



Connecting it All: How Connecting Students to a Text Increases Motivation to Read

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Introduction

“Why do I have to read this?” is a question I often hear when beginning a new text. In order to get my students engaged in beginning a text, I must give some type of promised reward for finishing the book. Many times my students need constant encouragement to finish reading a novel, as they tell me that the book is boring. I understand the importance of reading, but how do I pass that value onto my students? How can I help my students understand the value of reading, without telling them every day? I believe reading brings exposure and with that exposure, hope. Hope can bring encouragement even in the most dismal situations. If my students can be motivated to read, then they will have hope for their future.

In my classroom, I often see my girl students gravitate towards books that represent the mainstream culture. They often desire to have hair and features of the mainstream culture that they see in picture books. I have noticed them drawing pictures of themselves with longer, straighter hair and lighter skin color. It hurts me to see how some of the girl students view beauty. I notice my boy students flip through books that contain expensive cars and big houses. One day I overheard some of my boys talking about a picture book filled with expensive cars. One of them said, “that’s the kind of car white people have.” I was again hurt that my boys associated an expensive car with the mainstream culture, not with hard work and saving money. What role does identity play in students’ being motivated to read? If my students see themselves more in the text, would they be motivated to read more and therefore appreciate their own beauty and chances for success?

I remember a unit that I taught a few years ago regarding goals for the future. Kendall, an 8-year-old boy, responded that he didn’t know how to set goals for his life because he was going to be dead at 18. Kendall was a bright student who could add much value to his community. However, he was allowing the reality of his community, that many of his older male cousins and uncles were shot and killed in the streets of Chicago, to influence his outlook on the future. Kendall is not alone in his thinking. I think it is a problem that many of my students are unaware of their history and have no goals to live past 18. What am I doing every day to help students who have a mindset like Kendall’s? In this unit, I want my students to be exposed to individuals like themselves, who had similarly dismal situations, but could choose to rise above. I want my students to have hope for the future, their future, as a result of this unit. I will use the mentor text *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington in order to share African- American history with my students and also to give my students a

positive role model, who became more than his surroundings. Also, in this unit, students will work with their families in order to publish a family story of perseverance. This project will enhance families' value as students and learn from their history.

Rationale

Many of my third-grade students on the south side of Chicago have never left their block. A few of my students are not even able to go outside to ride their bikes because their parents fear the gun violence. Not only do my students not go outside, but they do not leave their neighborhood. On a recent field trip to a museum in downtown Chicago, my students asked if we were "out of town." They did not know that we were still in Chicago, just downtown. They saw their neighborhood as Chicago and could not associate a different setting as still Chicago. This lack of exposure has caused my students to be closed minded. I want to use literature as a means to expose my students to places and people through reading in order to motivate and encourage them about their future.

Booker T. Washington was born a slave during very dismal times. Despite his upbringing, he was determined to educate himself, at all costs. Washington had many opportunities to give up and quit, stay uneducated, but he did not allow his circumstances to stop him. I chose the mentor text *Up From Slavery* because many of my students can identify with Washington's dismal circumstances. I also chose it to give my students exposure to a complex text. Many of my students do not have any family member encouraging them in school. They are often made to care for younger siblings as their parents are working or enjoying night life. Because of this extra responsibility, many of my students think that this is all life has to offer them. I think the story of Booker T. Washington will help my students identify with someone who overcame his circumstances to become a productive member of society. By using the story of Washington, I will also educate my students on an influential member of their heritage.

Many of my students come from single-parent households or are being raised by a family member who is not their mother or father. In having conversations with many of my students, I have learned that they do not know their genealogy. Some of my students cannot even name grandparents, let alone tell a family story that has been passed down. Due to a lack of elderly members of the community and gun violence, many of my students do not see themselves getting old. I find it a problem that my students are disconnected from their heritage and roots. How can my students value their goals if they are unaware of their own family history? Many of my parents are unaware and hopeless about their own situations. This attitude of hopelessness has been passed down to my students. Therefore, many of them want to be just like their parents in careers and life, even if that means living in poverty. I believe my students and their parents feel that their futures are so bleak because they have not been exposed to individuals who have faced and conquered similarly dismal circumstances. I want my parents to also understand the power of their family stories for their children. In this unit I want to provide a space in which families can share their family stories and therefore empower themselves and others by hearing the resilience of their families. I believe all families have overcome something, and there is power in sharing these stories.

