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Empowering English Teachers to Contend with Gun Violence: A COVID-19 Conference Cancellation Story

STEVEN T. BICKMORE, GRETCHEN RUMOHR, SHELLY SHAFFER, AND KATIE SLUITER

On March 11, 2020, less than twenty-four hours before boarding the plane to attend the Michigan Council of Teachers of English 2020 Think Spring Conference, we found ourselves cancelling our flights in response to a global pandemic. We had looked forward to a robust conference—and the discussion, discovery, and connections that would accompany it.

Currently, we are practicing social distancing, working from home, doing puzzles, preparing food and endless snacks, and worrying about family, friends, and neighbors. In the midst of this event, families and community leaders realize in more intense ways the important role educators have in society. Teachers in school districts across the country are teaching homebound kids. With all classroom instruction comes differentiation, personalization, community building, individual and group assessment, and vast amounts of encouragement. Even though the student is on the other end of a video feed rather than in our classrooms, the teacher's responsibility has not changed. In fact, it has intensified. Parents and other caregivers are realizing the difficulty of constantly engaging students in educational activities under strained circumstances.

We recognize that schools can be a refuge for many students—a place where they can be fed, a place where they belong, a place that provides consistency, and a place where they feel valued and loved. Even prior to COVID-19, the concept of schools being a refuge for students has been challenged. Students and teachers no longer feel safe in schools, with the fear of school shootings and gun violence looming. Our conference topic, “Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Arts Classroom,” addressed the importance of knowledge, safety, security, and community

as we consider the difficult topic of gun violence. All evidence suggests that keeping students safe from gun violence will still be an issue as communities return to “normal” patterns of social engagement, and we see this article as an opportunity for proactivity in such an endeavor.

Knowing that we have the opportunity to broaden our (cancelled) conference audience, we follow a less traditional article format below, highlighting information from planned keynotes, breakout activities, and concluding discussions. Ultimately, we desire that readers are able to navigate the topic of gun violence in this country, in their community, and in their schools with administrators, colleagues, students, and community partners.

Sharing the Book: Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom

Before detailing information from the conference, a summary of our book, *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom* (see Figure 1), can provide some background as it served as the basis for our conference plan (Shaffer, Rumohr-Voskuil, & Bickmore, 2019). In her preface of the book, Ashley Boyd points out that while many in our country would like to avoid talking about gun violence, our students do want to “face the challenges--they desire critical conversations, personal reflection, and thoughtful action around gun violence and school environments” (p. iii). In order to give students what they crave, we as educators need to take a critical look at what conversations we can nurture in the classroom environment. The book addresses gun violence and trauma in its various forms including school shootings, gun ownership, gun violence outside of school, and gun culture—while providing teachers with tools for teaching about and discussing these issues in the classroom.

The text is divided into five sections: 1) the history of gun violence in schools and the ideologies of gun ownership, 2) books that deal with school shootings and their aftermath, 3) books that show recovery and taking action, 4) writing strategies for addressing fear, and 5) how to prepare future teachers for the age of school shootings. The book begins with young adult (YA) author, Chris Crutcher, contesting arguments that perpetuate the misconception that anything other than guns and gun ownership are to blame for violence. This first section continues with essays that consider government action (or inaction), what the gun violence problem looks like from people outside the United States, and how youth are responding.

Sections two and three concentrate on young adult literature (YAL) that can be used as entry points for students to talk about gun violence in schools, the trauma that comes with such attacks, and the ways students can move to take action. Each chapter presents a different text with possible before, during, and after reading activities.

The final two sections of the book focus on writing and the power of telling difficult stories--both for students and teachers. This includes writing as both an outlet for feelings and emotions, but also for becoming an advocate for change. In these sections, authors outline ways to examine rhetoric surrounding gun violence, as well as how to use writing to cope with trauma. The book concludes with a chapter for teacher educators preparing future teachers for a job in a field that has an increasing risk of violence and trauma involved for both staff and students.

Conference Keynote Topics

When Anxiety is Real: Preparing Preservice and Inservice Teachers to Teach in an Age of Uncertainty

As K-12 English teachers, we desperately wanted our students to love what we love. Yet, we knew that not all of our students loved to read or write. In short, very few of our students were like us. We enticed them with stories, we cajoled them into reading books, we encouraged critical thinking about the books in the class, and, yes, we hoped that they would become lifelong readers. Now, as English educators who work with students preparing to be English teachers, we find our students to be kindred spirits. We gather together and joyfully discuss great literature and relish the pleasure of our ideas turned into words on the written page. While some of that is true, that scenario does not comprise most of our class time. We discuss classroom management, curriculum design, essential questions, and the difference between an

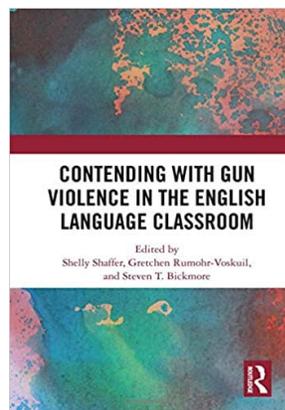


Figure 1. Book cover for Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom (Shaffer, Rumohr-Voskuil, & Bickmore, 2019).

isolated lesson plan versus the value of a thoroughly designed unit with integrated activities that meet standards. We discuss the role of the English teacher in a comprehensive secondary school. We extol the virtues of collaboration within and across departments. We talk about the education of the whole child.

