The Giver Project

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THE CHILDREN'S MEDIA LAB:

THE GIVER PROJECT

The Children's Media Lab was established in 2013 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its goal is to conduct exploratory research into the ways that multiple forms of old and new media—in this case, the use of both book and film—can be used in classrooms to bolster students' learning engagement, academic skills, and social competencies. This report specifically examines findings from *The Giver Project*, a research effort where sixth grade teachers implemented a curriculum that was created for *The Giver* book by Lois Lowry and its film adaptation by The Weinstein Company and Walden Media. The findings from this report are exploratory, but can provide valuable insight that will allow educators, families, curriculum designers, and researchers to strengthen their understanding of how books and films can be leveraged to amplify learning experiences for youth.

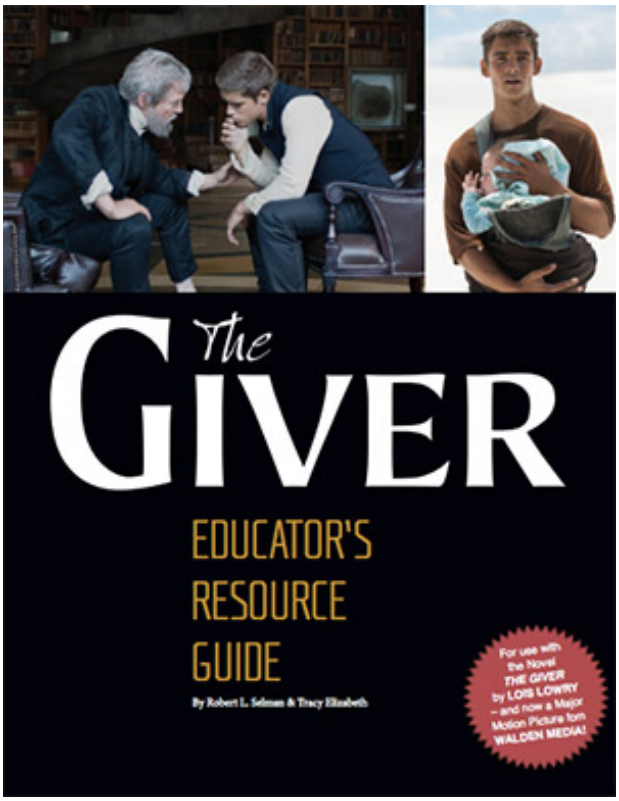
Acknowledgments

Our inquiry into developing the social, emotional, civic, and academic competencies of youth has been greatly furthered by the Anschutz Foundation; we gratefully thank the foundation for their generous support for The Giver Project. We also thank the teachers in this study for their expertise on curriculum, instruction, as well as their kindness and patience throughout the study—without you, this work would not be possible! And of course we thank our participating students for their time, honesty, and ingenuity.

Impact on Education

Given the trend to translate popular children's books into movies, educators have an opportunity to work with movie and television producers to develop engaging learning experiences for youth. With the right educational tools and teaching guides—these engaging forms of crossmedia could enhance adolescents' education experiences. While media experts are already recommending such an effort, information on this emergent topic lacks teacher input. This research study will help teachers and researchers better understand the strengths, challenges, and possibilities within crossmedia curriculum design. This specific study focuses on middle school youth, yet the findings could help curriculum and instructional design for other ages (e.g., elementary school, high school). Further, the insights garnered here may be useful for informal education settings outside of school (e.g., the home, museums, or after-school care centers).

This study only reflects the work and responses of those students who had written permission from a parent or guardian to participate in *The Giver Project.* To protect students' identities throughout the project, teachers submitted student work to us using Study ID numbers in place of students' names. The findings presented throughout are based on a small sample and cannot be generalized to the larger population; they are to be regarded as exploratory findings intended to guide the development of future research.



Rationale for *The Giver Project*

Today's youth are watching more television shows and movies than ever[1], and at the same time they are reading fewer books[2]. It is also commonplace for production companies to turn popular kids' books into movies. Given the changing patterns in the ways kids read books and watch movies and television, experts have argued that incorporating entertaining texts and film into classroom lessons might enhance students' academic[3] and social skills[4]. In this report, The Children's Media Lab introduces *The Giver Project's* strategies for understanding how a crossmedia curriculum could promote learning in classrooms. This study was designed to allow researchers to better understand adolescents' perspectives in regards to social and civic engagement, and to determine what types of instructional activities motivate students to achieve academically. Based on previous research that demonstrates effective ways to enhance learning, *The Giver Educator's Resource*[5], was carefully created to bolster adolescents' academic skills (basic literacy, vocabulary, grammar, content comprehension, critical thinking, etc.) and social skills (empathy, self-awareness, perspective-taking, kindness, upstanding, etc.). *The Giver* story is rich with themes of social and civic dilemmas that challenge students' sense of ethics and social responsibility; the book version is typically taught in Grades 5–7. This report will specifically address preliminary findings in regards to the social development of early adolescents (ages 10–13). These findings will serve as a platform to guide the development of future research projects and curriculum materials.

