said that to her, my mother felt very happy since, coming from such a big family, she was rarely recognized individually. My mother remembers feeling unstoppable and that nothing could bring her down. To this day, she has the same doll that she eventually received from her father and can still remember exactly what her father said to her when she was nine.

Not long after the doll incident, my mother was bitten by a rattlesnake and had to stay in the hospital for three days. When it happened, it was morning and she was in the backyard which were often "mini jungles" in Venezuela. The rattlesnake came out of the jungle and was hissing when she turned around and was bitten. She yelled so loud you could hear it from the moon. No one came. She thought she was going to die because of the poison she assumed was in its fangs. Eventually, her parents came running into the backyard and scared it away. To this day she is scared of snakes: "It sends shivers down my spine every time I think of snakes."

When my mother was 15 years old, another incident occurred that would affect her the rest of her life. It was a day in which the ground, sky, and sun were at peace with one another. It was a day like any other day. Nothing seemed wrong until my grandfather crashed into a huge truck and broke his vertebrae. Now without the ability to turn his head, life became very difficult for him. It also became difficult for my mother who could no longer go places with him or play with him. Her father was in a hospital for year and then in physical therapy for six months using a wheelchair for two or three months. He finally used a cane to walk. My mom was very sad about her father and said, "I felt as if at that moment [when the accident occurred] I could not continue on with my life. But

then I realized I must do as much as possible to make sure that he is taken care of and well nourished.” It was at that point in time that she decided to go to America to make money and send it home so she could help out financially.

Her father and her mom agreed that she could go to the U.S., but told her that she had to come back as soon as possible. When she finally arrived in America, she immediately received a grave message from her parents. Her grandfather on her mother’s side had died. My mother cried for “what seemed like forever.” She was crying mostly for her mom as she knew how important he was to her. It took her about ten years before she could return to Venezuela. Now my mother visits them in Venezuela more often and has never stopped loving them.

When she first arrived in America, my mom went to look for a job. Since she could not speak English very well, it was hard to find one. She finally found one as a waitress in a restaurant. When she was at the end of her shift one day and everyone else had left, the cops showed up and arrested her because there were illegal casino machines in the restaurant. She happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Going to jail in her first year in America made her feel “like killing myself with all this negativity in my life.” But when she had children, they made her feel recognized and happy again so she brushed away the dark memories.

My mother is currently living in Queens with her two children and a husband. She remembers these memories the most because they are the ones that touched her emotionally inside and physically outside. That is why my biography of my mother is called inside out.

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