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# My brain wakes up

Nicole McDonough

*Bank Street College of Education*

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**My Brain Wakes Up**

**By**

**Nicole McDonough**

**Mentor:**

**Cathleen Wiggins**

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### My Brain Wakes Up

From its conception, the classic children's show Sesame Street used interviewing children as a method of gathering knowledge. This simple but powerful format modeled the importance of inviting children to discuss what is important to them and what is going on in their world. Significant research and discussion has taken place around how teachers can better understand students' individual learning styles, yet the group who is most often left out of this conversation is the students themselves.

When given the opportunity to explore the topic of learning styles, children demonstrate profound expertise on themselves and their environment. *My Brain Wakes Up* is an original work of fiction designed to open the conversation between students and teachers about the striking contrasts and innate beauty in how differently each of our brains are made. It is at once a work of fiction, an interview of children, an opportunity for personal reflection, and an invitation for all learners to honor our unique creativity. In *My Brain Wakes Up*, readers find themselves immersed in ordinary, everyday events that illuminate the extraordinary inner-workings of each of our minds.

As we seek to more deeply understand who makes up our classroom community, this project proposes that one way to value student input and allow children and adults to reflect on their journey as a learners, thinkers and creative minds is to invite them into the conversation.

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## INTRODUCTION

“A is for Abuela and abandoned car  
B is for the bottles smashed like falling stars.  
Broken bottles of black cherry soda bought at barrio bodegas.  
C is for the Chino-Latino corner store we call Ortega’s.” (Hudes, p.5)

Every child has a unique story made up of knowledge and personal experiences that form the bedrock of their journey as learners and thinkers. As teachers, we dig for strategies, connections and materials that will help access these rich reservoirs of thought and emotion. But still, we struggle. Do we know our students? Have we reached down to the core of what matters to them? Are they engaged? Do they feel valued?

My original work is a children’s book entitled *My Brain Wakes Up*. This work aims to explore practical strategies that support the power of individual voice in the classroom by inviting personal student narratives to be central to their educational experience. In achieving this aim, it is helpful to understand that every story consists of two parts: (a) personal life experiences, and (b) innate characteristics. My research, original work, and curricular design provide a framework for how these two parts can and should work in conjunction with one another. The project serves as both an inspirational blueprint for innovation and a dynamic curriculum guide. The heart of my works rests within the notion that every child is unique and should feel valued and celebrated in the classroom.

In the work that follows, you will find an in-depth analysis of the pedagogic theories that support my work, a narrative look at the foundational questions that guided my rationale for this work, and a framework for how this book can be used in a variety of curricular settings as an exploration of personal narrative, creativity and self-reflection.

When we value individual voices in our classrooms, we invite children to join the conversation about multiple intelligences. *My Brain Wakes Up* combines children's literature, personal narrative, and group discussion to uncover the diverse environments that awaken our unique creative abilities. Allowing personal narrative and self reflection to remain central in our approach to thinking and learning allows us to lead a classroom of curious learners, engaged citizens and empathetic future leaders.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many educational theorists have devoted their life work to exploring the what, how and whys behind teacher effectiveness as it relates to fostering creativity. To begin, Holt's stance on the lack of inspiration and intrinsic motivation places the blame squarely on the shoulders of adults, as he asserts that "[children] fail because they are afraid, bored and confused" (Holt, p.6) He goes on to note that, "We adults destroy most of the intellectual and creative capacity in children" (Holt, p.274). So, the question remains, what should teachers (the adults) be *doing* to ensure that the creativity in children is not wilting once in our current educational practices?

This literature review is divided into 6 sub sections: The Value of the Individual, Empowering Conditions and Student Potential, Multiple Intelligences, Autonomy and Engagement, Trust and Student Expertise, and Group work, Tolerance and Empathy. The chosen excerpts present varied perspectives on the sub-headings above and will be discussed in detail in the section to follow.

### **The Value of the Individual**

"The best teachers tend to look for and appreciate the individual value of each student... Paul Baker, the highly successful drama professor from Texas, said it repeatedly. "Every student is unique and brings contributions no one else can make.'" (Bain, p.72)

Much like a family, each classroom has a unique set of traditions, practices and priorities that reflect the people that make it up. While classroom tone and structure are often established by the teacher, the layers of meaning within a classroom culture are determined by the students and the chemistry that results from their collaborative efforts.

John Bain discusses how, as teachers, it is our job to look for and appreciate these qualities. Some student's strengths might be more apparent, while other students might require a more patient, tender look. Some students might not think of themselves as valuable, nor will their peers treat them as such unless it is consciously modeled by a thoughtful, respected adult.

My Brain Wakes Up is first and foremost a public celebration of the private world of each child. Intimate in nature, it is designed to acknowledge our unique minds and to explore strategies that celebrate our individual perspectives and stories in hopes that children will begin to grasp "...that their experiences [have] value, no matter how ordinary they might seem." (Appelsies & Fairbanks, p.71)

In a review of "Write For Your Life", a nationwide writing initiative through designed at the University of Texas, Appelsies and Fairbanks refer to Maxine Greene's stance on the importance of personal narrative as a way to "[help] students "articulate their stories . . . not only to help them pursue the meaning of their lives . . . [but] to keep posing questions about the why." (Appelsies & Fairbanks, p.71)



In a safe, inclusive environment, open-ended writing assignments that encourage self-reflection allow students to confront tolerance in action; personal beliefs are treated as equal to academic knowledge. When we regularly ask students about their personal stories—their thoughts on themselves and their lives—students can more fluidly engage in the dynamic journey of acquiring new internal and external knowledge. They are more self-aware and more tolerant of others unique thoughts and experiences.

### **Empowering Conditions and Student Potential**

“Most fundamentally, teaching in this conception is creating those conditions in which most—if not all—of our students will realize their potential to learn.” (Bain, p.173)

The formation of self worth cannot be traced back to the presence or absence of a single component; the human psyche is complex, and self worth is formed in response to a myriad of foundational experiences. However, we do know that the conditions created by the teacher have a significant impact on the learner’s attitude about themselves.

Children's sense of self-worth is especially fragile; they need teachers and adults who have faith in their innate ability and think critically about the world around them. When a child has a sense of ownership over their insights about themselves as a learner, they are more likely to engage in the learning process on a more holistic level.

Thomas Armstrong takes a compelling stance on the importance of physical space and its connection to performance. He echoes Weinstens theories about how classrooms are the only place where we expect people to perform their best on challenging assignments and work peaceably with their peers, all while being crammed into a small space for so many hours. (Armstrong, 1999) Though many factors are not within our control, giving careful thought to the classroom setting and tone will have a great effect on student's clarity of focus and ability to tune in to their personal learning needs.

When we position students to discover something themselves rather than point it out to them, we encourage ownership, exploration and inquiry. This familiarizes students with the learning process. Self-directed learners begin to form, taking ownership over the direction and momentum of their work. As a result, they seek out new experiences that offer this same sense of ownership. Acknowledging and documenting their unique learning process carries great rewards and builds their confidence and sense of cognitive identity.

**Multiple Intelligences**

“An individual centered education is not one that is self centered or narcissistic. Rather, it is an education that takes the differences among individuals very seriously. Educators attempt to learn as much as they can about the learning strengths and proclivities of each student. As far as possible, educators make use of this information to craft the optimal education for each child.” (Gardner (MI) p. 56)

When students leave our classrooms, how do we hope they view themselves?

What do we hope they’ve gained? One elementary school in New Haven, Connecticut, where I had the privilege of teaching, states their mission as:

*To challenge children to become self-reliant, curious, and resourceful problem solvers with the academic and social skills to engage constructively and ethically in our diverse, changing world.*

Self-reliance, curiosity and group problem solving skills are all contingent on a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Often, in our attempt to respond sensitively to the variety of socio-economic status represented in our classrooms, we have a “...tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths.” (Delpit, p.172) Part of being able to decipher our student’s unique intelligences is to “...have some knowledge of children’s lives outside of the realms of paper and pencil work [so we can] know their strengths.” (Delpit, p.173) This will better prepare us to genuinely acknowledge and celebrate the spectrum of individual

strengths that make up our classroom communities. Moreover, students will experience the security necessary to more deeply explore their learning proclivities.

While education is a deeply personal journey, it is designed to be experienced in a community. However, our goal is not to create uniformity within that community, but to use our collective intelligence and group problem solving experiences to sharpen both our individual strengths and our responses to unexpected problems. Working in an inclusive community brings opportunities for students to learn from multiple perspectives, build tolerance, and experience the power of collaboration.

Metacognition—the ability to think about thinking—is a crucial aspect of self-awareness. When we model reflective thought for our students as normal behavior, we're not only better prepared to meet the evolving demands inherent in working with students, parents and colleagues, but we're demonstrating habits that will deepen our students appreciation for reflection as well. In his book *Leaders with Vision*, Robert Starratt examines how reflective practice is essential for teachers, and how systematic modes of reflecting yield great benefits.

“Practitioners who analyze the uniqueness of a problem in ways that structure it’s intelligibility, think about the results of their actions, and puzzle out why things worked and why they did not tend to build up a reservoir of insights and intuitions that they can call upon as they go about their work.” (Starratt, p.66)

In Edutopia’s article titled “Defining Differentiated Instruction,” Rebecca Alber defines equal education as “... not all students getting the same, but all students getting what they need.” (Alber, 2010) This concept is based on the idea that every

child has a medium of experiencing and interacting with knowledge that is more natural to them than another. We first see these concepts dissected in Howard Gardner's multiple Intelligence theory. More recently, an organization called New World Kids: *The Foundational Programs in Creative Thinking for Young Children* in Texas takes a fascinating approach multiple intelligence theory through a framework called The Sensory Alphabet. For a closer look at this work, *see Appendix A*.