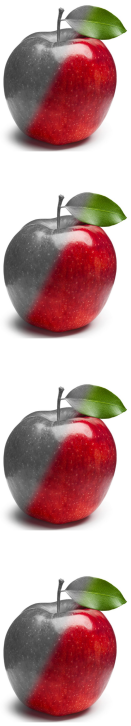
Study Participants

We collected data for the Children's Media Lab *Giver Project* from sixth-grade English Language Arts classrooms in three different states (Colorado, North Carolina, and Massachusetts). Among the seven teachers in our study, six taught in public schools and one in a private school. Three of the schools identified as Title I, which means they receive specialized government funds because a large percentage of their students are from low-income families. All seven of the teachers in *The Giver Project* were white, native-English speaking females who ranged in age from 26–59 years old. Each of the seven teachers taught *The Giver* curriculum in all of their classes for a total of 23 classrooms (total = 450 students). All 450 of the students engaged in the curriculum *and* took online surveys that asked questions about their opinions on a variety of subjects, including civic engagement, empathy, school enjoyment, and differences between books and movies. However, we randomly selected one class from each teacher to serve as a "study group" and then only collected writing samples and conducted classroom observations for a total of seven classes. The students in those seven study classrooms (total = 152 students[6]) collectively represented a range of ethnicities: White (54%), Latino (15.2%), Asian (5.3%), Black (4.2%), and Native American (4%)[7]. Six classrooms comprised mixed learning-ability groupings; one teacher described her class as containing predominately special needs children who had been classified as having specific learning or linguistic challenges. There was an even balance of females (51%) and males (49%) in this study, and their ages ranged from 10–13 years old with an average of 11 years.

Research Questions

The findings in this report are categorized by the following research questions:

1. According to sixth graders, what does it mean to be a good person?
2. What "big" life lessons do sixth graders report learning from *The Giver* story?
3. What perspective-taking skills do sixth graders demonstrate?
4. How do sixth graders recommend others react to school-based teasing?
5. What character traits do sixth graders identify as important in people?
6. What are teachers' reactions to the activities in *The Giver* Educators Resource?



Each section of this report introduces a research question and then describes what answers we discovered after communicating with the students, teachers, and parents who participated in this project. These questions listed above are but a few in a collection of dozens that can help us to better understand the social perspectives of today's youth. They will also help us learn from the expertise of teachers and parents regarding how they recommend youth be taught academic and social competencies in schools.

Methods of Data Collection for *The Giver Project*

To answer our research questions, we asked sixth-grade teachers to implement *The Giver Educator's Resource* in their classrooms during the fall semester of 2014. As experts of their own classroom, teachers decided for themselves how many weeks, and for how many minutes each day, they wanted to teach the curriculum. Therefore, their implementations ranged from 3–5 weeks, with an average of 4 weeks to teach the full curriculum. During this time, we gathered information by surveying students, observing classroom discussions, reviewing student writing, and interviewing teachers, students, and parents.

Student Surveys: We asked all students in the study to complete a survey approximately one week prior to their participation in *The Giver Educator's Resource* activities, and then to complete the same survey approximately one week after. These surveys asked questions about adolescents' perspectives on civic engagement, ethical behaviors, learning motivation, and enjoyment of books and movies.

Classroom Discussions: Inspired by research on the relationship between classroom discussion and students' social and academic development[8], *The Giver Educator's Resource* introduced several activities encouraged students to engage in conversations with each other about possible resolutions to social and ethical dilemmas presented in *The Giver.* We audio-recorded these discussions and then listened to them later to identify common themes that students brought up.

Student Writing Samples: *The Giver Educator's Resource* contained 11 writing activities for students; we collected from the teachers' copies of all of the writing that the students completed. These writing assignments—inspired by research on open-ended questioning patterns that promote perspective-taking[9], prosocial collaboration[10], civic reflection[11], analytic reasoning[12], and academic language[13]—were designed to elicit students' thoughts on ethical dilemmas that originate in the story of *The Giver* and could also potentially be encountered in real life.

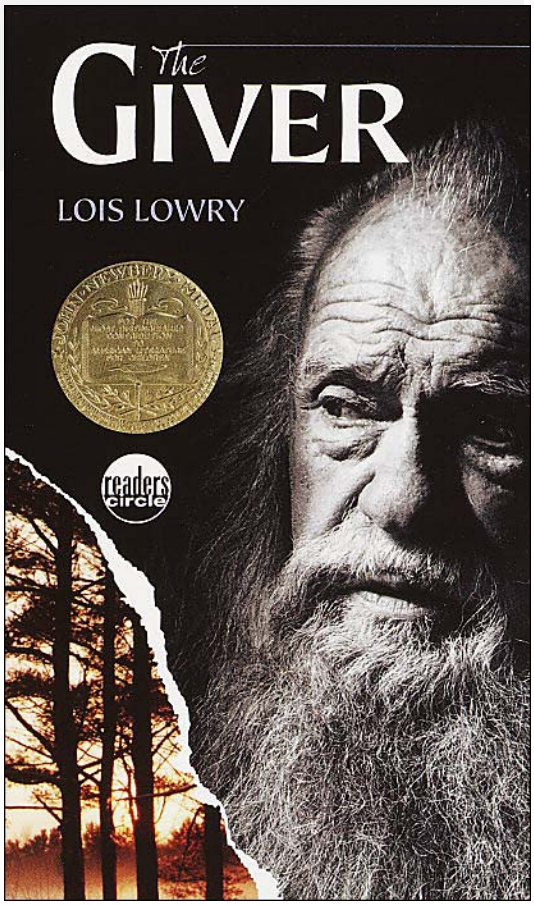
Teacher Interviews: After they had finished teaching *The Giver* in their classrooms, we interviewed each teacher once about their experience teaching the curriculum. Each interview was guided by two standard opening questions: *"Of these curricular activities, which did you prefer over others?"* and *"What modifications did you make and why?"*

Student Whole-Class Interviews: At the conclusion of their *The Giver* experience, we interviewed all seven participating study classes as a whole group about their overall experience with the curriculum and impressions of the story.

Parent Focus Groups: To conclude *The Giver* project, we interviewed small groups of parents whose children were participants in the study.

QUESTION 1
According to sixth graders, what does it mean to be a good person?

