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Voices of Power, Voices of Change: Narrative Writing in the English Language Arts Classroom

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Introduction: Social Justice Within the Secondary Language Arts Classroom

America has a rich history of student-led activism and youth-centered movements. Whether it be at the higher education level, such as the CUNY Student Strike of 1969 where Black and Puerto Rican students at City College fought for and won an unprecedented opening of admissions at the City University of New York, or at the high and middle school level, such as South Portland, Oregon’s student-led walk-outs in protest of gun violence after the elementary school shooting in Uvalde, Texas in 2022. American youth are ingrained with the patriotic impulse to exercise their right to freedom of speech and use their voices to rectify the injustices within their communities.

Many of my middle school students were introduced to what current social justice activism looked like through the Black Lives Matter Movement happening at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the summer of 2020. While most students spent that time inside, they watched the movement unfold from behind their phone screens or through the perspectives of friends and family members. For some students, marches and protests were led outside of their very windows or through the streets of their neighborhoods. Upon returning and acclimating themselves back to the classroom environment, there was a need for students to explore their thoughts, ideas and feelings following the events of the previous years (1).

While teaching narrative writing, it was apparent many of my students were struggling and discouraged throughout the writing process. Many students shared they were insecure that they had “nothing good to write.” A few shared stories about past teachers that destroyed their writing confidence or used writing as a form of behavioral punishment.

However, through their freewriting entries and classroom discussions it was clear that many students had strong opinions and personal experiences to share surrounding issues of race and social justice, but felt uncomfortable or reluctant using their perspectives to inform their graded, assigned writing.

Ethnic Studies programs around the country specifically work “to disrupt negative images that students of color have internalized about themselves” (2). I was inspired by these programs and my students’ voices to adapt the narrative writing unit to utilize an anti-racist model of the writing workshop and empower students

to publicly use their voices for change by sharing their writing beyond the classroom. “Strong Ethnic Studies teachers are responsive to their students and what they bring with them to the classroom whether that be their histories, experiences, or the cultures of their families and communities. It is the responsibility of the teacher to learn how to develop a pedagogy that speaks to the students’ lived realities” (3). The following unit is in response to the needs of my student and classroom, which may echo many classrooms across the country, however, can also easily be adapted and adjusted to meet the individual pedagogical needs of any secondary classroom.

I am a social justice oriented middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at a Title I school in New Haven, Connecticut, serving a population of majority Hispanic and Black students. This unit is intended for any educator with the desire to adapt their writing workshop model into an approach that puts students’ learned experiences and writing confidence at the forefront of their objectives.

Rationale: Language Arts at Clemente

Roberto Clemente Leadership Academy (Clemente) is located in the neighborhood of New Haven named Sodom Hill, or affectionately known as “The Hill” by the community. A neighborhood ripe with diversity, The Hill has been an entry point for thousands of new residents over the last 200 years, whether it be as a stop on the Underground Railroad or the waves of immigrants trickling up from New York City (4). While rich in cultural history and strong community ties, The Hill has not been immune to strife and difficulty. According to Connecticut Neighborhood Profiles, “it has a 39 percent poverty rate and 64 percent low-income rate, the highest in New Haven: among the 15,069 residents, 5,924 are in poverty and 9,701 in the low-income population” (5). Many students live within the neighborhoods surrounding Clemente and though New Haven’s population is nearly 45 percent white, Clemente’s minority enrollment is 93 percent of the student population, the majority of who are Latino and Black (6). As the sole 8th Grade ELA teacher, all three sections of ELA are taught by myself.

I have designed this unit to be taught during the first five to six weeks of the school year. It is designed for teachers of secondary ELA students and fits within the National Common Core Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts and Literacy framework released in 2010, which has been adopted by 45 states, including Connecticut (7). This unit additionally focuses on launching a reconstructed, anti-racist writing workshop experience for students while building a classroom community that fosters a sense of belonging, promotes positive social skills, and provides opportunities for risk-taking. This unit is written to incorporate the Common Core State Standards along with New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) district wide adaptation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards. While the curriculum within NHPS relies heavily on a strongly implemented workshop model to teach all forms of writing, this unit will focus solely on constructing narrative prose and poetry.