Many educators accept Multiple Intelligence as viable theory, but translating abstract concepts into practical application requires logistical support. One exceptional initiative began at Cleveland High School in Seattle. Pre-school teachers are known to take part in home visits with incoming students; they know a strong school/family relationship will help the child adjust to the upcoming transition. But as students grow, the communication between home and school largely falls on the shoulders of the student. And when students are unable to navigate and merge these two contrasting worlds, adults on either end become frustrated, and in turn, the student suffers. That is exactly why Cleveland High School has designed a new home visit initiative. This program was highlighted in an issue of Educational Leadership magazine titled "Meeting Students Where They Are". Their work with children and families is a profound example of the compassion and human service that is at the heart of education. Let's pause this section to look at two practical ways teachers can meet students where they are.

### **Meeting Students Where They Are**

The text that follows is an analysis of two articles from an issue of Educational Leadership titled “Meeting Students Where They Are”. These articles speak deeply to the heart of my motivation for creating My Brain Wakes Up: how we can explore practical strategies that support the power of individual voice in the classroom by inviting students’ personal narrative to be central to their educational experience. And furthermore, what frameworks will allow students personal life experiences and innate characteristics work in conjunction with one another. The educational practices described in this issue of Educational Leadership stem from the ideas that classrooms should be places where our uniqueness is acknowledged, our stories are invited in, our assumptions examined, and our ability to listen to one another is continually called upon. Students are treated as the experts on themselves and their world-view. This approach builds community, mutual trust and an inclusive, pro-active mindset about education.

Additionally, these two articles outline the lasting change brought about by teachers who practice humility, self-awareness, and a commitment to learning rather than promote themselves as the expert. The authors challenge teachers to: (a) look closely at the knowledge students enter the classroom with, the methods of communicating and synthesizing information that work best for students, and (b) gain insight into students lives to help individualize their educational practice. Authors Robyn Jackson and Amy Baeder believe that students should expect the material and

concepts presented to them in school have a clear connection to their lives outside school. Furthermore, they should be encouraged to probe more deeply behind the content when that connection is unclear. Above all, the resounding ideas explored look at how we can ensure that tolerance, respect, equality, inclusion and trust are central to every child's educational experience.

In Robyn Jackson's article "Start Where Your Students Are", she illustrates how we can acknowledge the currencies students enter the classroom with, and how we can use those currencies to help them access the curriculum. "If students don't feel that we understand or value their currencies, they often assume there is no place for them in the classroom—and they opt out."(Jackson, p.8) As teachers, we want to understand our students. We want to make the material accessible, engaging, and make our students aware of their learning process. However, it's often unclear why this approach is so challenging. Teachers are compassionate, knowledgeable and motivated; students want to be understood, involved and successful. Yet neither party quite knows what they are up against. Sometimes, they are speaking silent languages that are entirely different.

So what is a currency? In this context, a currency is considered a medium of exchange. "Any behavior that students use to acquire the knowledge and skills important to your class..." (Jackson, p.7) Both the child's developmental stage and the culture that child is from will determine the currencies they value.

We also enter the classroom with a set of values—currencies we see as effective and acceptable. However, the mediums of exchange student's value is often

quite different. So, how do we access this information? How do we learn about one another's currencies without treating one as more acceptable than the other? How do we learn from one another's perspective rather than allow our currencies to divide, discourage and confuse us?

First, let's examine our fundamental goal as educators. Is our goal to make students value what we value? Or respond to the curriculum in the manner we deem acceptable? Or is it to acknowledge the skills and insights they enter the classroom with, and use those skills as the foundation for their intellectual and emotional growth? In essence, to "...help them connect with the curriculum in a way that enables them to leverage their skills and talents to meet or exceed the [curriculum] objectives." (Jackson, p.9)

Whether through mass media, consumerism, or politics, our culture presents life as if there is one norm from which it is experienced. Most teachers today were educated in institutions that perpetuated this idea. Therefore, they themselves might not realize the assumptions they carry upon entering a classroom. For example, is it fact or opinion that students learn best when they are still and quiet? Is it fact or opinion that note-taking is the best way to grasp new concepts? Is it fact or opinion that talking to friends during class is solely an interruption and a distraction from the learning process?

The practices explored in this article confirm that if we observe our students, listen to their stories, and remain open-minded and teachable about their familial backgrounds, we will begin to change the ineffective student/teacher patterns that



make up our educational history. Rather than brushing past the stores of knowledge students enter the classroom with to impose the currencies we value as essential to success in school, we will know how to acknowledge the necessity of different cultural capitols within our classrooms. We will begin to learn from one another, communicate more clearly, and deepen our awareness and our respect for each unique being.

The phrase “Start where your students are” is catchy, but putting it into practice takes thought, time and humility. Jackson defines starting where your students are as “... showing kids how to learn in ways that work best for them. It’s about creating spaces in the classroom where our students can feel comfortable being who they are rather than conforming to who we think they should be.” (Jackson, p.9)

Imagine you are an American student entering a Japanese classroom. You are bright, capable, and you love to learn. But before you can learn, you must first become Japanese. If not by appearance, you must at least adopt all of the cultural nuances and values that make one Japanese. And you must do so on your own accord, without anyone to identify or articulate those cultural values to you. Then, you must prove you are able to learn by acquiring new concepts within the framework you are struggling to understand and adopt. You will be assessed on your speed and ability to memorize the information presented to you, which might or might not have any connection to your life outside of the classroom. And all the adults in your life will be holding their breath to see if you succeed or fail.

What child or adult could thrive in such a setting? Is this so different from what we expect of children when they enter our classrooms? Do we acknowledge that they come from families whose cultures and values often differ greatly from our own? Do we treat *them* as the experts on themselves, their lives and their learning styles? Do we ask them to educate *us* about life from their vantage point? Or do we teach as if our set of values are the norm, and wonder why they are struggling? “Our students often carry currencies that can help them learn, but we don’t recognize that these currencies are valuable because they don’t look like the ones we value.” (Jackson, p.9)

In order for students to fully engage in the learning process, they must first feel that we acknowledge and value their unique perspectives. Often times, we think we are doing this by including an activity, book, poem, craft or project from a culture that is foreign to us. But this is a finite activity rather than an invitation to an ongoing exchange of stories and perceptions. If we were to adopt the latter, each student’s values, unique experiences, and dynamic perspective of the world would serve as the central focus of our curricular design. Our “norms” as teachers are merely one piece of a much larger puzzle, and if we truly want to include our students in their learning process, the values *we* bring to the classroom must be put in perspective.

Educating children is not about transmitting information, values and habits as fact. It’s about, “...helping kids feel safe enough to bring with them their skills, strengths, culture and background knowledge—and showing them how to use these to

acquire the curriculum.” (Jackson, p.9) And such practices require teachers to demonstrate self-awareness, insight, patience, humility and flexibility.

In her article “Stepping Into Students Worlds”, Amy Baeder examines how home visits are one way teachers can build trust and gather valuable information about student’s family lives—what Baeder sites as “reservoirs of accumulated knowledge and strategies for survival.” (Baeder, p.57) These visits are intended to be warm and inclusive, acknowledging the *families* as the experts rather than the amateurs. They are designed to give teachers a glimpse into a private world that will help them better connect with and motivate their students.

When families hear the phrase home visits, they often think of the teacher as an outsider who is coming into their world to tell them what is wrong with their child and provide them with resources on how to fix the problem. However, the motives behind the home visits required of all faculty at Cleveland High, a small school in Seattle, are quite different. Teachers are to enter each home as a learner. They are trained to focus on the families strengths, to listen attentively, to work towards establishing trust and a sense of inclusion, and to personally invite them into the school community. Above all, teachers are to demonstrate their commitment to providing an education that acknowledges the child as an individual who is part of a greater whole.

Some teachers design their own curriculum while others work within a state mandated curriculum. Yet most teachers take part in designing *how* they will present the information so that students can access the material. Unfortunately, the rich

stores of knowledge that make up the students understanding of the world aren't always taken into consideration in the construction of this design. But, how can we include this information in our design if we don't know *who it is* that makes up our classroom? Cleveland High's response to this problem is conducting purposeful, well-intentioned home visits.

“The primary focus [of these visits] is to build relationships, create a more tightly knit school community, and eventually design classrooms that better reflect our students.” (Baeder, p.58) This quote illuminates the desire at the heart of the movement for home visits: that each classroom would be one that reflects the students who make it up. This idea strongly contrasts with many of the schools of thought at work in education today. For instance, the public school system was designed after the factory model—a place to produce humans who could learn to follow orders and master isolated skills. As a result, the mindset that each classroom community is a living organism that will and should change from year to year has not yet been widely adopted. Schools and administrators often expect students to be passive learners, to leave their “street smarts” at the door and accept the values and skills presented to them as relevant without questioning their purpose or application to their lives.

Madeliene Ray, professor at Bank Street College of Education, uses the word “curriculum” to refer to “*anything that takes place within the classroom.*” The beauty of Cleveland High's model of home visits is that it places student's lives and family values at the center of curricular design. In hindsight, it's peculiar to think how we might engage students in the curriculum by doing it any other way.