One goal of *The Giver Project* was to learn more about the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives that are held by sixth graders. Because our study is interested in social development, we were interested in sixth graders' basic ideas of what it means to be a good person. Rather than simply tell youth from our adult perspectives what it means to be good, we wanted to learn from these sixth graders about their own individual perspectives on what it means to be good.



METHODS

We collected survey responses to following question from approximately 425 sixth graders: *In your opinion, what does it mean to be a good person?* The students took the same survey twice: Once right before they started *The Giver* curriculum, and a second time right after *The Giver* curriculum. After we collected all of the students' responses from each survey, our research team analyzed their ideas to identify common themes that were reported across the sixth graders' responses.

Rather than explicitly define actions that are representative of "being good," sixth graders tended to describe "being good" in terms of <u>who</u> will benefit from the goodness, <u>how</u> goodness will affect other individuals, and <u>why</u> people are motivated to be good.

According to sixth graders, what does it mean to be a good person?

FINDINGS

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM GOODNESS?

Overall, the majority of youth in *The Giver Project* referenced a generalized "other" as the primary beneficiary of goodness. This means that while the sixth graders did not name a specific person that would benefit from goodness, most youth indicated that some person other than himself or herself would benefit from goodness:
To be a good person means to care for others more than yourself. *–Male, 11, CO*

However, about one quarter of the youth indicated that they themselves would benefit from goodness. We interpret this not as a sign of selfishness, but as a positive indicator that youth have the healthy perspective that it is okay to love and take care of yourself:
To be a good person means you care about others and yourself. *–Male, 12, CO*

A very small number of youth explicitly named specific people who would benefit from goodness. These people tended to be listed as friends, family, soldiers, and people of poverty within the student's community.

HOW WILL GOODNESS AFFECT PEOPLE?

We found an increase from the 1st survey (16%) to the 2nd survey (21%) in the number of youth who associated feelings and emotions with being a good person. These youth tended to describe <u>happiness</u>, for themselves or for others, as a primary outcome of goodness:
A good person is most likely a happy person. *–Female, 12, NC*

Some youth extended the concept of happiness to include dispositions and other emotions:
To be a good person is to have a good caring heart full of laughter kindness generosity honesty loyalty and love. *–Male, 12, CO*

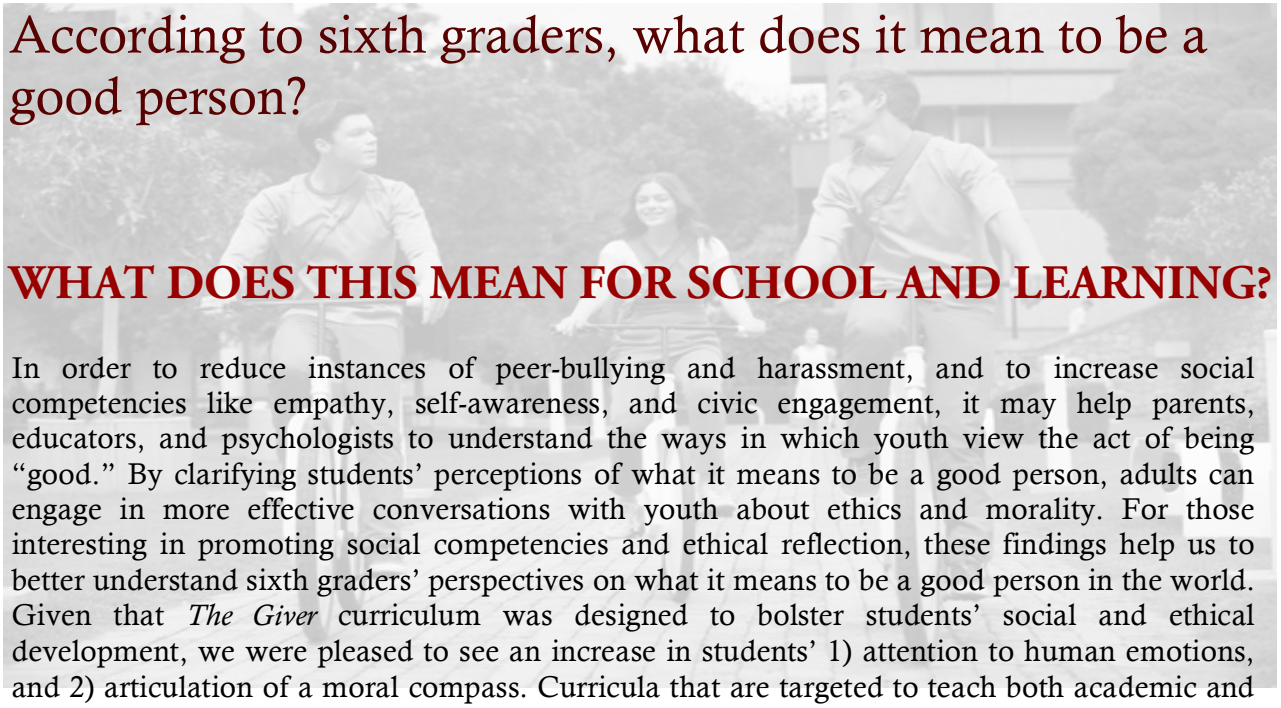
Across both surveys, about 10% of youth reported anticipating that goodness will result in the securement of a goal, and most described that goal as academic achievement:
A good person is someone that helps others and achieves high grades and does well in studies. *–Male,*

WHY ARE PEOPLE MOTIVATED TO BE GOOD?

