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5. CLASS ON FIRE

Using the Hunger Games Trilogy to Encourage Social Action

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores ways to utilize students' interest in fantasy literature to support critical literacy. Focusing on Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games series (2008, 2009, 2010), the author addresses how elements of the trilogy relate to violent acts in our world, helping student understand that violence and brutality toward children is not fiction, but very real, and that they can play a role in its abolishment, just like Katniss, through social action projects. Issues such as hunger, forced labor, child soldiers, and the sex trade that appear in both the fictional series and our world are discussed, encouraging students to assess their world and advocate for change. Examples of social action projects that utilize multiple literacies are suggested as a way to inspire students take action in the community and to stand up to injustice and brutality in hopes of creating a better world and a better human race.

Using popular literature to pique student interest, this chapter explores how to incorporate the books in the Hunger Games series into the ELA classroom to support literacy and critical goals.

INTRODUCTION

The Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins, comprising *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010), is a pop culture sensation. With more than 26 million books sold and box office receipts grossing $68.3 million on the opening day of the film adaptation of the first novel, this postapocalyptic, dystopian series clearly appeals to a wide audience that is not limited to a specific age, group or gender.

The Hunger Games, the first book in the series, introduces readers to Panem, a country in North America that is controlled by a wealthy area referred to as the Capitol, which is dependent on 12 poorer districts to supply its inhabitants with the necessary resources to maintain their political dominance and luxurious lifestyle. As punishment for a past rebellion, every district must provide via a lottery system a male and a female tribute between the ages of 12 and 18 to fight to the death in a high-tech arena. Only one tribute walks away the victor.

P. Paugh et al. (eds.), Teaching towards Democracy with Postmodern and Popular Culture Texts, 77–95.

Katniss Everdeen, a 16-year-old girl from District 12, volunteers to be a tribute when the name of Primrose, her younger sister, is drawn. Peeta Mellark, the baker's son who is in love with Katniss and provided her with bread when she was starving, is selected as the male tribute. The book then follows the pair to the Capitol, where they are transformed by stylists to win popularity with the viewing public, sent into an arena with 22 other tributes to murder one another, survive together by gaining the public's sympathy as star-crossed lovers, and incite rebellion in the districts through their unconventional victory. The second and third books, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, recount the events surrounding the rebellion and the eventual overthrow of the Capitol (see Table 1 for a more detailed summary of each book). With a thick love story, action-packed adventure, and shocking twists and turns, the Hunger Games trilogy is a rich meal for the imagination.

There are many reasons to love the series, but one reason I find it so compelling is that Katniss Everdeen is the most accurate depiction of a teenager that I have ever encountered in adolescent literature. Yes, I am a fan of Harry Potter (Rowling, 1997) and Frodo Baggins (Tolkien, 1954) and the Pevensie children (Lewis, 1950) but Katniss Everdeen seems the most *real*. She is oxymoronic with her uncertain impulsivity and her role as a leader and a pawn. She is strong and brave, features I observe daily in my students, but fragile to the point of breaking. Her black and white sense of right and wrong, betrayal and loyalty, is a trait of youth; as she matures, she is introduced to the ambiguity – the gray – of human nature. Considering her similarities to today's teens, does Katniss Everdeen, the "girl on fire" (Collins, 2008, p. 147), a description inspired by her opening-ceremony outfit that blazed with flames, have the power to set our classrooms on fire? To make them burn with desire and urgency and even anger?

By incorporating the Hunger Games trilogy into the classroom, teachers can encourage students to look at current issues of violence and domination in our world, relating them to the injustices faced by the 12 districts of Panem while using students' out-of-school literacy practices, "learning [that students] consider powerful and important" (Moje, 2008, p. 98). Addressing issues of violence through popular literature is important, for as Downey (2005) pointed out, students are desensitized to violence, and one goal of educators is to resensitize them so that they understand the reality of brutality and injustice. In *Entertainment Weekly*, Stephen King (2008) wrote that the Hunger Games series is "violent and jarring" (para. 3). That may be true, but the trilogy is fiction and, therefore, unthreatening to most students. By pairing popular novels with real-world violence, novels that are defined as fantasy or science fiction are kept from being romanticized (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000) and in fact help "students deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society" (Morrell, 2002, p. 72).

However, "once students recognize the reality [of violence], they express feelings of helplessness and a sense of inevitability" as well as the "weight of responsibility" (Downey, 2005, p. 37). This is where the fire metaphor that Collins

Table 1. Summary of the trilogy.