English educators acknowledge that preparing English teachers is more than creating a series of mini versions of ourselves. In both of our teaching worlds (i.e. K-12 and post-secondary), we learned to care for the individual learner. We try to assess where they are, where they need to be, and then work like crazy to help them get there as they navigate their varied lives. Unfortunately, our teaching must now include discussions on topics such as school shootings, which means that difficult questions like the following need to be addressed in order to help our students think ahead to their future identities, ideologies, and practices:

- Must we inform future teachers that school is a place to be afraid of?
- Must we prepare future teachers to face a fatal uncertainty?
- Must we teach future educators to use their bodies as a human shield?

We hope not, yet the world today is more uncertain than it was thirty, twenty, or even ten years ago. There is a strong political divide in many communities, racial tension exists as represented by #BlackLivesMatter or #WeNeedDiversebooks, and unease exists in our lives and communities. All of this uncertainty is uniquely represented by the fact that COVID-19 cancelled our presentation at the MCTE spring conference, and this article was written through a series of Zoom meetings.

Teachers and students feel a heightened sense of anxiety as we try our hand at online instruction, and families, in a vast array of configurations, experience homeschool with new definitions and parameters. Most certainly, this situation will result in more cases of depression, social isolation, and marginalization. Teachers and students try to stay connected

and the reality of the digital divide that has long existed manifests itself in ways that cannot be ignored. And this divide extends itself to the ways we as teachers try, and fail, to keep students safe. In fact, students still see school as a safe place—despite the risk of gun violence that looms over schools. Yet, because of domestic violence, lack of food, or other social factors, students may experience the COVID-19 quarantine as a period of gloom, which could serve as a precursor to more gun violence in the home and in society at large during and after this pandemic.

In short, our pre-service teachers need to think critically about how societal ills, specifically gun violence in and out of school settings, creep into the classroom. We prepare teachers to teach every child, not just the ideal reader who reminds us of ourselves. We reach through and beyond the things that separate and divide us, especially into those communities and circumstances that are not represented by the large majority of teachers, who continue to be white middle-class women.

We must talk about making school a safe place. Both teachers and students might feel anxiety about their safety, and that is hard to explain. We need to talk openly to pre-service and in-service teachers about defending their students against the emotional and physical effects of gun violence and how both intertwine and exist separately from all the instructional concerns of the ELA classroom.

How School Gun Violence is Manifested in YA Literature

I (Shelly) began researching YAL related to school shootings and school violence several years ago. I was motivated by a curiosity and sense of responsibility to find out what texts youth had access to in their classrooms that dealt with gun violence and mass shootings at schools and how authors wrote about this issue. I wondered if YA authors had addressed the issue from a social justice perspective, and what each hoped to accomplish by their books being read by young people. Even during my analysis, I continued to see school shootings reported across the United States, and I wondered if ELA teachers could promote conversation and discussion about this topic with students, which might result in some action and change taking place in schools. In my mind, I always considered awareness and critical thinking as a way of promoting social justice, and I wondered if these books could become a conduit for such work.

Many authors have shied away from writing about school shootings. In fact, one of the earliest books dealing with school shootings, *Rage* (King, 1977) was pulled from publication after King's book was attributed to several school shootings in the

1990's. After a school shooting in Moses Lake, WA, young adult author Chris Crutcher wrote a book with a school shooting plot, but Crutcher admits that the book was on the publisher's desk on April 20, 1999 when the shooting at Columbine High School occurred. Crutcher chose to not have the book published (C. Crutcher, personal communication, November 23, 2019).

In the past decade, several YA books dealing with school shootings have been published by various publishers. In order to think about how authors address school shootings and gun violence in their novels, I conducted a textual analysis of YA texts related to school shootings. I began by reading and re-reading books related to school shootings. Several themes emerged from my analysis. These include: outsider mentality, gun culture, bullying, mental illness, stress, guilt, humanizing, trauma, relationships, family, home life, warning signs, aftermath, and media influence (Shaffer, 2020).

A key finding from my research was that many authors humanized the school shooter. In reality, the school shooters, understandably, are demonized by the press and society. However, I found that in several nonfiction and fiction texts related to school shootings, the stories of school shooters were told in a way that helped the audience to understand their lives in a way the press had not. For example, in Sue Klebold's *A Mother's Reckoning* (2016), Klebold humanizes her son, Dylan. Readers see Dylan as a person and not just as a school shooter. Several YA novels also approach the shooter in this way (i.e. *Violent Ends* [Hutchinson et al., 2015]; *Mercy Rule* [Leveen, 2018]; *Silent Alarm* [Banash, 2015]; and *Aftermath* [Armstrong, 2018]). In some books, authors have told the story from the point of view of the shooter himself, which brings the audience into the shooter's mind, and in others, we learn about the shooter from his sister (*Silent Alarm* [Banash, 2015]; *Aftermath* [Armstrong, 2018]). The families of the shooters struggle; reconciling the person they have known their entire lives with the person who took the lives of so many innocent people is often inconceivable. Even though we may not feel justified in feeling empathy for the shooter, these books help readers to develop empathy.