Sixth graders report they are motivated to "be good" for two primary reasons. First, across both surveys, over 1/3 of youth expressed a responsibility to <u>help</u> those who are in need:
Being a good person means doing good to others and helping someone if they are in a bad or not so good situation. *–Female, 12, MA*

Next, there was an increase in the percentage of youth (14% in the first survey, 23% in the second survey) who described a personal <u>moral compass,</u> or altruistic and ethical drive to do "what's right" as what compels them to be a good person:
A good person is a person who cares about others and who realizes when they make a mistake and then they fix the mistake. Some one who is trustworthy and who normally does what is right. *–Female, 12, MA*

According to sixth graders, what does it mean to be a good person?



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SCHOOL AND LEARNING?

In order to reduce instances of peer-bullying and harassment, and to increase social competencies like empathy, self-awareness, and civic engagement, it may help parents, educators, and psychologists to understand the ways in which youth view the act of being "good." By clarifying students' perceptions of what it means to be a good person, adults can engage in more effective conversations with youth about ethics and morality. For those interesting in promoting social competencies and ethical reflection, these findings help us to better understand sixth graders' perspectives on what it means to be a good person in the world. Given that *The Giver* curriculum was designed to bolster students' social and ethical development, we were pleased to see an increase in students' 1) attention to human emotions, and 2) articulation of a moral compass. Curricula that are targeted to teach both academic and social skills are an effective way to promote kindness in youth. Some direct evidence for this was found in our survey data, when one student referenced his school's social-emotional curriculum while reflecting on what it means to be a good person:

Our findings suggest that youth typically talk in very general terms about who will benefit from goodness. We view this as an opportunity to engage youth in concrete conversations about specific populations or individuals who may benefit from goodness. Who will be affected? And how? Students tended to focus on either an ambiguous, unspecified, or generalized others, *or* specific people they could identify from their personal inner circles; the sixth graders also tended to overlook (or not understand) how goodness could affect their greater communities, society, the environment, and animals. By encouraging youth to explicitly consider how their actions affect specific people (or animals, or the environment), they may develop stronger capacities for empathy and more deliberately behave in acts that will benefit others. Furthermore, these findings show us that youth often overlook themselves as beneficiaries of good. While we do not recommend promoting selfishness, it is important to distinguish self-absorption (or even self-loathing) from self-respect and self-protective. Youth in our survey do consider self-care and self-value as an important capacity. Engaging youth in conversations about the differences between selfishness and self-respect may help to bolster their self-awareness and esteem.

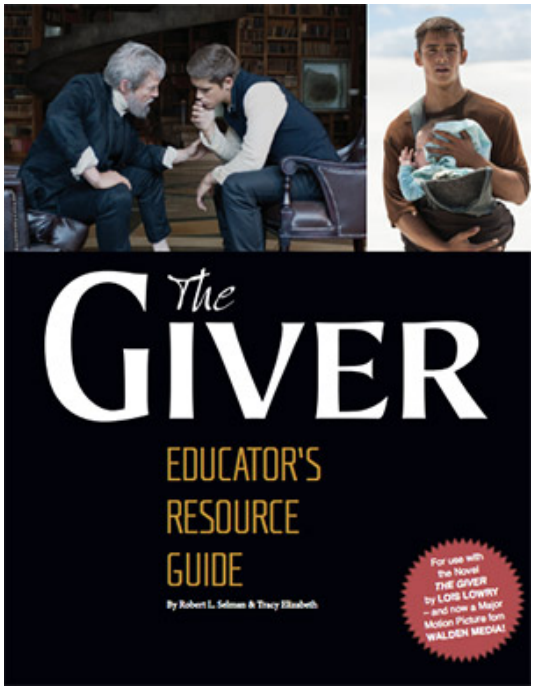
Finally, youth in this study very generally describe "helping" others as important. This presents an opportunity to have concrete conversations with youth about different ways to help others and to consider why they are motivated to help. For example, while being charitable is important, giving to the needy is but one way to promote goodness. There are also social aspects of good (avoiding hurting one's feelings; ensuring that peers feel included; appreciating the kind things that your parents or teacher does for you, etc.) that are also respectable ways to demonstrate goodness.

QUESTION 2
What "big" life lessons do sixth graders report learning from *The Giver* story?

It can be challenging for teachers to find time to incorporate opportunities for students to actively reflect on social and civic ethical dilemmas. However, by giving students the freedom to contemplate books and movies like *The Giver*, teachers may be pleasantly surprised to find that students can use these media as ways to practice critical thinking, content comprehension, and analytic reasoning skills. Given the social development aims of *The Giver Project*, we sought to identify what important life lessons, if any, the students learned from *The Giver* book and movie experience.

METHODS

To determine what life lessons students learned from *The Giver* book and film, we visited each of the sixth grade classrooms in our study schools to talk with students. During these whole-class interviews, youth discussed their impressions of the differences between the book and the movie, what they liked and disliked about the overall story, and the life lessons they learned. We identified three common themes that emerged when students discussed the life lessons they had learned.



The three most common themes that students discussed centered on 1) whether it is preferable for everyone to be the same or if it is okay for people to be different, 2) a mature perspective that all life comes with inevitable instances of good and bad, happy and sad, and 3) the importance of personal choice.

What big life lessons do sixth graders report learning from *The Giver* story?