Rationale: The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop

In *The Anti-racist Writing Workshop*, Felicia Rose Chavez describes the traditional writing workshop model as “an institution of dominance and control upheld by supposedly venerable workshop leaders (primarily white), majority white workshop participants, and canonical white authors memorialized in hefty anthologies, the required texts of study” and the “ritual of silencing the author when critiquing their work” (8).

Workshop models are typically implemented at the start of the school year, including lessons that strictly follow a schedule of mini-lessons, small group instruction, and opportunities for students to apply narrative skills taught through the “appropriate” mentor text to their independent writing. This dominant model of teaching writing upholds the classic conventions of power and white supremacy, asking students to relate to the ideas of white authors, write like canonized white authors, and uphold writing conventions decided to be “best” by mostly white critics of classic literary works. The use of model texts in this way affirms the idea that the participating writers are secondary in the experience and have little control over their own work. This model is reflective of “systemic oppression that breeds behavioral norms” (9) and can be limiting at best, but also damaging enough to make writers of color disregard writing as a form of protest and self-expression altogether. Instead of being used as a tool to help writers produce their best works, it tends to lead toward the direction of tension, competition and a sense of failure (10).

Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies or practices, and general public attitudes to redistribute power towards shared equity among all (11). In an anti-racist writing workshop, students participate in a workshop that includes the following guidelines:

- The narrative writing workshop that forgoes classic models of prose and poetry for diverse, contemporary models that exemplify the power of voice.
- This model de-centers instructors as facilitators and restructures workshop mini-lessons to build a community of courageous writers open to sharing their writing journey (12).
- Instructors are required to unpack their bias, privilege, and perspective. “To embody a sense of purpose in a culturally and community-responsive pedagogy, they must be reflective and be able to critically interrogate their own identities and experiences” (13).
- The demand that writers remain silent during the feedback process is eliminated, and instead empowers students by implementing a goal-driven method in which writers will formulate questions for readers on what criticisms they desire prior to sharing their writing with the group.
- Finally, this model removes writing expectations of grammar, syntax, and structure that rigorously enforce that writing must follow set conventions to be validated. Instead, students will acknowledge the construction of power within linguistic structures and be encouraged to explore creativity, voice, and craft above the acquisition of academic language.

Strategies: Diverse Mentor Texts

To put focus on the knowledge and creativity students already bring to the classroom community, most of the writing process is centered on the writing students compose and share. However, reading can be an important tool to develop a writer's skill set. Whether it is for self-exploration or demanding change, students should be exposed to a narrative's various purposes to best understand the power they wield within their pen. The traditional writer's workshop model uses mentor texts that affirm "the authority of white literary 'masters' through a strict study of canonical texts, imparting an implicit rubric for the 'right' way to write" (14). The white canon is clearly exemplified by the anthology *Literary Genius*, in which the editor, Joseph Epstein, appoints twenty-five classic writers as definitive masters of Western literature. The list features twenty-two white males, and three white females (15) which implies that to master the art of writing, one must also master and artificially imitate the literature of white, literary (so-called) geniuses. Many of these works, while not written in the last few decades, are also written from a bourgeois and elite sensibility that excludes a broad range of issues relating to labor, gender, race and sexuality. While it is not as if all writers who are white will automatically write in the same way or form, teaching only from these texts suggests that to write well, you must exclude these pieces of the human experience.

To contrast this elitist narrative, Toni Morrison asserts that the idea of white literary purity is a myth and that "there seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, moved from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States" (16). Due to the nature of the preservation of the white canon, to teach within the traditional writing workshop method is to uphold a political, historical and social narrative that denies the effort and contributions that African, Latinx, Native and Asian Americans have made to literature.

Additionally, most students find classic models of literature to be inaccessible and uninteresting at best. If educators want to spark interest in writing, we should choose reading examples that fuel that same motivation. Where the traditional workshop methods make writing feel inaccessible to students who do not reflect the values and social norms presented in these texts, the anti-racist workshop methods embrace contemporary work from living archives composed by people of color, gender-nonconforming writers, queer writers, or differently abled writers. Chavez argues that by "supplementing participants' own writing with a living archive of scanned print material, sourced pdfs, and multimedia art" (17) will create an environment that centers justice, dignity and self-love within the writing workshop. Teachers should aim to embrace works that focus or highlight diversity in both style and form, but also written perspective and audience.