Book 1: *The Hunger Games*
The Hunger Games introduces readers to Panem, a country in North America that is controlled by the wealthy Capitol that depends on 12 poorer districts to supply them with the necessary resources to maintain their political dominance and luxurious lifestyle. As punishment for a past rebellion, via a lottery system, every District must provide a male and female tribute between the ages of twelve and eighteen to fight to the death in a high-tech arena. Only one tribute walks out the victor. Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen year old from District 12, volunteers as tribute when Primrose, her younger sister's name, is drawn. Peeta Mellark, the baker's boy who is in love with Katniss and provided her with bread when she was starving, is selected as the male tribute. Haymitch Abernathy, a previous victor from District 12and a drunk, attends the games with the pair as their mentor. Once at the Capitol, they are transformed by stylist, Cinna, in order to gain public popularity that might lead to rich audience members donating gifts that might aid in their survival. During an interview, Peeta declares his love for Katniss, a ploy she believes is a strategy for gaining more public support. When sent in the arena, 11 of the 24 tributes are killed in the first day. A skilled hunter, Katniss's knowledge of the forest and skills with a bow and arrow help her survive and escape many life threatening situations. She allies with Rue, the youngest tribute from District 11, and displeases the Gamemakes and President Snow when she decorates Rue's body with flowers when she is eventually killed by another tribute. The Gamemakers then announce that there can be two winners if the victors are from the same District. At this news, Katniss sets out in search for Peeta. Playing into the "star-crossed lovers" façade, they ban together and receive gifts from sponsors that keep them alive until the grand finale. When Katniss and Peeta are the last two standing, the Gamemakers change the rules again, stating there can only be one winner. Unwilling to kill each other and determined to beat the Gamemakers at their "game," Katniss and Peeta act as if they are going to commit suicide by eating poisonous berries. Knowing that two victors are better than no victor at all, the Gamemakers declare them both winners. After the ordeal, Haymitch reveals to Katniss that she has incited President Snow's fury at so openly defying the rules. Knowing she has put her family in danger, she quickly tries to convince the authorities that "love" made her act so irrationally, declaring it was not an act of open defiance. On the way home, Katniss tells Peeta that her actions of love in the arena were an act to keep them alive, a truth that leaves Peeta heartbroken.
Book 2: *Catching Fire*
As winners of the Hunger Games, Katniss and Peeta are subjected to participate in a "Victory Tour" of the country. Katniss is visited by President Snow who threatens her with the consequences of inciting any further rebellion. While in District 11, Katniss speaks of Rue, her young ally. The audience reacts by saluting Katniss when a man whistles Rue's tune that she used to sing to the Mockingjays, an act that costs him his life. After returning to District 12, Katniss encounters two runaways from District 8 who tell her of other rebellions and their belief that District 13, previously thought to have been demolished in the rebellion, actually still exists. It is then announced that for the next Hunger Games, previous victors will be forced to compete again, an event known as the "Quarter Quell" that happens every 25 years. Katniss and Peeta are forced into the arena again. Katniss promises to herself that she will protect Peeta. While in the arena,

Katniss and Peeta join up with Finnick and Mags from District 4, Beetee and Wiress from District 3 and Johanna from District 7. They soon find out that the arena is set up like a clock, meaning each danger is triggered in a specific parameter during a particular hour. The alliance decides to create a trap to eliminate two contenders using the electricity from the force field that surrounds the arena. Katniss is charged with directing the lightening rod, and the shock of the blast knocks her out, leaving her temporarily paralyzed. When she wakes up, she is on her way to District 13. It is then revealed to her that there was a plan among most of the tributes to break out of the arena. While they succeeded in escaping, Peeta and Johanna were captured by the Capitol. Gale, Katniss's best friend from District 12, tells her that in retaliation, District 12 was bombed and destroyed. However, he managed to get her family out in time.

Book 3: *Mockingjay*

Safe in District 13, Katniss is coerced in becoming a symbol of the rebellion: "the Mockingjay," so named for the pin she wore during the Hunger Games. Before agreeing, Katniss demands that she be allowed to kill President Snow. Peeta and Johanna are rescued from the Capitol, but Peeta has been brainwashed to hate Katniss and tries to kill her during their reunion. After securing many of the districts, the rebels attack the Capitol. During the assault, many of Katniss's allies are killed, and killing President Snow becomes impossible as he has surrounded himself with all of the Capitol children to use as a human shield. During the attack on the Capitol, bombs are dropped on the children and the rebel medical team rushes in to help, including Katniss's sister, Prim. Prim dies as another set of bombs explode, making Katniss catatonic with grief. The Capitol is secured and President Snow is found guilty for crimes against humanity; however, it was president Coin, District 13's President, who ordered the bombing of the children, not President Snow. The bombing tactic was also originally developed by her best friend, Gale. Although he was not directly involved in Prim's death, their friendship is forever altered. President Coin then suggests holding a Hunger Games using the Capitol's children as retribution for all of the Hunger Games that killed District children. Knowing that President Coin is no better than President Snow, Katniss shoots her with an arrow when she was supposed to execute Snow. During the riot that follows, Snow chokes on his own blood and dies. Katniss is taken into custody where she tries to kill herself with a cyanide pill, but Peeta stops her. When on trial, Katniss is acquitted due to temporary insanity and she, her mother, Haymitch and Peeta return to District 12. As Peeta recovers from his brainwashing, Katniss finds herself falling in love with him. Together they make a book that pays respect to past fallen tributes and begin to heal. In the epilogue, Katniss speaks as an adult, revealing that she and Peeta had two children, who represent the future of Panem. While She and Peeta still have nightmares and traumatic, emotional scars, they teach their children about their past so as to ensure it does not happen again. When Katniss feels the evils of the world around her, she, plays a "game" where she remembers every good thing she has seen a person do since the fall of the Capitol. The irony of this game is not lost on her, but she admits that there are worse games to play.

