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"What Is Essential Is Invisible To The Eye": Culturally Responsive Teaching As A Key To Unlocking Children's Multiple Literacies

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"What Is Essential Is Invisible to the Eye": Culturally Responsive Teaching as a Key to Unlocking Children's Multiple Literacies

Introduction

A midsized city in the Texas panhandle, Amarillo is home to more refugees per capita than any other city in Texas, and in recent years, Texas has received the largest number of refugees of any state in the nation, according to information from the Amarillo Independent School District (H. Shelton, personal communication, April 1, 2015). In the district, fourteen hundred refugee students are four percent of the overall student population, most of them attending school within the Palo Duro High School cluster of schools in North Amarillo. Most have fled warfare and religious persecution in Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Others were born and raised in places such as the Ma La Refugee Camp in Thailand and the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya.

Almost two thousand students are served by Palo Duro High School, a Title I school. Almost eighty-five percent qualify for free/reduced lunch, a poverty indicator used by the federal government. Nearly twenty percent are English language learners, and these students speak thirty different recognized languages, in addition to some other languages and dialects. At Palo Duro High School, twelve percent of the students are designated as refugees or asylum seekers.

The first year I taught refugee students, my co-teacher and I had almost no knowledge of how to work with students from countries other than Mexico. We made many mistakes, but we knew that we had to provide genuine reasons for these students, mostly from Burma and Africa, to engage in reading and writing or lose them to the killing floor of our local slaughterhouse, where they could make up to fifteen dollars an hour without much language skill.

Drawing Into Meaning

Rather than seeing our students through a deficit model of everything they could not do and how much they struggled with written text, we noticed, named, and used their visual literacy skills. What we noticed about our students was the ease and facility with which they approached videos and photographs, especially the photographs in their various social media and picture files. We decided to use their visual literacy to build a bridge to written words.

So, we began with drawings. I used a prompt that first day that I have used for my entire career: "Draw something you'll never forget."

Almost always, I get drawings about roller coasters and puppies, and maybe one or two about when a beloved grandparent had passed away. I was totally unprepared for my refugee students' drawings. They drew very detailed scenes of small huts on fire, of beatings, of leaving family members behind a razor-wire fence – and most disturbingly, of small children being bayoneted by soldiers.

Suddenly, I knew the depth of the trauma my students had experienced. Their courage, resilience, and willingness to share these violent memories with me transformed me as a teacher and a person. It seemed wrong that only my co-teacher and I were the audience for these memories. We wanted others to understand what our students had seen, and for them to know, as poet Lucille Clifton has written, that every pair of eyes facing us had seen something we could not endure.

From Drawings to Digital Narratives

Those same students, with help, created digital narratives of their experiences. Because so many of them struggled to put their experiences into traditional written narratives, we worked with them to use storytelling programs to help them express their history with images. Students were able to upload their personal photographs, as well as to find photojournalism about their countries on the Internet. Many wanted to use music to create tone and mood. For example, one of the most powerful videos was from a Karen (Burmese ethnic minority) student, who used the song "We Are the World" underneath graphic images to detail the destruction of her village and displacement of the survivors into the jungle, then later into a Thai refugee camp.

My co-teacher and I shared these images in district meetings to create awareness of the students' histories, as well as empathy for them. We were encouraged to share them at state-level literacy conferences to prompt teachers to adopt digital narratives as a technique for helping students struggling with written language. Later, we housed them on the school's website so that everyone could view their work. "When [a student] participates in this sort of educational experience, he or she comes to a new awareness of self, has a new sense of dignity, and is stirred by a new hope" (Friere, 2000).

Using Visual Literacy to Boost Textual Literacy

For me, this experience was an epiphany about using all students' inherent visual literacy as a bridge to textual literacy. Students who seem to "have nothing to say" may need a different medium to express themselves – especially language learners and students with cognitive

and learning disabilities. Those who are identified as needing special education are particularly adept with this technology and technique. In school, we often over-privilege written text, which can shut out the voices of students who are weak in writing skills. As a teacher, I found it both humbling and exciting to see that students whom I had prejudged as not able to achieve sophisticated devices like tone, mood, and pathos could perform beautifully when given the right tools.

To this idea of using visual literacy to craft and create personal stories, I added specific lessons to evoke and celebrate what Zohan and Marshall (2012) call "spiritual intelligence," which they define as "the intelligence with which we address and solve problems of meaning and value." Each student, in my experience, regardless of his or her cognitive or language ability, comes to school with visual literacy and spiritual intelligence, which function as a built-in multidimensional literacy used to produce, consume, and make meaning of the world. My work with refugee students as well as struggling students native to North Amarillo taught me to widen my perspective on what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher. Culturally responsive teaching is really an openness to all of our students' experiences, not just speaking a different language.

As Serafini (2014) explains, "This new world is a multimodal world. Language is one mode; images, actions, sounds, and physical manipulation are other modes. Today, students need to know how to make and get meaning from all these modes alone and integrated together. In the twenty-first century, anyone who cannot handle multimodality is illiterate."

Wilhelm (2008, p. 151) quotes other researchers who believe that the best literacy practices are respectful of students' backgrounds and positioned to create relevant outcomes. "Thinkers in the Vygotskian tradition argue that reading and writing must be taught in contexts in which they 'are necessary for something, in a way that is part of complex cultural activity, not as isolated motor skills for school' (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 128). Likewise, cognitive scientists studying the situated nature of all thinking agree that situations are not ancillary to learning, but are necessary to it" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). My refugee students' nuanced work supports this and showed me that when we view children through an assets-model perspective, which asks us to choose to see everything that is right with them rather than everything that is "wrong," we naturally help them to find their voices.

