

TEACHING  
YOUNG MEN  
OF COLOR

# Teacher Voices



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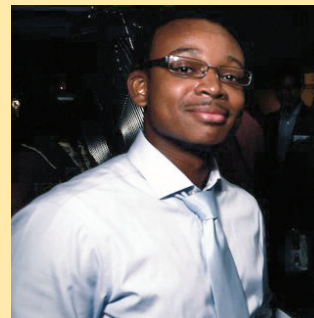
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# Teacher Voices

The National Writing Project believes that successful education reform can only be accomplished with the active participation of practicing classroom teachers, whose experience and knowledge are essential to plotting a course toward more effective learning for all young people.

The National Writing Project has acted on this conviction, working with the College Board and other organizations to amplify teacher voices in national conversations on education in the 21st century. As part of this work, teachers have voiced their opinions and recommendations through webinars and reports and at Capitol Hill hearings on topics such as second-language learning, immigration, mentoring, writing, parent and family involvement, and the use of technology in the classroom.

## Project Background

In 2008, the College Board embarked on a series of conversations about the inadequate educational progress of males of color in America. Later known as Dialogue Days, the project embraced four groups: African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, particularly Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders. Dialogue Days raised such significant and complex issues that the College Board went on to sponsor follow-up papers; seminars; a report called *The Educational Crisis Facing Young Men of Color*; a review of research literature, summarized in *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color: A Review of Research, Pathways and Progress*; and in-depth interviews with more than 100 young men — both within and outside the education system — about their experiences in secondary and postsecondary programs, captured in *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color: Capturing the Student Voice*. These reports, in turn, gave rise to journal articles highlighting successful programs, as well as policy briefs, webinars, and additional research.

So, what was learned? The data show that within each racial and/or ethnic group, males have lower high school diploma and postsecondary degree attainment than women. Males are less likely to gain access to college, more likely to drop out of high school, and less likely to complete college than their female counterparts.

To advance the conversation about these complex issues and create solutions that could be widely implemented, the College Board opened a dialogue with other organizations, including the National Writing Project, that work directly with teachers.

The focus of this new work was classroom-based. Twelve extraordinary teachers from diverse geographic and ethnic backgrounds and academic disciplines came together to discuss two seminal questions: One, did they see gender-differentiated behaviors among their students that had an impact on academic performance; and two, if they did, what were those behaviors and how did the teachers deal with them?

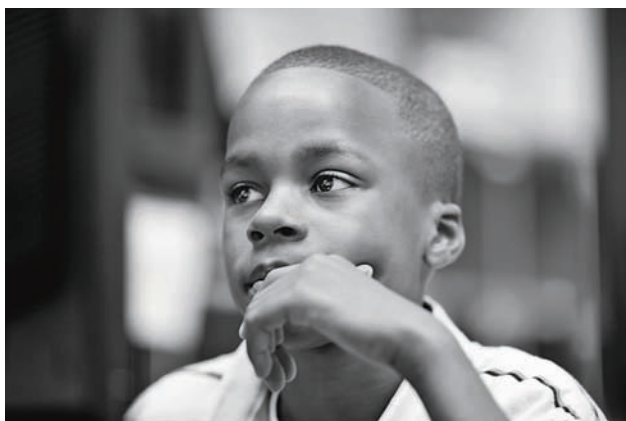
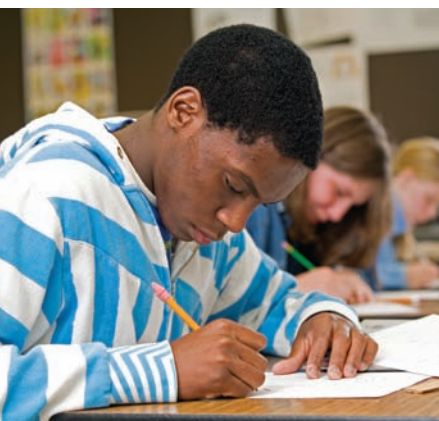
Over 18 months, through meetings, online communications, and written submissions, these teachers have talked about the role that gender plays in their classrooms, identified barriers to learning, suggested ways to overcome them, and submitted successful teaching ideas. This report attempts to capture these rich veins of knowledge.

## Insights and Recommendations

The teachers in this project offer us powerful insights and information about young men of color that could only be derived from years of classroom teaching. Their messages have remarkable subtlety and complexity, but roughly fall into two broad themes.

**Gender** — along with factors such as race, language, and socio-economic status — plays a critical role in the teaching and learning process.

**Effective classroom practices** for teaching young men of color are plentiful. Some are tied to the fundamentals that undergird all good teaching. Others are specific to particular populations.



The following pages expand on these themes and present the teachers' messages in their own words, as well as classroom assignments they have found effective in teaching young men of color.

**Before proceeding, we offer two words of caution.** First, what follows must not be seen as an end point. These excerpts and assignment summaries represent just some of many such conversations happening in numerous locations. Their purpose, rather, is to support a larger — albeit scattered — search for wisdom. Second, issues of gender are closely tied to a host of other factors including race, socio-economic status, family structure, culture, language, and geography. Given the overlap among many of these factors, it is impossible to deal with one in isolation. So this group's views are only one piece of a much larger puzzle. Our hope is that the messages identified by these 12 teachers will spur further conversations throughout the education world.



# Talking about Gender, Race, and Role Models

GENDER

## Understanding the Importance of Identity

“We cannot overlook gender and its impact on teaching minority males. If we do try to avoid how gender influences learners and learning, we might as well try to ignore culture and disregard identity altogether. That would be a disaster because teenagers are about finding their identity, about exploring, acknowledging, and respecting who they are. It is when people do not do this, when people discount, underestimate, disrespect, belittle, or even just ignore someone else’s identity that problems arise. If we want to reach all of our learners, identities must be a beginning. We need to understand who our students are and how gender plays a part in this discovery.”