FINDINGS

SAMENESS V. DIFFERENCE

Many youth indicated that they gained an appreciation for differences in other people and in themselves:

...the biggest take away I had was don't be afraid of being different 'cause being different might give you the biggest advantage. Don't be afraid of saying something nerdy…Don't be afraid of what you say and what you think and what you believe because only those who matter don't mind, those who mind don't matter.
–NC Student

Yet some students discussed how differences could be viewed as problematic:
In the movie and book, everything was black and white. No one saw colors and there was no judgment. No one would be like, "Oh you look terrible today," or something like that. They saw the same thing, they had the sameness and everything was the same for them… I feel like the sameness helped a lot. If everybody saw the same thing and it was all black and white, there would be less judgment.
–CO Student

LIFE IS NOT PERFECT AND THAT'S OKAY

Many students demonstrated a mature outlook in their reflections on how life is not perfect. Their comments implied that they appreciate life and understand that it offers a balance of positive and negative experiences:

I'm not sure if this is a lesson, but I was thinking about how there are so many amazing things in this world that everyone in that community wasn't able to experience and just that a lot of us are really lucky all those things are available to us. There's also bad things, but then the good things overcome the bad times.
–MA Student

Even if everything isn't the best—if there is more hurt and pain and stuff—it doesn't mean that everything is bad. I think people should look at the little enjoyments of life too. There's love and joy and happiness and stuff like that too. *–CO Student*

PERSONAL CHOICE IS VALUABLE

Students also commented on how much they valued their own autonomy and choice when making decisions during certain situations:

I was thinking—choose carefully, basically. Choices are important and you need them in life, even if people try to take them away. It makes your life… Some choices are bad, but you still need them.
–MA Student

So in the book they lived their life by the rules. Like, if they broke the rules they were chastised and it's kind of like being here, we have rules like don't be loud or something. Those are okay. But sometimes when the rules start to control your life, you have to make decisions on whether to do something that you want to do and that will make you feel happy. Between following the rules, sometimes it's okay to choose what makes you happy.
–NC Student

What big life lessons do sixth graders report learning from *The Giver* story?

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SCHOOL AND LEARNING?

Books and movies can raise deep ethical questions allow students to engage in critical thinking and self-reflection. However, this does not guarantee they will take advantage of the opportunity. By creating a nonjudgmental space where students have the freedom to form their own opinions and discuss ideas with their classmates, students can gain a better understanding of the messages of these media while also investigating their own belief systems. Using books and movies that allow for flexible interpretation may lead to greater student engagement and classroom discourse as students search for ways to make sense of their own lives. This was evidenced in the variations found in the life lessons youth reported learning from *The Giver* curriculum experience. Teachers may be pleasantly surprised at the maturity and depth of thinking that can result from course materials that pose more questions, rather than answers. And teachers may find that students will assume greater responsibility for their learning when given the chance to create their own meaning.

QUESTION 3
What perspective taking skills do sixth graders demonstrate?

Children's lives are filled with tough choices, many of which are social in nature. Youth are often faced with difficult decisions about navigating their worlds, such as how to resolve conflict with peers, what to do in response to a teasing situation involving a friend, and how to maintain academic integrity. Fortunately, social perspective-taking skills are easy-to-learn tools that can help kids handle these situations. Research has linked children's use of social perspective-taking skills to increased empathy[14], the ability to overcome hardship[15], and academic success[16]. How do we know, though, the sorts of perspective-taking skills children may already have? And how can educators intentionally support kids' perspective-taking skills? One goal of this study was to explore these answers by asking the advice of young people.

METHODS

We asked sixth graders to read and then respond in writing to stories of social dilemmas (teasing, bullying, cheating, etc.) that could potentially happen in their real lives. These stories[17] (or scenarios) have been statistically validated for use with American youth in the 4th through 8th grades. Our findings are based on the written advice the 152 sixth graders from *The Giver Project's* study classrooms. In each story, the student reads about a troublesome social situation at school and then is asked for advice about what to do:

What would you recommend to someone who has witnessed the problem?

Why would you make that recommendation?

What might go wrong with your recommendation?

In general, the students in The Giver Project demonstrated moderately high levels of perspective taking, which is expected for this age group.

What perspective taking skills do sixth graders demonstrate?

FINDINGS

On average, students named four different people who may be affected by (or able to help with) the social dilemma. Some students only named one person, while others named up to eight. This helps us to understand how many different people, beyond themselves, sixth graders are capable of taking into account when faced with a social dilemma.

Beyond naming people who may be affected by the dilemma, students in this study talked about the thoughts or feelings for an average number of two people who may be affected by the dilemma. Some students did not describe the feelings of any people, while others discussed up to four different individual's feelings. This helps us to understand how, or if, sixth graders are thinking about the emotional and social perspectives of others.

Girls demonstrated slightly more complex perspective-taking skills than boys. This could be explained by the different ways in which boys and girls in our culture tend to be raised to think about the emotional well-being of others[18].

Students with minority racial identities tended to use more complex perspective-taking skills than their white peers. This increase in the use of perspective-taking skills may be explained by minority children's practice with self-protective acts like code-switching (e.g., to speak or behave one way at school, yet a different way at home). In other words, minority children may have more practice thinking about what is expected of their behavior and mannerisms, thus allowing them to more often express others' perspectives.

Students in the special needs classroom also exhibited slightly more advanced perspective-taking skills, as compared to their peers in the average-track or advanced-level classes. As with ethnic minority children, one could speculate that the additional social demands that are required of special needs children to be successful and fit in at school offer these children additional practice with expressing the perspectives of others.

What perspective taking skills do sixth graders demonstrate?

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SCHOOL AND LEARNING?