My thinking on this topic draws on my experience as a classroom teacher, teacher trainer, and continued involvement in the professional development of teachers throughout North America and beyond. Here, I

suggest an array of perspectives and instructional practices that have proved successful in my own classroom and in the classrooms of teachers with whom I am currently working, particularly those who support literacy in English language learners, refugees, children in poverty, and children with trauma.

Visual Literacy as a Key to Textual Meaning

These experiences in flexing their visual literacy skills showed students that they already possessed a tool to unlock challenging text and could "tap into the considerable rhetorical awareness" that seems hardwired into teen-aged brains" (Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007, p. xix). Leveraging their visual literacy, as well as the inferential skills they already possess, allows them to feel a sense of control over their own learning and to feel confident in themselves as learners who can make meaning, draw inferences, and apply it across texts. That, in my experience, is really powerful for students who feel shut out of learning. You can see it on their faces as they begin to use simple, repeatable strategies to understand short, wordless videos like *For the Birds* (Eggleston, 2001). They do not realize, until you make it explicit to them, that they strategically view film because they have taken it for granted. A student, Noemi, struggled with written text and had not accrued many high school credits because of her family's transience. However, she could immediately identify a theme of mob mentality in the film. When asked to explain how she came up with the theme, she could easily point to the behavior of the characters.

"It's like the little birds all have the same brain. They are mean to anyone who isn't in their group, like the big bird. The way they start cheering like it's a game shows you how mean they are," she said.

I pointed out to her that she had just done character analysis as a way of helping her find the theme.

"But that was easy, Miss," she laughed. "Reading is hard."

It was easy precisely because she is already so adept at making meaning from video and film. When I showed her the recursive nature of applying the exact same skills to written text that she had used to understand the theme and characters in the film, she began to see that she was more skilled than she had believed.

Using Film as Text With Language Learners

Influenced by Golden's work in pairing film and literature, I decided to begin this recursive process of matching visual skills to reading skills with short films because they would be easy to watch several times. This allowed us to isolate "particular skills that we want active readers to

possess and [demonstrate] how they can be introduced and practiced with film and then transferred to the written text" (Golden, 2001, p. 36). Students were asked to take notes about what they noticed as they viewed three-minute Pixar videos (Eggleston, 2001). Pixar videos are easy for students to access regardless of their language ability because meaning is quite easy to gather from the characters' wordless actions. From these notes, the students and I created a simple anchor chart listing all of the things they had noticed. Then, I asked them to take a more metacognitive stance as they viewed the film again, noticing what their brains were doing to figure out what was going on. This is particularly effective with language learners because they can turn all of their attention to making meaning from the visuals rather than trying to parse unfamiliar dialogue. They love *For the Birds* because it is a funny revenge tale that is easy to understand with its peek into unintended consequences. My Burmese students asked to watch it several times because they liked the feeling of competence with the material. This is an emotion they do not often feel because they are struggling so hard with language and cultural shifts. Images, photos, videos, and films help them demonstrate their critical thinking abilities freed from the pressure of having to process huge chunks of unfamiliar text in a new language.

 "The birds are bullies," Pa says confidently.

 "How do you know that?" I ask him.

 "They follow the bird who gives the idea. That bird makes them the bullies. He wants them to be mean like him."

 This explanation shows that Pa is processing the theme of how we allow ourselves to be influenced by others. His face breaks into a huge smile when I tell him this and write the theme on our anchor chart.

 Making the strategies explicit helps them to name and then repeat those strategies, like re-reading. Rereading is the first and most important step in close reading of any text. It is an engaging activity for students because they are more willing to practice with images, like those found at the *New York Times* website, What's Going On in This Picture? All of these practices seem so simple, but deploying them strategically and then having students deliberately use them gives them access to texts of all kinds.

Matching Visual Skills to Skills Needed for Text

Once students have exercised their visual literacy skills and created a list of meaning-making strategies, we are ready to try them out on a poem or piece of flash fiction. Two particular favorites of mine are Robert Frost's poem *Out, Out-* and the flash fiction piece *The Hit Man* by T. Coraghessan

Boyle. Students are encouraged to use their visual literacy strategies from the chart to begin creating meaning from the short texts (e.g., re-reading, noticing character clues).

Mugisha, from Burundi, easily could point out the character clues in Boyle's story. His own experiences with people whose behaviors match those of the main character's helped him to create inferences about the character.

"He always wears black because he wants to be in shadows. He wants to hide," he points out.

From Mugisha's observation, the class is able to add the academic word *stealthy* to their notebooks, in addition to a quick sketch of how they think the main character looks. Because so many of my language learners come from violent areas, they have little trouble understanding that the main character is a murderer from the author's descriptions of his clothing and behavior – even though most have never heard the slang term *hit man*.

Too often, I have failed to tap into this well of experience in language learners because I have mistakenly seen them as a "tabula rasa" waiting for me to teach them "everything." It is easy to forget that they come with all kinds of cultural experiences that can help them decode and unlock human behavior, which is an important literacy skill. It is easy to discount the experiences of immigrant students because they may not match our own, but these very experiences, along with their innate ability to read images, is a powerful tool we can use to help them access language.