## Supporting Positive Classroom Competition

“While I had deliberately constructed the activity as a game to be played, I had not considered the competitive aspect that I later found out was a driving force of motivation for many of the young men in my class. That the curriculum in my class became a source for excelling and to compete at demonstrated to me a change in several of my male students. I should note here that all of my students told me they enjoyed this as a class assignment, so it is not that this catered solely to the men in the classroom. However, the young men — much more than the young women in my class — were concerned with ‘winning.’”

## Building Confidence for Conversation

“Many of the Hispanic boys in my classes are reluctant to ask questions of their teachers. The boys from migrant families, especially, rarely initiate conversations with their teachers. It doesn’t seem to be an issue with language so much as a lack of practice talking with adults in positions of authority. [My computer-based design] assignment drew students into more in-depth conversations with me simply because they had to explain what they were trying to do with their models or drawing in order for me to help them.”

## Composing Declarations of Education

The Great American Teach-In wasn't only a teachable moment; it was an essential moment to share with my English Language Learners.

Composing Declarations of Education refocuses students on what they value in education. It encourages discussion of not only what needs to be changed by teachers and administration, district, and state-level staff, but also of what the students are responsible for in an academic environment. Working together, students recapture what is important to them, who can help improve education, and what potential there is in future learning.

Students engaged in a quick write: Why is education important? This short piece helps to bring the students' values to the forefront, helping them to stay focused on the academic context of this piece.

What is a declaration? Using the Declaration of Independence as a mentor text, students identify what the historical document says. They are asked to consider: What is the purpose of the document? Who is its audience? How does the structure support its purpose? What do you notice about the language of the piece? Are there devices used to help achieve the text's purpose?

Students annotated the text, pulling out responses to the questions. This close text study provided the basis for composing "Declarations of Education." Groups of students worked together to create documents that reflected

their ideas of value, reform, and personal accountability. They used elements of language from the Declaration of Independence to persuade their audience that these changes were crucial.

Learners need to feel comfortable with one another in order to learn, but for a true sense of community, values must be communicated and, where possible, shared by members of the community. If values are not shared, individuals need to feel they can work through differences.

Reflection is so important, but who has the time? Who creates opportunities for students to reflect not only on their learning but also on what worked and didn't during the process?

Students offered reflections at the end of the unit. They used these questions to guide their discussions about the process.

- ▶ What did you think about this project?  
How did it make you feel?
- ▶ What did you learn from the writing?
- ▶ What did you think about working collaboratively?
- ▶ Do you think it is important to write a Declaration of Education?  
Why or why not?



## Seeing School as a Social Haven

“The question arises: when do my teenage boys get to be just that, teenage boys? When do my Hispanic male students get to step away from the identity as provider, and all of the responsibilities that go with that, and be kids? For many, the opportunity to be a teenager with fewer responsibilities and burdens occurs in school; it makes it that much easier for them to fall into seeing school as a social haven rather than a place of discipline and hard work. Besides, they have that already at their paying jobs.”





## Recognizing Different Worlds

“We have to make sure that we understand that minority male students, and minority students in general, live in two different worlds. They live in the world of their race and/or ethnicity and in the world that’s presented to them that happens to be the world of white. ... When I, as a student, go into school, my teacher — no matter what race or ethnicity they are — they tell me I need to act this way, which reflects the world of white privilege. So I’m conflicted, as a minority student: the world’s telling me I’m this thing, but now school is telling me I should aspire to be this other thing.”



## Creating Two-Way Trust

“If a student has no shared experiences or understandings of cultures other than his or her own, then the student cannot relate to others’ cultures. There is even more veracity to this when the students of color are male. This results in a two-way lack of trust. Students do not trust that the educator has their best interests at heart, and educators do not trust that the students are capable of achieving at high levels.”

## Cultural Responsiveness

“The traits typically associated with males, and Black males in particular, such as anger, hostility, hyper-masculinity, swagger, and toughness, have all been seen in the classroom at some time. These roles are indeed significant in teaching and learning because they have become some of the accepted cultural norms of our day. These behaviors are seen as cultural in nature and, regrettably, when these behaviors are seen the student is instantly categorized as not possessing the potential to achieve or behave ‘appropriately.’ Cultural responsiveness dictates that one adjust behavior based on learning and respectfully relating not only to one’s own culture, but to those of others as well. An educator who is not culturally responsive will not be very successful with these students.”



## Shifting Priorities

“At the beginning of the year, practically everyone tries. It’s a new year, and no one wants to disappoint. They see it as their opportunity to shine: to either continue their previous behavior or turn over a new leaf, or figure out what is cool — smart or not. ... As the year continues, what happens to my male students? ... My newly arrived immigrant males become more aware of their financial duties to the family. They feel pressure to provide for their families either here or in their home countries. This leads to focus on work: more demands on time, shifts in priorities. For most of my male students their culture asks males to be the providers, so many of them see education as secondary or tertiary or even further down the list of main concerns.”





## Bringing the Classroom Outside

At our school, we begin each academic year with a three-day cultural camp.

Cultural Camp is a chance for students to be with the staff and interact with the school's other 159 students. Each year this camp is even more successful and engaging for our students and staff. Each of our classroom teachers has the opportunity to give a lecture based on whatever subject they teach. For example, my subject area is science, and I would teach a lesson about a specific topic within biology, like plants.

Upon arriving at the cultural camp in Mount Lemmon, AZ, the immediate task is to start chopping wood for the bonfire, cooking area, and male/female camp fires. It's always very rewarding to see the enthusiasm of the males assisting me in chopping and preparing the wood for the entire camp. Meanwhile, the females are busy preparing the meal. So as we're chopping wood, that's my opportunity to share the importance of why we're asked to do this particular task. More importantly, it gives me a chance to explain to the males the purpose of why we are at the cultural camp (since most are asking that very question anyway).