employs so effectively throughout the trilogy can be appropriately transferred to the classroom via social-justice education and social-action projects. By raising awareness and advocating for change, such projects encourage students to assess their world and take action against the social problems they observe (Wade, 1997), allowing them to make a "real and material change in what people do, how they

interact with the world and with others, what they mean and what they value, and the discourses in which they understand and interpret the world" (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998, p. 25). According to Morrell (2002), students will then be "motivated and empowered by the prospect of addressing a real problem in the world" (p. 76) and will use multiple literacies in hopes of changing it.

This article addresses how elements of the Hunger Games trilogy relate to social injustices in our world and presents activities for the language arts classroom that can foster literacy and help students understand that violence and brutality toward children are not fiction but fact. The activities can engage students to play a role in the abolishment of harm toward children, just as Katniss does, by using their literacy skills to participate in social-action projects. For example, the hunger and starvation experienced by the districts can relate to issues of hunger in the United States by comparing the Capitol's wastefulness to that of the U.S. population. The forced labor in the districts correlates with various types of involuntary employment around the world. The idea of children set against one another in combat is relevant to the use of child soldiers in many African countries. And Finnick's description of how victors are sold as sex objects is a means for revealing the booming sex trade and sex-slave industry that occur in all major countries, even the United States. Although focusing on these dark issues may seem too heavy for adolescents, it is equally difficult for teachers because "one of the great difficulties in teaching about horrific periods of history, the underbelly of human experience, is addressing how to help students comprehend the incomprehensible" (Downey, 2005, p. 33). The horrors with which students will become familiar may alter their conception of humanity, but the social-action projects in which they can participate will show them that, as long as there are people like Katniss and themselves who are compassionate and brave enough to stand up to such brutality, there is hope for a better world and a better human race.

CRITICAL LITERACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Similar to Katniss's development throughout the trilogy, "through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us" (Shor, 2009, p. 282). To understand the world's role in our self-development, critical literacy is a "pedagogical process of teaching and learning, by which students and teachers interrogate the world, unmask ideological and hegemonic discourses, and frame their actions, in the interest of the larger struggle for social justice" (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 279). According to Freire and other critical theorists, a critical-oriented mindset can be developed through conscientization and problematization. The term *conscientization* (*conscientizacao*) implies obtaining a critical consciousness that enables one to demythologize reality (Freire, 1970/1986). Once one obtains a critical consciousness, that person has obtained "awareness of oneself as a knower" (Berhoff, 1987, p. xiii) and is able "to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970/1986, p. 19).

According to Greene's (1993b) explanation of the purpose of the language arts classroom, developing a critical consciousness is essential in helping students

articulate their experiences, empower others, and imagine the world differently. With this in mind, social-justice education is especially amenable to the language arts classroom because reading and talking about fiction make a difference in how we live together democratically (Davis, 2010). It is therefore natural for social-action projects to stem from the critical reflection of literature, especially those texts drawn from popular media sources (see Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999) because the projects can engage students in meaningful experiences through – not just with – literature (see Rosenblatt, 1938) and provide "transformative practice [that] engages students as critical thinkers, participatory and active learners, and envisioners of alternative possibilities of social reality" (Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003, p. 167). Doing so helps "encourage student voice and responsibility" (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005, p. 72), skills that are relevant to the language arts classroom and students' developing sense of citizenry.

SOCIAL ACTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Golden and Christensen (2008) reminded critics that social-action projects are "academically rigorous" and that social justice does not supersede learning the skills needed to "traverse the world" (p. 60); on the contrary, social-action projects require students to take their learning into the community to benefit the greater good through the use of their learned skills. With this in mind, teachers have incorporated such projects into their classrooms in various ways, but all projects have one thing in common: they allow students to express their feelings and desire for change to the wider community. For example, Plemmons (2006) incorporated a social-action project in his classroom when students were outraged about the destruction of historical landmarks in their county. The students took pictures of specific landmarks and wrote poems from each landmark's perspective, giving these inanimate objects a voice. Plemmons then had the photos and poems published and delivered copies of the students' work to doctors' offices, libraries, banks, historical societies, and tourist sites to bring awareness to the community that their cultural heritage was being neglected and needed to be preserved. In addition, Darts (2006), an art teacher, described how her students incorporated performance and multimedia artwork to combat hate and violence instigated by discrimination. Students led small-group discussions on such topics as bullying and displayed artworks around the school to advocate for respect and tolerance. Through artistic and language skills, Darts's students attacked issues they faced in their everyday lives – racism, discrimination, and bullying – and became active participants in change.

