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Moving Student Interests to the Center of the Curriculum

Diana Mitchell

“Omygosh,” I thought as I considered my decision to become part of the Write For Your Life project. How can everything we do in a language arts classroom be related to health? How can we look at everything we do through only one lens? Won’t it get boring and meaningless to only identify health issues? And if we do, what then? Moreover, how did this inquiry stuff work? Did I wait around in my classroom hoping someone would come up with something? Could I plan for more than one day at a time? Was I supposed to find out what kids were interested in and then run around and find materials to fit their interests? How could I have any sense of direction? How could I structure a classroom in such a way that I was actually responding to student interests, to areas my students wanted to know more about?

I felt like a new teacher uncertain about how to proceed. I felt constricted by the layer of expectations that had been added on to what I already did. I wanted to appear as if I knew what I was doing. I wanted to participate in this project because I felt it would enrich my students’ learning and teach me more. But up to this point I pretty much liked what I did in my ninth grade language arts classroom. I had always used writing and young adult literature as ways to involve teens. I wasn’t sure I could be successful running a class built around student interest since at first I didn’t see how I could work in the successful practices I already used. But with the promise of working and talking with other committed professionals whom I respected, I decided to take the plunge.

The first time the Write for Your Life participants got together (the weekend at the end of the summer before we embarked on the program), the activities we did helped me understand more about how to put this inquiry approach into action. We were asked to write about an issue of health that

had been important to us. We wrote stories, we shared stories, we bonded. We looked for common themes in our writing and then brainstormed what we could do to make these themes the “material “ of the classroom. As we worked through the weekend I was excited about what we were doing. I could see possibilities. I could see glimmerings of ways this piece or that might work in my classroom.

But how was this going to work in my general ninth grade English classes which met for one 55-minute period each day? I knew it would take time to develop enough trust so that students would write and talk honestly. I also knew I would have to work hard to overcome many students’ belief that it was the teacher’s job just to tell them what to do, and not to expect them to be active participants in a class. Although I knew I would have to do a lot to motivate my students, I felt very comfortable dealing with the tough issues that I imagined would arise in class. I also felt that the composition and culture of my classes would be very conducive to dealing with issues of health and well-being. The type of student I usually got in general ninth grade English was not fearful of speaking his or her mind. These kids were not overly worried about grades or about always pleasing the teacher. I knew I could count on them to be straightforward in sharing opinions. Another strength of these classes was the wonderful racial mix of my students, approximately fifty-five percent would be African-American, eight percent Latino, three percent Asian, and forty percent Caucasian. Because of this blend, students were not usually hesitant about discussing racial issues.

Getting Started

I decided to begin by engaging students with topics and assignments that were not personal or threatening in nature. After the first few introduc-

tory activities, I began by playing an audio tape from PBS entitled "Ghetto Life 101." In it, two eighth grade boys who live in the projects in Chicago taped incidents and interviews to show the listeners what their lives were like. My students were captivated. They liked the honesty and the energy of LeeAllen and Lloyd. Students immediately wrote reactions to the tape, and we passed the reactions to others who commented on them. After discussing the themes or issues commented on the most, students worked in groups to develop lists of what they had learned from the tapes. These were shared and created further points for discussion. Then I asked students to write a dialogue from the point of view of one of the people in the tape. They could assume the persona of the drug addict sister, or the alcoholic father, or the eighth grade teacher. We listed all the possible points of view they could adopt and then discussed with whom these characters might engage in dialogue. Students wrote dialogues between the alcoholic father and his dead wife; between the grandmother and LeeAllen; between the addicted sister and her child. These dialogues were shared in small groups and the students wrote in their response logs once again.

I then introduced the idea of health issues by explaining that our focus this year was on the lives of teens, what was important to them, and what can shorten or interfere with their lives. I found myself throughout the year recasting this focus as I worked to help students make sense of how health fit into this.