Our resident school elder talks to the males as they're starting the fire and explains to them the importance of keeping the fire going throughout our duration at Cultural Camp. The main bonfire is the camp's central location, which separates the male and female staff and students. The main bonfire is where the male students begin the opening prayer and song and

it's where we have school assembly and guest speakers. It's our task, as males, to keep the fire going and for it to be clean as well. Pitching tents is usually a group effort, and our male tents are always separate from the female tents, out of respect and privacy. As we're pitching tents, the males of all grades (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) work together quietly as we hear the females off in the distance laughing, screaming, and talking away. We have many tribes represented, including Pascua Yaqui, Navajo, Apache, Hopi, etc., and this team-building exercise allows the males to come together with ease and begin to get to know each other.

Each year, the school chooses elderly Native American male guest speakers to speak to our male students. Our male elder usually speaks on cultural issues as well as other topics that affect our Native youth, such as drugs, alcohol, gangs, and suicide. Our elders address these issues because that is the reality for our young males. The mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being is what our elder speaks about in detail, as well as why it is so important for these young males to respect our women — the sisters, mothers, aunties, and grandmothers. Students are expected to practice their listening skills through being respectful towards our elder. Students are also expected to give a brief written self-reflection once they have returned to the school the following week.



## Pursuing Higher Education

“Categorizing my students and targeting the boys or targeting the girls is an uncomfortable and still-necessary part of what I do as a teacher. Particularly with my older male students, I have seen a greater sense of uncertainty and nervousness in supporting their family. Many of my 12th-grade students over the year would talk to me at lunch or after school, sharing their — assumed conflicting — aspirations of immediately supporting their families by working or going to college to pursue a higher education no one in their family has ever completed.”

### Engaging With Elders

“I believe it crucial for these male students to hear from their male elders because a lot of these young students aren’t brought up in a traditional sense. It is very important to carry on those respectful ways, the cultural language, the cultural teachings, etc. Afterwards, these young male students always manage to express their gratitude toward our guest speaker and through doing that, they honor their families and learn that part of being respectful. Even though the elderly guest speaker may not be of their tribal descent, our male students still respect the fact that he sacrificed time from his life to come speak to them.”









## Honoring Knowledge

“Educators cannot always select what curriculum to utilize. We can, however, create an environment within the classroom that does acknowledge and celebrate contributions of minorities. As a science educator, my classroom walls were filled with Black scientists and inventors, moving beyond the select few that are always acknowledged.”

## Becoming a Role Model

“I also want to note that as a (somewhat) young, male teacher, each year a few of my male students approach me to bond in ways that are father-like. I think many of my students, growing up in single-parent households, often lack positive male role models and — for my males in particular — being able to have a male adult to look up to is about more than doing one’s homework. For me, this has played out in having students stand very close to me. Literally. My own circle of comfort was initially breached my first year of teaching and I felt uncomfortable with how close some of my male students chose to stand next to me. Other students linger long after school ends to talk, to reflect, or to share. This too was something I was not prepared for initially. However, at the end of the day, I believe that this component, too, is a part of what being a teacher is about. And in this context, teaching young males of color in an urban environment requires extensive time out of school, relating on more than an academic level, and being deliberate in demonstrating when I do and do not conform to community expectations of my gender.”

## Mapping the Environment

As part of a recent project, one of my ninth-grade classes created a scavenger hunt to look at various areas of the school through a critical lens.

The activity involved several steps. First, students needed to identify four locations at or near our school related to the topics of inquiry that groups of students had developed for the class. For example, one student was interested in exploring the food options at and around the school — he selected the cafeteria and the nearby McDonald's as relevant locations. Similarly, a student interested in looking at the persistence of violence at the school identified a parking lot where fights often occur and the school's deans' office, where students are disciplined.

Once students had decided on these locations, they wrote cryptic clues that would challenge players to identify and then locate these different spaces. In addition to directions and hints as to the location, each clue also included questions for readers

to reflect upon once they found the intended location. Students were to hide small badges that players would find and collect to highlight that they found the correct spot. Students turned in all of their written clues to me and I made copies so that each student could have the clues written by their peers. With nearly 20 students each writing four clues, I distributed packets of clues that included almost 70 different locations on campus and in the immediate blocks beyond the walls of the school.

After a week of preparation, students spent the period scouring the school for the whereabouts of the badges peers had hidden. For each location they successfully found, they were to note it in their journal, write a very brief in-the-moment reflection, and then move on to another clue. This was a game, after all, and time was of the essence!

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# Life in Classrooms

## Building Mutual Respect

“I call my students Mr. and Ms. wherever I encounter them, on or off campus. I use it as I stand at the door to greet students entering the room or passing to other classes. Addressing students in this manner sets high expectations for me as well as for the students. The students’ best interests must drive my decisions to design lessons; I must have an appropriate response to their concerns — not much of a leap from client care in the corporate arena. In our conversation, Joseph says, ‘Calling us Mr. and Ms. says to us we won’t be belittled. You will not try to overpower me, and I won’t have to fight back. You give us respect and you will get it from us. You will not be judgmental and you promote confidence. I feel credible and worthy when I am referred to in that way.’”