Furthermore, after reading several newspaper articles that portrayed "OCHS students as being a bunch of 'druggie, loser, good-for-nothing' kids" (p. 32), Mancina (2005) engaged her students in an action-writing project that aimed to change the community's view of their school and student body. Also using writing as a platform for change, Borsheim and Petrone (2006) encouraged students to critically question the world by providing them with examples of authors whose research questioned the status quo: for example, Eric Schlosser's (2002) *Fast Food*

Nation and Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) *Nickel and Dimed*. Students then researched issues important to them and distributed information throughout the community in the form of documentaries, letters, and brochures.

Inspired by Bomer and Bomer's (2001) action-writing project that encouraged students to write to city officials about police brutality, Epstein (2010) aimed to incorporate social action into her own classroom. By writing about complex social issues, her students were able to articulate their opinions and passion about political issues while fulfilling reading and writing standards. As Epstein continued to include these writing assignments in her class, she hoped that "students will eventually develop a sense of identity beyond that of 'student' to one of informed, concerned activist" (p. 365).

These action projects not only strengthened the literacy goals of each teacher's classroom by enhancing communication skills and building critical thinking (Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2005), they also lent "reality, importance, and purpose to reading, making it a part of students' 'here and now'" (Wilhelm, 2002, p. 160) and served as a source of empowerment, showing students that they had the ability to speak out to support change in their community.

Social Justice and the Hunger Games

Teachers of adolescents can engage students in similar projects by using as a catalyst the Hunger Games trilogy, a text that is currently in students' "here and now."

HUNGER

Collins (2008) introduces the effects of hunger as a major theme early in the series when Katniss describes the following:

> Starvation's not an uncommon fate in District 12. Who hasn't seen the victims? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Straggling through the streets. And one day, you come upon them sitting motionless against a wall or dying in the Meadow, you hear the wails from a house, and the Peacekeepers are called in to retrieve the body. Starvation is never the cause of death officially. It's always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one. (p. 28)

This passage tells us that the people of District 12 do not receive enough resources to sustain the population and that those in charge turn a blind eye to the cause of so many deaths (see Table 2 for a brief description of each district). Later, the reader learns that the Capitol is full of gluttonous people who waste food that could haveeasily saved thousands of lives across Panem (Collins, 2008). The overabundance of food and people's wastefulness are especially clear in *Catching Fire* (2009), in which it is revealed that citizens of the Capitol drink a liquid that makes them throw up, effectively emptying their bellies, so that they can continue

Table 2. The districts of Panem.

District	*District Attributes*
The Capitol	The Capitol is in the Rocky Mountains. The inhabitants of the Capitol are frivolous, shallow, and gluttonous. They are concerned with luxuries and outrageous fashions and are generally ignorant and/or uncaring of the poverty and starvation in the districts.
District 1	District 1 provides the Capitol with items such as diamonds, gems, and fine materials. This district illegally trains children, known as "careers," to participate in the games. It is thought to be near the Rocky Mountains.
District 2	District 2 provides the Capitol with many of their "Peacekeepers," and it is the source of the Capitol's weapons. Because of the Capitol's dependency, this district is favored and often given preferential treatment, which also suggests that it may border the Capitol. "Career" tributes are also trained in this district.
District 3	District 3 tributes are skilled in electronics and other elements of engineering because their industry involves technology. Wiress and Beetee, allies of Katniss in *Catching Fire*, provide a means for the tributes to destroy the arena's force field. It is assumed that District 3 is close to Silicon Valley.
District 4	Tributes from District 4 are strong swimmers and skilled with knots. That is because they are the fishing district. Finnick Odair, another ally from the Quarter Quell, comes from this district, which possibly lies near the Gulf of Mexico.
District 5	District 5's industry is power. It is unclear where this district is located. Foxface, a clever girl who dies accidentally by stealing Peeta's poisonous berries, is from this district.
District 6	District 6 provides transportation, suggesting that it is near Detroit. The two tributes from this district are "morphling" addicts, an indication that it may also produce pharmaceuticals.
District 7	District 7 produces lumber and paper. Johanna, another ally from *Catching Fire*, is dangerous with an axe and reveals that the smell of pine needles reminds her of home. These clues imply that District 7 is near Oregon and Washington.
District 8	Because the two District 8 runaways in *Catching Fire* are traveling on foot, it can be surmised that it is close to District 12. The district's industry is textiles and clothing.
District 9	District 9's industry is grain, which suggests that it is in the Midwest. Little else is known of this district because its tributes die early in the games.