For this unit, the selection of narrative prose texts are taken from the winners of the *New York Times* Youth Personal Essay Contest in 2020 (18). Not only are the selected essays written by authors of various race, ethnicity and backgrounds, but each of them are composed by different high school students across America. They will be taught in tandem weekly alongside poems that share common thematic ideas centering on defining and discovering identity. The selection of narrative poems come from the anthology, *Woke: A Young Poets Call to Justice* (19) which includes poems from activists and authors such as Jason Reynolds, Mahogany L. Browne, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Mahogany L. Browne (20). The complete collection of poems covers a variety of topics surrounding social justice, activism, discrimination and empathy, focusing on the need to embrace your voice. The weekly thematic ideas explore how we can make amends for our past misconceptions, reflect on our present mindsets, and manifest our future selves.

Strategies: “Facilitating” the Anti-Racist Writing Workshop

Though this unit will still require planning and pre-teaching expectations from the classroom teacher, writing workshops should be student-led most of the time. Prior to student writing, it is imperative that teachers establish a classroom environment that centers mindfulness to ensure students are physically and mental present in the moment.

Requiring mindfulness for yourself and students is an important expectation to set from the start. “Mindfulness does more than push students to break with old writing habits and unlock their creative power. It also helps achieve an anti-racist workshop agenda. White institutional customs of control and domination are ingrained in participants’ psyches. To disrupt these habits, workshop participants must engage in ongoing self-awareness. The goal is twofold: students; mindfulness of their nonverbal and verbal communication” (21). Guidelines for mindfulness should be present throughout every step of the writing workshop.

“When you write, you write with your whole body, not rushing or multitasking or compartmentalizing the assignment but rather relinquishing control, surrendering to the creative impulse. When you read, you read with perspective and open intention, harnessing a wandering mind. When you listen, you receive another’s words without judgment or defensiveness, that egoistic impulse that mistakes the sound of your own voice with being smart or right. And when you rest, you aim for outward and inward attunement so that you may return to the work revitalized” (22).

Posting these expectations, having students verbally state them, or revisiting them as a daily ritual before workshoping will set the intention of the task. Holding a classroom discussion on what these strategies look like and how they feel prior to initiating the workshop will help young writers develop an idea of how to put mindfulness to practice later on.

The anti-racist workshop involves the act of de-colonizing teaching practices, to let go of the disingenuous notion of objectivity in the classroom, of maintaining political neutrality, of seeing all sides and positions as having equal impact on marginalized groups (23). A de-colonized workshop means educators are, not in charge of the conversation beyond setting expectations for kind and mindful communication. Prior to stepping back from classroom discussions, educators should have the understanding that students enter the classroom with their own perspectives on the usefulness and purpose of writing, as well as lived experiences surrounding culture, power, and education that will transfer into the classroom. Teachers should “develop tactics that foste[r] greater affective and intellectual receptivity to learning[...] respecting students’ widely divergent points of entry into race-gender sexuality-conscious knowledge” (24). Mini-lessons that traditionally focus on teachers prompting students to find meaning in the selected quotes from various mentor texts should be altered into small group discussions on the purpose of voice and how power is manifested from the words. Educators must relinquish power over the discussion surrounding texts and student work in favor of allowing students to control the conversation. Identifying their own voice and craft within their writing will be soon to follow.

After analyzing a set of diverse narrative prose and poetry, students should be given a quiet, comfortable classroom environment to begin writing. Whatever prompts students to write, the most important piece of the workshop is reserving time to allow students to tune in with themselves, open up, and write. “With frequent opportunities to fail, play, and experiment, they train their authentic voice to flex on command” (25). To

encourage students to relinquish anxiety around getting it right, set a time on the board for ten-minutes that is meant for non-stop writing no matter how nonsensical, messy or error filled (26). Establish that students writing notebooks are a place for themselves to explore their identity and voice, not a place they need to disclose or share every piece. Prior to flipping through notebooks the first time, give students the option to label their work “Do Not Read” or “My Eyes Only” to signal to their teacher that the writing is for the author alone (27). This will encourage students to forgo semantics and embrace taking risks.