This research can help K-12 teachers and teacher educators provide space for critical analysis of school shooting texts with students in their classrooms. I have thought about YA fiction with school shootings through the lens of activism in hopes that teachers and students would be able to address this topic in their classrooms and through these conversations, work toward a safer and more just school environment for all students. By confronting the issue of school violence through young adult texts, teachers and students in secondary

classrooms can consider their responsibility toward creating a safer school environment through awareness and knowledge.

Interrogating Gun Violence

Considering the ways that teachers (and teacher educators) must recognize issues in gun violence, consider the tensions accompanying them, and move from complacency toward advocacy, we can also consider how to move students toward similar recognition, reflection, and action. These are our students' books, our students' schools, our students' lives. Our students were born after Columbine; in their eyes, learning has always functioned in tandem with the threat of gun violence: Giffords Law Center reminds us that in America, around three million children are witnesses to gun violence each year (Gun violence statistics, n.d.).

As we work from home under the COVID-19 threat, we know that our students are unlikely to fear a school shooting at their home school. Yet we are reminded by Everytown (2020) that "Firearms are the leading cause of death for American children and teens," with Black children and teens being 14 times more likely than their counterparts to die from firearms. The bottom line is that if our students aren't being threatened by gun violence in English class, they may still be threatened when walking home. This leads us to essential questions: In what ways are students mindful of these statistics? What kind of information do we share with our students, and how much? How will students react to this information? and How can we encourage students to advocate for themselves through self-education and mobilization? We know that YAL can guide us in answering some of these questions. The books referenced in the section above can serve as springboards for discovery, reflection, and advocacy.

Prior to reading gun-related YA books, students can weigh what they know, want to know, and have learned (KWL) when they conduct data digs (Sluiter & Rumohr, 2020). Such activities encourage students to consider their preconceived notions of school shooters, checking these notions against profiles of mass shooters while also exploring teen firearm suicide statistics, such as those found on CNN's "Ten Years of School Shootings" (10 years. 180 school shootings. 356 victims, n.d.) resource. We can ask: What do you notice about these statistics? What do you notice about common situations or characteristics? And in the interest of fostering personal connections with data, we can ask: How do these statistics align or differ from what you notice in your own lives?

Inquiry into data means that we can discuss facts when meeting characters in YA books. We can ask: What do we notice about these characters? How do these characters' personalities,

actions, and situations affirm or challenge the data that we just found? What is important to these characters? What are these characters afraid of? Who is standing up for these characters? Who is challenging them? Who is bullying them? Who is enabling them? Most importantly, we can encourage students toward a triple connection between facts, characters, and self: How are these characters' situations similar to my own? How can I learn from what the characters have experienced and apply it to my own life? How have my own preconceived notions been challenged by facts and textual events, and how can I make sense of this dissonance?

In the past, I (Gretchen) have viewed the word "interrogation" as an aggressive, violent term. Interrogators drive a hard bargain: they gather every fact, insist on consistency, and don't let up until they have all of the information that they need. Yet, we owe our students similar aggression when we model what it means to interrogate a gun-related text. Unrelenting in our inquiry, we can share new facts we have learned, ways that the facts challenge things that we've read, and ways that characters teach us about gun violence. Such discussions can even serve as a bridge from a loaded political topic often based in a family system (such as our students' parents' views on gun violence) to rich textual discussions and connections, prompting students to contribute to broader dialogues and advocacy efforts.

Moving from larger discussions of gun violence to discussion of guns in YA books to ways of interrogating YA books and other texts about guns and gun violence, we now consider some pre-, during-, and after-reading activities that scaffold our students' experiences with gun-related YA literature. Please access the website we created as a resource for our keynote for specific information and resources related to each activity (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Website QR code (tinyurl.com/contentdgun)

Pre-Reading Teaching Activities

Opinionnaires as a Way to Frontload Gun Violence

Opinionnaires encourage readers to connect with textual themes prior to reading a text. Wilhelm (2019) states that frontloading activities such as opinionnaires "prime students' prior knowledge and orient the students by building background for learning about related issues" (p. 115). Frontloading concepts like loyalty and justice can help students to consider their overall implications for gun-related issues. After completing this opinionnaire for Jason Reynolds'

Long Way Down Pre-reading Activity: Opinionnaire

Directions: For each statement below, circle the response that most closely indicates your opinion.

1. **An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree
2. **Most people don't care about standing up for what is right.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree
3. **If enough people stand up for what is right, justice will prevail.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree
4. **Law enforcement can be trusted to bring justice.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree
5. **Being loyal means always fighting for your friends.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree
6. **Being loyal means always keeping secrets.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree
7. **People who are loyal are also well-respected.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree
8. **People can always trust their own sense of fairness and justice.**
Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree

Figure 3. Long Way Down Opinionnaire

Long Way Down (2018), students can group themselves, and debate answers to each question in the effort to discuss how loyalty and justice function in their own lives (see Figure 3).

In completing and discussing this opinionnaire prior to reading, students discover that “inquiry is about them and about the world they live in...and what they learn can immediately be talked about, thought about, and applied to their lives and the world” (Wilhelm, 2019, p.115). And while reading Reynolds’ riveting novel-in-verse that follows a young man as he avenges his brother’s murder, students should be asked to revisit their responses to the opinionnaire and “reflect on how [their work] reinforces and/or changes their thinking about their statements in the survey” (Wilhelm, 2019, p. 116). Students should also be asked how certain characters would answer opinionnaire questions as they read the text, helping them to consider how their own opinions align or differ from those in the book.