I asked students to brainstorm all the ways they could think of that poverty shortens lives. Using the audio tape as a point of departure, they came up with a stunning list which showed me they really grasped the idea of how poverty could be a health issue. Before I asked them to do this, I had created a list of my own so I could encourage students to think in different directions if they ran out of ideas. But I never had to refer to my list since my students' list far surpassed mine. They mentioned nutrition, depression, environmental pollution, safety threats, even issues of not being able to afford health insurance.

I then asked students to broaden their thinking and imagine what others might learn from the tape. I asked them to consider what governmental officials could learn? What educators could learn? What health agencies could learn? I also asked them to consider why Public Radio thought these two boys' lives were important enough to put on radio. Students wrote responses in their logs. I must mention that most of their logs were brief—often only a few sentences long. But this was a beginning. I wanted to establish early in the year that "text" was to be responded to, made connec-

tions with, and measured in terms of one's own life. These responses were used as starting points for discussion and the characters became permanent parts of the classroom community since we referred to them in many contexts throughout the year.

Unearthing Elements of Best Practice

I was determined to consciously think about what made this approach work with students. I needed to think about what pieces and parts seemed to be successful. So I turned to the idea of "best practice"—those practices which help students achieve because they are based on sound developmental theory, and learning theory, and demonstrate an understanding of motivation and the psychology of students. Too often we know what works and what helps students achieve but never have the time to extract from these assignments, structures, or practices that make them successful. By naming these elements, I found it is easier to look at what I was doing in the classroom. As I looked at what I had done so far, I could see that in creating conditions for learning in the classroom, best practice elements included the student centeredness of the work and the collaborative activities that helped create a learning community as students shared opinions, strategies, goals, problems.

Elements of best practice that seemed to be at work to push students intellectually included asking students to compare, contrast, analyze, and synthesize; to think critically by adopting someone else's perspective; and to formulate and raise questions of their own.

Reclaiming the Old

In my quest to focus on health issues, I began by very self-consciously selecting material that had a health connection. Thus one of our next activities was to read a short story by Gary Soto whose work I had used often in the past. The story detailed how the main character, against his mother's instructions, sat for long periods of time in front of a window fan with his eyes open and eventually got infected eyes. Students responded to the story in terms of the mother, the older brother, and the main character. We talked about discipline and whether or not he should be punished, how the mother could have handled it, and what should happen to the older brother who dared his younger brother to sit in front of the fan.

After creating "family conferences," written conversations of what could have been said among family members, and/or writing letters to various characters, we turned to our own writing, and students had a choice of writing a fictional or non-fictional account of a time they were sick.

Stories spilled out of my students. They were

full of vivid language and description. Most students wrote of a time they remembered very well. The interesting thing about the writing was that most memories were very positive—my students remembered with fondness being taken care of and pampered when they were sick.

After we shared and enjoyed each other's stories, we worked to categorize the stories into types of illnesses—children's diseases, accidents, serious illnesses. Although this assignment didn't bring to the surface any major health issues, it did make clear to the students that their voices, through their writing, were important parts of the class; the material they created was part of the material of the class.

In order to make students aware of and learn to articulate elements of good writing, I made overhead transparencies of many of the colorful pieces I received. We talked about these pieces in terms of which sentences seemed to make an impact, what made the paper interesting, which descriptions they like the best, etc. Through our discussion students identified dialogue, figurative language, and suspense as some of the elements that add to good writing.

In dealing with student writing, I felt I was back on comfortable ground; nothing about this process was strange to me. The response to writing and writing daily in journals or logs were activities I almost always had my students use.

I was now beginning to see how to use the health focus without feeling that every single day had to have that as the major theme. I was using health as a framework to help me select content but now could see how improving writing skills could easily keep its place in this structure.

Another part of my teaching that I saw a need to continue with was my individual reading program. I set aside one day a week for students to read a book—fiction or non-fiction of their choice. Because many of my students did not read much on their own, I provided them with this time in order to emphasize that reading is indeed an important activity. Before I asked students to select books, I did book passes and book talks to try to pique their interest in reading.

Since most of the books they chose had teens as their main character, I asked them to not only react to the book but also to comment on whether the issues dealt with were ones many teens were confronted with. Because students always responded so positively to young adult literature, I continued my use of it and found many ways I could use it to extend the goals of inquiry-based learning.