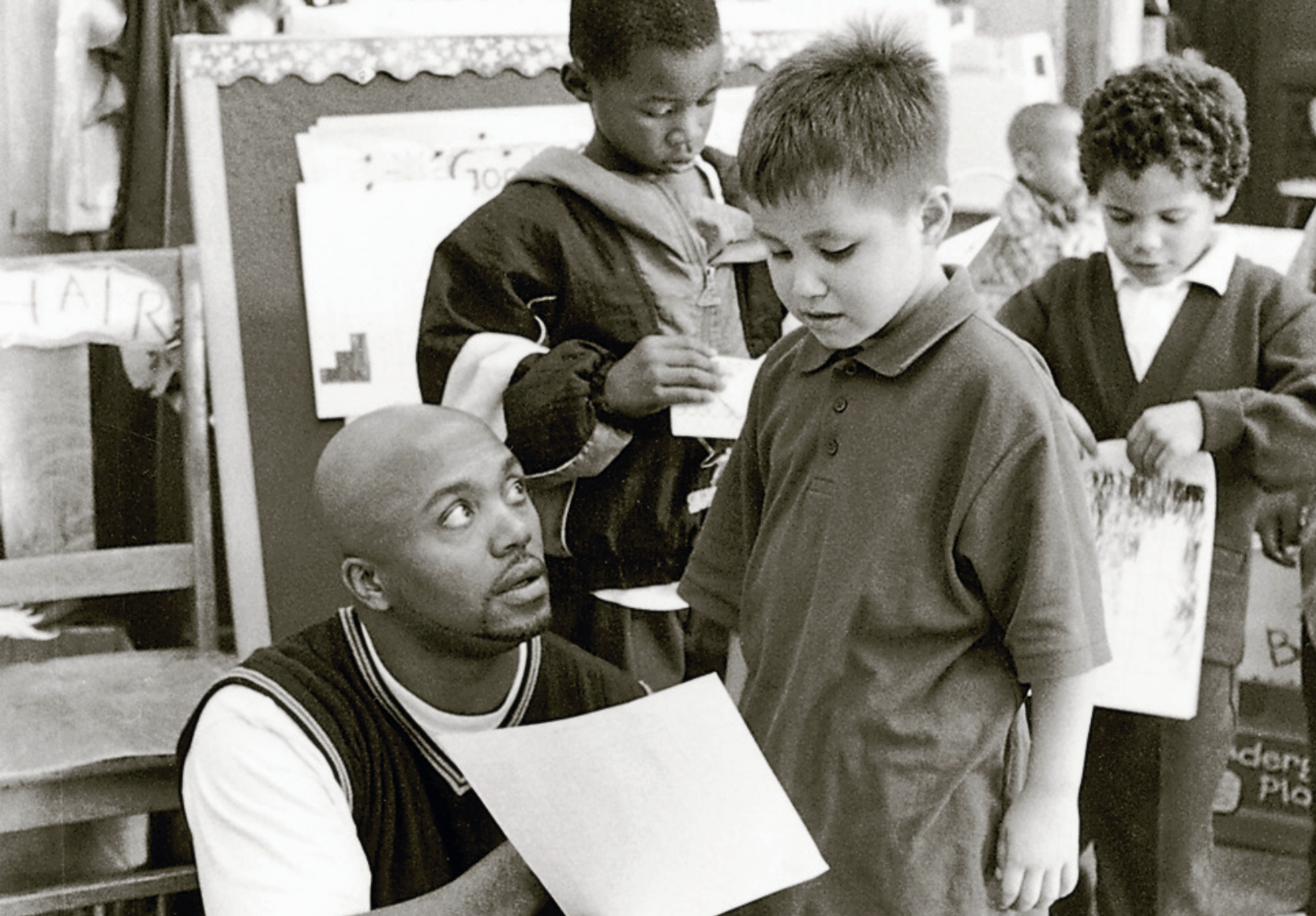
## Examining the Opportunity Gap

“Students began to see the institutional biases and inequitable practices that prevented all students from taking advantage of advanced coursework. The biggest problem is tracking. There are high-track classes and low-track classes, which were created so low-track students don’t slow down the high achievers from learning. The students can feel the segregation that is going on. We can’t close the achievement gap based on teaching the high achievers at high standards and teaching the low achievers an easy curriculum. There seems to be more pressure for boys to eschew the academic values that school represents. Many girls see college as a more clear part of their future than boys appear to. In my experience, this helps them persist when work gets challenging or when they experience academic or personal setbacks.”

## Reclaiming Ourselves

“One of the things that my male students of color talked about was that they wanted to dispel the mark of shame. Having come from the lowest-performing (by test scores) group of schools in the state, all they see are images of themselves on television. They’ve robbed a mall. They’re running away. So they wanted to get away from that. And that was really a driver for them. They say, ‘This is a chance for us to show that we’re not like these images that are portrayed. We’re not just some numbers on a grid.’ So it was that mark of shame that really was a driver for us.”