Students will share their writing within these small groups to build up confidence in a low-stakes environment before tackling more courageous displays of their craft. Prior to sharing, give students a second ten minute timer for them to go back, select a piece to re-read, tweak phrases or delete other sentences (28). This strategy may make the more symantec-minded students comfortable to share out. By the end of the unit, students will have shared one piece of writing to the entire class and have composed a finalized piece of writing to be published or performed online for the public.

Strategies: No More Red Ink

Students learn the best when they are engaged, and returning their paper covered in red ink is not going to engage them in the task of writing. This is why addressing surface errors of a text, the dualistic response to student writing, fails to motivate students to continue their learning process. Chris M. Anson explains that “for the dualistic teacher, response is teacher-based and egocentric, a way of displaying intellectual prowess, a way of asserting authority” (29). When teachers return student papers with each sentence slashed through and each grammatical error pointed out, it declares to the writer that their words are unimportant. It sets up writing as a daunting task rather than one meant to develop meaning and explore a larger idea. Paulo Freire’s banking system, in which the teacher is the undisputed authority figure in the classroom that imparts knowledge on to students as they see fit, is the traditional model of teacher feedback within writing instruction. A model that “is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on who will fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it” (30). Effectively shutting down student voice and autonomy over their writing means erasing “authentic thinking, liberation, and freedom” (31).

Though this unit will not require any red pen, it would be irresponsible to send students off to high school without knowledge on the basic conventions of academic writing and expect them to be successful. However, tackling gaps in grammar and structure does not take precedence over students cultivating a positive relationship with writing. Sending their first draft back covered in red ink and criticisms with the expectations they “fix” their writing only reinforces the negative notions most students already have surrounding academia. Composing narrative prose and poetry is the perfect starting unit for the year, as it centers mostly on the portrayal of ideas and emotions over syntax. “Empower students to do it ‘wrong’ before they do it ‘right.’ Such an approach to the writing workshop teaches the twin goals of creativity and courage” (32). By foregoing “mistakes” students have a chance to truly explore who they are as writers and teachers have the opportunity to empower students and give them autonomy over their writing. Once empowered, students will have more confidence and momentum to continue their writing journeys by exploring other writing conventions later in the year.

Strategies: Centering Student Voice Through Feedback

Instead of written feedback in the form of a red pen, students will receive their feedback orally from both their classmates and teacher. Furthering the idea over autonomy, the critical period of sharing your writing and receiving feedback can often be the most intimidating part of the workshop process. Enforcing the antiquated idea that authors need to remain silent while facing the critiques of their instructor (33) and peers separates them from their work and eliminates the opportunity for students to practice important communication skills such as advocating for themselves and asking clarifying questions.

By setting the expectation that writers must come to the feedback portion with targeted questions for their peers to provide criticisms or compliments on, students are forced to assess their own strengths and weaknesses. Shaking up the feedback process provides them with an opportunity to self-evaluate, a much more valuable skill than simply learning to sit quietly and comply. This also provides peers with a chance to communicate their own thoughts and build rapport with classmates, furthering the idea that the classroom is a community based on mutual respect and equity. “When we unsilence workshop, when we invite students to participate in the discussion of their own work, everything changes: the writer is no longer passively accepting comments. Rather, they become who they should be: the creators and navigators of their own work” (34). By requiring the author to come to the feedback portion of the workshop with targeted questions on what they would like feedback on, it also alleviates their peers of the pressure to perform or fumble for commentary, creating an opportunity centered around growth, not comparison or competition to be the best.