The Tea Party

This pre-reading activity featured one of Shelly’s all-time favorite ways of introducing a text to students, Christensen’s (2000) Tea Party. Using Marieke Nijkamp’s text *This is Where It Ends* (2016) to construct the tea party, readers can take on the role of one of the characters. In this activity, Shelly chose to use the text from Nijkamp’s first chapter to create roles for each character. Although Christensen (2000) writes roles for students, Shelly found that using this activity with a text that already includes multiple viewpoints aids in the authenticity of the activity and plunges students right into the action that’s taking place in the text. For this reason, *This is Where It Ends* (Nijkamp, 2016) works well. The first chapter of the

book takes place from 10:01-10:02 AM and features all four main characters: Claire, Tomás, Autumn, and Sylv. Students step right into the character’s mind and thoughts and must summarize and make inferences about the character they are assigned. Then, when they meet the other characters during the tea party, they are able to make inferences about how characters connect to one another. This tea party activity is included in Falter and Bickmore (2018), Chapter 8 “This is Where It Ends: How Studying School Shootings from Multiple Perspectives Promotes Critical Literacy” (Shaffer, Ellsworth, & Crawford, 2018, pp. 89-100). For copies of the roles, see our MCTE conference website.

Nijkamp’s novel *This is Where It Ends* (2016) takes place during a school shooting at Opportunity High School. Told from the point of view of four main characters: the school shooter’s sister, the shooter’s ex-girlfriend, the current girlfriend of the shooter’s sister, and the shooter’s sworn enemy, this novel takes the readers through approximately one hour of time in which Tyler Browne, the shooter, takes Opportunity High School hostage and murders 39 people in the process. Nijkamp takes readers into the emotions and experiences of the four main characters and this novel, with its multiple perspectives, helps readers to think critically about how school shootings impact people in so many ways.

The Tea Party moves readers beyond a simple book talk, anticipation guide, or other common pre-reading activity. At its core, this activity brings characters to life for students, as they explore key ideas from the book through reenactments of the characters. Students meet the other characters during the tea party and share with classmates facts and inferences they learn about the character after reading a short passage. Through the activity, students are able to make predictions and inferences based on the brief introductions they experience. As a pre-reading activity, tea parties have the ability to create excitement about the book and its characters. By choosing an excerpt that highlights key characteristics of each character or by writing a passage about a character, the teacher can introduce the main characters in a novel, and also hone in on the theme or conflict being addressed in the text. In the *This is Where It Ends* (Nijkamp, 2016) tea party, we don’t know yet that a school shooting is imminent by examining the first chapter, but we do learn some key traits of each of the main characters, and when we learn about the school shooting taking place, we already have connections with those characters.

Visual Discovery

Visual Discovery (Lobdell, Owens, & Bower, 2010, pp. 28-37) as a pedagogical practice is common within the social

studies classroom and easily included in the ELA curriculum. The primary purpose of Visual Discovery is to engage students in critical thinking through the examination of a visual product before reading about the issue via fiction or nonfiction. The exercise is a five-step process that helps students understand an issue that will be enhanced when they read the assigned text (see below). An example of this process is thoroughly explained and readily available online in the article, “Crossing Selma’s Bridge” (Bickmore, Rumohr-Voskuil, & Binford, 2017).

Visual Discovery Strategy (Lobdell, Owens, & Bower, 2010)

1. Select powerful images (with layers of meaning) related to the young adolescent literature your students are reading.
2. Project the selected image on a large screen using parliamentary seating, so students are facing each other (in order to facilitate discussion) with a wide aisle in the center leading to the image.
3. Ask carefully sequenced and spiraling questions that lead to discovery.
4. Challenge students to read an informational text (a related passage from young adolescent literature reading), which augments the information garnered from an analysis of the image.
5. Have students interact with the images to promote synthesis and demonstrate what they have learned from the visual and textual sources.

For the purposes of the topic of gun violence, we provide two examples of sources for visual discovery using free access images (see Website QR code). The first example is a series of images from the March on Selma by the noted photographer Spider Martin. While not about gun violence, it is certainly a moment of violence in which police turn on community members. The second series of photographs are from reports of the Kent State shooting on May 4, 1970. Using an image from either group can serve to help students frame questions for the fiction or informational texts they will read as individuals, in small groups, or as part of a whole class assignment.

During Reading Teaching Activities

Presumed Destroyed: How Hard is It to Get Access to a Gun or Weapon?

In the tradition of new critics (Brooks & Warren, 1938, 1943), close reading is a strategy that involves interpretation and interaction between the text and the reader (Beers & Probst, 2012). According to Beers and Probst (2012),

Close reading should suggest close attention to the text; close attention to the relevant experience, thought, and

memory of the reader; close attention to the responses and interpretation of other readers; and close attention to the interactions among those elements. (pp. 36-37)

This suggests that close reading is not only an interaction between the text and the reader, but also between the reader, the text, and other readers. In a classroom, close reading supports these types of interactions because students are able to discuss and interpret the text together rather than in isolation.