Perspective-taking is believed to be a building block of empathy, and may offer skills of compassion, understanding, and social-emotional reasoning[20]. This is helpful not just for successfully dealing with social challenges, but also for the daily compassionate understanding of why others act and feel the ways they do[21]. The happy culture of a school or classroom (or home!) can be created when adults help students practice their perspective-taking skills in a positive way. Research shows that a happy classroom culture can lead to more positive whole-school climate, which in turn may lead to better academic performance and fewer classroom misbehavior issues[22]. In order to promote prosocial perspective taking skills, we suggest asking children to think about and practice answering the following questions in relation to books, movies, television shows, or personal experiences that involve social situations:

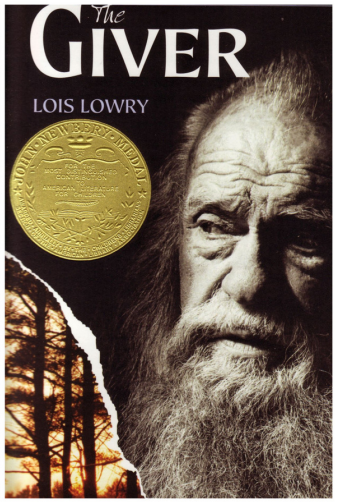
Who is involved in the situation?

How do those involved think or feel about the situation?

Why do those involved think or feel this way?

Some students are initially better at some of these tasks than others; this is to be expected, with time and opportunities to practice, youth become better at taking the perspectives of others, *but* they need to use these skills in a socially appropriate way.

QUESTION 4
How do sixth graders recommend others react to school-based teasing?



Young people are faced daily with difficult decisions about how to behave within the contexts of their peer groups, and specifically how to react during instances of peer harassment. In order to reduce instances of peer aggression and harassment, and to foster a positive classroom culture, it may be beneficial for parents and educators to understand how students react to social conflict. For this portion of *The Giver Project*, we sought to identify how sixth graders reflect upon a hypothetical school aggression scenario when in the role of a witness. The findings here may offer us insight into the types of prosocial behavior known to benefit young people and to foster a positive classroom culture.

METHODS

This is an extension of the perspective-taking stories that we discussed for Research Question 3. In order to gather information about sixth graders' behavioral decisions around peer harassment, we applied a thematic as well as a skills oriented analytic lens to evaluate the written responses that youth provided in reaction to the social dilemmas (teasing, bullying, cheating, etc.) that could potentially happen in their real lives. After we read each of the 152 students' responses, we created categories for the types of behavior choices present in their recommendations.

We identified four categories of actions that best represented the choices sixth graders presented in their advice:

1) ***Befriend or help the victim;***
2) ***Stand up to the teasers;***
3) ***Tell a trusted adult; and***
4) ***The victim should conform.***

How do sixth graders recommend others react to school-based teasing? FINDINGS

BEFRIEND THE VICTIM was the most common recommendation youth made when offering advice for how one should react to the teasing dilemma. Fifty-seven percent of all students (87 of 152) advised witnesses of the teasing to make friends with the victim (Jariah). These responses often focused on the victim's emotions, with emphasis on helping the victim:

I say befriend Jariah and be nice to him, because it will help him. *–CO Student*

My advice to Jariah would be to talk to him and make him feel better. *–MA Student*

STAND UP TO THE TEASERS was the second most common recommendation students advised in response to the teasing scenario. Thirty-four percent of all students (52 of 152) said that the observer should let the teasers know that the aggressive behavior is not okay. Students who offered this recommendation frequently suggested that the perpetrators of the teasing were doing something wrong and that intervention was necessary:

Casey needs to tell whoever is mean to Jariah to be a little nicer to him and not make fun of him. The bullies need to be stopped. *–NC Student*

I would recommend that she stands up for the kid, and to solve it with words, not fists. *–CO Student*

TELL A TRUSTED ADULT was advised by 26% of the students (40 or 152) in our study. Some students were very specific about who the adult should be; they listed people such as a parent, teacher, or guidance counselor. Their responses typically indicated that a person with more power would know what to do:

I would recommend she tells someone of power, like a teacher, and tell them what was going on, because the teacher will usually put a stop to it right away. –MA Student

She should go to her parents and explain to them her opinions and feelings about Jariah and find out what her parents think she should do. –NC Student

THE VICTIM SHOULD CONFORM was advised by 8% of the students (12 of 152) in this study. The rationale for this type of conflict resolution was mostly to help the new student at school fit in better to avoid social isolation:

I would recommend Casey tell Jariah the rules and tell him that his hair is not appropriate for our school. –Student, MA

I would teach him about the community that he had just come to, then Jariah may change the music that he listens to and possibly the hairstyle he currently has. –Student, MA

How do sixth graders recommend others react to school-based teasing?

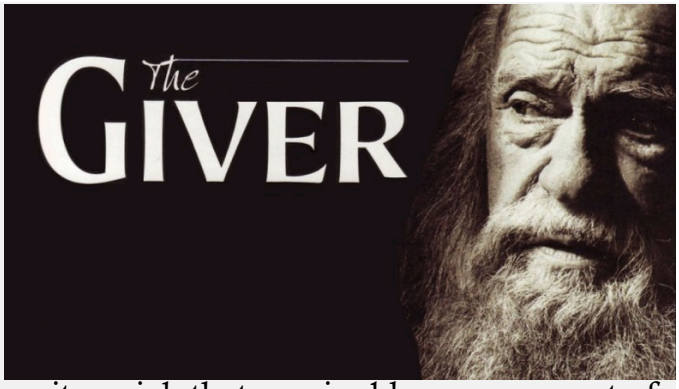
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SCHOOL LEARNING?

