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Putting the Heart Back into Writing: Nurturing Voice in Middle School Students

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Putting the heart back into writing: Nurturing voice in middle school students

The authors share five areas of inquiry that emerged as the result of a voluntary weekly before-school writing program.

Barb Ruben & Leanne Moll

"If you pay me a million dollars for me to stop writing, it would never work."

– Carrie, 11-year-old middle school student

For many middle grades students, writing facilitates a search for meaning; writing can foster self-expression and self-discovery and can help students cope with economic and family issues that are out of their control. Susannah [pseudonym] captures the voice of a middle school student perfectly in her short story:

Zodiac grabbed an apple. "There's not much to tell. Okay, you wanna hear? Fine. I am now best friends with a slut with a rock for a brain. My science teacher is a hippie. My history teacher is a hard-ass army freak. My math teacher is a rainbow Madonna. My social studies teacher is a freakin' Calvin Klein model. My Spanish teacher is a hopeless romantic. My wellness teacher is a douche bag with 7 sons AND a divorce. And my language arts teacher is an air-head rag city ghetto girl." Zodiac cried loudly, "I have a crush on my new friend's BOYFRIEND!" Zodiac got out five pages of homework Mrs. Brown had assigned her. Zodiac wiped away her tears. "Now leave me alone." Ryuzaki nodded.

In our experience working with a team of adolescents, we witnessed young authors using writing as a vehicle to explore their innermost thoughts, their struggles with identity, relationships, cancer, love, religion, and fears. Their voices rang true as they wrote by choice, within the loosely structured setting of a before-school writing team.

Many researchers have reported the adolescent years mark declining motivation for some students to write (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Romano, 2007). Much of the research reveals that adolescents do write for their own authentic purposes, but this usually happens outside school (Yost & Vogel, 2012). Our experience as before-school writing team instructors contradicts these claims. At a high-poverty school with troubling test scores, students clamored for the opportunity and space to write. Our students responded enthusiastically to school writing time that nurtured their search for meaning. They wanted a quiet, safe venue to write, with support, about topics of their own choosing.

Faced with expectations of increasingly higher academic standards and accountability, along with extreme budget cuts, school districts have narrowed their focus to raise student scores on statewide literacy and math tests. Teachers nationwide are increasingly pressured to use class time for test preparation in core subjects linked to high-stakes tests. Writing is not always considered a core subject (Applebee & Langer, 2006; Dillon, 2006; The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges, 2006). A key stance in the philosophy of The National Commission on Writing (2006) is that effective writing instruction is time-consuming for students and teachers, and students are not spending enough time writing at school. If writing is addressed in the classroom, it is often in preparation for the statewide writing assessment, not for

its benefits to the “whole child”—nurturing curiosity, exploration, integrative thinking, and problem-solving. Applebee and Langer (2006) noted how state and district writing assessments limit the scope of a broad writing curriculum in favor of coaching students on how to respond to narrow prompts or questions in limited genres. With a focus on high-stakes test performance come more restricted tasks, often centered around structural concerns and a “correctness” mindset, not focused on inquiry or synthesis of a student’s classroom life with life beyond the classroom.

Even in classes where teachers make time for writing instruction, Applebee and Langer (2006) found, “Students seem not to be given assignments requiring writing of any significant length or complexity” (p. 11). According to Loveless (2012), the Common Core State Standards will not ameliorate this lack of writing time or instruction. In fact, the Common Core Standards focus narrowly on argumentative and research writing, leaving little room for journaling, poetry, fiction, memoir, and other popular student-choice genres (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011).

River Middle School [pseudonym] is no exception. Located in a blue-collar suburb of a large urban city in the Northwest, River has more than 1,000 students. Sixty-five percent of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, and 24% are English language learners. River is ranked as *troubled* by the state for repeatedly missing benchmarks. Although its state ranking is satisfactory for achievement, outstanding for attendance, and outstanding for percent tested, only 70% of its students are at grade level in reading, compared to the state average of 80%. Most significant, is its seventh grade writing scores with 60% of the students testing below grade level on a state writing assessment. With new state high school graduation requirements demanding passing scores on state writing assessments, writing instruction has become a priority.