Close reading also calls for reading a short text (i.e. a chapter or excerpt from a longer text) a second or third time in order to examine a passage more closely or through a different lens or a more critical viewpoint. The following activity uses an excerpt from the school shooting novel *Violent Ends* (Hutchinson et al., 2015), and readers are asked to note parts of the chapter “Presumed Destroyed” (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2015, pp. 170-183) that stand out or that cause surprise, wonder, or another emotional reaction. After noting those important passages, students are asked to discuss questions and back up their answers with textual evidence. Discussion questions might include:

- How does this particular gun get into the hands of its various owners?
- How does the situation in this chapter impact your understanding of gun control and gun laws?
- Should access to guns be controlled in your state? How?
- How can we keep guns out of the wrong hands?

After discussing these questions with small groups, or as a whole class, students can extend beyond the passage itself to other parts of the text and to the real world by discussing gun control and gun access.

This activity is an opportunity for students to hone their close reading skills and to develop critical thinking about gun control by rereading a chapter from a novel through the critical lens of gun access. By asking specific questions for students to think about during and after rereading, students develop their close reading skills as they discuss and interpret the text with classmates.

Setting the Stage:

Planning Thoughtful Discussions on Gun Violence

As students read gun-related books closely, we must make space for further discussions about guns: How do they function in our lives? How do gun policies affect society? How do guns affect how we do school? Such discussions are difficult to separate from political and religious beliefs, as well as students’ personal fears. While we wish to encourage

passionate inquiry into gun violence, we also wish to model the kind of civil discourse that has been lacking in some gun discussions. One way we can encourage civil discussion is by using YAL as a vehicle for further examination. As teachers, we ask discussion questions before, during, and after students read; White's (1993) questioning strategies point toward authentic, respectful response. Such questions, which include prediction, author's generalization, and structural generalization, can be considered in group settings as well as individually in journal prompts.

Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock (Quick, 2013) is a text rich with discussion possibilities as it follows lonely, depressed, bullied, and sexually abused Leonard Peacock on his 18th birthday, when he plans to kill popular jock Asher Beal and then kill himself. Leonard ultimately abandons his suicide plan thanks to a malfunctioning firearm and a caring teacher. As readers follow Leonard throughout his supposed "last day," they can consider: How does access to guns increase suicide risk? How can we reduce this risk? How can we block others' desire to kill themselves? (Rumohr-Voskuil, 2018). Such questions, among others, can be considered in the context of the book with White's approach, detailed in Figure 4.

White's (1993) "Authentic Questions"
<p>Prediction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (After Leonard leaves Walt's house, p. 26; Leonard talks to Baback, p. 94; Leonard talks to Herr Silverman, p. 122; Leonard talks to Lauren, p. 170) Do you think Walt, Baback, Herr Silverman, and Lauren will report Leonard's strange behavior to someone who can help him? If they do report, what might they say? If you were each of these characters, how would you choose to report? From what we've learned from gun violence data, what kinds of people could help someone like Leonard? (After Leonard interacts with Mrs. Shanahan, p. 100) Do you think anyone will find Leonard's gun? How does the way that Leonard stores his gun align with/differ from what we know about safe gun storage practices? What would you suggest Leonard's mother do to store the gun if she could do things over again? (At conclusion of novel) What might any additional "letters from the future" include? If you were writing a "letter from the future" about gun policy, what might you hope for? <p>Author's Generalization:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (After each letter from the future) What do you suppose Quick is trying to say about Leonard's hopes for the future? How are such hopes similar/different from your own? How does Leonard's access to guns affect his hopes for the future? Our hopes for the future? (When Herr Silverman expresses concerns that Leonard is suicidal, p. 117) What do you suppose Quick is trying to say about helpers through this discussion? What helpers in your life can you communicate with if you are having similar problems, and how can they help you? What people are trained specifically to help you in similar situations? (Throughout the novel) What do you suppose Quick is trying to say about friendship through Leonard's interactions with others? About family through Leonard's accounting of his father, mother, and grandfather? How does the way that Leonard interacts with others differ from/align with what we know about the social practices of shooters? (When Asher's friendship and abuse is revealed, p. 195, and then again, p. 229; <u>teachers must stress that victims of assault are not at fault</u>) What do you suppose Quick is trying to say about shame through Leonard's accounting of his rape? About how to help others cope with abuse? About the role of guns in retribution? <p>Structural Generalization:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (Throughout the book) How do you think this story would be different if Leonard had chosen a different day (non-birthday) for his suicide? If Leonard didn't have the gun with him? If gun regulations had been different than they currently are? (At conclusion of the book) How might this story have been different if Herr Silverman hadn't called Leonard's mother? If Leonard's mom made the pancakes? If Leonard hadn't decided to include gift-giving on his last day?

Figure 4. Questions for *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*, modified from Rumohr-Voskuil, 2019, p. 44

Referencing plot events allows students to "shelve" some of the passion they feel regarding gun violence and instead root their arguments in logic. There is no fear in considering how characters might react if regulations were different; class discussions can remain dynamic yet dispassionate. And when gun violence issues heat up beyond discussions of plot events, we should point to our previous mold: How are our discussions backed by facts? Which of our opinions are motivated by gut feelings rather than logic? In this way, discussing YA literature is a bridge toward civility.