District	*District Attributes*
District 10	Because the tributes from this district are dressed in cowboy costumes during the games and the tributes for the Quarter Quell wear cowbells, it is assumed that the industry is livestock. This leads one to believe that the district is close to Texas.
District 11	Rue, Katniss's young ally during the games, comes from this poor district. The industry is agriculture, and small children are forced into the highest trees to pick fruit. District 11 is thought to be in the South because growing fruit requires a warm climate. Because of Katniss's tenderness toward Rue, District 11 sends her a loaf of bread during the games.
District 12	Katniss and Peeta are from District 12, the poorest district in Panem. The industry is coal mining. Katniss illegally hunts game in the forest to feed her family, but others die of starvation. Katniss reveals that District 12 was once called Appalachia.
District 13	District 13 is secretly rebuilding and represents a threat to the Capitol because its industry is nuclear energy. The underground community is militant in its efficiency and is governed by President Coin. District 13 is a week away from District 12 by foot, so it is assumed that it is close to New England.

to gorge on delicacies provided at a feast. As Katniss witnesses this spectacle, she thinks, "all I can think of is the emaciated bodies of the children on our kitchen table as my mother prescribes what the parents can't give. More food" (Collins, 2009, p. 80). The irony of starving children lying on the kitchen table, a place associated with bounty and reserved for meals, is not lost on the reader and adds to the horror of the image while magnifying the wastefulness of the Capitol.

Hunger in America

Collins revealed in an interview that "the sociopolitical overtones of *The Hunger Games* were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events, including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations" (Blasingame & Collins, 2009, p. 726). Still, hunger as a method of control is not what initially disturbs the adolescent and adult in the United States; it is the blatant waste of food while others starve that makes our stomachs twist. Why does it make us so uncomfortable? Because if we look at patterns of wastefulness in the United States, we are more closely associated with the Capitol, the bad guys, than with the districts. For example, we overconsume food, which contributes to the country's high obesity rate, but waste vast quantities at the same time. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2012), in 2010 approximately 34 million tons

of food were thrown away. These facts force us to question how our standard of living affects others and the environment.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (2000), 792 million people worldwide, and 20% of the population in developing countries, suffer from chronic food deficits. In 2004, Timothy Jones, an anthropologist, concluded a 10-year study that showed that an average individual U.S. household wastes 14% of food purchases (William Reed Business Media, Nov. 25, 2004), supporting our nickname as the "throw-away generation." To address these issues, Atlanta Community Food Bank (2011) devised a curriculum called Hunger 101 (www.acfb.org/projects/hunger_101) to educate and empower students to support change in their communities. The program, which is aligned with state academic standards, has been adopted by multiple food banks and food salvage programs around the country to inspire social responsibility in the school system. The program includes local facts about hunger, suggests that students explore definitions of hunger and food security and factors that contribute to hunger, and understand the nutritional consequences of hunger, all while fostering critical thinking skills. Students are asked to think of practical and effective solutions to hunger and provide short-term and long-term initiatives to empower them to take action in their own communities.

Although 22.3% of children in my state (Georgia) live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), the area in which I teach is relatively middle class and the students have had little experience with poverty. As I have argued before (Simmons, 2011), some middle class students may choose to ignore critical issues of inequality because they have latched on to the idea that everyone is an individual and "equal." Therefore, having read the Hunger Games series, students who have not experienced need can use the text as a reference when discussing hunger, its reality, its causes, and its consequences.

Taking Social Action

Inspired by Hunger 101 and teachers' social-action projects, educators can foster social responsibility in students by allowing them to choose a project that addresses hunger. Working individually or in small groups, students can start a food bank, help advertise for a local hunger walk (the one in my metropolitan area raised $214,000), encourage home gardens or create one for the school, inform students about foods that can be frozen and eaten later instead of thrown away, or organize a letter writing campaign. Some of these activities may seem unrelated to the language arts classroom, but putting such programs into motion and ensuring their success require the use of many ELA skills. For example, the projects incorporate research, technology, expository and persuasive writing skills, public speaking, reflection, and creativity, not to mention the reading of the mentor text, *The Hunger Games*.

While implementing these projects, it is important to note that some students are financially unable to contribute to money or food collections. However, these projects are a valuable opportunity to show all students that multiple ways exist to

better one's community and that money donation or food donation – collection activities that are most popular in public schools and churches – are not necessary to make a difference. Instead, students can use their passion, skills, and knowledge, as well as the resources of the classroom, to create change.

For instance, one specific issue that is relevant to students' lives is wasted food from the school cafeteria, which provides a valuable opportunity for a letter writing campaign. Pat Meadows, a director of child nutrition, told Vreeland (August 23, 2010), a reporter, that it is against federal law for school food to leave the premises, making it impossible to donate the excess. In response, their county schools reduced waste by "batch cooking," preparing foods as they were served, ensuring that items were used on an as-needed basis and saving uncooked material for the next day. If your school does not participate in such methods, students can begin a letter writing campaign to county school officials informing them of the benefits of batch cooking and how it can reduce food waste. Considering that *The Hunger Games* references how propaganda was used to persuade citizens of Panem to side with either the Capitol or the rebels, such a project can focus on persuasive writing skills and rhetorical devices, encouraging students to avoid illogical reasoning and fallacies while still appealing to the audience's emotions and sense of ethics and logic. Such projects vary in complexity, time requirements, and resources needed and can be implemented throughout the school year or in a specific unit.