Booker T. Washington did have members of his family who encouraged him in his goals. I understand and believe in the role parents play in their child's education. I think that children are even more successful in school when they see that their parents value education. I want to give parents the space to tell their family

story to their children. I think much value is added to life when children know the history of their family, noting the circumstances that have been overcome. It would be even more empowering for families to share their stories not only with the children but also with the school community. My students will have a sense of pride of their heritage in hearing their stories made public.

In this unit, not only will I educate students about their history, but I will also teach them how to set goals. Since I understand the steps that may need to occur prior to goals being set, I will do what needs to be done so that my teaching will have an impact. This will encompass more than the teaching unit. In this unit, students will discover their family tree and the rich stories that explain the history of their families. I will encourage and support students in order to get the oral history of their families. I will ask students to make connections between family stories and their own goals and aspirations. Through this unit, learning about their ancestors, my students will understand that others before them had to encounter and conquer similar difficulties and still had a positive impact in life. In this unit, students will learn that they have much to contribute to the community. I will equip my students with the necessary steps in this unit to accomplish their goals.

Demographics

I am a third grade teacher in Chicago Public Schools, the third largest district in the Country.¹ My school is located on the South side of Chicago in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood. In this neighborhood residents have a 1-in-9 chance of being the victim of a crime.² The school day is the only time when many of my students are able to play outside because their parents fear random shootings in the neighborhood. I have had students tell me that they have had to dodge bullets on the way to school. A few times, our school has had to delay dismissal because of gang shootings occurring outside of the school. The fact that my students are unable to regularly play outside has affected their social and emotional growth and their interaction with their peers. During recess, most of my students fight each other as a means of playing.

My school has about 400 students grades preK to eighth grade. The student body is 97 % African- American, with the other 3 % being Latino or multiracial. Almost 100 % of the student population receives free or reduced lunch. My school has a mobility rate of about 45%.³ It is highly unlikely that I will start and end the school year with the same students. It is very common to get transfer students around the testing window because many leases in the area are terminated, for various reasons, during the Spring. At times it can be very difficult to establish an effective classroom community because the class is always changing.

Content

Identity through Text

Booker T. Washington in his autobiography *Up From Slavery* says that “My life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings.”⁴ Washington goes on to conclude that his “desolate” upbringing helped him to become an influential man. He did not become bitter or angry about his

upbringing, but he used it as lessons to be learned. For example, Washington had a strong desire to be educated. He often times had to work during the day and attend school at night. His determination was his motivation to be better than his surroundings. Throughout his autobiography it was evident that he had a plan and knew the steps necessary to achieve his goal. Even when obstacles were presented, he didn't allow that to deter him from the goal of being educated. For example, Washington desired to be educated at the school now know as Hampton University. While on his way to Hampton, Washington encountered financial problems that could have caused him to return back to the comforts of his home, but he decided to move forward remembering his goal, being educated.⁵ Students can be inspired by stories related to theirs. Many of my students have many daily distractions that can keep them from coming to school. By using the facts of Washington's life, I can help my students understand that distractions do not have to stop progress. If students do not hear stories related to their own, how will they have hope for the future? Stories are meant to be shared, and through sharing comes empowerment.

It is crucial that once students understand their story and identity, they become exposed to a variety of careers. Booker T. Washington noticed that once students learned to read, they felt "called to preach."⁶ This understanding was partly due to a lack of opportunity for African Americans during the time. But the students also had a lack of exposure to other opportunities that one could have as a result of being a reader. It is quite common that students in elementary school desire to be professional sports players or entertainers in order to achieve success. At times, students can force themselves to be people they are not in order to fit in the mold that was created for them by their community or even culture. The teacher can play a major role in the types of careers the students are exposed to in the goal-setting stage. A career fair can be held at the school to expose the students to a variety of careers. Parents may also come into the classroom to speak about how their job incorporates learning from elementary school. During Washington's teaching career, he found that students desired to become what they thought the community wanted them to become, preachers. My students desire to become what the community thinks they are skilled in, playing sports. Many of the skills used in sports can be adapted to other professions. When parents speak of other non- sports professions, students can get a glimpse of their options using their skill set.

