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Writing to Change the World: Teaching Social Justice through Writers Workshop

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The collective hum of the room quickly subsides as the classroom phone begins to ring. I can practically feel the anticipation as my class of sixth graders angles their bodies toward me, leaning so they can better hear the voice on the other side of the phone.

“Hello, this is Ms. Diamond’s class,” I say loudly and clearly for the benefit of my students. They wait eagerly, unsure of why instead of our scheduled read aloud, I had prepped them to quiet down when the phone rang.

I click the phone to speaker and tell my class, “Someone wants to talk to you!” They exchange uncertain looks, but grow even quieter, a rare occurrence for a group of 27 twelve-year-olds.

“Hello, this is Mayor Martinez,” the voice booms out, “and I’m calling to say that I received your letters. I have to tell you, I am truly impressed.” Now the excitement is palpable as the children look around, first giving each other bewildered looks then glancing up to me to confirm that what they’re hearing is true. I nod encouragingly, my pride evident.

Two weeks before, my class had sent out persuasive letters to the mayor of East Palo Alto, imploring her to hear their arguments in defense of initiatives such as reducing the number of plastic bags used by the city, potential steps to help the persistent gang problems in the community, and the importance of funding youth sports leagues. After weeks of gathering, sorting, and weighing evidence, my students had produced clearly structured, thoroughly researched essays, and they were thrilled to send their writing out into the world. They considered their target audience, and many of them had decided that the mayor was someone who would consider their arguments and take actionable steps to address issues in our community.

And now here she was, the mayor of their city, addressing each student individually over our classroom phone, specifically stating what she appreciated about their ideas and solutions. “Fatima,” she said, “I completely agree that we use too many plastic bags. And your point that we could put a tax on plastic bags like they do in San Francisco is very convincing.” Fatima, one of the quieter students in our class, blushed and smiled shyly.

At the end of her call, Mayor Martinez reiterated the importance of their writing. “You can each make a difference,” she stated. “I can see that you want to change things in the world, and you can use your writing to do that.”

With those words, she hung up and we returned to our normal classwork, but something had shifted: my students had experienced the power and potential of writing for change.

As a teacher of preadolescents, one of my primary duties is instilling a deep love of learning and curiosity about the world. I have taught sixth grade in a charter school in East Palo Alto, CA and fifth grade at an independent school in New York City, and though the contexts vary greatly, I have found that upper elementary students find issues of social justice to be particularly compelling.

Middle schoolers straddle the world between childhood and adulthood, eager to try on more adult roles. When I teach students that their work is meaningful and purposeful, our learning community becomes more invested and engaged. To foster this burgeoning sense of independence and purpose, I integrate themes of social justice across the three major genres we study, emphasizing the power of writing as a way to make one’s voice heard and ultimately as a means to change the world.

Personal Narrative: Crafting Stories That Explore Themes

Like many teachers, I love to launch the school year with a personal narrative unit. It offers me insight into my students' personalities and lives, and children's familiarity with the genre enables me to set the foundation for a productive writers workshop. However, many students start the year with a reluctance to tell real stories, instead deferring to the oft-told time of "when I went to the beach" or "how I broke my arm" that they've written again and again. By fifth grade, I tell my students, we cannot just write any old story; we are responsible for crafting narratives that matter, ones that others would benefit from hearing.

Telling a story that conveys deeper meaning takes courage and a sense of trust. I model such risk-taking in my own writing, sharing small moments of the time I faced the third grade bully, a middle school crush gone awry, a fight with a close friend. As I reveal myself to my students, comparing my own small personal tragedies and triumphs to those in beloved mentor texts like Sandra Cisneros's "Eleven" and Francisco Jimenez' "Inside Out," they begin to see the universality of certain themes. We may not all have wildly exciting tales to tell about ourselves, but when we closely examine our lives, we can find meaning in unexpected, even mundane moments.

To encourage crafting meaningful stories from the start of the writing process, we begin by brainstorming social issues we've encountered in our lives – bullying, friendship, identity. Then students generate small moments connected to the issues most pertinent to them. One of my students immediately began drafting a small moment story about a soccer game. Through writing conferences where we talked about what his story was really about, he was able to uncover the heart of his story. His narrative transformed into a reflection of a time when he let his team down. He wrote, "I stood up slowly. I was still goalie at least. I played while tears ran down my face. For the last few minutes of the game we didn't score 1 goal. But they didn't score a goal either. We still lost though 2-1...I thought to myself it's ok to lose the game if you have fun. I was proud that I did my best."

This first unit lays the foundation for leading a writerly life, where students become acutely aware of the way their lives intersect with important themes. They begin to align themselves with certain causes and issues, which allows us to establish a community that seeks deeper understanding.