SLAVERY: INVOLUNTARY LABOR, FORCED WARRIORS, AND THE SEX TRADE

Hunger is not the only issue experienced by citizens of Panem; forced labor, violence, and sexual exploitation are also daily truths for those living in the districts. This reality exists not only for adults in the novels; children about the age of our students submit to many forms of modern slavery to survive.

Involuntary Labor

For example, those living in the districts are forced to work to provide food, energy, or other materials so that citizens in the Capitol can continue to live in luxury. Gale is a prime example of this forced labor. To feed his family, at the age of 18 he is lowered into the mines to collect coal, most of which is sent to fuel the Capitol (Collins, 2009). Even though no one is holding a whip to his back, this is still a form of slavery, for Gale must engage in a hazardous occupation, receive an unfair wage, and gain little reward for his hard work while those in the Capitol reap the benefits of his efforts.

In real life, the situation is similar for many victims. The International Labor Organization (as cited by the U.S. Department of State, 2006) reported that at least 12.3 million people around the world are trapped in various forms of forced labor, from sweatshops to farm work to prostitution. Approximately $20 billion in wages is stolen from these workers, leaving them in debt bondage or poverty.

An especially violent example of forced labor in Sierra Leone is the mining of conflict diamonds, also known as blood diamonds, which are sold by rebels to fund armed conflict. To intimidate the locals, rebels often murder, mutilate, and enslave the population and force them to mine the diamonds (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2001). In District 12 (see Table 2 for details on the 13 districts), the Peacekeepers also resort to such tactics to ensure that the Capitol receives enough coal from the mines. For example, after Gale is found hunting in the woods to supplement his poor wages, he is brutally whipped for the crime (Collins, 2009). This brutality keeps the population dependent on the mines for its sole means of survival.

Brutality is further highlighted when Katniss meets Bonnie and Twill, two runaways from District 8. Katniss describes District 8 as a "place stinking of industrial fumes, the people housed in run-down tenements" (Collins, 2009, p. 142). Bonnie and Twill tell Katniss of the uprising in their district, giving an account of how citizens were required to work in factories, make goods for the Capitol, and live in squalor. When the workers rebelled,

> there was a lockdown. No food, no coal, everyone forbidden to leave their homes. The only time the television showed anything but static was when suspected instigators were hanged in the square. Then one night, as the whole district was on the brink of starvation, came the order to return to business as usual. (Collins, 2009, p. 145)

Violence and fear in both Panem and our world keep people in situations in which they are forced to work in dangerous conditions, receiving only the bare essentials to ensure that their bodies survive and are able to perform the same tasks day after day.

Forced Warriors

Forcing children into violent situations that require them to kill or be killed is the major theme of the Hunger Games series. As punishment for the districts' rebellion to the Capitol's rule, the Capitol created the Hunger Games to remind the districts of its power. Katniss describes the games in this way:

> Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch – this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. "Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you." (Collins, 2008, p. 76)

Forcing children to fight to the death, according to President Coin, the leader of District 13, represents "'vengeance with the least loss of life'" (Collins, 2010, p. 369). In real life, forcing children to fight battles is also a form of vengeance, as children of people who oppose an invading army are forced to become members of that same army, as has been the case in some areas of Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and

Uganda (Annan, 2000). It is as if to say, "You fight against us; you fight against your children" – a sick but effective tactic.

According to the International Rescue Committee (2011), approximately 300,000 children globally are trained to be "instruments of war" (para. 1) and "as many as 50 countries currently recruit children under age 18 into their armed forces" (Annan, 2000, p. 1). In *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), Ishmael Beah, recruited into the army in Sierra Leone when he was 13 years old, tells of the horrifying effects of using children as soldiers. Sharing his experience, Beah revealed to the United Nations Economic and Social Council that he fought because he "had to get some food to survive, and the only way to do that was to be a part of the army. It was not easy being a soldier, but we just had to do it" (2007, p. 199). Annan (2000) confirmed Beah's reasoning when he reported that children offer their services as soldiers to get regular meals and medical attention. Similarly, because of hunger, children in Panem sign up for tesserae, a year's supply of grain and oil for one person that can be bought in exchange for placing their names multiple times in the lottery. Doing so increases their chances of being selected for the games (Collins, 2008), showing how starvation and hunger remain the major incentives for putting oneself in danger.

When philanthropic organizations attempt to reintegrate child soldiers into society, the emotional and social wounds prove to be more devastating than any physical harm the children may have encountered (International Rescue Committee, 2011). When UNICEF removed Ishmael Beah from the front lines, he reported symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. His symptoms included violence toward UNICEF staff members, horrible nightmares about the violence he inflicted on others, debilitating migraines, and an inability to come to terms and forgive himself for the atrocities in which he played a role (Beah, 2007). Therefore, it would be appropriate to pair Beah's memoir with the Hunger Games series because it allows students to draw comparisons between the characters' experiences, reactions, guilt, suffering, and eventual healing and those of Beah, showing how what we believe to be fiction is reality for some children.