Thinking again about best practice, I could see that students were encouraged to write about

things they cared about; individual responses were encouraged so students could work and write from areas of strength; some activities broadened students view of text to include their own writing and speaking; time to write and read was built into the class structure; and teacher modeling let students know exactly what was expected.

Incorporating Young Adult Novels into the Inquiry Approach

When I had used young adult novels in the past, students responded to them through writing and talking and completed projects of their choosing. Now I felt I had to reconceptualize the way I viewed these novels. I didn't want to find "health" novels and simply talk about them. After reading Patti Stock's *Dialogic Curriculum*, and talking to her, I was very taken by her stance on "student as expert." She viewed students as experts on their own lives and experiences and encouraged them to think about and validate or challenge what they were reading in terms of what they knew. Viewing students as experts helped me see that this kind of reading could indeed be part of students' inquiry. They were in fact questioning books as they looked for connections to their lives and/or their communities. What follows is a brief summary of ways I found I could "fit" young adult literature into this framework.

a. Students read novels and compared and contrasted them to teen life and teen issues. When some students read *Shadow Man* by Cynthia Grant they surveyed friends and talked together about the problem of teen alcoholism. After talking to counselors and doing cursory research they concluded that the book did not overstate the problem.

b. I selected specific young adult novels such as Chris Crutcher's *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* and Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* as a stimulus to other health issues and as a way to locate issues teens responded to. Although *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* showed the effects a physically debilitating accident had on the life of a teen, it also contained a myriad of other issues that affected teen lives. *Freak the Mighty* showed the effect abuse can have on a child's learning and the effect a serious disease can have on a teen, his family, and the ones who care about him.

c. I used young adult literature as one source, one piece of evidence for a larger project, an I-search paper. When students did I-search papers, I helped them locate a novel that in some way spoke to their issue or concern. If the issue they chose was dealing with death, I suggested they read such books as *Say Goodnight, Gracie* by Julie Reece Deaver, *The Silent Storm* by Sherry Garland, or *The Silver Kiss* by Annette Curtis Klause. I encouraged

them to use these books as another source of information, or as a way to validate what they were finding in their interviews and other forms of research.

d. I used young adult literature to complement the units we focused on by finding poems that spoke to issues, non-fiction that summarized issues, or short stories that made us think about the issues. We talked in terms of whether the literature dealt honestly with the issues at hand.

e. After showing videos or films such as *Lean on Me*, we read many short young adult stories trying to locate attitudes similar to and different from those of the characters in the films.

f. I used young adult literature as a central piece to build a unit around such as when we read *The Giver* by Lois Lowry as part of our unit on what makes an ideal community where people are happy and healthy. We saw the TV video of "There Are No Children Here" and discussed the two communities presented.

As I established classroom procedures and structures that I was used to, I didn't worry as much about what the classroom structure looked like. Now I knew that students could be given assignments, and could be asked to read all-class material. I had a better sense of direction when I realized I would help stimulate student interest in topics through my selection of materials that often was gleaned from class discussion.

Using a Novel as a Centerpiece to Spark Inquiry

One of the non-fiction sources I used to expose my students to the lives of others their ages was *Voices from the Future* by Children's Express. The subtitle of the book is "Our Children Tell Us About Violence in America." I read excerpts to my students after we had been introduced to the people in Ghetto Life 101. We started by looking at the cycles of violence that begin in the family. My students got very involved in the issues of child abuse, alcoholic parents, and foster homes. As we read about and talked about these issues, the students were intensely involved because we were talking about teens their age. However, after several weeks of this very "heavy" kind of work, I decided we needed a change of pace, something to lighten up the class a bit. (As I look back, I'm not sure whose need this was!) What I decided to do was use the novel *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli. Although the main character was a runaway, the story was an upbeat tale of adventure and a search for a home on the part of Maniac. Because so many issues were embedded in this novel, I felt it could spark further topics of inquiry as we became involved in the story.