Once Washington was educated, he looked for opportunities to educate others, in order to give back to his community. He began a school, Tuskegee Institute, with that goal. He not only looked to be educated himself, but also understood that "the individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of his race."⁷ It was not good enough to have a school that educated African-Americans: Washington wanted those educated to understand their purpose, their goal, beyond education. How can this idea be transferred into the classroom? Once material is taught, how is it being transferred to real life? Real learning takes place when that transfer occurs. With this unit, the transfer of learning will occur with the goal setting process and increased motivation for reading.

Motivation to Read

The type of text given to students is important. The teacher must be intentional in the text selection and its purpose. In this unit, books that represent the students' culture and history will be used. The formation of identity is a crisis each of us must go through on our journey to adulthood.⁸ Knowing that students spend a majority of their day at school, teachers should take personal responsibility in helping to form student identity. In the materials provided, teachers should be mindful of the images and messages, directly or indirectly, that are being portrayed. Teachers cannot tell students how to define themselves, but tools can be provided to help them discover their identity. One of the school's priority should be to educate the students so

they are able to meet the conditions as they exist now.⁹ Students on the South side of Chicago should be prepared in school to function in the city of Chicago. The factors of the environment that affect the students should be considered during the school day. For example, if a teacher knows that students face poverty, then address that need and how to overcome it in the curriculum.

Another way students can be motivated to read is through the teacher. At the beginning of the year, the teacher may give the students a book survey in order to determine the type of books the students like to read. It would be helpful to have a variety of student choice of books in the classroom library. Even if the teacher is unable to purchase books, he/she may check out of the public library books that interest the students. By having some desired books in the classroom library, on students' reading level, they will be encouraged to read. Once those books have been provided in classroom libraries, the teacher should ensure adequate activities to further engage and motivate students.¹⁰

Parents' Role in Education

How much of student success in school is dependent upon the parents? Some parents are unable to participate in school events, for various reasons, but does that affect the academic growth of the child? Many schools host family nights, in order to partner with the parents for the education process. At the elementary level, children are more influenced by their parents, and therefore parental involvement is a predictor in academic achievement. It is important to capitalize on this influence because it changes as students get older, and therefore has less effect on the students' academic progress.¹¹ Parents have lots to offer the school, but some may not get involved unless invited. The school environment must be such that the parents feel welcomed in the school. Parents who have had positive school experiences may be more inclined to volunteer in school. Some parents may have experienced trauma in their own educational experience, so they do not want to come into the school. If this is the case, then the school should be intentional about forming positive relationships with the parents, making them feel welcomed in the school at any level.

One way parents may be involved in the schools is through story telling. In their article "Experiment, Share, Revise: Learning Through Oral History and Digital Storytelling," Bazley and Graham discuss oral and digital story telling.¹² In this unit, students will study some ancestors from their community. They will learn about individuals from their families and outside of their immediate family. A way to get parents involved in a non-threatening way is to have parents share their family stories. When parents share their stories, they will be the experts. Each one's family story is personal to him or her, which no one else may know. Parents will get a voice and a sense of empowerment when they share the rich history of their family. This storytelling project does not have one correct answer, nor does it rely on academics. It will allow parents to be comfortable in sharing what they know. The children will get a sense of pride from seeing their parents involved in their education and also from hearing their family story. By collecting and organizing their family stories, children will have to read, analyze, and write. There will be student ownership, which will promote motivation, as students and parents work on their family stories together.

Goal Setting in the Classroom

Many times in elementary schools we set goals for students. We tell students what to learn and how to learn it. What value does that approach have for the student? What would the process look like if students were involved in goal setting? A great way to motivate students in reading and in the classroom would be to get their insight into learning. Palmer and Wehmeyer defined the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* as "a model of teaching to enable educators to teach students to self-direct the instructional process and, at the

same time, to enhance their self-determination.” With this model, the teacher guides the students through three phrases, set a goal, action plan, and make adjustments to the plan, that help them set goals according to the students’ understandings.¹³ The students will have ownership of their learning because they are essentially designing their own learning path. The teacher still has control of the classroom, but the students have a voice in the direction of their learning. Students may also hold one another accountable for the goals that have been set.

In this unit, students will embark upon goal-setting and action planning for their goals. Ex- slave Booker T. Washington was adamant about achieving his goals, so students should be encouraged to do the same. The method that students use in this goal setting process can transfer over to setting goals in life. Overall, students should understand the importance of knowing what you want to accomplish and how to get there.