Overcoming Past Experiences of Academic Failure

To many students, reading is a pseudo-concept (Vygotsky, 1986). They know they are supposed to "get" the text, but they do not know how or why they should even try. So, they behave pseudo-conceptually by forcing themselves to come up with wild inferences based neither in reality nor in the text. They see accomplished readers – or their teachers – perform a magic trick with text, seemingly able to extract deep meaning with little to no effort. So that is what struggling readers do as a way of imitating what they have always seen – and what, to some extent, has always made them feel ashamed. They will pull text that does not support the inference because they have been drilled on "text evidence" for test preparation since the third grade. And, this is the good news for the ones who try. Others simply shut down, too overwhelmed by frustration and repeated failure to hazard an attempt.

Poverty is a main contributor to this posture of defeat, as found in research on vocabulary and language use from the University of Kansas. Researchers discovered a gap of thirty million words by the age of three between children raised in impoverished homes and those raised in more affluent homes. They found major discrepancies not only in the sheer number of words heard by children in poorer homes but also in the types of messages given to children in poverty. Most distressingly, the number of negative messages that children in poverty hear dwarfs the number heard by their more affluent peers, with researchers extrapolating that children on welfare will hear "125,000 more instances of prohibitions than encouragements. By the age of four, the average child in a welfare family will have had 144,000 fewer encouragements and 84,000 more discouragements of his or her behavior than the average child in a working-class family" (Risley & Hart, 1995, p. 199).

Small Successes as Motivators

Knowing this, teachers must take care to create positive experiences and small successes for students from trauma and poverty. If the deck is stacked this lopsidedly against them, then how many more messages of hope, of praise, of their basic ability to solve problems and make meaning must we provide them? For me, this is why using visuals as a bridge works to begin repairing the lack of positive self-regard that causes them to see themselves as academic failures. Part of culturally responsive teaching with children in poverty is to understand that this gap is real and that its damage is pernicious, contributing to the so-called Matthew effect among struggling readers (Stanovich, 1986).

More troubling, this is not only a problem with "struggling readers" – it is also a problem with college preparatory students. In some ways, gifted students are the worst because they are such accomplished players at the game of school. They know how to slyly and subtly coax their teachers into answering questions, and then regurgitate the answer back to the teacher in writing. When asked to make their own meaning, they freeze because they *hate* to be wrong, hate the pain of what feels like failure, which is a deadly sin to high achievers. They want all As with little to no effort. Convincing them to tolerate the sense of confusion and frustration on their own terms is a hard sell, but crucial in creating critical thinkers.

Solving literary problems is, in a way, like practice in dealing with human behavior. Why does she do that? What made him do that? Inferences get at the most vexing of human questions: Why do I do these things?

Writing as a Spiritual Practice

These deeper literary questions naturally flow into the questions inside students, both younger and older. For the past twelve years, I have asked students and adults to think about and list their deepest questions, then allow me to share them anonymously. Adults and students alike then use these questions as authentic prompts for writing, reflection, and research.

The whole idea of "spiritual writing" was fraught for me because conversations with colleagues revealed that teachers who are more liberal in philosophy worried that this meant teaching dogma of the religious right, while the more conservative teachers worried that it meant teaching some sort of pagan or new age heresy. However, what I was thinking of, and what I thought would work in public school, is a broader, more classic definition of *spiritual* as encompassing "a realm of human life that is nonjudgmental and integrated. It is about belonging and connectedness, meaning and purpose. Spiritual experience cannot be taught. But, it can be uncovered, evoked, found and recovered. Humans have the capacity for creativity, for love, for meaning, for purpose, for wisdom, beauty, and justice. All these are aspects of our spiritual lives" (Lantieri, 2001, p. 7).

By adding to students' innate visual literacy skills, I also believed I could tap into their innate questions as a way to invite deeper and more authentic writing, but also to give them a voice. I wanted them to see that the questions they had not only mattered but had been asked by the smartest people in the world for thousands of years.

Students, and especially my refugee students, relied upon a spiritual stance to give them a sense of purpose and meaning. Not only do we have three separate language-specific Catholic churches in addition to six English-speaking Catholic churches in Amarillo, we also have three language-specific Buddhist temples, a Baha'i center, four language-specific Protestant congregations, two Islamic centers, a Quaker meeting, an active pagan and atheist community, and numerous strains of evangelical Christian churches. To say that the spiritual does not affect our community is somewhat ludicrous in the face of all of these communities of practice.

Inviting Students' Deepest Questions Into the Classroom

My hypothesis was that I could use this deliberate evocation of their curiosity and wonder to help them see themselves as thinkers in a long and honorable tradition. Honoring their questions was a way of honoring not only their cultures but also their own sense of humanity. To be human is to question, and when we shut out philosophical or spiritual questions in

our classrooms, we are shutting down whole facets of our students' personalities.

I wondered if my students felt what I was beginning to feel – that school seems to be a standardized test prep factory and that the students are little more than scale score numbers or boxes inside a corporate-created rubric. Many times, especially in the spring semester, I heard myself saying, "We don't have time for that. We have to get you ready for 'The Test.'" This was in response to student requests for anything I could not assign a specific standard to.