Before students read the novel I asked them to

respond to the following kind of questions and statements:

1. When I think about a homeless person I think of

2. When I think about race relations, I think

3. A family, to me, is

4. One way you can tell a little kid probably isn't loved is

5. The most prejudiced behavior I've ever seen is

6. When I think of differences between races I think of

7. I think bullies act the way they do because

8. I think the worst kind of parents are those who

9. If I felt I was not wanted somewhere because of my race, I would

Because these questions asked students to respond from their own experience, they not only responded fully but wanted to talk at length about bullies and parents and race. We began reading the novel out loud after this discussion, and my students were immediately drawn into the story. They loved Maniac from the first page. They loved the humor in the book, and they loved it because it talked about kids they perceived to be like themselves. They were especially taken by the issue of race, seizing every opportunity the book gave them to talk about it. They loved the fact that kids openly talked about skin color and race and prejudice.

Throughout the reading of the book, we had heated discussions on many incidents that centered on race. Students responded very strongly to the words of an elderly black man who told Maniac to leave the black side of town. The old man felt whites should keep to their own side of town since he (the black man) wouldn't be welcomed on their side.

The "kidness" of these characters came through in the honesty of their comments and perceptions. At a few points in the book, if I could stop reading without students censure, I created writing and drama options. Then when we were done with the book, we wallowed in the ideas and feelings and images we had gotten from the book by doing projects on it.

Students created booklets based on several of the following options:

1. Write the letter Maniac would like to write to Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan.

2. Write the script of the conversation Amanda Beale could have had with her mother after Maniac left their house to live at the zoo. How would they feel about him leaving? Why didn't they try to insist he come back?

3. Maniac ran away from Grayson's funeral. If he went back the next day and talked to Grayson

about what he meant to him, what he learned from him, and how he felt about him, what would he say? Write up the talk he would give to Grayson.

4. At Valley Forge, Maniac was so depressed because of the death of Grayson that he wanted to die. If you had stumbled upon him, what could you say to him so he would see he was important to others, that his grief might eventually go away, and that life is worth living.

5. Write up the health department report condemning the McNab house as unfit for human habitation. Be descriptive.

6. If a social worker investigated the McNab home to see if the McNab children were being neglected, she would need to write up a report of her findings and recommend whether or not the boys should be removed from their home. Write up the report she would probably submit.

7. Amanda was angry when Fishbelly was written on her house and those actions helped drive Maniac away. Write the letter to the editor that Amanda could have written about her feelings on the subject.

8. Look in the daily newspaper for cartoon strips that the characters in *Maniac Magee* would appreciate or that describes one of them or that speaks to a theme in the book. Cut out at least three strips, staple them to a sheet of paper and underneath each cartoon explain how it relates to the novel.

9. Go through a book of quotes and write down five quotes that someone in *Maniac Magee* could relate to. Copy down the quotes and write a brief explanation of why each quote would appeal to the person you picked it out for.

10. Make up a one-page handout entitled "How to get along with people of different races." Include at least ten different points.

11. Make up another jump rope rhyme like the one in the book and tell us more about Maniac or what happens in the book.

12. Write a poem about some aspect of the book or write a poem to a character. Possible topics are loneliness, love, caring, racism.

13. If you are artistic, draw a picture of how you visualize something in the book such as the McNab's house or the frogball game.

14. Create a script for any part of the novel that you would like to act out or videotape.

15. Write a scene from the point of view of another character. For instance, how would John McNab tell the story of the frogball game? How would Grayson tell the story of finding Maniac and taking him in? How would Amanda tell the story of Maniac's decision to move out of their house?

I was again incorporating the kinds of assignments I had previously used with students from past years because I felt they involved students by asking them to respond to the literature in ways that could be meaningful to them. The issues in the book that touched the deepest chords with my students were runaways, dealing with death, racism, and family. These were the topics they were most interested in following up on and learning more about.