Working with Informational Texts on Blogs: Assessing Accuracy

Sometimes it is all we can do to get students to read. Finally, when they are reading we hesitate to stop them. In my professional experience, talking with colleagues, and working with practicing teachers, it appears the bulk of instruction around a text occurs when we introduce it and when we are finished reading. We privilege beginnings and endings. We spend time with anticipatory questions and summative evaluations of the plot and character development. We might discuss how symbols were used, how examples of foreshadowing played out, or how characters have developed.

As we use more and more informational texts to inform the critical thinking and writing of our students on any given topic, we need to plan how they might track the ideas presented in a variety of forms of informational text. Imagine, as your students read a novel with gun violence as a central theme, they encounter topics that are new to them. For example, what are the laws around selling, buying, and owning a variety of guns? In today's world, many people run to the internet and array of websites representing companies, political movements, lobbyists, and government data. But, how reliable is the information from any given source?

We should encourage and foster inquiry that occurs while students are reading. To facilitate curiosity we suggest providing students with a group of vetted websites on the topic and graphic organizers for them to track information as they read their novel and, occasionally, turn to informational sources. To that end, we prepared a series of four graphic organizers with some advice to help students compare and contrast websites, gather evidence for an argumentative essay, and to evaluate how citations are used within a particular website (see website QR code). Provided here is a graphic organizer designed to compare and contrast websites (see Figure 5).

Comparing Websites		
1. How is it organized?	Details of #1	Details of #2
2. How does it use visuals?		
3. How is the information presented?		
4. How do they support their claims?		
5. Do they ask for money? If so, are the organizations finances transparent?		
6. Is the content subjective or objective?		
There are many components to consider when comparing two websites. On the left are several points to get you started. Begin to record details.		

Figure 5. Graphic Organizer for Comparing and Contrasting Websites.

Post Reading Teaching Activities Bringing Ideas Together through Music to Assess Student Learning

Many adolescents in our classrooms fill their days with music. They pick songs to match their moods. They select different bands and genres to begin and end their days. Some are actively engaged in playing instruments. They play the piano and sing. Some belong to the marching band, orchestra, or jazz ensembles in school. Others form rock and roll bands or produce albums alone in their bedrooms. Music surrounds their lives. Yet, we often forego methods that would allow us to incorporate music into our curriculum, assess student learning, and increase student engagement (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2016, 2017). Music can also be a key way to help students consider gun violence as they read.

Throughout the history of social action in the United States, music has punctuated a movement--the American Revolutionary War with “Yankee Doodle went to town,” or memorialized an event--the Kent State Shooting with “This summer I hear the drumming,/ Four dead in Ohio” (Young, 1970). This has been true of gun violence and one of the most notable songs in this era is “Hell You Talmbout” (Robinson et al., 2015) most notably performed by Janelle Monáe. This song is an homage to people who have been killed by gun violence. The intent is to “Say his/her name” as a call to action for us to remember those who have been killed.

After reading a novel with gun violence or studying informational texts about the issues, students can be placed in pairs for several related activities. First, they might be assigned a song or a music video from a list that the teacher has collected to analyze musical elements, the lyrics, and the intent of the

song (see website QR code).

Second, in the same way directors select songs to create a score for a film, students can be asked to provide a soundtrack for a novel. Students pick a song to accompany the beginning and end of the book and to highlight two or three scenes from the body of the book. Students also provide a brief rationale that connects the song to the tone, symbols, or themes of the specific section, paying special attention to songs that may allude to gun-related events, emotions, or even policy.

For a more aggressive combination of music and ELA, students can be asked to create a musical product. A first step is to ask them to do a remix project. This can take several forms. One is to take a song and add images to create a music video. A sophisticated example of this project is how Common and John Legend created a music video using their song “Glory” (2014) and clips from *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014). Few people watch this movie without the awareness that a key character, Martin Luther King Jr., will lose his life to an assassin’s bullet. Some ELA teachers may be reluctant to take on such a project, so we suggest combining your expertise with a music and/or an educational technology teacher.

Another project is to ask students to write their own songs. They might focus on recreating the tone of the piece being studied, they might write lyrics that respond to the book as a call to action regarding gun violence, or, as in the history of poetry (i.e. Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” or Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”), they might write a song in memoriam of those who were lost. To model this, a teacher might begin by playing one of the many versions of “Abraham, Martin and John” (Holler, 1968). This song has been used frequently as people remember the loss of four American leaders, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy and, his brother, Robert F. Kennedy who were all lost to gun violence.

It might surprise you what students can do and how many of them might be familiar with music making software like GarageBand for iOS, which is a free Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) for any iPhone or iPad, or Soundtrap (www.soundtrap.com), a web based collaborative DAW that is also free. Both of these applications, and others, allow anyone—regardless of musical training—to be able to create and manipulate unique musical expressions easily. Many others will be able to play an instrument with varying degrees of expertise. We encourage our readers to reach out to general music teachers and ensemble directors to see what resources are available and to open the door for collaborative, interdisciplinary learning opportunities. Adding music into the ELA classroom can be fun and invigorating. Johnson

and Goering's *Recontextualized: A Framework for Teaching English with Music* (2016) offers a host of ways that teachers can venture into this cross-curricular adventure.