“When we visit a student’s home, students become aware that lines of communication have opened between their family and their teacher, and a feeling of trust and inclusion develops.” (Baeder, p.59) By visiting their student’s home, a teacher is publicly acknowledging the student as an individual with unique family traditions and values, and they are allowing the family to be the expert on those values. One might describe them as teachable: a word not often associated with the traditional persona of a teacher as all-knowing disciplinarian. If the teacher demonstrates an eagerness to learn about their student’s lives, this attitude alone will establish a sense of trust between the student and the teacher. And one of the most powerful ways to learn and gather insight is to listen. When a teacher takes the initiative to visit a student’s home, they are saying *I am here for you, and I’m here to listen*. “Some students remain a mystery to me until I visit their homes and they unfold into real people. Teachers need to know students in this way; everyday we make instructional decisions that hinge on what we know about our kids. We can learn so much if we just enter students’ homes and listen.” (Baeder, p.60)

Both the practices examined in these two articles, as well as the curricular possibilities inherent in *My Brain Wakes Up*, are based on the importance of valuing student’s personal lives and allowing them to be the experts on who they are, where they come from, and how they learn best. If put into practice, visiting students homes, acknowledging our unique currencies, and inviting students personal lives into the classroom will prove to be exponentially beneficial for our work with students. Such practices will help us shift towards an educational model that engages

children and empowers them to take an active role in determining the course of their educational journey.

### **Autonomy and Engagement**

“The opposite of autonomy is control. And since they sit at different poles of the behavioral compass, they point us towards different destinations. Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement.” (Pink, p.110)

At its conception, public school was designed to train young minds into factory workers who could follow rules and take orders. While educators and policy makers have responded to our evolving society and are working to ensure that the mission of public schools prepares children to contribute meaningfully to today’s society rather than the industrial era, we are still left with contrasting ideas among educators about what success within education looks like. Does it manifest itself as the ability to follow rules? Demonstrate respect? Solve a problem? Conduct research? Ask meaningful questions? Demonstrate strong study and memorization skills? Explore one’s environment? Be self-reflective? Manage time and stay organized? Complete a difficult task? Express passion about a topic? Desire further knowledge? Certainly there is a need for each of these skills, but are we capable of merging our

ideas to create a shared vision of what a classroom of successful students looks like?

Can we agree on a universal definition of success as it relates to education?

In his work, author Daniel Pink (2005) outlines what he deems as evidence of a successful classroom: engagement. Teachers continually work to find new strategies of engaging their students. They recognize that their curriculum must first feel relevant in order for students to stay actively engaged in the material. But how can we ensure students are engaged? Firstly, children need ample time to make sense of their work. “Racing through content without regard for basic skills development and the experience of joy during this early learning phase is a surefire recipe for killing any chance for students to develop a love of learning. (Sornson, 2013)

Pink believes that engagement is the result of autonomy: the more freedom and independence students have within the learning process, the more determined they will be to see their projects and research through to completion as, “...our basic nature is to be curious and self-directed.” (Pink 2009, p.89). He goes on to note that, “autonomous motivation promotes greater conceptual understanding, better grades, enhanced persistence at school... higher productivity... and greater levels of psychological well-being.” (Pink, p.91) Unfortunately, SiSAL refers to a review of practical strategies for fostering autonomy in current teacher education materials, and the results showed that, “despite the common interest in learner autonomy teachers are not necessarily provided with sufficient information in teacher training texts to develop an understanding of learner autonomy... not at a practical level. Without

such an understanding, perhaps it is not surprising that we often find learners struggling to develop as autonomous learners.” (Reinders & Balcikanli, p.25)

### **Trust and Student Expertise**

“At the start of the school term, ask students about their individual passions and areas of expertise. Keep a list of your experts, and then call upon them as needed throughout the term. A classroom of teachers is a classroom of learners.” (Pink, p.184)

In an ideal setting, students and teachers would feel as though they're on the same team. But phrases like *Don't get in trouble*, or *Listen to your teacher* can paint school as a place where reverence for rules and authority hold greater value than excitement or curiosity. How might a student's perception of their education change if the phrases surrounding the start of a new year were *What do you want to learn more about this year?* or *What are you excited share with your class this year?* How might their perception of the teacher's role change? How could this shift alter their personal approach to the year ahead?

We have little control over what messages a child receives outside of our classrooms. But if we believe that each student's personal knowledge and life experiences are a vital ingredient to a vibrant, healthy curriculum, we should actively



seek ways to invite them to share and invite them to teach. Teachers who extend such an invitation from day one are creating an atmosphere of trust and friendship. They are sending the messages *I'm glad you're here. You're contributions are important. I look forward to learning from you and with you.*

In a curriculum based solely on mastering isolated skills, students are not required to apply their common sense or knowledge of the outside world. This can cause them to file their personal knowledge away under “street smarts”; a label that demotes their perceptions of reality as subpar or irrelevant in an academic setting. This is tragic. Both teachers and student suffer from this division. In his work *Education Nation*, Milton Chen discusses the stance of Professor Mazur from Cambridge on the topic of traditional lecturing. He believes that “...students should play a vital role in assessing their learning and sharing what they know and don't know.” (Chen, p.121)

When we invite students to merge their observations with the dynamic resources available to them at school, the process of connecting related problems and concepts will naturally become more fluid, building their confidence in their inherent research skills. In such inclusive and trusting environments, we communicate that the currencies students enter the classroom with are essential in reaching and exceeding their potential as learners and thinkers. As we continue to rethink the role of the teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, in addition to subject mastery, it appears to be “...more important that [teachers] understand[s] that students need to arrive at their own understanding.” (Chen, p.206)

When we approach teaching by acknowledging that we are all capable of formulating and sharing insights, we model respect. Such attitudes are contagious. Children are highly capable of being confident, tolerant and appreciative of others, but they need these attitudes to be modeled for them.

### **Group Work, Tolerance and Empathy**

“During the early years of school, such issues are best approached through experiences in which members of different groups work together on common projects, come to know one another first hand, deal with differences in an amicable manner, and discover that a perspective may be different without being deficient.” (Gardner 2009, p.114)

The most universal conflict people encounter is how to work together, especially when faced with a problem. No matter the setting, we all struggle to communicate, express empathy, work towards an amicable solution and listen to one another’s perspectives. Fisher and Ury remind us that, “...human beings are not computers. We are creatures of strong emotions who often have radically different perceptions and have difficulty communicating clearly.” (Fisher & Ury, p.11) Only repeated exposure to group problem solving allows us to become comfortable and eventually confident navigating such complex dynamics.

The social and emotional intelligence that results from regularly working in groups cannot be acquired any other way. Mary Gordon writes extensively on the development of emotional literacy and how it “...allows us to bring a thoughtful,

respectful approach to solving conflicts.” (Gordon, p.117) She goes on to note, “...it is emotional literacy that opens the window to empathy, allowing us to see situations from another’s perspective and understand their feelings.” (Gordon, p.117) Learning how to navigate group dynamics—how to balance your own skills and ideas with those around you; how to know when to speak and when to listen, or when to take charge and when to follow—can only be gained by being immersed in such scenarios repeatedly, establishing group work as a norm that we can expand, dissect and revisit.

When designing group problem solving activities for your students, there are 3 structural elements that can position each group member for success: (a) carefully construct groups based on previous knowledge of student compatibility, (b) present group with controlled problems that have minor real life consequences, and (c) ensure there’s at least one adult nearby to call on for advice, intervention, clarity and guidance. If students become familiar with group problem solving dynamics at a young age, they’ll be familiar with the messy nature of group work and more prepared to push through the mess and make innovative progress.

Embarking on group problem solving activities is indeed messier than rote memorization or busy work. Unpredictable outcomes, strong emotions, and time-consuming efforts towards effective communication are all part of the process. Yet, continually placing students in this scenario throughout their education allows them to gain sympathy and self awareness.

In addition to deepening our self-awareness and emotional intelligence, group work can deepen our knowledge of others. Working closely to solve a problem or achieve a task with peers you might not otherwise choose to work with broadens our understanding of our similarities and differences, and deepens our appreciation for these characteristics.

When we expose students to the wide variety of perspectives represented in groups, we build tolerance and empathy, which Gordon describes as, "...the ability to see things from another person's perspective... the foundation for the development of pro-social skills. These are the skills that most victims and bullies seem to lack." (Gordon, p.177) Each person's perspective is one piece of the puzzle; unique, needed and equally valuable. Encouraging students to lean on discomfort in emotionally safe educational settings yields a broadmindedness that transcends the traditional boundaries of content and subject area.

## RATIONALE

### *My 7 Essential Questions*

The following list of essential questions has served as the compass for my work. I have made every effort to continually circle back to these guiding questions, making adaptations and additions where I deem fit, and/or necessary. Thence, the essential questions that continue to motivate and guide me through this experience are as follows:

1. What are the origins of creativity?
2. Does everyone have the opportunity to be creative?
3. What type of environment encourages creativity?
4. What squashes creativity?
5. How can we foster creative thinking in the classroom?
6. How can we ensure that each student feels valued?
7. What does it mean to value students' ideas in the classroom?

While each of these questions could easily be the focus of an entire dissertation, given the nature of this project, specifically, I've chosen to make a cursory effort at pondering, researching and responding to these questions, providing a simplified platform from which teachers, administrators, and students will find mutual benefit. For a thorough explanation of my creative process, *see Appendix B*.

## **1.) What are the origins of creativity?**

According to Anita Woolfolk, (2007) creativity is an outward expression of the internal desire to rearrange components to explore a new strategy to solve a problem. When faced with a challenge, humans continually demonstrate the ability to step back from a problem and analyze its components in order to remove it as an obstacle entirely. Our ability to analyze and persist through trial and error is what gives way to the basic inventiveness found in our daily existence; from formative inventions such as the wheel or electricity, to basic domestic inventions such as the clothesline, humans have always demonstrated the ability to think beyond the confines of what's before them in order to make their daily lives and routines more efficient and more manageable.