For adults who wish to support youth in making prosocial decisions about peer conflicts, these findings help us to better understand sixth graders' thoughts about school teasing. Current campaigns that battle school harassment focus on empowering students with the knowledge that they can actively choose how to behave when they know that a peer is being teased. Our findings indicate that sixth graders are comfortable with making a choice in a social dilemma. In recent years, educators, parents, and children alike have become increasingly aware of the prevalence of school-based peer harassment and victimization, also known as bullying. Anti-bullying campaigns have sprung up across the US, and internationally. Such campaigns often advise that "upstanding" is the key to both intervening in individual instances of harassment, as well as creating a more positive school culture. The US government's bullying prevention initiative[1] defines upstanding as making any of the following choices[24]:

- ✓ Befriending or helping the victim;
- ✓ Telling a trusted adult;
- ✓ Letting teasers know that their behavior is wrong;
- ✓ Setting a good example for other students

Based on this definition, 89% of the youth in our study recommended that the observer upstand. Just 11% of student responses advised behavior that is defined as bystanding, and no students recommended that the observer join in the teasing behavior. How, then, can we act to convert student's desire to upstand into the courage to speak out? Researchers believe that student perceptions of their school climate may directly infuence the choices they actually make about whether to upstand, bystand, or perpetrate when witnessing instances of school-based harassment[23]. Students who feel that their school climate is safe and supportive are more likely to choose to upstand in the face of peer victimization. Essentially, youth often know what the right thing to do is; what we can help them learn is why it can be so difficult to *do* the right thing.

QUESTION 5
What character traits do sixth graders identify as important in people?



The Giver book and film are rich with questions about what it means to be a valuable member of a community and to live with integrity. The students in *The Giver* project were invited to ponder these questions with the lead character, Jonas, who embarks on an adventure to discover how to empathize, love, and be selfless. Jonas is awarded a special job within his community, a job that required he possess a set of valuable personal traits (integrity, intelligence, wisdom, courage, and the "capacity to see beyond"). In order to better understand how sixth grade youth value these traits, we asked the youth in our study to reflect on how valuable they perceive these traits to be in their own lives.

METHODS

Activity 5 of *The Giver Educator's Resource* was a writing assignment that asked students to rank ordered the five character traits espoused in *The Giver* (Courage, Wisdom, Integrity, Intelligence, & the Capacity to See Beyond) from *most* important to *least* important, and then to write a reason for why they named one as the more important than another. First, we used a quantitative ranking method to analyze 144 student responses to determine sixth graders' assessments of the traits. Next, we used a mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis method to understand students' rationale for valuing some traits as more important than others.

Sixth graders ranked courage as the most important character trait. This was followed by wisdom and integrity, which youth ranked as equally important. Interestingly, youth identified intelligence as the least important character trait, followed by the fictional capacity to see beyond.

What character traits do sixth graders identify as important in people?



FINDINGS

#1 COURAGE

Sixth graders consistently ranked *courage* as the most important character trait. In their written justifications, youth indicated that having courage allows people to face their fears, stand up for beliefs, and be perseverant and resilient:

It doesn't have to be a life or death situation, you could show courage just be trying. If you're afraid of anything you will never make it in life. Even the smallest amount of bravery could help someone in need." *–CO Student*

Courage is most important because you can't live your life scared and actually be happy. *–NC Student*

#2 WISDOM & INTEGRITY

Sixth graders ranked both *wisdom* and *integrity* as equally important; these traits were viewed as second most important:

Wisdom is my top one because if you can't know what is true to do and what you want to do, it can be a little confusing. Like, if you wanted to have a whole bag of candy, you would know that that wouldn't be good for you. *–CO Student*

I view integrity most important than others for many reasons. One reason is it gives you honor. Another reason is it makes you believe in yourself and others believe in you. My last reason is that this gives you someone to rely on. They will always be there to help with this trait. *–MA Student*

#3 INTELLIGENCE

Students ranked *intelligence* as the least important "real life" trait of the five. They tended to describe intelligence as being "smart" or having knowledge, and credited the trait as a way to help one achieve goals (such as good grades or a future job):

I chose to do Intelligence last because "smart" is not everything and no one needs that more than wisdom, or courage, etc. *–MA Student*

#4 CAPACITY TO SEE BEYOND

As the *capacity to see beyond* is a fictional construct specific to *The Giver* story, it is unsurprising that many students indicated that they don't see the trait as useful:

I thought Capacity to see beyond was the least important because you don't need to see the future. I like surprises. *–CO Student*

What character traits do sixth graders identify as important in people?

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SCHOOL AND LEARNING?

Activity 5 of *The Giver* Educator's Resource asked students to think about the qualities of intelligence, integrity, courage, wisdom, and the capacity to see beyond. As revealed in the many thoughtful responses that students in *The Giver Project* provided to explain why they ranked the character traits in a particular order, sixth graders are capable of maturely reflecting on how particular traits, dispositions, or personal attributes impact their daily lives. The youth demonstrated a sense of moral intuition, and they were able to articulate justifications for why they viewed any given trait as important. Further, most students described how having a specific character trait (courage, for example) can be leveraged to help one overcome challenges in life. Providing youth of this age with opportunities to reflect on these qualities in relation to their own lives, and to make connections between behaviors and outcomes, can allow students to deeply engage with how they create meaning for themselves and to value the unique qualities in others. Some scholars and practitioners think that the emphasis youth place on courage may very well come from cultural messages they are now receiving, especially through film and television stories that dominate popular media. However, additional research is still necessary to help us better understand how, or if, mass media affects children's and adolescents' perceptions of the value of any given character trait.

QUESTION 6
What are teachers' reactions to the activities in *The Giver* Educators Resource?

School curricula are most successful when they incorporate design ideas and contributions from the very teachers who bring those lessons to life in the classroom. Thus, our analysis of the successes and shortcomings of T*he Giver* Educator's Resource would be incomplete without considering the range of responses that it elicited from the teachers who implemented it in their classrooms. By considering educators' perspectives on the content and variety of activities included in the curriculum, we will develop a deeper understanding of what works, what doesn't, and *why* when introducing a curriculum of this type to a middle-school classroom.