Please Allow Me: How Different Voices Can Provide a Critical Look at Gun Violence

In the following activity, students will compose a piece using the RAFT technique (Santa, 1988). The RAFT writing strategy helps writers to focus on the Role, Audience, Format, and Topic of their writing. The RAFT strategy "has the potential to help students connect prior and new knowledge, to write in a rich context, and to develop literacy skills that will serve them far beyond the classroom" (Groenke, 2006, p. 27).

In this post reading activity (Henning & Shaffer, 2019), following the reading of a YA novel or unit focused on school shootings and gun violence, students will read the poem "Please Allow Me" from Ellen Hopkins' book, *People Kill People* (Hopkins, 2018, pp. 9-10). The poem takes on the voice of "violence" as a character in the story. Modeling after Hopkins' creative use of voice in her novel, students write a poem (FORMAT) with small groups using a creative ROLE, which could include animate and inanimate objects, such as the gun itself, a law, people affected by guns, historical figures, politicians and critically analyze and connect to the issue of gun violence (TOPIC). After each group composes their poems, each group shares their poems by reading aloud (AUDIENCE).

This activity provides students with an opportunity to connect multiple ideas from the text they read and the various activities they completed while reading the text.

Beyond neutrality, toward advocacy: further writing about gun violence

To encourage students' discussion of gun violence in YA books, they can also read, analyze and respond to gun advertisements. While their emotional reaction to these ads can keep them engaged in the topic, keeping the ad analysis--not their emotions or opinions--at the forefront can encourage them to examine how gun rhetoric works and ultimately develop their critical thinking in ways that bring awareness and advocacy.

With an ad analysis assignment, students can first be asked to informally analyze gun advertisements; a simple Google search of "gun control ads" or "pro-gun ads" will yield a provocative collection that can be shared with students (see Figures 6 for examples).

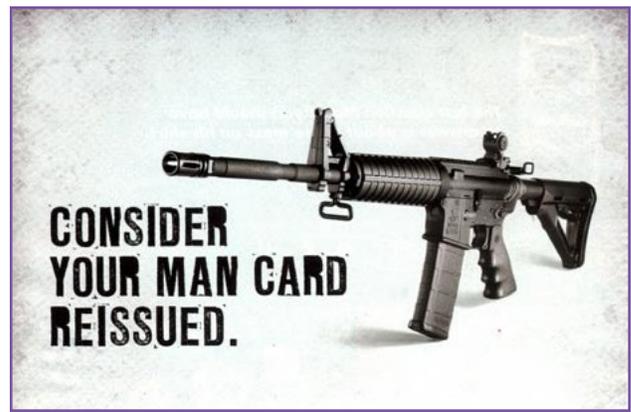


Figure 6. First example is an anti-gun ad from Moms Demand Action's "Dodgeball" campaign (Grey Agency, 2013). The second example is part of the Bushmaster "Man Card" ad (Stampler, 2012).

Once students have these ads in hand (or on screen), they can be put into small groups in order to summarize the main point of the ad, describe its appearance, consider what makes the ad effective/ineffective, come up with questions about the ad, craft an argument that could be supported with the piece, and discuss ways that this ad could be deceptive. Discoveries can be shared in large group discussions, where further insights can be offered and unanswered questions can be flagged for further research.

After students have had a chance to practice their analysis, they can select and analyze another gun ad using the ad analysis assignment (see Figure 7). As students choose ads to analyze, common resources such as the American Public Health Association, Everytown, and the Gun Violence Archive should be introduced and discussed; students can create annotated bibliographies for sources that challenge or confirm their ad's claims. It is in the midst of such discussions that an examination of logical fallacies encourages students' inquiry into their ad--and their own assumptions--even further.

Ad Analysis Assignment:

This assignment will help you with your visual literacy skills, research skills, AND help you learn more about logical fallacies (and successes). It requires that you

1. Select a pro-gun control or anti-gun control print ad;
2. Summarize the overall goal of the ad;
3. Analyze and evaluate several parts of the ad (see list below for ideas) to determine whether it is effective at persuasion AND whether its claims can be trusted.

You can assume the reader has the ad in front of them (and thus, you can limit your written descriptions to the point you are trying to make).

Feel free to refer back to some of the strategies you used in the “practice” ad analysis. This list can help you brainstorm as you analyze your ad:

- What’s the main purpose and message of the ad?
- Who is the ad’s intended audience? Is the ad successful in reaching its audience?
- What parts of the ad catch your eye? Why?
- What is the text of the ad like? Are there too many/too few words?
- How would you describe the ad’s tone? Does the ad’s tone match its message?
- Is there anything about the ad that could offend someone?
- Are the images and words a successful combination?
- Is the ad accurate? Share research to explore the ad’s accuracy.
- In what ways does the ad try to persuade? Is it funny? Shocking? Does it include compelling statistics? Does it picture a celebrity?

Expectations:

The essay will be between 4 and 6 pages. It will include a summary of the ad’s appearance and message towards the beginning; a compelling introduction and conclusion; and at least 3 references to relevant, appropriate, credible research to confirm/challenge ideas.