In *The Hunger Games*, Annie, Finnick's wife and a former tribute, illustrates the lasting emotional, mental, and social effects of witnessing and participating in violence. Because she saw the beheading of District 4's male tribute (Collins, 2009) Annie cannot stand arguing, loud noises, or any talk that references violence or the Hunger Games. Her tragic past experience has debilitated her capacity to function in a "normal" community. Furthermore, at the end of the series, Katniss discloses her and Peeta's moments of panic when she reveals that "there are still moments when he clutches the back of a chair and hangs on until the flashbacks are over. I wake screaming from nightmares of mutts and lost children" (Collins, 2010, p. 388). Although they have become more adept at functioning in society after their ordeal than Annie was, it is still clear that Katniss and Peeta's experience as tributes in the Hunger Games left them afflicted with emotional scars that will be prevalent throughout their adult lives.

The Sex Trade

Being a victor and surviving the violence of the Hunger Games does not mean that one can retire and live out one's days in peace. Finnick's story of what happened to him after his victory is a prime example of the continued exploitation of Panem's children. Collins (2010) writes,

> "President Snow used to … sell me … my body, that is," Finnick begins in a flat, removed tone. "I wasn't the only one. If a victor is considered desirable, the president gives them as a reward or allows people to buy them for an exorbitant amount of money. If you refuse, he kills someone you love. So you do it." (p. 170)

Katniss suggests that Finnick was not the only victor to endure such intimidation. Although Haymitch, Katniss's mentor, was not blackmailed into prostitution, he suggests that the Capitol killed his family and girlfriend to warn victors of what would happen if they didn't obey President Snow. He told Katniss, "I am the example. The person to hold up to the young Finnicks and Johannas and Cashmeres" (Collins, 2010, p. 172). Listening to Finnick's story and realizing that attractive, young female victors were also subjected to prostitution made Katniss reflect on what might have happened to her had she been the sole survivor of the 74th Hunger Games.

Unfortunately, child prostitution is not a fictional horror created out of Collins's imagination. According to the Juvenile Justice Fund (2012), more than 2,800 men in my state (Georgia) have been involved with an adolescent prostitute, and 250 girls are victimized every month. Despite these alarming statistics, underage prostitution is considered a "low visibility" crime (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007, p. ii); as a result, the gruesome techniques used to manipulate young girls into preforming such acts are not widely known. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (2007), 50% of girls engaged in prostitution are controlled by pimps who sometimes beat and threaten them by telling them that their families will be harmed if they do not cooperate. Furthermore, "often traffickers tell children that if they escape or cooperate with law enforcement, previous cash advances to their families and other money 'owed' will be collected from their parents, who may also be physically harmed" (p. 5). Finnick shows the effectiveness of such tactics when he submits to President Snow's demands out of fear that someone he loves would be hurt if he refuses. Like the rich people in Collins's series who are willing to pay a high price in exchange for sex with victors, those seeking to sexually exploit underage children are participating in sex tourism, traveling to countries with developed sex industries and spending large sums to engage in sexual acts with "exotic" adolescent girls.

Taking Social Action

As mentioned in the previous section, students can engage in multiple social-justice activities that do not require money donation, although some worthwhile,

long-term initiatives do require such tactics to enable change. One example is Loose Change to Loosen Chains (LC2LC), "a student-led campaign for elementary to college students to combat modern-day slavery while learning about the reality of injustices today" (International Justice Mission, 2012). This organization has raised more than $10 billion by collecting loose change that people have lying around the house.