Strategies: Sample Workshop Agenda

With the purpose of each strategy in mind, here is a sample of the weekly workshop agenda that will be utilized throughout the unit. Though the content, writing, and discussions will change weekly, a structured workshop agenda can provide students with a level of comfortability so they can begin to anticipate each activity and focus on their writing instead of what happens next. Instructors have the freedom to start class with the daily ritual of a community snack, freewrite, or check-in opportunity to build comradery in the classroom. Beyond that, the daily activities may change. Here is a sample of how the week may look (35):

- **Day One:** Set the intention of the week with a mindfulness activity such as having students complete a train-of-thought freewrite in which they write whatever comes to mind for a full 5-10 minutes. Allow students to share what came to mind if they choose. Use the rest of class time to do a first-read of the mentor text for the week, watching video performances of the poets if available. End class with first impressions and asking students to discuss what they believe the week’s topic might be based off of the texts.
- **Day Two:** In small groups, students will complete a second read of the texts while analyzing for craft and craft elements. Allow students time to develop and study how to frame effective questions for the discussion tomorrow.
- **Day Three:** Small-groups will conduct student-led discussions in which they can discuss their questions from the previous day, or use guiding questions to discover deeper meaning in texts. Students will use their writing notebook to note thoughts and inspiration for future writing.

- **Day Four:** Students spend the majority of this class time writing narrative poetry or prose. They may also use this time to revise past pieces. The last moments of class will be spent creating or reviewing writing workshop rituals, signing-up for share outs (teachers can determine how often they require students to share), and discussing the pre-/post workshop agendas for the following day.
- **Day Five:** Students that have signed up to share come prepared with their piece and select questions on what they want to receive feedback on. Students will practice the previous set workshop rituals and affirmations prior to share-outs. Selected students will share their pieces one at a time. Audiences will provide the selected feedback and have the opportunity to pose follow up questions for the author, who can choose to respond or pass on the questions. Authors and audiences will complete written reflections in their writer’s notebooks.

Week One: Expression of Identity Within the Writer’s Notebook

In the long run, the creation of the writer’s notebook is a physical manifestation of the writer themselves. “A writer’s notebook creates a place for students (and writers) to have their words - in the form of a memory, a reflection, a list, a rambling of thoughts, a sketch, or even a scrap of print taped on the page. A notebook can become whatever the writer makes it to be. As teachers, we can guide its use, present strategies and even mandate entries if we wish. If the notebook is to be a useful tool, however, it must be useful to the writer first, and the reader (teacher) second” (36).

To empower students as writers, it is imperative they have a place that is wholly their own to explore their own thoughts and ideas. The first week of instruction should be used to establish a relationship between notebook and writer. Introducing the writer’s notebook the first week of school as an extension of the writer’s identity gives students a jumping off point to view the writer’s notebook as important beyond just grading purposes.

Choosing a physical notebook over a digital one is more than a stylistic decision. While technology can amplify ELA instruction in many ways, staring at a blank document with a blinking cursor can be an intimidating task to the young writer (37). A physical writer’s notebook allows students to have physical control over the materials, grounding them to the task and focusing their mind to put pen to page. “Writing by hand certainly takes the pressure off getting it ‘right,’ the perfectionism that petrifies so many talented writers. [...] The physical, forward momentum of the pen compels us to write now and edit later” (38). To motivate the reluctant writer, spend the first day or two allowing students to customize the writer’s notebook to their personal tastes and preferences. Providing stickers, glitter, tape and other art supplies to decorate the front and back covers. Allow students to print pictures of friends, families, or even themselves to add to the cover. The time and effort that students put into their custom notebooks will not only give them a stronger sense of autonomy over their writing instruction, but will help ensure they care for their notebooks in more permanent ways. Once students have finished customizing their notebooks, establish that students will be writing in them daily. Depending on your preference and maturity level of the class, students could leave them in the classroom or be responsible for bringing them to class. The act of writing daily creates a routine for students that forces them to engage in ongoing self-awareness and consequently day by day “the words come easier” (39). Teachers may also want to establish how often the notebooks will be collected and grading policies along with the daily expectations.

Content: Identity and Narrative Writing

What's in a Name? (2020) by Mahogany L Browne is a poem that encompasses the struggle many students face at the start of each school year - mispronunciation or stereotypes that come along with a non-anglo name in a white dominated space. It ends with a call for a future in which every family has a name to be celebrated within our country and centers around themes of equality.

Instruction: Student-led Discussions

After reading the piece, students will begin the first small group discussion in the writing workshop. A written recording of student observations, comments, and provoking thoughts will be kept in a section of their writer's notebook as a running record of possible inspiration or ideas. Oftentimes, middle grade students can be hesitant to begin conversation or need guiding questions to help them remain focused on the topic.