At this point I felt I had to reconceptualize what we were doing, what directions we were taking. I told myself that this was a class that reads, writes, listens, watches, and researches. The material we read, write, listen to, watch, and research will mainly be on issues that concern the quality of life for students. If students are afraid or worried or stressed out, the quality of their life is lowered. If they get involved in drugs or alcohol or violence—the quality of their life is usually affected because their lives will be shorter. Thus any of the topics they wanted to do more work on could be related to this overall theme of well-being or quality of life. At this time I also broadened my view of what an inquiry-based class looked like. I found that now the content or the material of the class was of paramount importance to me and my students. Now they really wanted to know about runaways, seeking to understand situations that drove teens from their homes and what happened to them. Once this became a burning issue with my students, I read excerpts to them from *Voices from the Future* and other books published by Children's Express, and we talked in class about what we read. A few students interviewed other students they knew who had run away. One student found information on where runaways could get help. Our school social worker, herself a teen runaway, talked to my ninth grade classes sharing stories of how she survived, mistakes she made in her life, and how early marriage seemed a solution to having a place to live. Two of my students wrote a story for the school newspaper based on all the information the classes had gathered.

Moving into areas of real student concern, I could see that more elements of best practice came into play: many activities were connected to and relevant to participants because they involved students in thinking about important issues in their own lives; students often had choices in both reading selections and in writing topics and forms; students were encouraged to look for common threads that tied their lives and experience together and to "texts" read, listened to, or viewed; students discussed, challenged, and questioned the "texts;" and the format of activities encouraged student discovery.

Learning Beyond the Class

It was at this time that I began to see that all learning and interaction didn't take place only in the classroom. When we talked about runaways, kids shared stories of friends they knew who had run away. Often other members of the class would approach them privately and share the stories of friends they knew who had run away and how they had tried to help these friends.

Divorce, anorexia, drug use, and teen pregnancy were other topics that began through student interest, grew into classroom topics, and then moved almost into subgroups within the class. Students who had stepparent problems talked to one another and shared advice on getting along with stepparents.

I was struck often by the difficult position so many of these students were in. They were the people their friends went to for advice. They were being counted on to help their friends since most students simply did not go to adults for advice. So many of these teens felt they were failing their friends if they couldn't stop them from being anorexic or from using drugs or from running away. Because these issues were not usually given any time in class, not seen as important enough to deal with, our kids were struggling on their own to try to help their friends. Since adults know teens can't be expected to have this kind of expertise, allowing these issues to be raised in class lets teens know there are ways they can get helpful information and lets them know there are adults who could support and advise them.

Before my involvement in Write for Your Life, I had always measured my effectiveness as a teacher by how involved students were in my class and by what they produced. I found through WFYL that class time couldn't always be neatly wrapped up. It seems messy ends were everywhere. Some days students left upset, sometimes angry at other students. I always had felt that talk must move to either writing or researching or dramatizing or reading more. But this didn't always happen.

When we got into issues that touched students deeply, such as appearance issues, students wanted to talk and sort out and rethink and talk and argue even more. Here we were challenging each other's assumptions about males and females and what appearance had to do with who that person was. These were tough, tough issues. Prejudices came out against girls with small breasts and boys who were short. None of this was easy or comfortable to deal with. It was hard for all of us. As the adult, I had to challenge student thinking and question students who may have glibly stated an

opinion. So we didn't always leave happy, and we didn't always leave feeling we had accomplished anything, but we all knew we were dealing with issues of the utmost importance.

When I look back, I realize that this talk and the stories were at the center of everything we did. Through talk we grappled with the major issues these teens were concerned about. And they did want to know more. Thus from their stories and talk, I worked to find material that could stimulate further connections. I was now getting to the point where I was finding my center in my inquiry-based class.

In Conclusion

Changing my teaching practices after twenty-seven years of teaching enriched me personally by leading me in new directions and benefited my students by helping them take more ownership of their own learning as they learned through the integration of language arts skills. My class became a lively forum for discussion of issues central to teen lives. Our content was the real "stuff" of their lives so no wonder engagement was easier, no wonder they were willing to read and write and research. Students' lives and stories and concerns were at the heart of the class and informed all we did.

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