The advice of Lantieri (2001, p. 11) was a beacon: "Pursue those teachable moments that will outlast our test scores. Do not miss opportunities to address life's deepest questions because of fear of being 'off task' or venturing into a realm that is forbidden in public schools. Welcoming the inner life into our classrooms will matter." Inviting, honoring, and celebrating questions made a space in the midst of testing mania for "the yearning, wonder, wisdom, fear, and confusion of students" that researchers promised would help students find "purpose in life, do better in schools, strengthen ties to family and friends, and approach adult life with vitality and vision" (Kessler, 2000, p. x).

Standardized Testing Devalues the Experiences of Language Learners and Low-Income Students

The current cultural embrace of standardized testing rewards those who are well resourced and adept at this particular ability. However, that is not true for most of my students. What sense does it make to force students who have never sat inside a classroom for most of their childhood to take standardized tests in English when they are teenagers? That is the case for many of the ethnic Bantu Somali students. They, along with all language learners in Texas, are expected to take the same assessments for graduation as those children who were born, raised, and schooled in America.

But, beyond the simple inequity of testing recent immigrant children is the fact that standardized tests can give us only a hazy view of what a student knows. They are woefully inadequate at showing us who a child is and what he or she can do. Tests cannot give us data about how children communicate with others in their actual lives, like some of my students who speak three and four other languages fluently. The tests give us no data on how a child can create, such as the Laotian student who coded and designed a working video game as part of his research project in my class. Tests give us no data about the character of children, how well they persist in the face of difficulties, like my students who not only work part-

time to help their families pay the bills but also take care of younger siblings while both parents work at two or more jobs. Tests cannot show us how students collaborate to create projects like multilingual storybooks for new immigrant children, like the ones my students have made for their peers.

For this reason, I wanted my students to have the experience of having their voices valued. I wanted them to feel seen at a deep level and valued beyond what a scale score or a raw score reported about their supposed abilities. But, I knew that for this to be a valid experiment, it would have to work in classrooms with children of different ages and in different parts of the city.

An Experiment in Questioning

Colleagues in elementary and middle schools agreed to participate in this experiment, trying out the hypothesis that students carry a sizable load of questions, curiosity, and wonder based on their own emotional experiences. All students in the third and seventh grades and in high school would receive the same writing prompt:

"What do you think about a lot? What scares you, makes you mad, makes you sad? These are all the big questions we carry inside of us that we do not really tell anyone, but we wonder about just the same. What do you daydream about at lunch or on the bus? What questions haunt or nag you at night during those last moments before your consciousness crumbles and you fall asleep?" (Fletcher, 2003).

I worked with my own seventh-graders as well as high school students in Palo Duro High School's Flex night school program. Nearly eighty-five percent of my seventh-graders qualified for free/reduced lunch, and most spoke a home language other than English. The night school is the feeder school for the high school where I work now. The night class serves students who for various reasons are unable to attend day school. That can be a girl who wants to accelerate her credits after finding out that she is pregnant so she does not fall behind academically when she is homebound with the baby. Others students include those who must work in the daytime to help support their families, or who are transitioning out of jail and back into school. Still others are returning dropouts who recommit to their schooling in their early twenties, thirties, and even forties.

While the adults were skeptical, the students were eager to share their questions, and I soon had a thick file of student work. I noticed that certain themes matched what Needleman (2001, p. 91) considers "the ten great questions of philosophy – and of life:

- Are we alone in the universe?

- Who am I?
- Why do we suffer?
- Is death the end?
- What can we know?
- Why is there evil?
- What can we hope for?
- What ought we to do?
- How should we live?

What follows is a sampling of the responses of students, ages nine through eighteen, when given Fletcher's prompt. Their questions naturally fell within the pattern of responses identified by Needleman's questions.

Timmy 14, Aug

I wonder about if dogs di what do
They do in heven I think that they
don't know that they are in
heaven because they are diffrent
then us but sometimes I wonder
that if there was no cholate
because I love cholate but
but if there was no cholate
then I will start to cry like
a little drink but I will be
enbarsed but I don't care

Figure 1. Timmy, age nine. This figure illustrates the types of questions that elementary school students write when asked about their deepest thoughts.

Timmy's questions in Figure 1 show me several things. First, he has some interesting questions about consciousness and the afterlife, although his response also shows me that he does not quite trust this process. The fact that he pulls back into safer territory by writing about candy shows me that he is trying to please his teacher and does not want