Possible guiding questions are as follows:

1. Which lines in the poem convey imagery surrounding the power of a name?
2. How might a name be important to an individual's cultural identity?
3. What personal details or stereotypes are often inferred from a person's name? Who decides these to be true?
4. What social norms convey the importance of a name? What social norms should be in place to ensure names are held to equal importance?

Writing Prompt: Origins of My Name

This first piece of narrative poetry was selected not only due to its relativity and timeliness, being the start of the school year, but also as introduction to their first writing prompt in their writer's notebook. "Students put their name or a family name at the top of a notebook and write about it - how they got their name, what they like about their name, what they don't like about their name or nickname. The naming of something or someone is significant for writers. Understanding the history of a name leads to deeper understanding" (40) of that individual.

Week Two: Amending Our Past Misconceptions

Content: Poetic and Prose Selection

To understand identity and voice, reflecting on our past, lived experiences can be a useful tool for self discovery. The following section of the writing workshop will be centered around reflecting how past experiences have shaped our perspectives and identity, in both positive and negative ways. To embrace how past mistakes and failures teach us more about ourselves than our successes, I have selected the following mentor texts.

Nothing Extraordinary (2020) by Jennifer Kim is written as a nonfiction, narrative essay. In her essay she reflects on her feelings of shame and alienation during an outing to an upscale mall with her working-class, Asian American mother.

Gift of Grace (2020) by Mahogany L. Browne is a poem written about themes of seeking forgiveness and

acknowledging you made a mistake. It delves into the feelings of loneliness one feels when burdened with the knowledge they have hurt or disappointed another human being.

A Me-shaped Box (2020) by Olivia Gatwood is a poem that highlights the restrictions surrounding identity and the limitations of stereotypes students feel as they grow up. However, the poem ends with the feeling of joy one experiences when they let go of the expectations set by society.

Instruction: Student-led Discussions

Using the aforementioned texts, students will have a plethora of topics to discuss after analyzing the mentor texts. A written recording of student observations, comments, and provoking thoughts will be kept in the previous section of their writer's notebook as a running record of possible inspiration or ideas for this new workshop week. Although they have facilitated their own conversations the previous week, middle grade students may still be hesitant to begin conversation or need guiding questions to help them remain focused on the topic. Possible guiding questions are as follows:

1. What similar aspects do you see between the overarching themes in the prose text and poems? Do they contain more similarities or differences?
2. Why might the authors feel internally obligated to share these experiences? What insights did we learn from them out of these short pieces they have shared?
3. How might you or your peers connect to or find meaning in these texts?

Writing Prompt: Amending Our Past

Though students have the freedom to use their writing time to produce whatever forms of nonfiction narratives they desire, it is important to provide them with a prompt to help struggling writers. Prompts can also give successful writers a challenge or new direction to fuel their creativity. For this section, I wanted to include a prompt to have writers think on the theme of amending past misconceptions:

Consider how we often need space and time away from past events to fully put them into perspective. Recall a past experience you have had with a close friend or family member that was impactful to you. Include how you felt in that moment, the context that surrounded that moment, and details on the insight you have looking back on how it shaped who you are right now.

Week Three: Reflecting on Our Current Mindsets

Content: Poetic and Prose Selection

Seeing ourselves objectively and understanding how our fluctuating emotions impact our day to day choices is an important lesson for adolescents to learn. Giving ourselves grace when we make mistakes, overcoming obstacles and bouncing back after a set-back are essential themes that connect youths across the nation.

Speechless (2020) by Maria Fernanda Benavides is a nonfiction, narrative essay that explores how racism and microaggressions caused her to develop self-doubt. Through her writing she shares her feeling of numbness when she felt her voice did not make a difference.

Amari Explains a Frown to Her Little Brother (2020) by Mahogany L Browne explains racial profiling through poetic imagery. Browne details the conversation many families have surrounding public safety and racial bias, even alluding to events of racial injustice such as the murders of Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till.

Activism Everywhere (2020) by Mahogany L. Brown is a poem centered around voice, both the power of the individual voice and the necessity of the collective voice. This poem highlights the importance of finding and using our voice to ensure progressive change.