Howard Gardner defines a creative thinker as “a person who regularly solves problems, fashions products, or defines new questions in a domain in a way that is initially considered novel but that ultimately becomes accepted in a particular cultural setting.” (Gardner, p.35) The trait we often call resourcefulness is a strong indicator of creative thinking. When human survival was based on our ability to be resourceful, creative thinking was a daily practice. Compared to the structure of chores and routines found when farming dictated family life, modern culture no longer necessitates creative thinking in regards to basic survival. Therefore, creativity as we have defined it here must be re-inserted as essential to our survival in modern society.

As educators, our response to creative thinking has a tremendous influence on a child's confidence in their ability to make meaningful contributions. We can unknowingly discourage student's naturally creative responses by valuing order over original thought. But because creativity *is* essential to thriving in our modern society, we must create classroom environments that lay the foundations for creative problem solving, encouraging our students to think about options, explore possible uses, ask questions and take risks. Such responses will embed the creative process as normal, and necessary.

Obtaining rich stores of knowledge on specific topics is an essential foundation for creative thought as it allows us to build on what we know to arrive at new insights. However, these stores of knowledge about useful topics will look differently in early childhood than in more sophisticated realms of creative thinking. For example, if a child is faced with a social obstacle on the playground regarding fairness and inclusion, the knowledge that will help him navigate his way through this problem include his knowledge of: the children he's playing with, the playground environment, the authority figures he can turn to, the rules of the game, his past experiences, and his feelings. If he calls upon this knowledge, he will eventually be able to use the resources available to him to solve it. This knowledge, paired with the ability to restructure the pieces to see the problem in a new way, will lead to a sudden insight. A creative solution.

## 2.) Does everyone have the opportunity to be creative?

In His book *The Element*, Ken Robinson takes a powerful stance on our limited conception of our natural capacities. “We are all born with extraordinary powers of imagination, intelligence, feeling, intuition, spirituality, and of physical and sensory awareness.” “...For the most part, we use only a fraction of these powers, and some not at all.” (Robinson, p.8-9) So, what circumstances might limit one’s ability to use these powers? Tragically, the social and emotional effects of living in conditions of serious economic and emotional strife pose great threats to a child’s physical and emotional safety. In conditions of lack—and the incurring psychological and behavioral effects that result from it—children are often unable to see themselves as valuable or worthy of making meaningful contributions: two components that are essential to bringing forth the creative thinker inside each of us. While classroom teachers cannot remedy problems rampant outside the classroom, they can build a classroom culture that communicates *You are safe, and you are valuable*.

Conditions of extreme poverty can also hinder a child’s emotional access to play and imagination. Most children respond to such environments by internalizing the message *you are not safe and you are not valuable*. Security and self worth are foundational to our ability to value ourselves, value our creative tendencies, and risk contributing our ideas with the assurance that we’ll be listened to and celebrated.



When asked about the success of the students at her school—most of which come from poverty stricken neighborhoods in Washington DC— Alisha Coleman-Kiner, principal of Booker T. Washington High School, states that teaching requires love, and love “requires seeing other people’s children as valuable and worthy of love even when their parents and communities may not.”(Coleman-Kiner) If teachers keep this quest at the heart of their practice, the children in their classrooms can experience first-hand the transformative powers of education when presented with faith, compassion and basic human decency.

### **3.) What type of environment encourages creativity?**

“Teachers are in an excellent position to encourage or discourage creativity through their acceptance or rejection of the unusual and imaginative.” (Woolfolk, p.484)

Unusual and imaginative ideas can elicit both excitement and fear. We’re excited by the possibilities and fearful of the mess. Order is not the enemy of individuality; basic orderliness is necessary for children to feel safe. Experiences within the classroom should feel orderly and structured. However, once that structure is established, unusual and imaginative ideas should be invited in. Children naturally and joyfully let their imaginations guide them, therefore pockets of autonomy within a structured whole can yield exciting avenues for exploration.

Once a sense of trust, safety and love are established, environments that encourage creativity involve brainstorming. Brainstorming is a familiar word often used to describe a finite activity. But the protocols that make brain storming safe and effective are quite specific. Effective brainstorming separates the process of creating ideas from evaluating them. When we ask students to take risks by sharing their personal ideas and unique perspectives, evaluation, discussion and criticism must be postponed. Such protocols will ensure a safe environment, free of judgment and criticism. Within these protocols, we give our collective intelligence permission to expand. In group discussions based on tolerance and respect, our individual ideas have the power to grow into something lively, dynamic and transformative.

#### **4.) What type of environment squashes creativity?**

While creativity can sometimes flourish in spite of the environment, tone and atmosphere play a pivotal role in hindering or encouraging creative thought. If we lack security—don't have our basic needs met or a sense of predictability in our lives—our capacity to tap into our intrinsic creativity will be limited. Additionally, if we are constantly in settings where convergent thinking—thinking that leads to only one right answer—is rewarded, we will take creative or intellectual risks. Similarly, if a child's environment lacks proper supervision and adult advocacy, or feels chaotic, they are unlikely to take risks. Furthermore, if the adults present establish their

authority through criticism, causing learners to feel as though it's their job to please the adult rather than interact with them, the child's inherent creative abilities will not emerge.

In his book *How Children Fail*, John Holt outlines three factors that contribute to children's failure in schools: boredom, fear and confusion.

“They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing... the many anxious adults around them... They are bored because the things they are... told to do in school are so trivial, so dull and make such limited demands on the wide spectrum of their intelligence, capabilities and talents. They are confused because... the torrent of words that pours over them in school makes little or no sense.” (Holt, p.6)

In the environment described above, teachers perform rather than engage their students in discussion; they feel the need to defend their expertise at all costs. These environments function best when students are obedient, compliant, and resist the urge to think for themselves; only convergent thinking is rewarded.

However, if teachers believe they are also there to learn, and position themselves alongside the students, their teachable demeanor will diffuse this idea that teachers are perfect, all-knowing disciplinarians. When we act as both facilitators of learning and learners ourselves, children are more likely to trust their instincts, ask questions, and take personal responsibility for deepening their knowledge.

In addition to feeling safe, students will not take risks unless they see that risk-taking is rewarded.

“What hampers [children's] thinking, what drives them into these narrow and defensive strategies, is a feeling that they must please the grownups at all

costs. The really able thinkers in our class turn out to be, without exception, children who don't feel so strongly the need to please grownups." (Holt, p.29)

As educators, if we are willing to embrace the unusual and the imaginative—the child who is full of energy and ideas that might or might not relate—and redirect their energy rather than fear it, we send the message *this is a place where courage and risk taking are indeed rewarded*. John Holt speaks very candidly about our schools response to courage in young children.

“Someone called courage “the lovely virtue.” It is lovely, and nowhere more so than in little children, who are so weak and vulnerable, and have so many good reasons to be afraid. With few exceptions, schools and school people do not value courage in children. Not understanding it, and having very little of it themselves, they fear it, and do all they can to stamp it out. They think that children who are brave will be hard to handle, rebellious, defiant, and that children who are scared will be easy to control...” (Holt, p.234)

If administrators, fellow colleagues, or the ideas beneath a school's culture only reward maintaining control and displaying results, teachers won't be able to reward risk-taking, courage, and divergent thinking, because they themselves will not be rewarded.

In these scenarios, we must ask ourselves: what role should respect play in the classroom? How can we foster a deep love of learning and respect for individual knowledge in our classrooms? Without these ideas at the heart of our work, children will feel afraid, bored and confused, and will accept their role in education as one of obedience and compliance.

### **5.) How can we foster creative thinking in the classroom?**

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences beautifully outlines the range of intelligences humans can express. While his work has been acknowledged and accepted as viable theory by many educators, certain intelligences are still seen as more valuable than others. As Gardner writes "Once we realize that people have very different kinds of minds, different kinds of strengths... then education, which treats everybody the same way, is actually the most unfair education." (Gardner, 1997) Differentiated learning gives equal value to all intelligences, causing learners to feel understood. Consequently, students develop a sense of educational purpose. And ultimately, a willingness to explore deeper functions within the learning community, such as empathy and the courage to take risks, will inevitably emerge.

Now that we've defined creativity as the ability to rearrange problems to arrive at new solutions, we can move beyond the idea that creativity is simply artistic expression by artistic people. Problem solving is a pure expression of true creative—or divergent—thinking. In the elementary years, teachers who thoughtfully design "problems" for their students to solve are laying foundations that encourage creative thought in all life situations rather than just art class. In the middle and upper school years, projects on problem solving can expand to include global issues, environmental issues, ethics, politics etc. In his work *What the Best College Teachers Do*, John Bain discusses how, in the college years, problem solving moves from the concrete to the

abstract. Students begin to confront their own mental models as well as external problems.

“...the best teachers often try to create what we have come to call a “natural critical learning environment.” In that environment, people learn by confronting intriguing, beautiful or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality. These are challenging yet supportive conditions in which learners feel a sense of control over their education; work collaboratively with others; believe that their work will be considered fairly and honestly; and try, fail, and receive feedback from expert learners in advance of and separate from any summative judgment of their effort.” (Bain, p. 18)

Our personal assumptions can be rather uncomfortable to unpack in front of a group. Therefore, even if the teacher has already spent years actively dissecting their own assumptions, perspectives brought to the table should be handled with compassion and care. Alternately, if a teacher positions themselves as having completed the process of examining their assumptions and acts merely as an observer of this humbling and gruesome process, students will be reluctant to take intellectual, conversational or emotional risks.

What follows is an examination of five practical ways Anita Woolfolk (2007) suggests teachers can encourage creativity and divergent thinking in their classroom.