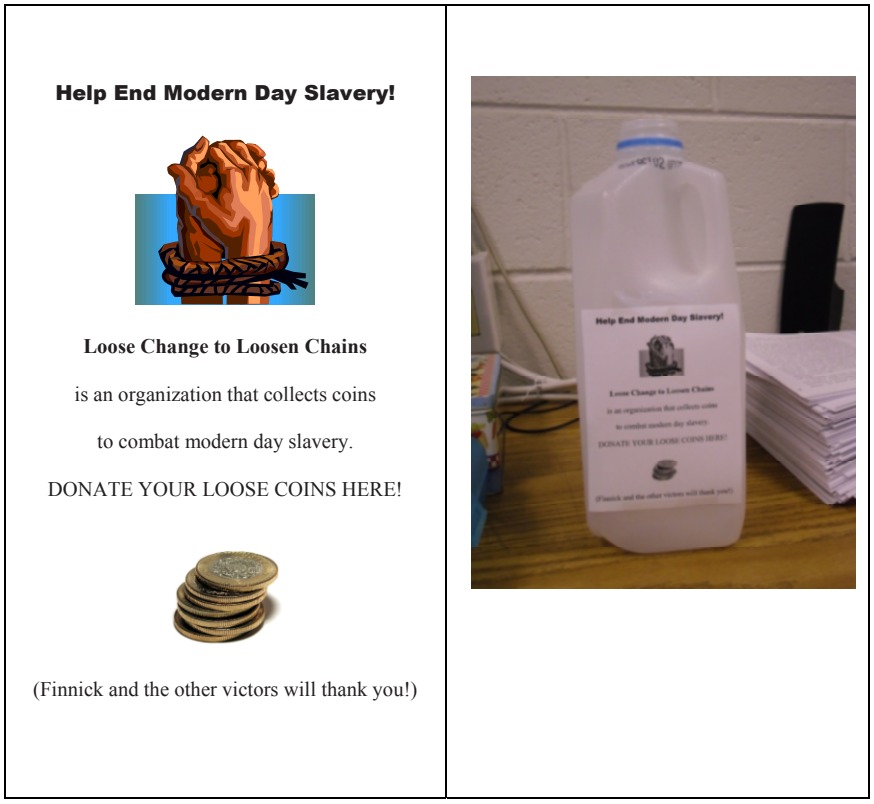

Figure 1. Sample social-action project.

To initiate this program at their school, students can participate in a multimedia project that encourages them to use their creativity, writing, and digital literacy skills to create a logo, slogan, posters, and a challenge video. Using an empty milk jug, students can glue their slogan and logo onto the container and distribute the containers to each classroom (see Figure 1). Students can hang their posters, which include researched statistics on modern slavery, and feature their challenge video during the school announcements. In this way, loose change can be collected schoolwide to end slavery. Although this project does involve money collection,

students are not obligated to contribute; moreover, by requiring donations in the form of change and leaving the jug in the classroom all year, participation remains anonymous. Even a penny can contribute to a greater cause.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although I agree with Banks (2003) that "an education that focuses on social justice educates both the heads and hearts of students and helps them to become thoughtful, committed, and active citizens" (p. 18), a focus on such difficult topics may lead to complaints that the curriculum is "too depressing." Zandy (1994) sympathized, stating that "we all want to divert our eyes, our awareness" (p. 47). But language arts teachers have a responsibility to make our students conscious of such difficult issues, not to turn away from them. We should strive to provide a venue in which students can use their language skills to promote change and contend with social responsibility and justice (Greene, 1993a; hooks, 1994).

Furthermore, Johnson (2005) wrote that "hope is often seen as quaint, religious, and naïve" (p. 48), and in the classroom there is much focus on social problems but little emphasis on how to fix them. Suzanne Collins's trilogy provides a way to illuminate social tragedies affecting adolescents around the world and to assure our students that, when paired with action, hope is not naive. Through social-action projects that address hunger, modern slavery, and other societal problems (e.g., poverty, child labor and labor laws, war crimes, drug use, ineffective public works programs, forms of apartheid or segregation, class inequality, abuse of authority, government corruption), students can realize that to create change, they cannot just read about human misfortune and social calamity, lament its existence, and hope for change. They must act, or their hope is in vain.

In the last novel of Collins's series, *Mockingjay* (2010), Katniss warns President Snow that "fire is catching" (p. 186), meaning that if the people of the districts suffer, the Capitol will, too. This warning is relevant to our world as well. If global citizens continue to suffer from injustice and exploitation, humanity will pay a high price. Fire, like passion, is powerful, and if harnessed it can be used for good or for ill. In our language arts classrooms, we have an abundance of fire in the form of passionate students. And if the fire is kindled, we can encourage students to use their literacy skills to serve others, creating a more compassionate and just society. Like an ember that fuels a fire, reading can stoke our students into becoming socially responsible citizens, causing them to spit and blaze in the face of injustice and spread their fire throughout the community.

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

– Gauge your students' interest in and knowledge of the Hunger Games trilogy. Because of the books' current popularity, students may have already read them, making it unnecessary to read all the novels in class. Depending on the current critical consciousness of your students, either ask them to give examples of social issues being addressed in the novels or guide them toward the social

issues by pulling relevant quotes from the texts. Lead a discussion about how these issues are at work in each of the books.

- Provide students with examples of how these issues are apparent in our own world by guiding them to social-advocacy websites, reading supplementary newspaper articles, or watching news programs about the social issues on which your class decided to focus.

- Ask students how such social ills can be changed.

- Introduce ways that outreach groups take social action: letter writing campaigns, public service announcements, bumper stickers, educational posters and pamphlets, fundraisers, etc.

- Engage students in a project that educates the public on a social issue and advocates for change, focusing on language arts skills such as research, persuasive writing, and digital literacy.

Distribute widely! It is important that students know they will be reaching a wide audience that includes their community and peers. Ask the editor of the school newspaper if it will feature students' work or, if your school has a broadcasting system, ask if students can broadcast their public service announcements or videos. Make posters and pamphlets that educate the public on chosen social issues and distribute them to local libraries, doctors' offices, and other businesses. If participating in an activity such as a canned-food drive, involve the local grocery store. Although educating students on these issues is important, having students educate others and create change is what makes it social action.

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