Figure 8. Gun ad analysis assignment

Overall, challenging students to analyze gun ads encourages civil, grounded habits of mind. To peers that express gun-related opinions opposite their own, they might ask: Can I make sure I understand your opinion? How did you form this opinion? Help me understand why you feel your opinion is how I should feel, too. Even if students don’t see eye-to-eye on their own views, they have nonetheless had practice in learning to listen to and question the opinions of others.

Our original plan was to conclude the MCTE Think Spring conference with reactions from a panel of teachers. Our co-author, Katie Sluiter, one of the scheduled panelists, shares some reactions below.

The Time to Talk is Now: Thoughts from the Field

As both a practicing eighth grade ELA teacher and a doctoral student in the field of English Education, everything about *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom* (Shaffer, Rumohr-Voskuil, & Bickmore, 2019) has been beneficial to me as I (Katie) plan, research, and guide my students through hard topics via young adult and middle grade literature. I read two books with my eighth graders that deal with gun violence: *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018) and *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds (2018). Neither of these books are about a school shooting, but they both highlight kinds of gun violence that my students are likely to encounter: racial prejudice and revenge.

The time to talk about gun violence with our students is now. Even as we sit in our homes and tackle distance learning, we know that gun violence is not taking a break. It is not quarantining itself. Many of our students deal with the fear of

a shooting at home and in the streets, as well as worrying that it will walk into their schools when we reconvene classes. As teachers, it is our obligation to do the research by reading and discussing books such as *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom* (Shaffer, Rumohr-Voskuil, & Bickmore, 2019), and incorporating these difficult discussions into our lessons.

As my students read these books and explored the difficult experiences of the characters, I conducted regular check-ins via Google Forms and written responses. Not only did I want to check for understanding as we moved through our lessons and standards, but I wanted to gauge comfort-level with topics that can hit pretty close to home like racism and violence, and I wanted to get a feel for how engaged students were in the texts our eighth grade teaching team chose. My main concern, as we plunged into racially charged topics, and as a White educator, was to do no further harm to my students of color by presenting realities that they are all too aware of already, yet not identifying Black males as magnets for violence. In this regard, I also sent home weekly emails to parents/guardians outlining the topics, chapters, and supplemental readings that alleviated the single story narrative of violence and Black males. I made sure to invite questions and concerns from all stakeholders as we went forward into these conversations. Students almost unanimously reacted positively to these texts, many commenting that the fact that it’s uncomfortable probably means it’s really important. Parents agreed, telling me their children had not been so invested in a novel for school in a long time.

Students unequivocally agreed that difficult topics like racism and gun violence were not just important to talk about, but subjects they personally connected to. Many students wrote about drive-by shootings, losing family members to gun

violence, and experiencing both micro- and macro-aggressions. It was abundantly clear that students didn't just want to talk about these things, they needed to. They needed to make the connections and have a place to explore possible solutions while also finding those who shared their experiences.

One shortcoming of *Contending with Gun Violence* in the English Arts Classroom (Shaffer, Rumohr-Voskuil, & Bickmore, 2019), however, is its laser sharp focus on school shootings when, statistically, we know our students are more likely to encounter gun violence at or near home rather than in school. While the uptick in violent attacks on school grounds is a good entry point for this discussion, we can't fixate on it and ignore the majority of students' experiences. For example, I teach in a school that, due to the socioeconomic status of most students (more than 76% economically disadvantaged) in addition to their demographics (more than 80% non-White), has a low probability of in-school gun violence. But Chris Crutcher's message from the first essay in the book still stands: the issue is the gun.

If we expose our students to "gun books" that show the violence guns perpetuate, we can open a discussion about all gun violence including school shootings, gang violence, racially motivated gunfire, even accidental discharges. I believe this book is a start--a good start--as educators begin to explore how to tackle gun culture as a whole in their classrooms.

Conclusion

This article, written while Steve, Gretchen, Shelly, and Katie were sheltering in place in three different states, shares the work prepared for the Michigan Council of Teachers of English Think Spring Conference 2020. Unfortunately, we did not get to see any of you there, but it is a privilege to be able to share with you now.

COVID-19 has presented us with so many interesting challenges, but it has also pushed us to expand our thinking about teaching and learning, online environments and online teaching, and the meaning of connection with our friends, family, and colleagues. It has also prompted us to think about life, and its fragility, through a different lens. In the age of COVID-19, when so many are sick and dying, we have closed our doors and stayed inside in order to save others. With the exception of a small minority of (sometimes armed) protestors, Americans have been willing to act in unprecedented ways for such unprecedented times. Given these extraordinary measures, we ask ourselves why people in the United States are not willing to take similarly extraordinary steps to save lives lost to gun violence, which claims 37,000 lives (Everytown

Research, 2020) every year in the U.S. Even with such a divide, may the ways we engage with texts--and our students--lead our schools to a safer place.

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Katie Sluiter is an eighth grade ELA teacher in the Wyoming Public School District in Wyoming, Michigan where she has taught middle and high school students for over seventeen years. She is also a graduate student in the English Education doctoral program at Western Michigan University. Katie has published and presented on the significant impact of young adult literature in the secondary classroom and the best practices of integrating it into an ELA curriculum. Areas she is interested in researching include multi-age, community-based reading programs and opportunities, the influence of author visits on student engagement and learning, and the methods of incorporating traditionally controversial topics with young adult literature in a middle grade ELA classroom.