### ***Celebrate Divergent Thinking***

As educators, we want to empower our students to solve their problems. One way to do this is by articulating that: (a) multiple perspectives are needed to fully grasp the concept at hand, (b) participation and evidence of thought is more important

than the correct answer, and (c) there is great value in group problem solving rather than settling for an answer and moving on. When we make time for individual thought processes as much as academic completion, we reinforce the importance of risk-taking and finding unusual solutions to problems.

### ***Tolerate Dissent***

The systems of rewards we use in our classrooms will benefit from careful analysis. If we reward students who are more apt to conform with a leadership role, this practice will send the message that John Holt discusses as confusing and counterproductive to the learning process: the message that students are there to anticipate what will please teachers and act accordingly. "...what hampers their thinking... is a feeling that they must please the grownups at all costs." (Holt, p.29) However, if we aim to build a learning community where dynamic, unconventional ideas abound, we might give careful look at how to ensure our nonconforming students receive an equal share of classroom privileges and rewards as well.

### ***Encourage Students to Trust Their Own Judgment***

Our job is to foster children's innate tendency to think and problem solve by empowering them to trust themselves, consider other perspectives, and take full responsibility for their quest for knowledge. Essentially, to deepen their awareness of the complexity of the learning process as it is unfolding. Two simple ways we can incorporate this into our practice are: (1) when students ask questions they can

answer, rephrase the question and direct it back to them, and (2) give ungraded assignments from time to time so students can focus on the direction of their process and the quality of their work rather than worrying about their performance.

### ***Emphasize that Everyone is Inherently Creative***

How do we send the message to our students *You are capable and I am here to help?* How do we empower our students to trust their instincts and follow their own thought processes? Language is a powerful tool. And while reactive, careless language can fracture trust and dampen the learning environment, one small, thoughtful comment has the potential to empower a young learner to trust their instincts and take initiative for actively pursuing deeper understanding.

If we believe creativity is a universal trait, practices that demonstrate this might be to: (1) avoid describing great inventors and artists as if they were superhuman, and (2) recognize the creative efforts in students work by having a separate grade for “originality”.

### ***Be a stimulus for Creative Thinking***

Ordinary tasks are often comprised of many small decisions. Opening our student’s eyes to those small decisions and including them in the process stimulates creative thinking. For example, *“On our museum fieldtrip, what mode of transportation will allow us to arrive in time for our 10:30am tour? Where can we locate the train or bus schedule? How much will it cost for every student and*



*chaperone to ride? How else can we prepare for our trip?* A conversational, inclusive approach requires students to confront the practical problems ordinary to adult life and develop confidence in their research skills.

Asking questions evokes ingenuity and intellectual risk taking as well. *“We’ve all agreed that we’d like to decrease our classrooms carbon footprint, but what does that actually mean? Where do we begin? Are there ways for us to measure this? In what different ways could we document our efforts? How might we share our finding with others? How will this make a difference in our school community?”* Students feel their knowledge will help solve the problem at hand and therefore are more likely to contribute.

Another way we can stimulate creative thinking in our students is by modeling creative problem solving. If we contribute unusual solutions and ideas within the brainstorming process rather than observe or evaluate it from afar, we model creative problem solving as a normal function of the engaged mind. As students watch a teacher participate and learn alongside them, the age-old idea of the teacher as authoritative disciplinarian and expert is diffused.

**6.) How can we ensure that each student feels valued?**

Children are experts on the world we live in. They gather insights from their everyday observations and form alarmingly accurate conclusions about our world. The classroom should be a place where these thoughts and observations are called upon, valued and documented. Whether it's their bedroom, their family, their neighborhood or the playground, children are experts on these personal territories. One way to acknowledge this expertise is to focus on personal narrative. "One of the main things we try to do in schools is to give children a tool—language—with which to learn, think and talk about the world they live in." (Holt, p.148)

Each student's personal life contributes to the vibrant fabric that makes up the classroom community. Students should be encouraged to share their stories in a medium that speaks to them. When we acknowledge students personal lives as relevant, we cultivate self-respect and the ability to reflect on their lives and the lives of those around them.

A trusting student teacher relationship allows both parties to experience notable growth. John Bain speaks candidly on the power of trust and openness in the classroom:

"Highly effective teachers tend to reflect a strong trust in students. They usually believe that students want to learn, and they assume, until proven otherwise, that they can. They often display openness with students, and may from time to time, talk about their own intellectual journey, its ambitions, triumphs, frustrations and failures, and encourage their students to be similarly reflective and candid... They often discuss openly and enthusiastically their own sense of awe and curiosity about life. Above all, they tend to treat students with what can only be called simple decency." (Bain, p. 18)

When, as teachers, we allow our imperfect selves to surface, when we share the questions, emotions and frustrations that fill our journey as learners, students feel invited to be human along with us.

### **7.) What does it mean to value students ideas in the classroom?**

Before we can value a student's contributions, we must first value them as human beings. One way to do outwardly demonstrate this is by learning about the culture from which they come and acknowledge their perspective as distinctive and necessary. We assume we know nothing about their lives or their feelings and instead demonstrate that we desperately want to. We treat our students as the experts on their culture, and invite them educate us about the vivid and challenging experiences that structure their everyday lives. Normal human ethnocentrism causes us to think there is a single norm from which life is experienced. Yet, when we enter the classroom with this mindset, we marginalize our students, demean their most personal insights, and miss opportunities to learn from them, and learn about ourselves through them. Bell Hooks shares how this has been happening for quite some time: "Most of us were taught in classrooms where styles of teachings reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which we were encouraged to believe was universal." (Hooks, p. 35) Two simple but effective assumptions that will help us as

we approach educating children are: (1) that every child wants to learn, and (2) that every child is capable of learning.

Students need to feel secure in order to make meaningful contributions. As we acknowledge this desire for security, we'll see how first modeling vulnerability and risk-taking before expecting them to do so will build trust and respect.

“Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share.” (Hooks, .21)

Classrooms that emanate collective trust have the potential to transform students' perceptions of themselves, their peers and their place in the world around them.

Asking questions is a basic, healthy response to making sense of our world. Therefore, we can embrace student's natural desire to question without feeling exhausted or threatened. When we expect students to passively receive knowledge without questioning its relevance or connection to their everyday lives, we discount their innate desire to draw connections, synthesize information, and apply new insights to their personal knowledge. “[Students] rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences.” (Hooks, p. 19)

Many educators view the classroom as a place solely designed for academic discussion. However, learning to listen to one another before focusing on debating academic ideas allows us to build the foundations needed for a strong community.

When we listen, we demonstrate a sincere appreciation for student's individual thoughts, feelings, contributions, responses and ways of processing the world around them.

“One of the reasons I appreciate people linking the personal to the academic is that I think that the more students recognize their own uniqueness and particularity, the more they listen. So, one of my teaching strategies is to redirect their attention away from my voice to one another's voices.” (Hooks, p. 151)

In my quest to grapple with such grand concepts of student worth, creativity and classroom environment, I can draw a few conclusions but I'm left with even more questions. In short, I assert that the origins of creativity are found in human resourcefulness; that a sense of safety and love provide the foundation for opportunities to be creative; that environments which promote autonomy and interest based learning encourage creativity; that models of top-down authority squash creativity, while rewarding risk taking encourages it; that problem solving, personal reflection and a sense of trust can help foster creative thinking; that one way to value students is to treat them as experts on themselves and their world; and that valuing students is evident in our willingness to learn about their worlds, remain teachable, and engage in content that is clearly connected to their personal lives.

**MANUSCRIPT**

What follows is my original work: My Brain Wakes Up. While the published format would likely change, this text only format is intentional, allowing room to imagine original art by a professional illustrator, as well as serving as a blank canvas from which teachers and children can respond to the text.

My Brain Wakes Up

Nicole McDonough

Do you love to learn?

You do?

What do you love learning about?



Do you have lots of ideas?

No, I mean lots and lots and lots of ideas.

*You do?*

When do you have the most ideas?

What makes your brain wake up?

My brain wakes up when I jump rope with my friends.  
We skip and clap and make up rhymes. Slap! Fly! The  
rope keeps spinning. Nothing sad can interrupt our  
happy sidewalk songs.

My brain wakes up when I explore the beach. I stuff my  
pockets with treasures; I climb on driftwood logs.  
Driftwood is a tree that falls into the ocean and drifts  
alone until it finds a beach. I love when the waves  
pound my feet. Someday, I'll explore the sea.

My brain wakes up when I have an important job. Appa owns a store and he needs my help. I sort peas, candy, and rice crackers. I make the store inviting. When my rows are complete, I choose a soda because I've worked very hard.

My brain wakes up when I weave baskets with my sisters. Circles are the most popular shape: round, shallow, coiled baskets. Everyone sets up their tents. Ours is filled with sweetgrass and we're ready to begin.

My brain wakes up when I watch clouds with my dad.  
We lay in the grass. Our minds drift. I see a shark, he  
sees a man skiing. It's easy to use my imagination  
because there are so many clouds to choose from.

My brain wakes up when I hear new languages. At the  
café, people around us talk; I close my eyes and listen.  
The strange words tickle my brain. It sounds like a  
parade.



My brain wakes up when I make oil dumplings with my cousins for Chinese New Year. We start with the sweet rice dough. Grandmother helps. Everyone works together. We have many reasons to celebrate.

My brain wakes up when I fix something. When my  
paper airplane doesn't fly right, I think really hard.  
I squeeze out ideas and try to fix the problem.  
Finally, it flies.

My brain wakes up when I meet new kids at the park.  
“Go ahead,” mama says. “Hello,” I say. Usually they  
join me and we race to the slide. All of a sudden, we’re  
almost friends.