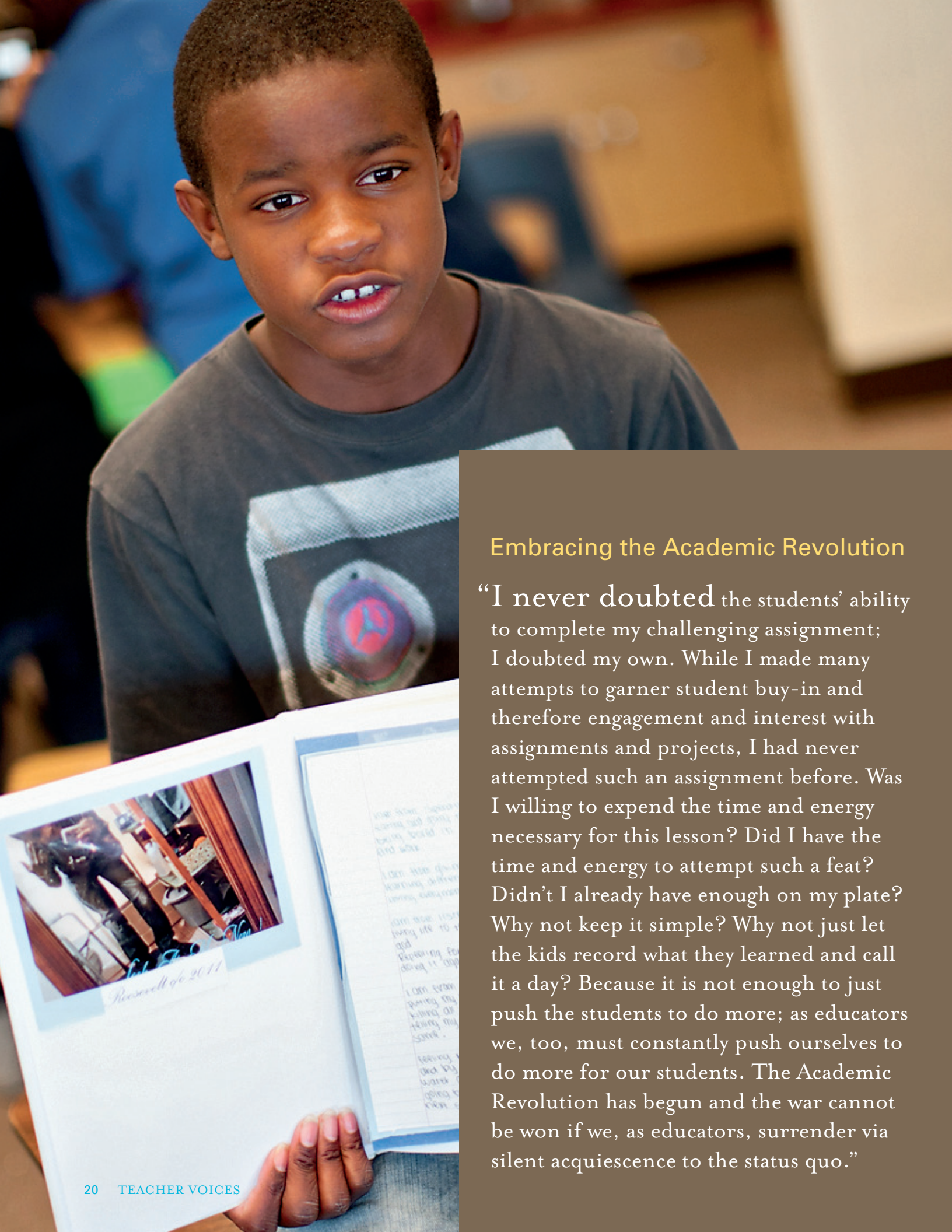




## Avoiding Academic Divisions

“One of my African male students wrote: ‘In addition to the advanced and accelerated academic load, teachers almost always have higher expectations of their honors students than of their regular students. I can recall countless occasions where teachers would say to an honors class, “You are my honors kids, I expect better from you ...” or “You are honors kids and I expect you to do honors work.” Teachers also often criticize the behavior or academic performance of their honors classes by comparing them to regular classes and regular students. Being a student in the honors track also causes teachers and other faculty to respond to students differently, generally more favorably than they do to other students. There is a sense that teachers are proud of students in higher [classes] and want to see them do well. [The] tracking system is designed to promote more efficient learning but often it creates division among students in different tracks.’”





## Embracing the Academic Revolution

“I never doubted the students’ ability to complete my challenging assignment; I doubted my own. While I made many attempts to garner student buy-in and therefore engagement and interest with assignments and projects, I had never attempted such an assignment before. Was I willing to expend the time and energy necessary for this lesson? Did I have the time and energy to attempt such a feat? Didn’t I already have enough on my plate? Why not keep it simple? Why not just let the kids record what they learned and call it a day? Because it is not enough to just push the students to do more; as educators we, too, must constantly push ourselves to do more for our students. The Academic Revolution has begun and the war cannot be won if we, as educators, surrender via silent acquiescence to the status quo.”

## Owning Education

Our overall theme is education, since it is a topic that allows students to explore different types of texts and engage in critical examination of their own experiences.

Our first paper asks students to reflect on tensions in their own education, which helps students enter the conversation about educational issues from a point of authority. We read Gregory Michie's *Holler if You Hear Me*, which validates their experiences as urban students by exploring topics such as student engagement, gang pressures, and family-school issues from both teacher and student perspectives. This year, my students were particularly interested in Michie's criticism of academic tracking. For many, it mirrored their own educational histories and gave them a vocabulary to discuss inequity. Students began to realize that while the tracking system sometimes benefited them, it did so at the expense of their peers. They began to question the system and its impact on their education.

After we wrote about educational tensions highlighted in Michie's book, we prepared to take a deeper look at educational issues through a more academic lens. In the process of selecting articles that the entire class would analyze and discuss, I gave students a lengthy menu of options, as well as asking them to

identify issues they were interested in.

Students elected to analyze three articles out of the more than 20 options I brought: "Closing the Achievement Gap" (Haycock, 2001), "Closing the Achievement Gap by Detracking" (Burris & Welner, 2005), and "Are Schools Failing Black Boys?" (Martin et al., 2000). The last of these was written by a group of students at another Minneapolis public high school. Students worked in groups to teach one article to the rest of the class and lead their classmates in an in-depth discussion of key issues raised in the text. All three articles pointed to tracking as one of the causes of the achievement gap, with different levels of focus.

The final paper of the year was a major research project involving primary and secondary research, an essay, and an action step that asked students to share their research with the audience who they felt needed most to hear it, including other teachers, school administrators, and other interested students and community members.