Information Writing: Integrating Content into Workshop

To energize our informational unit, I draw heavily on our social studies curriculum, which allows me to integrate themes of social justice. In my classroom we study several ancient civilizations over the course of the year, and students enthusiastically make connections between past and present. In order to think like historians, students practice questioning the information they learn, testing where certain facts appear biased or unreliable, and thinking about perspective.

In this unit, developing the ability to analyze the past goes hand in hand with writing informational texts. As we learn the basic structure for an essay, I also emphasize the skills necessary to be a strong researcher and historian. To place these skills of research and informational writing in an engaging context, I integrate our writing unit with our study of Ancient China. Students select appropriate structures for their chapters, gather a variety of information, and use a teaching tone to make their work engaging. More importantly, we begin to look closely at whose perspective we get when gathering research and figure out whose voice is missing. This work fascinates upper grades students, as they are constantly aware of fairness and equity in their own lives.

After building background knowledge on Ancient China, students select their own expert topics, aware that they need to develop their own ideas and conclusions through their research in order to bring something new to their subject. We practice gathering information and using the facts to grow our own ideas and theories. Students study the role of religion, treatment of women, and the impact of the economy, and each writer is fueled by his or her own interests and research questions. My students' ability to relate issues affecting our society with those of the past has amazed me. One student introduced her essay with the following comparison: "Today women rights are legitimate. We have a lot of opportunities and we appreciate them. If you lived in Ancient China though, you would not have had the convenience, of having these opportunities. Men were the leaders of Ancient China, and where were women? They did not matter."

As students explore social issues that have persisted throughout history in their texts, they gain insight into the typically one-sided nature of the historical narrative and the resulting bias that comes with it. By leveraging history as a context for understanding others' perspectives, students begin to recognize that the issues we study are complex and multidimensional. In their texts we seek to not just reiterate information gleaned through research, but to make something more of it. This integrated curriculum lifts the level of our writing and critical thinking, helping students fully understand the ways in which nonfiction texts can lead to more sophisticated ideas and connections.

Argument and Debate: Becoming Advocates Through Writing

Persuasive writing is perhaps my favorite genre to teach. Nothing comes more naturally to middle schoolers than arguing. Over the course of the year, my students find reasons to debate just about anything and everything: what is the central theme in our read aloud, is a hot dog really a sandwich, was Athens truly a democracy? By the time we get to our argument writing unit, my students have been exposed to debate across the curriculum and they are eager to apply what they know about crafting strong arguments. This work builds upon the informational writing unit as students continue to practice and hone their skills as researchers. When we begin working on argumentation, we talk at great length about suspending initial judgment. “How can we know which side is stronger until we have fully researched both positions?” I ask my students, and they dive into their research with zeal, eager to see if the research will change their minds.

Students select their own inquiry topics to research, generating debatable questions within an issue of their choosing. They gather, sort, and rank evidence. They respond to counterarguments, hold debates with classmates, and look for patterns across their sources. Where they can question or challenge the perspective of one of their texts, they do so with a keen eye for bias.

We talk at length about who to target with their argument in order to actually implement change. Students think carefully about their audience and revise their work so that their tone, word choice, and solutions will appeal to their intended reader. This year we sent letters to congressmen about money for space exploration, to the Central Park Zoo imploring them to consider how the environment affects animals, to parents asking them to rethink the dangers of extreme sports. One student sent an email to the Nepalese government. “Dear Bidhya Devi Bhandari,” he wrote, “I am writing this letter to inform you that climbers and Sherpas are dying because of little training from climbing other mountains and lack of experience. More than 300 people have died climbing Mount Everest and more are dying as you read this letter. Climbing Mount Everest is dangerous and I am writing this letter to prove it.”

As students develop their own persuasive voices, they also become more critical of the arguments of others. Whenever we read texts together, students practice identifying and analyzing the arguments presented and determining the strength of the evidence provided. At the end of the year while reading a picture book about famous person, one student brought up the author’s bias in the text. “It seems like the author just wants us to think this person is a hero,” the child explained, “so they don’t even tell us the whole story.” Students around the room began to nod, and another volunteered, “It’s like nothing is really true. There’s always

another side. You can't just agree with what you read." This is why this work is so vital. When students challenge and question ideas and texts, they develop critical thinking skills and begin to position themselves as active learners and citizens.

At the end of the school year, I ask students to reflect on their progress and growth. One student shared, "This year I learned that in writing I get to be me." This is my purpose as a writing teacher: to teach my students that through writing we can develop our unique voices, to share our lives, communicate our ideas, and most importantly, change our world. The arc of our year allows students to identify how specific issues affect them personally, to explore the perspectives of others, and to communicate compelling solutions to prevalent problems in their lives. Students expand their awareness of social issues affecting our world and address them through writing. This is an early step to social activism, and it all takes place through writers workshop.

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