The 2011–2012 academic year was a rough year at River Middle School. Due to budget shortfall, the school was forced to lay off nine young staff members. Remaining teachers accepted 14 furlough days. With the addition of sixth grade, came an additional 340 students. Of the 48 teachers, 19 were new. Two-thirds of River’s 1,000+ students were also new to the school. Class periods were reduced by five minutes to create a seventh period strictly devoted to intensive literacy instruction. Class sizes grew to more than 40 students.

Despite this disruptive environment, in stark contrast to best practices, school staff remained dedicated to ensuring their students were ready for high school. They viewed literacy as a civil right. Monthly professional development meetings were dedicated to instructional improvement. The expectation was that the principal, or coach, could walk into any classroom and see learning and language targets posted for each lesson, along with what students were expected to learn and how students would achieve those targets. All teachers were required to follow a lesson architecture that included active student engagement, formative assessment, and a literacy component for every lesson.

While this initiative was essential to achieving basic literacy for all students, it left little time for student creativity and choice. Furthermore, with more than 40 students in a language arts class, and shorter class periods, little time remained for students to participate in an authentic writer’s workshop. Students no longer had the luxury of writing on a topic of their own choosing over an extended length of time without a specific product and a generic learning target in place. Staff felt a sense of urgency that students must be taught “the basics” they need for success in high school. However, something critical was lost in the shuffle. Students no longer had the freedom to write for the joy of writing about a topic of their choosing in a genre they personally wanted to explore.

By October of 2011, the principal started receiving notes from students complaining about their language arts classes. Several eighth grade students reported that they were no longer allotted adequate time for writing during class sessions. Students complained about the limits placed on their choice by writing assessment-like prompts and a focus on informative writing. In response to the students’ concerns, the school established a before-school, once-a-week writing team—the River Writing Team. Subsequently, 26 students (or nearly 2.6% of the school’s population) applied to participate. . During the weekly late openings, we (a professor involved in a university-school partnership and a former River teacher teaching writing at a community college) volunteered to facilitate a one-hour writing team time for students who loved to write. No academic grade was attached, no learning target posted, and no specific genre, topic, or length of writing was required. Students wrote what they wanted to write. For the culminating event, students were invited to attend a state-wide, all-day writing festival at a local university.

As instructors for the River Writing team, we wanted to try to understand what was motivating these students to come to school early voluntarily and to engage willingly in the difficult task of choosing a genre and topic, drafting, revising, and polishing writing. We asked ourselves, what are the intrinsic motivators that drive these young students to write? What are the components of a nurturing writing environment? How can we understand student motivation so that we can nurture student interest in writing within the constraints of large classes and the current emphasis on Common Core standards? For students who are already intrinsically motivated to write, how can teachers nurture—and not lose—these intrinsic, self-regulated writing interests? In what ways can a before-school writing team nurture young adolescents' natural craving to use writing as a tool for augmenting adventure and discovery?

Background literature

What motivates middle grades students to write? Little research exists on developing motivation to write (Bruning & Horn, 2000). Researchers agree that both motivation and practice are essential to becoming a more effective and efficient writer (Daniels, 2010; Dredger, Woods, Beach, & Sagstetter, 2010; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Generally, students feel most motivated when they have a sense of autonomy or control (Ryan & Deci, 2003); they feel connected to their instructor, to their class, and to the school (Daniels, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2003); and they have self-efficacy—they feel they possess the skills necessary to meet the challenges of writing, and their needs for instruction are being met (Lipstein & Renniger, 2007).

Students learn they have control over their choices, thoughts, and actions when teachers successfully create a motivating learning environment. (Daniels, 2011; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). They are more likely to learn the material or complete the tasks when they feel it is their choice (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). Daniels (2011) asserted that the autonomy of students to make their own choice increases motivation and participation in school. When students engage because they see value in the learning experience, their intrinsic motivation leads to increased engagement (Daniels, 2010). If young adolescents are more motivated to write when they sense a worthwhile, authentic purpose for their expression and when they feel competent and safe in their self-

expression and written analysis, how can teachers harness these motivations in a way that can advance their fluency in writing? This is what we hoped to explore during our time working with the River Writing Team.