Objectives

During this two week unit, one objective is for students to compare and contrast their lives to that of Booker T. Washington. Students may choose to use a Venn Diagram in order to display their thinking. They will also use this graphic organizer to write a few paragraphs regarding the similarities and differences between their lives and that of Booker T. Washington. Students will also be able to explain the significance of Booker T. Washington in today’s society. Students will note that Washington implemented many programs that helped African Americans become educated.

Another objective is for students to write and publish a family story of perseverance. Parents and students will work together to determine the story they wish to tell about their family. Students will begin to unlock their family history and genealogy. Not only will students create a written report of their family story, but parents and students will also be invited to present their story during the day in the classroom.

The last objective for this unit is for students to engage in the goal-setting process in order to set instructional goals. Students will think about their own learning and what they hope to accomplish. Students will determine actionable steps for accomplishing their goal. They will also explain how they will assess the accomplishment of their goal.

Essential Questions and Enduring Understandings For Students

1. How does an individual overcome dismal beginnings to become successful?

An individual has determined goals and steps to monitor the progress of accomplishing the goals. Students must know how their goals can make their life better, not only for themselves but also for others. The more people that who are impacted by your goals, in a positive way, the better the goal.

2. What does my family story say about the resilience of my family?

It is important to know what your family has overcome to show the history and perseverance of your family. Your family has strong ties; if they weren't strong, you wouldn't be here. Be proud of where your family has come from and what they have overcome because your story will show you some of what lies inside of you.

3. Why are goals important?

Goals help an individual have direction in life. With proper direction, an individual can know the people and organizations to associate with in order to accomplish his or her goals. To have an even greater impact, goals should include the benefit of others.

Strategies

The history of Booker T. Washington's life is an important component in this unit. To ensure that students are retaining this new knowledge, the teacher may have text-based discussions. The teacher provides an excerpt from the reading and some guiding questions. The students take time to read the selection and think about possible responses to the questions. In groups, students discuss the questions; however, in order to begin speaking, students must acknowledge what has already been mentioned. Students will have access to conversation starters so that all students will have access to the conversation. In order to compare and contrast Booker T. Washington's life with those of the students, a Venn Diagram may be used. Students should compare and contrast their lives with that of Booker T. Washington's to help them understand that other people go through similar or worse situations, but do not make excuses for what they cannot do. Once students have used the graphic organizer to compare and contrast, then they may confer with some peers to write an essay. This collaboration with other students will increase their understanding by hearing others' perspective.

Book Motivation

A teacher may decide to have book critics in the classroom. Students can be empowered to write their thoughts, good and/or bad, regarding a book and post it in the classroom library. The peer critique of a book may encourage students to read the book and form their own opinion.

Book competitions are another way to engage the students in reading. In the classroom, the teacher may host a Book Slam, similar to a Poetry Slam. Every day the teacher will give one student the opportunity to present a book he or she is reading. The student will have three minutes to advertise the book and tell one thing he or she learned from the book. The students may choose to dress up like a character or act out a scene from the book. Some students may be motivated by being in front of their peers and having all eyes on them. For students who are more reluctant, the teacher may ask them to prepare a video to explain their Book Slam.

Family Journaling

One way to involve families during this unit is family journaling. Students will need a composition notebook, a pencil, and an older family member to participate. Every week as a class, students create a list of topics that were discussed pertaining to the unit. For example, students may list Booker T. Washington, slavery, goals, etc. Students will then choose one topic and write a letter to a family member, who is able to respond back in

writing. The student writing should contain facts about the topic and a few questions to engage the reader. The student will take the family journal home and read it aloud to a family member. The family member will then take time to respond to what the child has written. Students may share their letters and the responses during the school day. This strategy motivates children to write. Students are eager to write in order to get a response from family members. This is also a way for the teacher to assess the students. The teacher can assess the understanding of the student on a particular topic and also his or her writing in the family journals.

S.M.A.R.T. Goals

S.M.A.R.T goals are actionable steps one can use to accomplish a goal.¹⁴ S.M.A.R.T. goals are specific, measureable, attainable, realistic, and timely. It is important that students understand what a realistic goal is and steps to accomplish the goal. For example, if creating goals for reading, students may say that they want to read more books. Students would be specific in saying how many books they want to read during a selected period of time. Once they define the goal, students should determine how they will achieve their goal. The teacher can have individual conferences with the students to help them create steps in accomplishing their goals.