to risk being rejected for writing about a possibly taboo subject. Opening up a safe space for Timmy and other students in elementary school to talk about their deep questions can only help them to see themselves as valued thinkers and questioners.
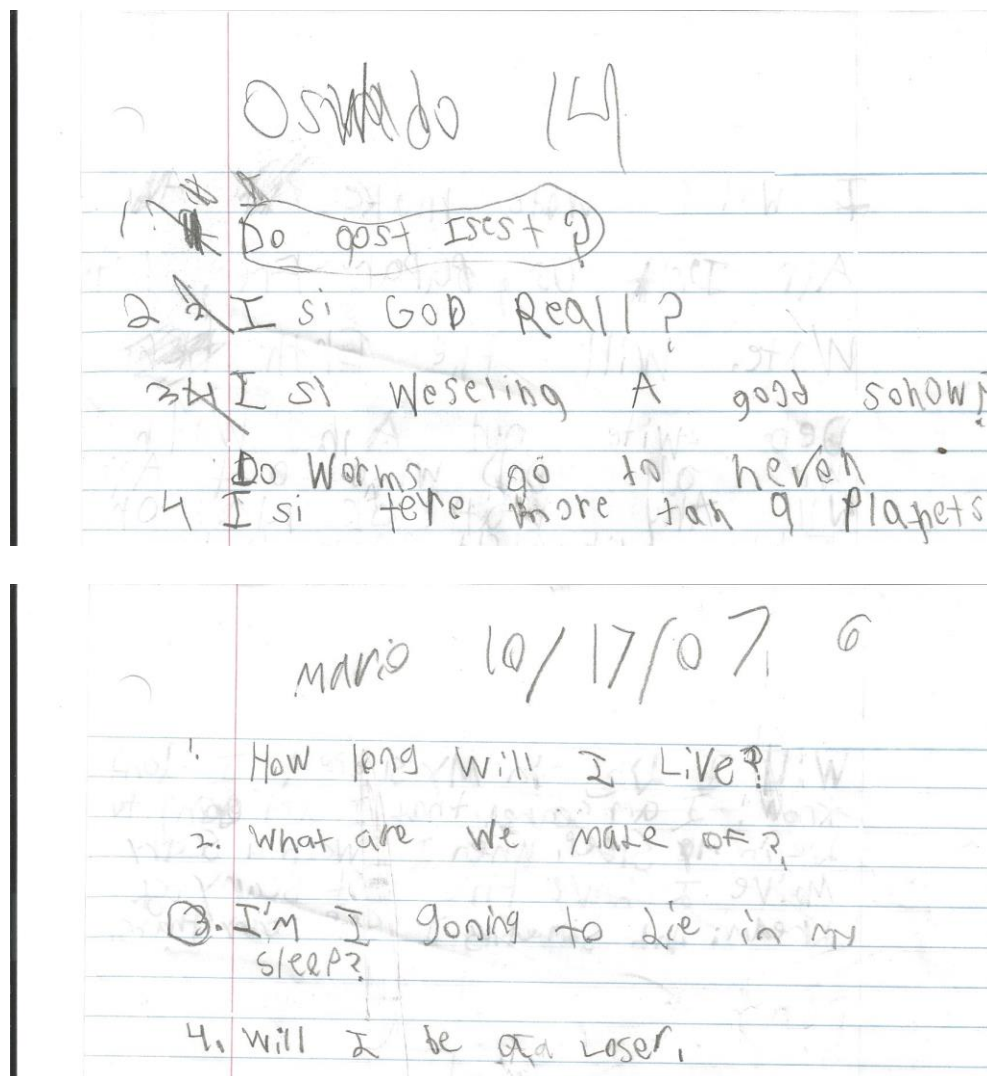
Figure 2. Representative questions from English language learners of elementary school age.

The questions in Figure 2 show that English language learners of elementary school age are able to participate in this kind of philosophical writing at the same level of inquiry as their native-speaking counterparts. Even though Oswaldo and Mario make the kinds of errors frequently seen in students at the

intermediate level of language acquisition, it is easy to understand what they are writing about. They are most concerned with what philosophers would label metaphysics. This shows that even our youngest students are asking profound questions about the essence of being, knowing, identity, time, and space.

Walsh and Sattes (2015, p. 7) report that questions like these are rare in K-12 classrooms, and unfortunately many children are never invited to move beyond questions of simple recall and application. "Questions that promote deep engagement in the analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of ideas are of a completely different order than those used in recitation to determine if students are learning facts or building the expected knowledge base. Questions for discussion are divergent, not convergent; that is, they are open to different interpretations and conclusions, not closed to one 'right' answer."

Being open to different interpretations and conclusions also helps to build what Johnston (2012) calls a "dialogic classroom," which aids children in finding reasons to learn and allows them to be active meaning makers who find value in inquiry.

Adolescent Inquiry

The questions from adolescents mirrored some of the same topics as those from the elementary school writers, but with more depth and personal context. More of the questions were based on what had happened to students or to people they knew. Given the chance to express themselves, students poured questions onto the index cards I gave them. Reading them showed me that they grappled with questions of identity, questions about suffering, questions about ethics, and other wonderings about what is right and what is fair.

Why don't I have friends? Why do people ignore the
Will the world end soon? truth?
Why are people mean? Why do people thinks there all
Why do people kill? that?
Can peace really exist in this world?
Why do people have to die?
Am I gonna find the right person for me?
Do other things live in this universe? If so
why haven't we seen them? Why do people kill
Why do we suffer? themselves?
Why do I get nervous around people?

I wonder if I'll ever get married?
What if all my friends turn their
backs on me? What do my friends
really think of me? What will happen
in the future? What about the
guys are they still going to be
as nice as they are now or
worse? How long will I or my
mom live? What happens if we
die? What will I do if my mom dies?

Do Parents Love One Child more than another?
How come my purebreed dog act like a mutt, but my mutt acts like a
pure breed dog?
Are dogs mouths cleaner then humans because they pant?
How come you can't dream about the thing you want to dream about?
Will animals ever have rights?
How many stars are in the sky?
How far can a human eye see?

Figure 3. Questions collected anonymously from students of middle school age in a school with a high poverty rate.