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## Understanding Individuals

“I’ve been struggling with the question of the role that gender plays in my classroom. I look at it for a moment, reflect, and tend to move to something easier. The challenge for me, with answering this, is multifaceted. Yes, there’s the easy-way-out answer that gender — like so much else in my classroom — is a significant factor in my classroom and how I teach. But at the same time, I would also say the biggest factor in my classroom’s success has been getting to know each student individually and that this individual knowledge has driven what happens. The relational — much, much more than any kind of quantifiable — attribute of my students has been the pathway for my pedagogical growth.”



## Drawing on Student Interests for Academic Motivation

“By acknowledging and drawing on the strengths and interests of each student, I can figure out how to motivate them and build relationships with them. ... The key was tapping into their existing interests and finding out what they felt confident reading about, and then using that knowledge to try to expand their reading interests as well (not that it always worked). ... One student was determined to read sports books only — at least for independent reading — but just getting him to read more was key, so I tried to find as many sports books as I could on his reading level. Improving literacy goes hand in hand with getting students to read texts they can access more and more, so that was what I tried to do. One last note is that culturally relevant books, and books that engaged critical thinking and discussion, also seemed to draw student interest.”

## Listening to Student Voices

“Engagement is not only planning lessons so that students can feel confident about what they are doing and why, but knowing your students and their strengths as well as their interests so that you can tap into their motivations and inspiration. It’s all about building relationships, and to build relationships, you have to talk to your students, read what they write and listen to what they say. The smaller the class size, the easier this is to do.”

## Supporting New Academic Identities

“Overall, many male students’ reading identity seems to impede them from embracing the value of reading. Anthony, a male student leader, who likes working on cars and reading car magazines, doesn’t see these things as reading or related to school. Anthony’s struggles in my class reflect the challenges that many young male students face because of [buying into a] hyper-masculine identity. While working on his project, I recalled Anthony’s saying, ‘I am not going to have to know how to write or need to read books because I am going to work on cars.’ Ultimately I need to figure out ways to make writing and reading cooler!”

## Connecting to the Wider World

“Relationships are a powerful motivator, but ultimately, students have to understand how the things they are learning relate to their lives. Of course this applies to all students, but as we see more and more boys detaching from school, it will serve us — and our male students — well to keep these foundational principles at the center of our practice. In the writing classroom, this means giving students a real reason to write, and offering them the kind of individual feedback and conferencing that honors their needs as learners and helps them express their ideas to the wider world.”



## Setting High Expectations

“Educators must reach students first, and once that occurs they can teach students anything. Students must have an opportunity to have ownership of what they do in the classroom. Does this mean that students can decide what they will and will not do? Yes and no. Once a student has displayed interest in a particular area, any curriculum can be modified within the classroom to assist in creating student buy-in and ownership. Does this require more effort on behalf of the educator? Absolutely, but in a day and age where the words ‘high expectations’ are tossed about on a daily basis, educators must ‘walk the walk’ as well as articulate the words. High expectations must be combined with all tools necessary to do the task, trust that the task can be completed in a manner that meets or exceeds said expectations, unwavering support, and, last but definitely not least, tough love.”



## Creating Classroom Literacy Centers

One of the most successful class activities I have done with my students — all of whom are students of color — was to set up classroom literacy centers.

I created eight different short lessons, allowing for 10 minutes in each center. The students came to class to find each center set up and ready to go. In one, they had to find nutritional data on snack food labels and enter it on a chart. At the next center they did some interpretation of the data, such as discovering which food had the most fat or sugar. At another center they were given a pile of words and they had to sort them into three sentences and copy them on their paper. They had a short reading with content questions to answer at one center, and at another they did some brain gym activities. There was a prefix/suffix dominoes game set up at one table and at another a worksheet about a grammar point we had been practicing. The final center was a vocabulary practice activity on the SMART Board. All centers were designed to be collaborative and each skill they practiced had been previously taught. At the end of the period, the students gave written feedback on the day's activities. They told me whether they enjoyed it or not (they loved it), how often they thought we should do it (this ranged from every day to every other week), and what they thought I should change about the procedures.

Using literacy centers allowed everyone to move around the classroom often, but according to a prearranged schedule, rather than moving just for the sake of moving, as often happens when I try to hold their interest for too long. The boys were just as engaged as the girls and almost all completed each of the tasks assigned. They seemed to feel challenged to complete each task before the timer signaled them to move to a different center. It allowed the boys to talk and move, which they need, yet met their pedagogical needs in the classroom.

The students enjoyed being asked to give their opinions of the activity, and eagerly made suggestions as to its future uses. Asking them respectfully for their feedback made them part of the equation, rather than just consumers (or rejecters) of my ideas.

For the teacher, literacy centers require a different type of planning than we may be accustomed to. It is important to set up concrete procedures for this activity so the management of it can be easy enough to do it often.

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## Building a Community of Learners

“When learners identify themselves as members of a learning community, they feel accountable for helping the group reach the learning objective. A community shares values and goals that motivate them to work together. Classroom tasks should support and drive the community of learners.”



## Building Trust

“Educators must be cognizant of and consider the cognitive, emotional, and social development of these students. Often educators take student actions as a personal affront when there truly are existing physical, cognitive, social, and emotional reasons behind the students’ actions. Building a trustful relationship, verbal processing, active listening, validating student feelings, and consistency must become the status quo for our male students of color who are often undergoing a difficult self-actualization period.”





## Inspiring Peer Support

“A design-scaffolding process allowed for differentiated instruction that enabled diverse learners to explore, envision, and develop innovative and problem-solving ideas. I noticed students developing empathy for each other as they took risks to explore different design approaches. I also saw many of my male students trying out many different types of ideas. They thought outside the box and deferred judgment while coming up with unique ideas. In some ways they formed their own incubation workstations. They built upon each other’s ideas, until they would consider a prototype design or feasible invention idea.”