Group Identity

In his book *The Concept of Self*, Allen defines group identity as the individuals' being able to identify with a particular group. Allen continues to say that one may have high self-esteem in terms of self, but have "serious reservations about the We (the group)."¹⁵ As this unit encompasses the importance of self-identity, group identity should not be forgotten. What can be done to ensure that the students understand that their value to the group is just as important as value to self? Once students have completed the individual stories of family perseverance, the class may compile all of the stories into a larger story, or production, for the school. This whole-class project will embody the essence of togetherness, being stronger together. The students will understand how family stories impacted lives and therefore support the goals of one another.

Activities

Jigsaw

In order to give all students access to the various discussions that will take place, the teacher may use a jigsaw method in groups. Students should be randomly placed in groups of four; this will be the students home group. Each student will be assigned a letter from A-D. The teacher will assign a different reading excerpt for each letter. For example, group A may read the fifth paragraph. As students are reading their assigned excerpt, they will sit with their expert group. The expert group is made up of individuals who are reading the same text. Once the expert group is finishing reading, the group will decide upon important facts from their text. The facts can be written on a jigsaw template. As experts, students then report back to their home group to share their facts.

This strategy allows all students to access the discussion. Since students are not reading the same passage, everyone has something to contribute to the discussion. In the same matter, everyone has the opportunity to listen. With this strategy it is important that the culture and climate of the classroom are conducive to

student-led discussions. The teacher should take time to establish norms about how to respectfully agree and disagree with one another. It may be helpful to assign roles or jobs within the discussion groups. While the students are discussing, the teacher may move from group to group trying to capture the essence of the discussions.

Role Play Interviews

In order to monitor and assess comprehension of students as excerpts from *Up From Slavery* are read, students may engage in interviews. The teacher should place the students in pairs. It may be helpful to place students of various reading levels together so that students may help each other. As a class, model some questions that they want answered regarding Booker T. Washington. Once a list of questions is derived, have the pairs create additional questions and also determine the answers to those questions. If questions have not been answered in the text already, some pairs may choose to research their questions on the Internet or in books provided by the teacher. After all answers have been determined in pairs, students decide who will be Washington and the interviewer. Depending upon time, each pair may present its questions and answers in an interview style in front of the whole class. If time does not permit, divide the class up so that two pairs are presenting at the same time.

Dance

This activity will appeal to the bodily-kinesthetic learners. Before beginning this activity, the teacher should choose at least four excerpts from the mentor text, *Up From Slavery*. The excerpts may be a few paragraphs. As a whole class, read one excerpt not to be chosen by a group, and discuss its meaning. Ask students the questions, how could this be interpreted through dance? Would the dance moves be graceful or choppy? Explain.

The teacher should place students in random groups of four. Each group will receive a different passage to interpret through dance. As students create their dance to accompany their passage, the teacher will monitor the discussions. Once completed, the students will showcase their dances with their group in front of the class.

Resources

SMART Goals

SMART Goal Worksheet

Today's date: _____ Target date: _____ Start date: _____ Date achieved: _____

Goal: _____

Verify that your goal is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely)