The questions from my seventh-graders in Figure 3 serve to remind me of the accuracy of Nancie Atwell's observation that "the thorns of adolescence are real and cause real pain" (Atwell, 1991). Giving my students the opportunity to share their questions anonymously helped them to give me authentic responses. I shared the questions, without the names of the authors, at the beginning of class on Fridays as a way to allow students to feel that they were not alone in their questions and confusions. The validation of simply hearing their words taken seriously changed the tone of my class, and students began to feel more trusting and more willing to take other risks in sharing their deepest hearts, not only with me but also with one another.

Writing Circles

What if students could be validated by one another? What kind of space could I make for students to experience the small successes of articulating real questions and sharing them? These are the questions I had as I began my next steps with the questions when I began teaching high school. I wanted them to go deeper, using the questions as springboards for honest, courageous, and naturally engaging writing.

Using the idea of "special interest groups" that is often found at professional conferences, I grouped students according to topical similarities in their questions. Students began to form communities of trust in my classroom by writing about their questions and sharing them in small groups that I call writing circles, after the model of Vopat (2009). These writing circles serve to foster real dialogue by students with one another and with me, and are not just an "activity." The circles are co-created as safe spaces where students can be vulnerable and risk the real learning that comes from that. As Friere (2000) remarked, "[dialogue] is a way of knowing and should never be used as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task."

In high school, this is challenging, but achievable. My English language learners meet every day for the first twelve weeks because they need quite a bit of support and so many are at basic levels of literacy. Other on-level and advanced placement English students meet on Thursdays and Fridays because they are warmed up by the end of the week. In middle school, students met three times a week. Our structure is to meet in writing circles on one day to pre-write and brainstorm, and then draft and revise during the next day's writing workshop. It sounds counterintuitive, but in my experience, adolescents produce more work

when they are given more voice, choice, and control over their own learning.

Circles offer an empathetic audience for each writer. One year, we were able to blend a class of students who did not want to take senior advanced placement English with a class of third-year refugee students. The seniors acted as peer tutors for the refugee students, which allowed them to interact with the peers for the first time. More than once, the seniors were in tears listening to the writing of the refugee students. One student shared that she had not seen her birth mother since she and her father migrated from Kenya. She explained to the circle that her birth mother was "too old" for her father and he did not want to take an "old woman" to the United States, so he married a much younger woman and had her accompany him. She detailed the grief she felt every day as well as her resentment toward her "new" mother. The seniors in her circle cried along with her, validating her sense of loss and pain. As a teacher, I was thrilled to see this student experience of what it feels like to have your own words touch another person's heart, and was also thrilled to see my seniors expanding their thinking around what it might mean to leave one country and come to another. As a human being, I feel that this was some of the most important work I did that year because I know that none of those students will forget the experience of sitting in a circle, sharing, and being truly listened to.

I often join as a participant and have found Wilhelm's words to be true: "We are in a human profession, and we need to learn how to listen to each other, learn from each other, and celebrate each other's successes. Teachers, like students or any other learners, need respect, support and assistance over time" (Wilhelm, 2008).

Students write at home and in class. The consistency of the structure creates an eagerness on the part of students to come with writing to share. A reluctant writer is most likely a student who needs heavy scaffolding along with multiple instances of small success to feel safe with the process. Also, the reluctant writer may need practice with the experience of true collaborative learning to understand its benefits to him or her.

Creating Small Successes

For one of my students receiving special education services, the benefit was clear. Often, I have groups bond by arranging silly little competitions based on solving simple problems. For example, on this particular day, I gave students the problem of how to propel a ping-pong ball the farthest – with a rubber band, a rolled-up magazine, a paper clip, or a straw. No one

has ever picked the paper clip, but William did. He convinced his group that he knew a great solution. They were skeptical, but he was so confident that they agreed. We went out into the hallway to start the competition. One group tried to use the rubber band like a slingshot. It propelled the ball almost halfway down the hall. The next group used the straw to blow on the ball, but the ball did not move very far. Another used the rolled-up magazine as a sort of golf club. The ball hit the wall, using up most of its energy in bumping off the lockers before stopping almost halfway down the hall. William's group watched as he unfolded the paper clip, making it into a holder for the ping-pong ball. He scooped it up and walked it all the way to the end of the hall and back. In the subsequent writing about the experience, almost all of the students were amazed by William's ingenuity. William saw himself as a creative and innovative thinker, and his writing reflected this. I love this exercise because it draws out "hidden skills" that would not otherwise show up. For students who are not as skilled with writing, it nevertheless gives them a successful experience to write about.

I like smaller groups, particularly triads, because they move faster and have a higher degree of accountability. I keep my circles together for at least a semester because older teens are notoriously withholding and slow to trust or share with one another. In middle school, I switch out my groups more frequently, usually every six weeks, so that the kids have more experience with more able peers.

As Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998, p. 59) observe, "the best language-learning occurs when students attempt actual communication and then see how real listeners/readers react."