My brain wakes up when I catch fish for my family. It's hot. We pile into our boat and dive until our net is full. Every bite of salted fish shows we've worked together

My brain wakes up when my family tells stories. After dinner my dad leaps onto his chair. He's on a roll! "Be careful!" mom shouts. I feel my own stories grow inside me. I love my family.

My brain wakes up when I see buildings from different cultures. I touch the walls, stare at the ceiling, study the shapes; I'm speechless. It's strange to stand inside something so ancient. And wonderful too.

My brain wakes up when I play music with my uncle.  
His trumpet sings. We tap our feet; our bones feel like  
butter. Someday, when we're on stage together, the  
whole city's bones will feel like butter too.

My brain wakes up at sunset. We stop our game and climb up to watch. Every roof in our village glows. I smell Moqueca cooking in the streets. Sunset: time for dinner.



My brain wakes up when I read a map. Maps help us understand our earth. After I go exploring, I draw maps to remember where my favorite places are. Maps are like puzzles, except more useful. When I use them, I feel brave.

My brain wakes up when I chase the ball as  
fast as I can. The field is big but my legs are fast.  
If I could, I'd play in this field with my friends  
all day long.

My brain wakes up when I watch our city out the bus window. I tune out the noise and watch buildings speed by. I notice new things like it's a fieldtrip through a very special place.

Wow! That was a lot of ideas!

There are so many different ways to learn!

But, I'm still waiting to hear:

when do *you* learn best?

What makes *your* brain wake up?

## APPLICATIONS

### *Educational Uses for My Brain Wakes Up*

For those in the field of education, unexpected events are a daily occurrence. As in most human resource fields, teachers are accustomed to being bombarded by a slurry of unpredictable demands that are complex, urgent and costly. Teachers learn how to respond to these demands with notable courage and thoughtfulness, and take them in stride as part of their profession. Essentially, teachers are innovators. They operate on multiple planes at all times. The day to day happenings within their schools and classrooms require them to continually rewrite their lesson plans and goals based on the immediate needs of the students, colleagues, parents and administrators with whom they interact.

By design, certain standards based curriculums overlook this naturally innovative trait in teachers. While structure, goals, and maps can be helpful tools in curriculum planning, teachers should also be invited to interpret the curriculum in a way that allows for something unique to emerge. In this regard, the curricular possibilities inherent in *My Brain Wakes Up* beckon teachers to play a vital role. By design, it is intended to be a qualitative diagnostic tool that evokes a creative response rather than a fixed lesson plan. Teacher's are deliberately encouraged to first experience and reflect on the text before determining how to use it with their particular age group and subject area; curricular possibilities could range from a finite

activity to a yearlong thematic exploration. No two classrooms will respond in the same way because no two classrooms are alike.

What follows are a series of tables organized by subject matter that outline possible responses to the book within a variety of disciplines. Hopefully, the range of ideas presented will prompt teachers to further explore the range of activities and projects possible in response to the text.

## VISUAL ART

**Activity:** Allow students to choose which scene they'd like to illustrate; create a class book of illustrations

**Possible Themes explored:** Diversity, personal style, community, collaboration

**Activity:** Use abstract images, symbols, shapes, patterns, colors, fibers, collage materials, etc. to depict an answer to the question "What makes your brain wake up?" Include artwork title and caption.

**Possible Themes explored:** Principles of art, power of visual image, personal emblems, storytelling without words

**Activity:** Choose one scene from the book that the entire class will illustrate individually. Create a display showing how differently we each perceive the same activity, such as jumping rope.

**Possible Themes explored:** Community, diversity, storytelling, repetition, detail, contrasting styles, imagination

**Activity:** Discuss the different neighborhoods students come from; create a collaborative mural that depicts the many neighborhoods that are represented in the class

**Possible Themes explored:** Community, space, maps, grids, culture, symbols, family



**Activity:** Introduce the book through the lens of the Sensory Alphabet\* *Appendix A*

Group students by the sense they relate to the most and have each student or group represent their “sense” through a piece of artwork

**Possible Themes explored:** Multiple intelligences, principals and elements of art, tolerance, diversity,

## LANGUAGE ARTS

**Activity:** Apply the question “What makes your brain wake up” while analyzing characters and historical figures found in literature throughout the year; research learning styles and multiple intelligences

**Possible Themes explored:** Multiple intelligences, family and society, gender roles, character analysis

**Activity:** Have students complete the phrase “My brain wakes up when...” in a creative writing assignment. Compile and display writings, consider adding image

**Possible Themes explored:** Tolerance, imagination, perspective, learning style,

**Activity:** Use phrases from the book to create a lesson on character creation. Have students create a character in response to each phrase throughout the book that begins with “My brain wakes up...”. Compile and use characters in subsequent fiction assignments

**Possible Themes explored:** Dialogue, imagination, variety, creative output,

## SOCIAL STUDIES

**Activity:** Research a prominent historical or contemporary figure's life in relation to their learning style. Chart findings and group figures by kind of intelligence rather than time period

**Possible Themes explored:** Range of creativity, multiple intelligences, gender, class and society and it's relation to success and creativity

**Activity:** Conduct in depth research about different cultural values and norms as they relate to learning and creativity. Display and present findings

**Possible Themes explored:** Culture, creativity, diversity, government, freedom of expression

## CLASSROOM DIALOGUE

**Activity:** Have an open dialogue about the text:

- Which character can each of us relate to?
- Which experiences are similar or different from ours?
- Whose perspective is missing from this book?
- Brainstorm possible ways to respond to the text

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Activity:** Conduct a group read aloud of the text during beginning of the year meetings; discuss responses in groups as it relates to individual students and classroom culture.

**Purpose:** Provides time to engage in group literacy activity, acknowledge diversity and individuality, encourages discussion and accountability.

**Activity:** Present text in beginning of the year meeting; use as a writing prompt; discuss new realizations about self or students; reflect; use to discuss differentiated education and set goals for the year.

**Purpose:** Emphasizes multiple intelligences, allows teachers to write/respond/reflect before incorporating book into the curriculum, provides framework from which to set goals

**My Brain Wakes Up**

*Proposed Elementary Literature Curriculum*

*-adapted from-*

**My Brain Wakes Up**

*A Case Study of an Elementary Literature Curriculum*

*Madeleine Ray*

*LEAD 510 Curriculum and Instruction*

*July 2011*

## Introduction

In recent decades, John Dewey, Howard Gardner, Ken Robinson, Rick Ackerly and other educational theorists have written about the importance of identifying learning styles and nurturing creativity within education. Each of these experts provide substantial material for adults in the field to better understand the unique capabilities, needs and learning styles of children. However, there has not yet been a widely used work that encourages children to diagnose their own learning style within a developmentally appropriate framework. For this case study, I will look closely at the Original Professional Work I created for my Integrated Masters Project, a children's book titled *My Brain Wakes Up*, and how it can be used in an elementary literature curriculum to empower students to think critically about themselves as learners.

*My Brain Wakes Up* is an original work of fiction designed to open the conversation between students and teachers about the striking contrasts and innate beauty in how differently each of our brains are made. It is at once a work of fiction, an interview of children, an opportunity for personal reflection, and an invitation for all learners to honor our unique creativity. In *My Brain Wakes Up*, learners of all ages find themselves immersed in ordinary, everyday events that illuminate the extraordinary inner-workings of each of our minds.

The evolution of this project is a culmination of my realizations about my childhood as an artist, thinker and learner; my experience working with pre-k through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in private and public settings; my appreciation for children's literature; my research in the field of creativity and it's place in education; and my experience working closely with adults who deem themselves "not creative".

I strongly believe that everyone is inherently creative; I believe children can reach their creative, social and intellectual potential if they are in a nurturing environment that values their individual gifts and allows their thoughts and interests to be central to the learning experience. This book is designed to start an important conversation in classrooms and school communities: the conversation begins by asking each child: how do you learn best? What are you drawn to? When do you have the most ideas? As learning experiences are adapted based on student's answers to such questions, education

is more likely to be a continually rewarding experience, and the students are more likely to become passionate, autonomous learners.

### **Development Statement**

This piece of curriculum is intended to be used as a diagnostic tool through which the reader can explore themselves as a learner and thinker. It will be most useful in a setting that encourages individual exploration, such as a classroom or workshop. This book can be used with any age group and in a variety of subject disciplines, such as art, language arts, social studies, or professional development. However, for this case study, I will explore how this book can be used in the elementary literature curriculum.

### **Rationale**

As educators, John Dewey challenges us to thoughtfully create environments for children that encourage them to uncover the possibilities inherent in everyday situations so they are familiar with the process of critical thought and ingenuity and its application to ordinary situations. Dewey explores the concept that experiences are not in fact educative unless they are both continuous and interactive. A student's experience within the classroom should equip them with freedom of intelligence, purpose, self-control, and ultimately prepare them to see the "possibilities inherent in ordinary situations." (Dewey, p. 89)

In order to make what happens in the classroom dynamic and relevant to students' lives, we must first collectively explore who makes up our classroom community. If we want children to learn, we must find avenues to invite their personal narratives into the classroom. This project proposes that one way to value student input and invite children and adults to reflect on their journey as learners, thinkers, and creative minds is to invite them into the conversation.



In John Holt's book *How Children Fail*, he outlines three reasons why children fail in schools: because they are afraid, bored and confused. (Holt, p. 6) He expounds on this by saying that children are afraid of not pleasing the authority figures in their schools, bored with the monotonous way content is presented and assessed, and confused with the disconnect between subject content, their personal interests, and their lives outside of school. Clearly, we must look closely at how we approach teaching so that it enhances student's relationships with learning rather than damages it.