METHODS

In order to gather educator responses to *The Giver* Educator's Resource, we conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the seven educators who participated in this study. During this time, we asked the teachers to reflect on both the positive and negative aspects of the curriculum, as what modifications they made and *why*. We then compared the responses of the seven teachers to identify trends in regards to which activities were preferred over others.

Teachers tended to favor the dialogic activities in The Giver Educator's Resource. These activities included classroom discussions, debates, and theatrical role-playing—all of which were designed to enhance student interactions and collaboration. The teachers appreciated how these activities inspired students' creativity, captured their interest, and helped exercise students' social and academic competencies.

What are teachers' reactions to the activities in *The Giver* Educators Resource? FINDINGS

DIALOGIC ACTIVITES

In general, the dialogic activities in *The Giver Educator's Resource* earned the most positive and enthusiastic reviews from our teachers:

I think the kids and I agree that the role-playing activities and the debates— the argument activities— were their favorites. *–MA Teacher*

The kids and I liked anything with acting. I liked anything that involved the students, something that they could connect to their own life; those were really easy to teach, and they were genuinely fun for everyone. *–CO Teacher*

Two structured debates were also included in the curriculum. Activity 6 asked students to debate whether people in a given society should be required to wear lie detectors. *Activity 11 asked students to consider whether the character Rosemary's request for release should be considered suicide. In both cases, the teachers' enthusiasm was directly related to their students' enthusiasm for the content. The teachers were also pleased by the social and academic skills that their students were able to practice through during the debates; these skills included persuasion, critical thinking, supporting an argument with evidence, and utilizing a platform to be heard.

They loved the lie detector debate. I really liked going into the debates because my students just ran with it, full throttle. And that really tied in well with our classroom goals of 'decision making' and 'supporting your ideas' and all of that. *–CO Teacher*

I gave them class time to organize their debate positions and figure out how their team was going to work. They loved it! They can't wait to do another one. *–NC Teacher*

The teachers' reactions to Activity 11 were mixed, mostly because some identified the topic as controversial and expressed concerns that the students were not mature enough for the content or that parents may be upset by the topic. Two teachers chose not to teach Activity 11, three modified the prompt in order to soften its reference to suicide, and two teachers taught Activity 11 as it was originally designed. Of the five teachers who taught Activity 11, including those who made modifications, their reflections on the overall experience were positive. This raises important awareness about the challenges teachers are regularly required to navigate when faced with complicated curricular dilemmas or controversial subject matter.

WRITING ACTIVITES

The teachers particularly appreciated writing activities that were directly tied to the interactive activities described above. The individual writing activities helped students to better prepare their arguments:

I liked the fact that the activity asks you to take a perspective about, well, how would the father... so they had to write thinking about that. I also liked the creativity in the writing, so I gave students permission to either write it out as a script or write it as a narrative. *–MA Teacher*

What are teachers' reactions to the activities in *The Giver* Educators Resource?

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SCHOOL AND LEARNING?

Teachers prefer instructional activities that engage their students. Teachers in this study expressed feeling more joy from their jobs when their students' appeared to enjoy the classroom lessons. They liked to see their students enthusiastic about learning, and this is reflective of a larger body of school climate research that suggests there are connections between classroom engagement, students' academic achievement, and teachers' job satisfaction. We recommend that curricula strive to include collaborative lessons where students spend the majority of their time interacting with each other in ways that involve lots of opportunities for both creativity and serious conversation. This suggestion is supported by the findings of this study that confirm teachers' and students' preferences for interactive activities. In addition to infusing excitement into the classroom, these collaborative activities deepen students' engagement with the text and give them the opportunities to practice a number of competencies relevant for their social and civic engagement[25]. Given that some teachers felt overwhelmed by the amount of time it took to grade the writing assignments, we recommend not reducing the number of writing assignments, but instead minimizing the urge to grade. Teachers could ask students to publically share their writing to be reviewed and commented on by their classmates (either on an online form like Google Classroom or by physically hanging students' writing on the wall). Research has found that this peer-review strategy is an effective alternative to grading that motivates students to do their best. Additionally, students often benefit from ungraded free-writing opportunities. Writing can serve as a helpful precursor to a classroom discussion or debate because they allow students chances to think about different perspectives in the text, to organize their thoughts, and to gather evidence for an argument. We viewed the teachers in this study as expert consultants who are co-creators in our process of curriculum design, and we are grateful for the benefit of their insights. Ultimately, we suggest that regular, open communication between educators and education researchers will aid in the development of high-quality curricula that are appropriately responsive to students' needs.

Notes

1. Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartella, 2003
2. Common Sense Media, 2013
3. Johnson & Kress, 2003; Siegel, 2012
4. Jenkins, 2009; Myers-Lipton, 1998
5. Selman & Elizabeth, 2014
6. However, we asked all 450 students with permission to participate to complete a pre- and post-survey
7. Several students indicated "Other" (12.1%) or chose not to respond (4.8%) to the ethnicity question.
8. Elizabeth, Ross-Anderson, Snow, & Selman, 2012; Elizabeth, 2014; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009
9. Selman, 2003; Wentzel, Filisetti, & Loony, 2007
10. Elizabeth, 2014
11. Adler & Goggin, 2005
12. Resnick, Michaels, & O'Connor, 2010
13. Snow & Uccelli, 2009
14. Batson, 1991
15. Joseph, 1994
16. Wentzel, 1993
17. Selman & Diazgranados Ferráns, 2012
18. Lerner and Jovanovic, 1999
19. Banks, 2012
20. Batson, 1991
21. Kent, et al, 2013
22. Wentzel, et al, 2012
23. Diazgranados Ferráns, et al., 2014
24. United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov
25. Elizabeth, 2014

The Children's Media Lab: The Giver Project

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