Inviting "Forbidden Questions" Into the Classroom

The final examples from students display the depth within them that remains untapped by standardized tests, conventional writing assignments, and prejudices about their supposed lack of experiences and of language, academic, and cognitive abilities.
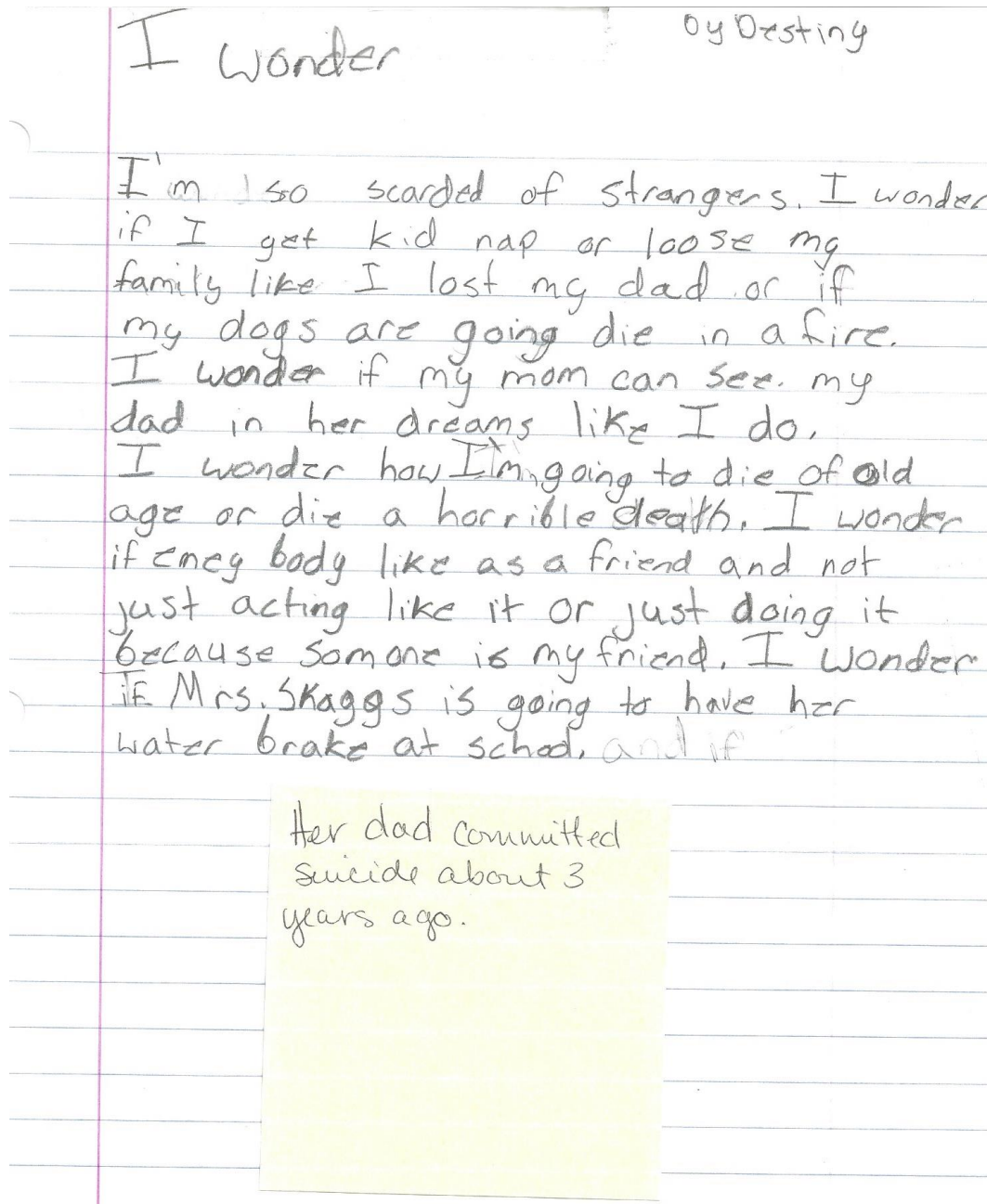
Figure 4. Expository writing based on the questions of an elementary school student whose father committed suicide. She had never written about the topic before.

Destiny's questions about life and death in Figure 4 are not just philosophical. Destiny's teacher included the note to me about her father's

suicide to give more context to her writing. Notice how she expresses her anxieties about being separated from her family, the way her father already is. When do students who struggle with these kinds of persistent worries get the opportunity to talk about them in school? The research of Pennebaker (2004, p. 8) shows that writing about emotional experiences can have mental health benefits: "People who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier and less negative than before writing. Similarly, reports of depressive symptoms, rumination, and general anxiety tend to drop in the weeks and months after writing about emotional upheavals." Lepore (1997, p. 1030) found that writing about our "deepest thoughts and feelings … [creates] a significant decline in depressive symptoms … [and moderates] the impact of intrusive thoughts on depressive symptoms."