There is no one approach to instruction that suits all types of learners. Significant research has been done in favor of differentiated education, which aims to present content in a wide variety of formats in order to reach each child's individual needs. But content needs to be applicable to students' lives. It needs to be relevant, and there needs to be room for children to combine the content presented with their own experiences to construct new knowledge.

The Mission Statement for this project is:

*My Brain Wakes Up* is designed to open the conversation about how differently we each learn as a way of (a) valuing the individual narratives that make up each classroom, (b) empowering students to construct their own knowledge by first exploring themselves as learners, (c) enlivening curriculum by incorporating children's experiences outside the classroom.

The core values that make up this piece of curriculum are community, individuality, creativity, and student led learning. By design, the format places great value on conversation and group exploration. But most importantly, *My Brain Wakes Up* is built on the idea that children's personal narratives are relevant, powerful and should be central to their educational experience.

The goals of the curriculum surrounding this original work are to:

- Invite children's narratives into the classroom
- Empower students to self-identify their learning styles
- Connect their education to their experiences in the outside world

My hope is that by exploring children's personal narratives and their unique perceptions of the world, we can lay the groundwork for establishing trust in themselves, tolerance of others, curiosity about learning, and ownership over their education. I hope this work will value the individual as part of a greater whole, encourage conversation, group exploration, reflection, individual response, and illuminate the power of our collective minds as we explore our unique differences.

### **School/community- Population/Setting**

My brain wakes up is intended to promote the importance of student led learning, creativity and self-awareness in any educational setting. It can be used in an elementary classroom, a library, a literature circle, an art classroom, or a professional development workshop. All children need to feel that their life experiences are relevant in the classroom. They need to feel acknowledged, valued and trusted. If this work is used as a foundation for the building blocks of conversation, personal reflection and deeper exploration, the intended goals of this piece of curriculum will indeed be on their way to being met.

### **Project Structure**

This project will be structured into two parts: the presentation of the book in a professional setting, and the curricular guidelines that accompany the book. The purpose of the presentation is to read the book aloud to an audience of educators, discuss the history of the creation of the book and its relevance to the field of education, introduce teachers to the variety of ways the book can be used in the classroom, give a brief overview of the different curricular guideline packets, and have an dialogue and answer questions about the book or its application.

The curricular guideline packets are designed to provide teachers with an inspirational framework from which to plan their lessons. Teachers can choose to follow the lesson plans closely, or use the guidelines and questions as a launching pad from which to work as they integrate the book into their classroom in the way that best meets the interests and needs of students.

It is up to the administrative staff of a school to decide what groupings of faculty they would like the book presented to prior to the presentation. Faculty members can then choose to order the curricular guideline packet of their choice depending on which age group and subject area they teach following the presentation.

Due to the nature of this project, the financial components are minimal thus far. Once the book and curricular materials have been copy written, it is up to individual schools to pay for the professional development workshop and purchase any materials of interest following the presentation.

### **Project Content**

There is a wide range of possible classroom applications for the book *My Brain Wakes Up*. The Art curriculum, the Language Arts curriculum and the Social Studies curriculum can all draw strong elements from the book into their studies and expand them as their students needs and interests determine. Specific examples are explored in depth in my Integrated Masters Project. However, I am simply going to examine the range of content covered in the elementary literature curriculum.

What follows is a chart that outlines the foundational literacy benchmarks contained in this curriculum that co-inside with Reading Standards for Literature K-5\*.

| Kindergarten  | 1st Grade                                 | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade                | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade                                 | 4 <sup>th</sup> Grade                           | 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade  |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Answer questions about detail                                 | Retell the lesson/message of the story    | Answer who, what, where, when, why   | Distinguish literal from non-literal                  | Determine theme, summarize text                 | Compare and contrast two characters                            |
| Describe characters, setting, events                          | Identify “feeling” words or sensory words | Acknowledge different points of view | Distinguish personal point of view from narrator      | Describe in depth a character, setting or event | Determine meaning of figurative language                       |
| Compare and contrast adventures and experiences of characters | Identify who is telling the story         | Read dialogue aloud                  | Describe a characters traits, motivations or feelings |   | Describe how point of view influences how events are described |

*\*Taken from the California State Reading Standards*

In addition to those listed above, broader concepts covered in the curriculum are:

*Diversity, Culture, Society, Creativity, and Personal values*

### **My Brain Wakes Up**

#### *Elementary Literature Lesson Plan*

**A. Explore the text:** In this section, teachers introduce the book in a class meeting before reading it with their students.

*Introductory Questions:* What do we know about learning? What do we know about how different children learn? What do we know about the brain? What does it mean to learn something? What do we know about children in other cultures?

This meeting is an opportunity to explore themes from the book before reading it, and encourage children to start thinking about what they already know. After the meeting, the teacher can decide to explore the text in the way that best suits their students. They might choose to read it aloud as a group or break into literature circles.

My Brain Wakes Up is intentionally not yet illustrated; this is an invitation for students to respond to the text with their own personal creativity, and teachers should present the opportunity as such.

**B. Discuss the text:** This portion of the project is where the students discuss

- Their observations about the book
- What else they would like to know after reading it
- What it makes them think of

*Follow up Questions:* Which character could you relate to? Which character's experience was unfamiliar to you? What does this book make you think about? Is there anyone missing from this book? Who is it and how might their brain wake up?

**C. Explorative Response:** In this section of the project, students can choose one of the following three activities:

*Literary Analysis*

Respond to the book by discussing or writing about 1-3 of the literary topics from the literature chart above

*Research*

Conduct research based on questions you have after reading the book, such as an interview or survey

*Cultural Exploration*

Choose one character from the book and explore the culture they might be from and how it is similar or different to yours

**D. Personal Response:** In this section, students should choose how they'd like to personally respond to the book. Students should have creative freedom to respond in the way that best suits them.

*Image*

Depict one way that your brain wakes up using visual art

*Word*

Use the phrase “My Brain Wakes Up when...” as a writing prompt

*Other*

Respond to the book in the creative manner of your choice

This curriculum has not yet been used with children. However, in looking ahead I can imagine some possible problems with the format. Below is a chart of potential problems with a brief description of how I might address them or prevent them from happening in the first place.

| <b>Problem</b>                                      | <b>Solution</b>  |
|---|--|
| Characters cultural context is unclear              | Have cultural references and research questions in the back of the book that correlate with the characters |
| Students lack ideas about how to respond visually   | Include visual art prompts in the back of the book   |
| Students lack ideas about how to respond in writing | Include personal narrative questions and writing prompts in the back of the book                           |

The environment that will use this work to it’s fullest potential is one that is friendly, trusting and discussion based, where curiosity and story telling are encouraged.

## IN CLOSING

In what has been named the digital age, education is under a larger microscope than ever before. Teachers, administrators and policy makers regularly intersect with material on the history of education, practices currently in place, research around past and present practices, and specific hopes and ideas for the future. In the midst of this barrage of information, we've also created a common language to describe our initiatives. But in some cases this flowery language overshadows the issues at hand, leaving teachers feeling pedagogically informed but logistically overwhelmed.

Revered for her simplicity of theory, Bell Hooks reminds us that “the point is not to render ideas less complex—the point is to make the complex clear.” (Hooks 1999, p.40) As such, *My Brain Wakes Up* reminds us that no voice is more powerful and more candid than the voice of a child. Fully alive and inescapably self-involved, these tender, wise experts fill our classrooms each day in need of someone who will listen; someone who will take them seriously.

As technology continues to advance at an unprecedented speed, we are required to prepare our students for an unknown future. Yet, in our continual efforts to engage our students, we can forget to include them. Tunnel-visioned and determined to stay one step ahead, we work tirelessly to craft the optimal education for our students, continually overlooking our most valuable resources. Why, in our attempt to preserve order, authority and predictability, are students continuously “...left out of the conversation about how to change [education]”? (Chen, p.213) How long will we consider curriculum design and educational reform a purely “adult conversation”? (Chen, p.244)

In order to make education relevant for tomorrow's world, we need to celebrate the fact that our students are capable of playing a pivotal role in transforming it, rather than fearing a loss of power. In an Edutopia documentary about a project called Generation YES (Youth and Educators Succeeding), Deanne Barre shares "...the more power you give them, the more empowered they become. They take responsibility for their own learning. They get very excited about having authentic, purposeful reasons to be at school and authentic ways of helping their teachers..." (Chen, p.235) Still, we've been of two minds. We've romanticized the age-old idea that children are our future, while simultaneously ensuring that they remain in the role of learner rather than teacher. Clearly, a shift in student-teacher partnership, though already begun, must continue to unfold with utmost thought and care. But can we expect children to contribute their most personal ideas and insights before we acknowledge their voice as essential to the future of education? No, we cannot. They need an invitation to join the conversation.

"What we all ideally share is the desire to learn—to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice." (Hooks, 1994)



*Appendix A*

## New World Kids

### an introduction

**New World Kids** is an innovative suite of programs for young children, Pre-K — 3, taught in an afterschool format and focused on building creative thinkers. Children explore a new way of looking at and understanding the world around them, and their parents learn about the individual strengths that will help their children to learn productively in the future.

**New World Kids** engages children with the creative thinking processes, the capacity to invent with many media, the ability to think across disciplines, and the reliance on (and joy in) the imagination.

These skills are taught through The Sensory Alphabet: the elemental building blocks for digital media and for a real literacy of creativity. Just as basic as the traditional alphabet used in teaching the traditional literacies of reading and writing, it is the basis of our sensory connection to the world — *line, color, texture, movement, sound, rhythm, space, light, and shape*. Learning and exercising the Sensory Alphabet multiplies a child's early repertoire of ways to symbolize, understand, and communicate ideas.