## Finding True Growth Indicators

“We’re moving away from instruction that we know is successful with students of color and boys because of the pressure of these high-stakes tests. And then the tests themselves have a negative impact because they’re labeling these students even if they are making a tremendous amount of growth, because they’re not reliable indicators of their growth.”

## Taking Risks in the Classroom

“My students used their personal experiences as an entry point into a higher-level academic discourse that could have been intimidating to them. We read a text that reflected and validated their experiences in an engaging narrative style, but also offered a manageable amount of analysis. Next, we worked together as a class to identify issues and texts for deeper exploration. Our strong classroom community, born from ongoing writers’ workshops, allowed students to question each other and take risks with ideas.”

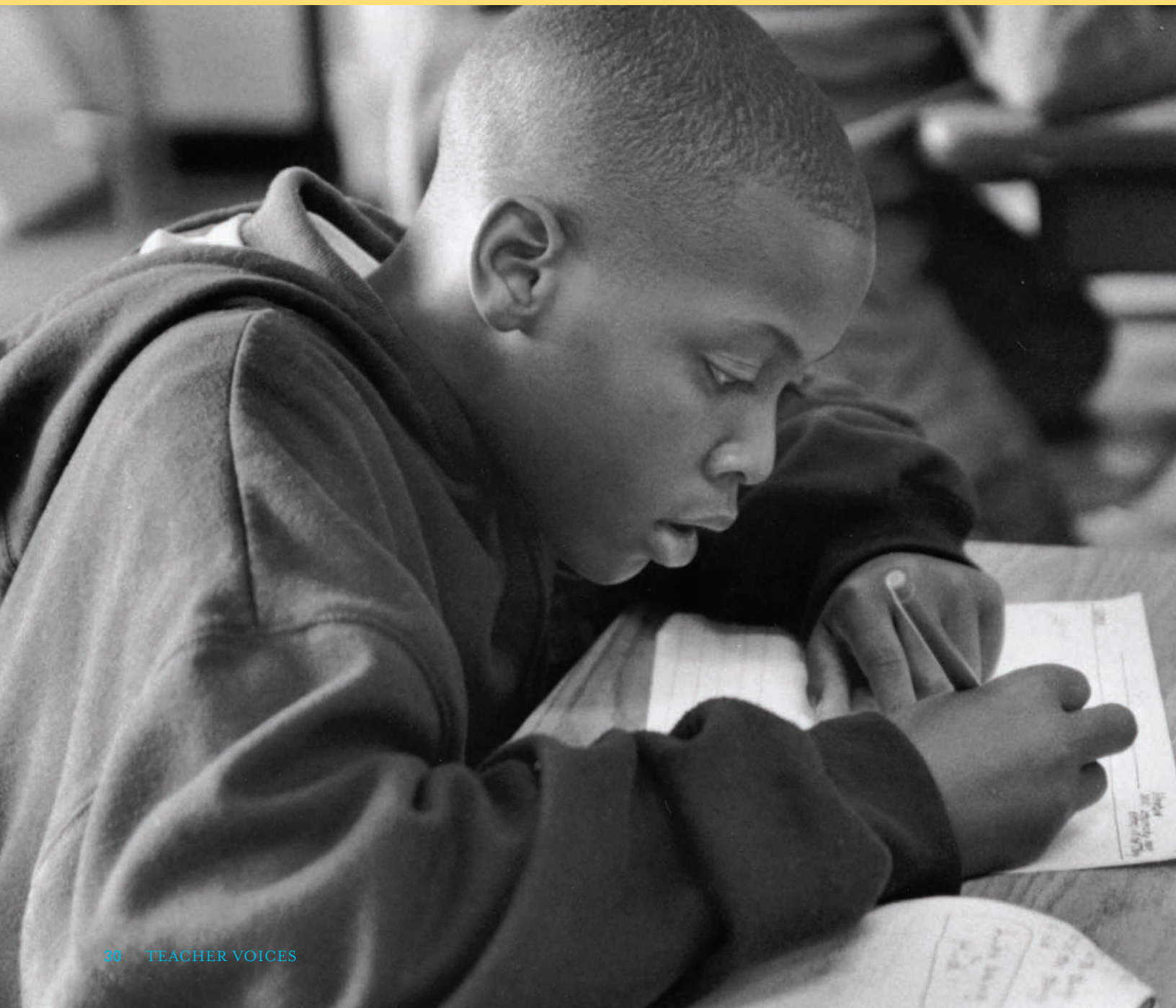
## Collaborating in the Classroom

“Many students indicated that the school district or their teachers decide what they learn, what they read and how much time they spend on a task. This is problematic because teaching and learning should be a two-way transaction. Schools should be a place where students and teachers collaborate on what they learn and read, and on how they demonstrate mastery in reading, writing, and speaking.”



## Understanding the Reasoning Process

“If you look at most of the questions that we ask students in class and on most tests, there’s a right or wrong answer. That’s not experimentation. That’s just simple pass or fail. And yes, it seems to me that ... encouraging students to understand the process of reasoning towards a solution may not be singular, that you might have alternative solutions to a problem. ... For instance, whether being a good student is having the ability to select the one right thing out of five wrong things, or whether it’s the students’ ability to figure out what I used to call back in the old days the ‘generative question’ rather than to find out the definitive answer.”





## Using Art as a Lens on the World

We begin our new world and our new space together at the art museum. With four visits, spread out over the course of a school year, my students meet some powerful realizations about learning in intentional literate actions.