Destiny shows this ability quite clearly as she wonders whether her teacher's water will break at school (my colleague was nine months' pregnant at the time). Destiny's writing always makes me think about what my students have seen and experienced that they may never share, yet that also has such a powerful effect on them. Her words are a reminder to me to always make a "sacred space" in my classroom to hold these pieces of students' hearts.
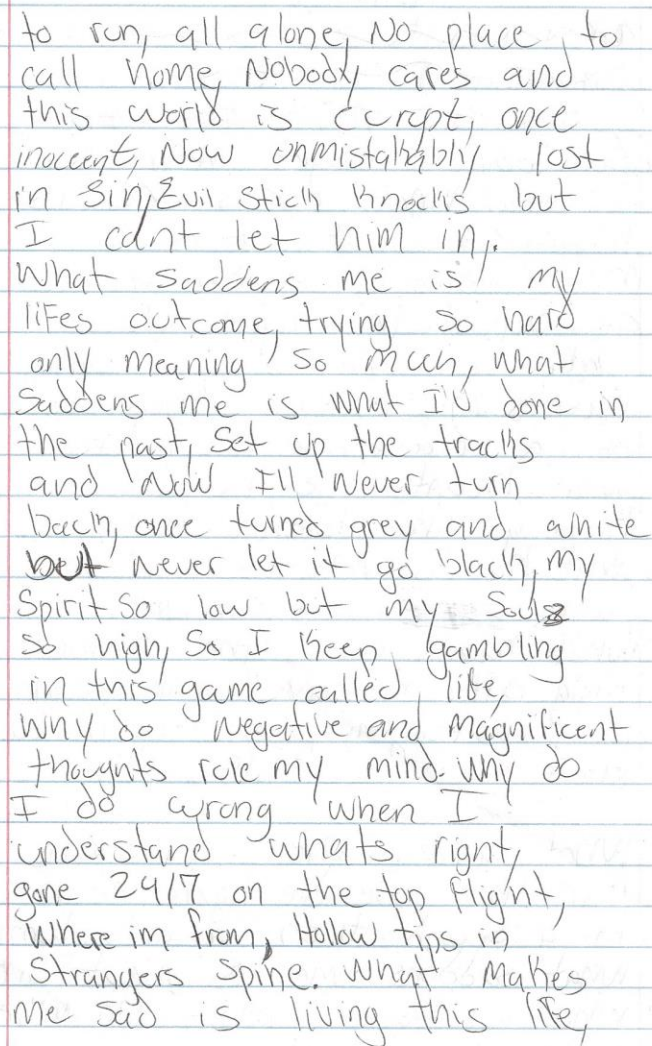
Finally, Joseph, a student who transitioned from jail into my Flex night class, reminds me of how many times I have underestimated what a student can do because I "misread" them based on the negative labels that stuck to them: troublemaker, dropout, gang member. I almost did not ask Joseph to try this writing because I did not think he would do it. He seemed aloof, cold, and distant – a demeanor for survival that had seen him through a year in juvenile detention for his part in a drive-by shooting. Yet, when I hesitantly asked him if he would like to try it, he immediately grabbed his pencil and began writing after I read him the prompt.

Joseph

Haunts!!
What haunts me is not
knowing if a certain
person in my class knowes
What haunts me is Sombody I taught aaaaa is
plotting! What haunts me is
Having to look out of
my bedroom window at
all hours of the night to
make sure all is good. What
haunts me is the memories
of a troublesome childhood.
What haunts me is not
knowing what tommoro holds.
What Haunts me is all
people ~~~~~ will change.
What haunts me is the same
thing different day, what haunts me
is Demons from my past creep in low cars
ready to blast. Saddens!

What saddens me is We are
born then, we die, light seen
for a second then awaits demise.
What saddens me is most likely
what saddens most, No where

to run, all alone, No place to
call home, Nobody cares and
this world is corupt, once
inoccent, Now unmistakably lost
in sin, Evil still knocks but
I cant let him in,
What saddens me is my
lifes outcome, trying so hard
only meaning so much, what
saddens me is what Iv done in
the past, Set up the tracks
and now Ill never turn
back, once turned grey and white
but never let it go black, my
Spirit so low but my Souls
so high, So I keep gambling
in this game called life,
why do Negative and Magnificent
thoughts rule my mind. why do
I do wrong when I
understand whats right,
gone 24/7 on the top flight,
Where im from, Hollow tips in
Strangers Spine. what Makes
me sad is living this life,

Figure 5. Creative writing based on questions from a high school student
sentenced to jail for gang activity and recently released.

Joseph's words in Figure 5 remind me of *Macbeth,* and I have used them to begin writing workshops as well as writing conferences both in my classroom and at professional conferences. His voice is so strong and confident, and he has much to tell us about the despair and fear of gang life.

Beyond that, Joseph is an exemplar of the untapped resources, literacies, skills, and abilities to be found in our students. He is a reminder of how often negative labels influence the kinds of educational opportunities we offer to "kids like that." What do we lose, as teachers, as students, as classroom communities when we do not welcome Joseph into the circle of readers and writers? What does Joseph lose when he has one more experience of being "other," of being discounted and shunted into remedial classes? What would happen if Joseph found his voice? What might happen if Joseph had many chances to hone his voice within an accepting and validating group of fellow learners?

These are the questions that haunt me, to use his first heading. These are the questions that drive me to continue to value what Robyn Jackson calls "currencies" that students may choose to spend on learning experiences in my classroom (Zmuda & Jackson, 2015, p. 39).

Lessons Learned

Student choice is paramount. When we invite our students into the process of inquiry, they are willing and able to co-create literacy spaces with us. When we position ourselves as co-learners of literacy, we begin to see each of our students as a doorway into cultures and experiences that we would never experience without their guidance. They are the ambassadors of their neighborhoods and families, for those who share their culture but who may not have a voice. We must honor our students' courage with our own. To bow to the pressures of "teaching to the test" or worrying about "preparing for the test" to the exclusion of authentic literacy learning dishonors and devalues students. Ironically, a singular focus on "achievement" vis-à-vis standardized scores serves to inhibit the very literacy skills we trust incessant test preparation to build. As teachers, it is incumbent upon us to make spaces for our students' voices. We must, in a sense, turn our backs on an inferno that is burning us up with demands and pressures; instead, we must turn toward our students and be open, supportive, and welcoming.

Note: All student work has been used with permission.

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