Each week children explore an element of The Sensory Alphabet by collecting ideas, engaging in open-ended activities, reflecting on their work, and hearing from people in the community about what it is like to think and work the way they do. It is our intention that each child will attain a sense of “I can do that!” at some point in the program.

The involvement of parents is a key aspect of New World Kids. At the end of the program, the educators organize an informal exhibition, which includes the children's work and documentation of both the children and teachers' reflections on their creative strengths. This gives parents an insight into the natural abilities of their children.

The Foundry believes in the importance of programs that prepare young minds to learn and grow in a future that will require new literacies and innovation.

*Appendix B***MY CREATIVE PROCESS**

In a children's book, vibrant illustrations weave universal stories and every day conflicts together in an exquisite medium that is accessible to hearts and minds of all ages. Through my life as an artist, I have maintained a sense of awe for picture books, and hoped to someday contribute something meaningful to the collection. At the peak of what has been a profound emotional and intellectual journey, I've created an original work for my Integrated Masters Project. This project enabled me to streamline the educational issues dearest to my heart in a format that will hopefully have an impact on the hearts of those who also care deeply about how to improve our approach to educating children.

In her course entitled, "Writing Your First Children's Book", author Amy Hest opened by saying, "If someone thinks what you do is cute, then they don't get what you're doing." A student asked Amy what she did when she got stuck, and replied, *"Well, if my character is alive, then they are sitting next to me as I write. And if I get stuck, I simply turn to them and say, 'What happens next?' If there is no answer, I know I have some work to do."* The wisdom I received in three short workshops from Amy Hest has served as the bedrock of my knowledge and inspiration on how to harness my passion for children's literature to make an impact.

Creating a living character is a mysterious process; one that continues to baffle me. Yet, in the creation of this book, I was immersed in this process for over a year. In my book, sixteen characters are interviewed; they are all real children from my imagination. Each one began as a mixture of children I've taught in the past and children

I imagine must be out there somewhere. But as the process continued, they became unique people that, eventually, were sitting next to me as I wrote, telling me what happened next.

My goal in writing *My Brain Wakes Up* was to create a work that addresses a complex issue most dear to my heart: *how to develop personal and collective awareness to the unique creative genius inside each of us*. My father has many creative capabilities that often astound those around him. But at a young age, the influence parents and teachers had on him destroyed his sense of self-worth. He was taught to obey authority and to avoid failure. And his bright young spirit was made to feel stupid, inferior, ordinary, and incapable.

Devastatingly, this scenario is quite common. Children are born with astounding creative capabilities, natural curiosity and tremendous potential. Ironically, it's often the parents and teachers designed to guide these children and foster their sense of self-worth who's actions and beliefs end up crushing their natural curiosity, and sometimes, their spirits.

So, the impetus for this work began with a fervent desire to advocate for young children who, like my father, have remarkable potential. My goal was to create a work that could be easily accessed by students, teachers and parents that could help shift the mental models in education that cause children to feel ordinary, incapable, inferior and even stupid.

As this idea began to take shape, I examined the range of concepts that speak deeply to me: creativity, working with people, different cultures, and the imagination. Human creativity is powerful, and I'm fascinated by how creativity manifests itself in

children and adults. I'm also intrigued by how our environment can either enhance or hinder our ability to acknowledge and respond to our creative potential. In my work with children and adults, activities I find most enlivening are those that lead toward self-discovery and personal reflection. Whether from a piece of literature, a conversation, or a group activity, some of the most poignant moments in my work with others can be characterized by the presence of creative expression, self-discovery and personal revelation.

For much of my adolescent and young adult life, I worked alongside children and families from cultures different than my own. Whether in volunteer settings, workshops, or non-profits, I've always sought out ways to serve others, and found myself overwhelmed with compassion for the individuals I've gotten to know. I deeply respect all people and I enjoy observing how our values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences are similar and different.

Inspired but overwhelmed, I decided to simultaneously hold all these passions and realizations in my mind and see what new ideas might emerge. As a result, I dreamt up a work of fiction that could be both a catalyst for creativity, self-discovery and tolerance, and also a tool to aide teachers in their quest to build a classroom community where joy, learning and individual growth can take place.

Thus I returned to the profoundly universal medium of children's literature. I set out to create a children's book about learning and the different ways we learn from common, everyday experiences. I was inspired to create a book that repeats one question but receives many different answers by a children's book given to me by a student called "How Do You Get There?" Initially, I thought the refrain would be something like

“Some people learn best when...”. I wanted to design a book that could lead learners of all ages down a path of self-discovery.

During the early stages of dreaming, brainstorming and research, I conducted a basic survey among family and friends. I asked them to complete the sentence, “I learn best when...”. In the survey, I defined “learning” as “a time when your brain feels most alive,” which differs greatly from the most common definition. The range of responses was fascinating. To see these survey responses, see *Appendix D*.

In preparation for beginning my manuscript, I researched Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences, a concept called “The Sensory Alphabet”, and multiple other frameworks that are designed to give people a way to identify themselves as learners. Using blank paper and markers, I designated one page for each type of intelligence. Under each heading, I listed everyday experiences from which someone who was this type of learner might learn. Once I had a wide variety of examples to choose from, I chose the example that seemed rich with imagery, the scenarios that already had a narrator.

As I began writing, I quickly realized the characters would only come to life if each excerpt was written in first person. The challenge in this was that with each new scene, there was a new narrator. So, I had use my knowledge of creative writing to get inside the head of over thirty different characters. And I took Amy Hest’s advice. If, during the writing process, I turned to the left and asked “What happens next?” and there was no answer, I left this excerpt alone and moved onto the next. The writing process was slow and difficult. I had to dig beneath my own ideas of what the outcome might be, continually sifting to find where the living parts and where the dead parts were; I had to

conserve my energy.

The editing process is often invigorating and exhausting. One challenge unique to editing my work was how to breathe life into depictions of personal experiences that were foreign to me. I had to acknowledge my positionality because I was writing about circumstances I'd never experienced. In such situations, it's easy to for authors to glamorize experiences outside of their cultural norm. Therefore, I had to challenge my assumptions about others and let each character tell their story. I acknowledged my ethnocentrism and carefully conducted research about the lifestyles and communities that differed from my own.

Another challenge unique to my editing process was editing the manuscript through two different lenses: (1) as a piece of fiction and (2) as a piece of curriculum. It was difficult to decipher when to be true to the characters telling their story, and when to focus on my second audience: teachers. Any good work of fiction has to have heart. But "heart" alone would not convince teachers that this book was an accurate, dynamic addition to any curriculum on community, personal narrative, and creativity.

The whole process was thrilling and challenging. Watching something you've created take shape without jumping ship is not easy. I developed a love/hate relationship with the words I strung together, and I thought the process would never end. My system of editing involved writing, printing my work, crossing out anything that was not lively with a black sharpie, opening a new document to type the words that remained, and starting the process all over again. I rarely added language; I mostly deleted, or replaced a word for another. Children's book authors must be economical with their language. And such harsh editing tactics call for humility and resilience.

Beginning with Sesame Street, interviewing children has proven to be an especially captivating and profound way of valuing children and gaining insight into their worldview. Journalism has echoed this sentiment as journalists have been interviewing experts, icons, artists and academics about their work, their lives and the nature of their habits for many years. Likewise, my knowledge of qualitative research helped me greatly during the creation of this book. Though the narrator in the book does not explicitly interview each character, as the author, I had to imagine I was interviewing them to get inside their hearts and heads.

My understanding of dialogue and the nature of childhood also enhanced my ability to create rich characters. I have always enjoyed writing dialogue; perhaps due to my early involvement with theater and creative writing, or the fact that I simply love listening to children articulate themselves and their worldview. Teaching has also provided me with substantial material in this area. And overall, I found this part of the writing and editing process to be the most natural and the most enjoyable.

Once I submitted a draft of my manuscript, I took a risk and first unveiled it to a group of five elementary teachers and administrators at a school I knew and loved. After introducing my work and the concepts behind it, we had a group read aloud. I printed and distributed each character excerpt on a small piece of paper, and asked those present to take one piece and pass the pile until it was gone. This guaranteed I had no control over the order in which the excerpts were read. The random selection allowed for a playful element of surprise that heightened our desire to listen. After the group read aloud, I asked those present to respond to the text, the characters, and the experience of reading aloud together. We engaged in a discussion about certain characters, and about

what was familiar and what was unfamiliar. We explored possible ways the book could be used with different age groups or in a professional development setting. To view the write up that accompanied this Book Share, please *see Appendix E*.

The night before the presentation, I was brainstorming a title with my husband. Initially, the beginning phrase for the book was, “my brain feels the most alive when...” Then the title evolved:

Wake Up, Brains...

The Wide Awake Brain Book...

My Brain Wakes Up!

This evolution changed the entire work. I changed the beginning phrase of every excerpt from *My brains feels the most alive when* to ***My brain wakes up when...*** It was an Ah hah moment for me as the author, and a major turning point in the solidification of my ideas and my confidence in the need to present and discuss my work. It was sudden, perfect and completely out of order. The teachers who attended the book share all found this phrase to be contagious and unique. Their feedback was encouraging. Watching something I created from nothing move a room full of educators and ignite an enlivening discussion was quite exciting. To view my notes on the responses to the Book Share, please view *Appendix F*.

Overall, watching my book come to life through the thoughtful responses and lively discussion among this group of educators was a significant turning point in my creative process. I acquired a new sense of peace and determination in regards to my work, and I



anxiously awaited the final summer in the Leadership in the Arts program so I could continue to present my work and watch it gain momentum with each new audience.

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