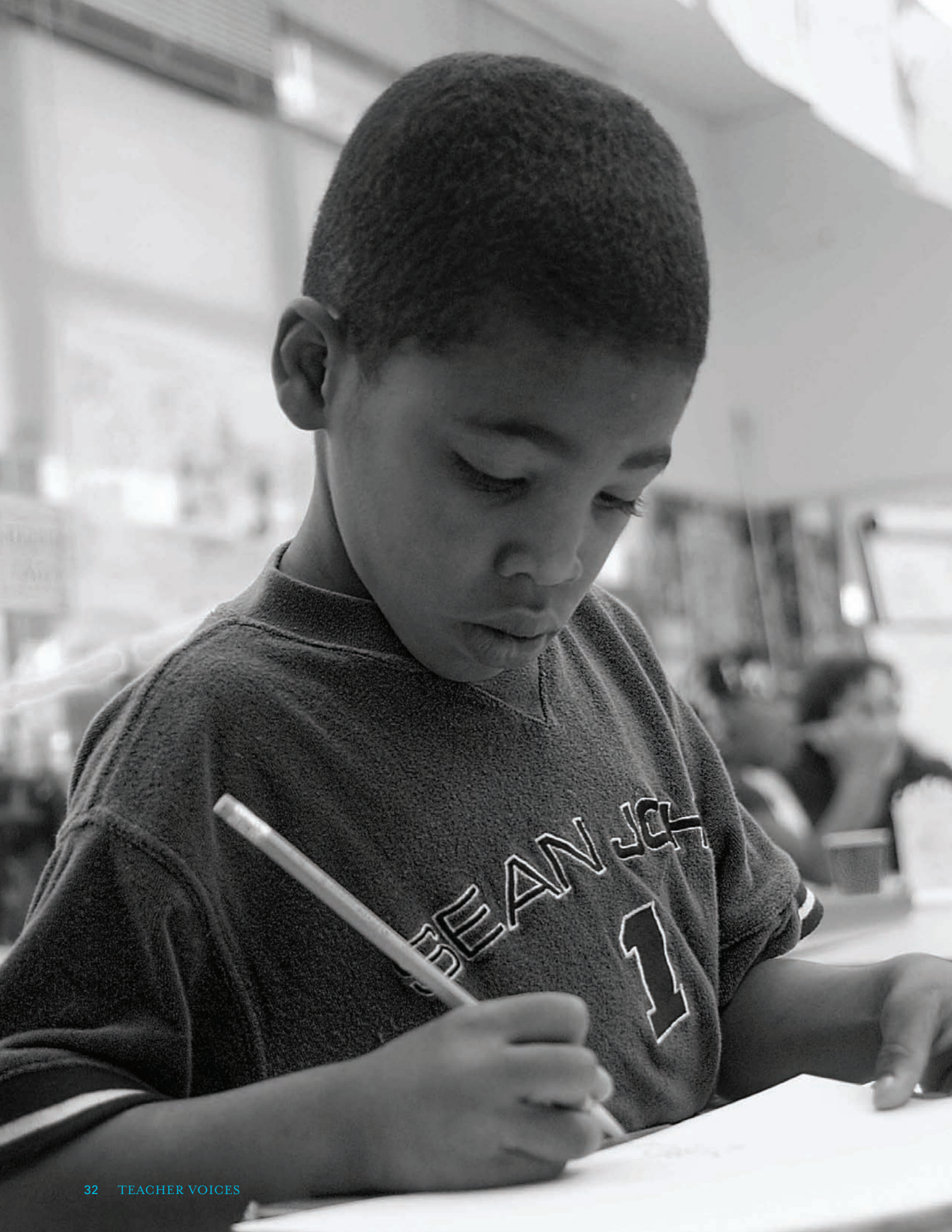
We begin with discussions about what it might be like to explore the museum, a place that only a few have visited. Students construct the learning landscape at the art museum by having discussions about what types of exhibits are available, and then make decisions about which exhibit to explore. The students realize they have power, using their own voice to decide what is captivating and motivating for them to learn. Students begin capturing how they make visible what they learn and want to learn about their discoveries. In deliberate ways we begin our work.

We start with activities on noticing. Using the sketchbooks that await us, we list 10 things we notice about the works, discuss them, list 10 more and discuss again. Already the students are digging deeper, searching for vivid points, observing with slow, intentional purpose. As we engage in gallery talks about themes such as environment, war, peace, and the role of objects in people's lives, we use the sketchbooks to record our thoughts and to describe and define clues about cultures. During subsequent field trips, we express ideas interactively.

In our classroom, journaling is the way we begin to open up the familiar, find out how much we know about museums and museum visits. But most important, the sketchbooks act as a bridge between our time at the museum and our work in the classroom. Because students are writing informally in

their sketchbooks about interpretations of art, students transfer these skills to make and share ideas into their classroom work. Before our art museum experience, critical analysis seems (mostly by the males) to be a one-dimensional, lackluster rambling, without much elaboration or examination of ideas. Using their sketchbooks to record explorations, observations, and work students do together that rely on creativity and imagination, we build portfolios of reflections and essays that are filled with critical analysis. I notice the males are more expressive, asking probing questions in peer discussions about improving writing. Males see revision as a necessary part of the process of writing and the females are not reluctant to ask the males for constructive criticism. Since the males are much more comfortable in their abilities to make known their ways of thinking, I suspend the traditional final exam, allowing the students to choose three from a list of five essay questions in which they must explain fully some aspect of the art museum experience and its connection to learning in the community and the world.

All in all, this experience at the art museum helps students expand what we start in our classroom culture, and in our writing to learn and learning to write. Art allows students to engage with the world, and in that level of engagement, students are less likely to see learning in narrow terms.



## ABOUT THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a nationwide network of educators working together to improve the teaching of writing in the nation's schools and in other settings. NWP provides high-quality professional development programs to teachers in a variety of disciplines and at all levels, from early childhood through university. Through its nearly 200 university-based sites serving all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, NWP develops the leadership, programs, and research needed for teachers to help students become successful writers and learners.

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## CREDITS

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