Parameters of this study

Through this study we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of young adolescent motivation and developmental needs as our nation plunges ahead with the national Common Core Standards and their implications for writing instruction. We pondered five questions as we studied our middle school writing team.

1. What intrinsic motivators drive these young students to write?
2. What components create a nurturing writing environment?
3. How can we understand student motivation so that we can nurture student interest in writing within the constraints of large classes and mandates to address Common Core Standards?
4. For students who are already intrinsically motivated to write, how can teachers nurture and even deepen—not lose—this student interest in written performance?
5. In what ways can a before-school writing team nurture young adolescents' natural craving to write?

All participants were students at River Middle School, a high-poverty school. Students' names have been changed to protect confidentiality. All students in grade level literacy classes were invited to apply to join a special school writing team. Of the 200 students who received the announcement, 26 students submitted short essay applications in December 2011. We decided to accept all applicants, anticipating attrition once students realized they were going to have to arrive an hour early to school once a week, without the school providing transportation. On the first day, 22 students arrived; they were evenly divided between sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Only two boys joined the team. Some students had parents drop them off at school, but most took public transportation, which resulted in arriving a half-hour earlier than the original start time. Sixteen students continued to attend regularly throughout the remaining 15 weeks. The final distributions of students consisted of seven sixth graders, three seventh graders,

and six eighth graders. By the fourth week one of the boys stopped attending, leaving one eighth grade boy as the only remaining male in the group.

The students were native English speakers testing at or above grade level in reading. Four of the students were in the school orchestra. Two of the students were studying dance outside school. The one boy was in foster care with a history of running away. He admitted attending primarily to be away from home.

Findings

The participants' writings reflected a strong sense of self-efficacy. All 22 students were strong readers, comfortable with rich language, confident in their writing ability, willing to take risks in writing, and willing to take feedback to make their writing strong. Four of them mentioned their intention to work as professional writers when they grow up. They were writing by choice, on topics of their choosing. Students felt a sense of autonomy and control, which is consistent with research on motivation (Anderman & Maecher, 1994; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Daniels, 2010 and 2011). They asked for time, guidance, and the tools necessary to be successful writers. The primary audience for these writers seemed to be themselves.

Commitment to writing

Participants demonstrated a serious commitment to writing. They talked about their love of writing, including writing outside school. Teresa wrote, "I love the feeling of having a story come to life on paper." Ann explained, "I love to write. ... I have a great vocabulary, yet I still strive for better." They recognized writing as a powerful vehicle for exploring who they were as people. Blake, an eighth grade boy, captured this perception clearly when he wrote:

I truly enjoy it [*writing*], I see it as a way of saying something but not really saying it. It's a sense of security, a sense [*sic*] of honesty I can have with myself.

Carmen, an eighth grade girl, reflected a sense of urgency these students felt for a venue to write as a way to explore options beyond their difficult lives:

I can make a world, people, or anything to escape the horrible world we live in. ... I am the kind of writer who could fill pages of description on a character so [that] the reader sees what I do.

Student self-efficacy

We saw evidence of students' strong sense of self-efficacy in their applications to be part of the team. For instance, Jennifer wrote about her desire to write for a larger audience beyond her parents and teachers. Her rich language was reflective of the group:

I love writing, it is my passion. ... I still wish more than just my mom, dad, and my language arts teacher ... could see what just pours out of me like a waterfall.

Nancy, an eleven-year-old, demonstrated a notable ability to articulate her writing strengths:

I can write in a number of genres, I have a very developed vocabulary (required for an intense story), and I have a wild imagination, perfect for writing love or adventures stories (my best two genres).

Adult influence

Two students mentioned past teachers' comments on their writing competence. For instance, Susannah wrote, "My fifth grade teacher said that I have a gift for writing and she couldn't teach the kids what I know and how I can write."