Specific: *What exactly will you accomplish?*

Measurable: *How will you know when you have reached this goal?*

Attainable: *Is achieving this goal possible with effort and commitment?*

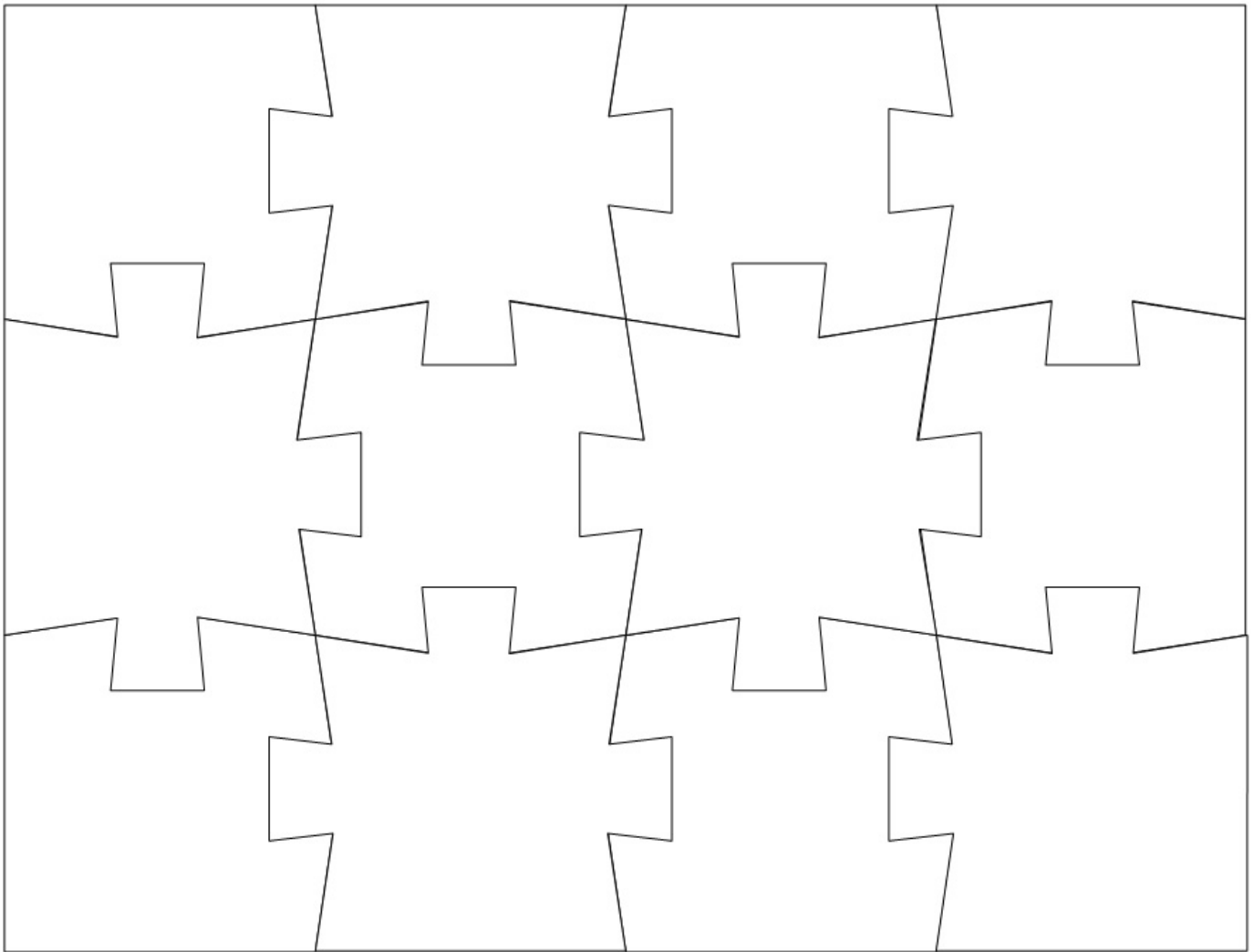
Realistic: *Do you have the resources to achieve this goal? If not, how will you get them?*

Timely: *When will this goal be achieved?*

Source

Kiwanis Kids "SMART Goal Worksheet"

Jigsaw Template



Source

Tim Vandevall "Jigsaw Puzzle Template"

Endnotes

1. "Largest School Districts in the U.S. by Enrollment," 2012-13.
2. "Four Chicago Neighborhoods Make List of Nation's Most Dangerous"
3. Chicago Public Schools. "John W. Cook Elementary."
4. Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*, 1.
5. Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*, 47.
6. Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*, 82.
7. Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*, 155.
8. Jacqué Roethler. "Reading in Color." 98.
9. Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*, 312.
10. Sarah P. McGeowen. "Sex or gender identity? 41.

11. William H. Jeynes. "The Relationship Between Parental Involvement and Urban Secondary School Student Academic Achievement." 90-91.
12. Martin Bazley and Helen Graham. "Experiment, Share, Revise: Learning through Oral History and Digital Storytelling." 110.
13. Susan B. Palmer and Michael L. Wehmeyer. "Promoting Self-Determination in Early Elementary School." 122.
14. There are many resources related to S.M.A.R.T. goals. See "Creating S.M.A.R.T Goals."
15. Richard L. Allen. *The Concept of Self*, 86.

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of Booker T. Washington.

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