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MIDDLE SCHOOL BOOK CLUBS OFFER MOMENTS OF CONNECTION

What does a retired professor's understanding of Kim Kardashian have to do with improving literacy among inner city youth? It's one of the magic moments of connection that happen in our MS ExTRA Book Clubs.

MS ExTRA (which stands for Middle School Expanded Day + Tutoring = Reading Achievement) is a collaboration between ExpandED Schools, the NYC Department of Education, City Council and Harvard Ed Labs whereby middle school students get an additional 2.5 hours of enriched learning each day. Students choose among classes like knitting or African drumming, hip-hop or salsa dance, robotics or STEM education. But Book Club is mandatory and meets daily.

What makes Book Club special is the personalized, small-group instruction led by a reading tutor, who is very often a retired professional with passion and time to give to kids who need it the most. Studies show that two-thirds of 8th graders can't read proficiently. And the achievement gap is greater in areas of concentrated poverty.

So these tutors work with four or five kids at a time, reading a book together and making connections from the stories to their own lives and the world around them. This intervention leads to improved scores on literacy tests, yes, but perhaps even more importantly, it fosters among students a passion for reading and a newfound belief in their abilities. It also enables intergenerational learning that goes both ways (case in point: confusing Kim Kardashian with the lawyer who defended OJ) along with an increased awareness and respect of different backgrounds and circumstances.

Thanks to an intrepid photographer, a kindhearted boy and a heroic principal, there's a huge awareness and interest in expanding educational opportunities for kids in low-income schools and communities. Now is the perfect time to capture that attention and profile other ways in which various New Yorkers are coming out in support of kids – and ways that kids are expanding their horizons.

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