On a number of occasions, students mentioned wanting to emulate favorite authors, indicating a comprehension of the relationship/correlation between reading and writing. For example, Sarah explained:

I love the way Norton Juster, author of *The Phantom Tollbooth*, can describe his characters and create places, like the "Sea of Knowledge," "Point of View," and the "Valley of Sound." Norton Juster's writing is logical, clear, and witty.

When one of the instructors commented on Molly's rich language, she responded, "Well, I am trying to write like Suzanne Collins." She was motivated to revise and edit, explaining she was striving for what she perceived as strong, powerful writing.

Student choice

The most dominant theme that emerged from the River Writing Team was the power of student choice in writing. Students were instructed to write on any topic they wanted. Most of the students had no trouble coming up with topics and sticking with them throughout the

four months of the team sessions. Topics ranged across a broad spectrum, from a memoir of a participant's visit to the public library to get her first library card; a fantasy set in Munchkin Land; a multi-chapter, complex science fiction fantasy; to a violent horror story. No one chose nonfiction expository writing, and only one student chose personal narrative. Five students wrote poetry.

Students have no say in the national obsession with standards, testing, and accountability.

Student voice

Students recognized the importance of voice. Nancy dropped a story after five weeks, insisting she could not continue because the protagonist was 17, and at 12 she felt inadequate to capture the appropriate voice because she "had not experienced being 17." Instead, she switched to writing very powerful poetry full of angst—more reflective of her current circumstances.

One student, very involved in dance outside school, worked on a fictional memoir of former dancer, now in her eighties. Through flashback, she describes the protagonist's first audition for a major role and the trade-offs and sacrifices necessary to become professional. Molly, who has been fighting cancer for two years, wrote a 25-page imaginative story set in "Chemoland," the world she imagined while attending her daily (now monthly) chemotherapy sessions:

I stood up and looked Chemo straight in the eye and said, "I hate you! Taking me away from my family, making me lose my hair, my mind, making me feel sick and look super skinny!" I dashed to my room ripped off my hat and stared in the mirror. I didn't even see me anymore. I saw a sick bald person. What happened to me, who had I become? I didn't want any more presents. I was fed up with being that tough 11 year old. I wanted to be with my family again. I wanted to go home.

At the end of the story, she included an epilogue describing her personal experience with cancer and dedicating the story to the other children she had grown close with during her experiences over the last two years.

Two students wrote disturbing poetry about suicide, cutting, and extreme angst. Nancy successfully captures the soul-searching angst of young adolescents in this poem.

Family told me it would be alright [sic], that I would make other friends,/ but they don't get it, and they never have. ... /I had given up on myself, already decided that I wasn't worth anything, that nobody wanted me to deal with, that nobody would or ever could love me./ And I knew it, all along I was just lying to myself, drunk with hope and longing. I hoped for a better life, to be prettier, smarter, more successful. I longed for something I could never have./ And so I stopped trying, stopped wanting, stopped everything./I gave up, and I never forgave myself.

Patty wrote about love and relationships in a poem entitled "Heart Breaker": "My best wasn't good enough/ it never has been, no matter how hard i try, it's never enough." Her second poem, about her next boyfriend, starts out, "He is my savior, in everything i do,/ he is the one who keeps me from the dark."

Blake, the one male participant, was at first resistant to sharing his work with anyone. Ultimately, he was comfortable using the Google Docs application to share his poetry with the researchers and specific students and to give feedback to other participants. An example of his writing on his vision of Utopia reveals the anger and powerlessness he feels as a 14-year-old in foster care:

Unlike most Utopian societies, mine doesn't have a set of rules. There is no religion, there are no false hopes, there are no lies, and there is no sunlight. There is only truth, only direct answers, no hidden faces or emotions, there is only everyone and their darkness within. A place for people who others think couldn't be any less conceded (sic). A place for the depressing, the indifferent, the so-called "freaks" of common society, a place where they can feel safe with their own kind, the avoidable or invisibles. A place for people to be themselves.

Not atypical of disenfranchised youth, Blake appeared to relish taking on the persona of the "other."

Perseverance

Students demonstrated perseverance that some might argue not developmentally possible for young adolescents. Many worked on a single piece of writing the entire 16 weeks, putting in many hours beyond the once-a-week meeting. Virtually no discipline issues occurred during the sessions. Students wanted to be there. They wanted quiet. They wanted to go deeper into the writing process than a 49-minute English class period allows. They wanted the time to think, write, revise, edit, and produce their personal best.

The emphasis on remedial work to ensure we are leaving “no child left behind” means those already at grade level are ignored.

Providing an external authentic audience, or an authentic audience that went beyond the classroom, was less valued than we had expected. Students persevered, developing and reworking the same pieces of writing for weeks at a time. The original flier announcing the establishment of the writing team made clear that the culminating event was attendance at a statewide writing festival, where they would share their writing with students from around the state, attend writing workshops, and hear a presentation from a popular professional young adult author. However, of the 16 consistent participants, only 11 actually attended the festival. All 11 who attended the festival were positive about the experience. However, responses to the exit questionnaire indicated that the writing festival did not drive the students to attend the early-morning sessions. Apparently, an outside audience was not a necessary motivator for these students.

School attendance records indicated a slight increase in attendance on Wednesdays, the writing team days. A parent of an eighth grader informed us she used the writing team as an incentive to get her daughter to do homework. This parent reported that Wednesdays were the only day her daughter jumped out of bed eager for school.

Concluding thoughts

The young adolescents who chose to be part of the school writing team saw themselves as writers. They sought out a place that would allow them a sense of autonomy, voice, and a venue to explore who they were as people and writers. Their dispositions toward writing were in alignment with the research literature. These students demonstrated an intrinsic motivation to write. They craved the autonomy implicit in this weekly unstructured time; they could choose what and how they would write, without a tight deadline and with easy access to adult guidance when they wanted it (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2003). They clearly exhibited self-efficacy as they confidently shared their writing with each other, instructors, and complete strangers at the state writing festival (Klassen, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). The River Writing Team did not achieve the strong connections between students and teachers or as a class community that many researchers identified as necessary for young writers (Daniels, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2003). The students' intrinsic drive to write was so strong, the classroom environment appeared to play a secondary role in their motivation. As long as the room was quiet and students could work uninterrupted, they remained content and focused (Lipstein & Renniger, 2007). The statewide writing festival, as an authentic audience, appeared to be less motivating than we had anticipated. Instead, the group of students appeared to provide an authentic audience for each other.

In this era of intense accountability, schools often focus on struggling students who are below grade level. The newly-adopted national Common Core Standards' emphasis on expository writing and informational text will move the focus further away from options for student choice than ever before (Applebee & Langer, 2006 ; Common Core, 2011).

Many young adults feel powerless and trapped in adolescence; contrary to the central foci of authentic middle schools, their natural developmental needs to search for identity and meaning are not being met within the current school system (Erikson, 1968; Yost & Vogel, 2012). They need more than the basic academic skills so centrally characteristic of a junior high. True to the middle school model, young adolescents need a venue to try on identities, to explore who they are as people, and to figure out their place in the world. Writing is an appropriate, safe venue for that exploration. Students have

no say in the national obsession with standards, testing, and accountability. The emphasis on remedial work to ensure we are leaving “no child left behind” means those already at grade level are ignored. Students are forced to write to controlled writing prompts designed to match or even replicate a test, denying them personal relevance and the autonomy necessary for self-exploration.

Schools must find the time to continue to nurture young people’s search for meaning through storytelling. If there is not time during the regular language arts class periods, then time needs to be provided through an elective, before school, after school, or even during lunch, for students who want a quiet, safe venue to write about topics of their own choosing with support.

To ensure all students meet all standards, we, as educators, adhere to a tightly-run schedule, with carefully construed lesson plans with explicitly targeted specific standards, for every period of every school day. Certainly, this approach is efficient. However, something vital is lost in this process—the heart of adolescent identity development. We need to hear and value the voices of young writers, especially if we seek to create true middle schools.

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