Instruction: Student-led Discussions

As a routine has been established, students should be well adapted to discussing in small groups. A written recording of student observations, comments, and provoking thoughts for this week's conversation will be kept in a new section of their writer's notebook. To continue established routines, but to also encourage more authentic conversations, only a couple questions will be posted to encourage students to formulate their own observations. Possible guiding questions are as follows:

1. How did people's positive or negative reactions to pieces of the authors' identity shape how they viewed themselves? Is this a universal theme?
2. How important is individuality? How important is it to acknowledge commonalities with others?

Writing Prompt: Reflecting on the Present

At this point, students may have pieces they are continuing to work on and add to, however, it is important to give students options and choices to grow their writing stamina. For this section, I wanted to include a prompt to have writers think on the theme of reflecting on their present identities:

Create a list of qualities you feel make up your identity. Out of this list, select the top three that are most important to who you are. Try to think about why these are important pieces that make you, you. Write on why these qualities are at the top of your list and how they present themselves in your personality. Finally, choose one and describe a moment when you realized this was a defining quality of yourself.

Week Four: Manifesting Our Future Selves

Content: Poetic and Prose Selection

Moving forward towards the future and the momentum of change is an important step in teaching ethnic studies. After exploring the numerous, sometimes dark, moments throughout our past and present, looking towards a bright future and setting a plan of action is imperative.

The Man Box (2020) by Gordon Lewis is a nonfiction, narrative short story in which he explores themes of emerging masculinity in middle school. In his essay, he reacts to his conflicted emotions surrounding vulnerability and manhood when a male friend confides in him about his parents' divorce.

I've Been There Before (2020) by Olivia Gatwood is a poem that shares how to show empathy to others. It outlines the differences between pity and support towards those who need it. It can help students set

important guidelines when allying themselves behind movements that do not affect them personally.

In Between There is Light (2020) by Olivia Gatwood is a poem centered around celebrating our unique differences, specifically those of use who are non-binary or gender non-conforming. It includes how discovering one's identity might not be linear and sexuality is a spectrum of colors with many shades to choose.

Instruction: Student-led Discussions

By this week, students should be well adapted to discussing in small groups. A written recording of student observations, comments, and provoking thoughts for this week's conversation will be kept in a new section of their writer's notebook. A couple questions will be posted to encourage students to keep the conversation flowing. Possible guiding questions are as follows:

1. How does knowing our own personal strength and weaknesses shape how we plan our future or how we grow? What strengths did our authors share?
2. What different themes are present throughout the texts? How are these themes important looking towards the future of our country?

Writing Prompt: Manifesting Ideal Futures

This final week is centered around the importance of hope and visualizing our ideal futures. While writing for social justice or progressive change is important, without hope and plans for the future it only ends there. Students need to have a chance to express their desires and hopes. This writing prompt is sampled from the Ethnic Studies program at Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School in East Los Angeles (41):

Think of yourself years from now; how many years into the future is your choice. What do you want to tell yourself about the you of today and the important things in your life now? We are constantly changing, so what do you want to document about who you are now? What advice can you give yourself? What do you want to always remember? Make a list of the things you want to achieve, the dreams you have, the changes you want to see in the world.

Week Five : Showcasing Our Work

An important student outcome from Ethnic Studies is that students have the opportunity to take social justice to action. "For many young people, learning to address real social justice tools of education is both academically and personally empowering and links education with a significant purpose" (42). Using their voice and confidently commanding the attention of a room through sharing their writing is a skill all leaders need. By the end of the unit, students will have experiences sharing one piece of writing to the entire class through the share-outs and have composed a finalized piece of writing to be shared.

Each student will spend three class periods of the final week workshoping and finalizing a piece of their choice. For this week, it can be beneficial to invite writers or authors in the community to visit students and aid in the revision process. Guests can also model and perform their own work to help inspire students to jump the final hurdle to share their work with the public. Inviting community members to partake in classroom

instruction is an important piece of Ethnic Studies (43). For my 8th grade students at Clemente, high schoolers involved with creative writing at neighboring NHPS high schools will visit for this purpose.

There are numerous benefits for students to share their writing for a larger audience beyond the classroom. Not only does it build confidence and teach students “that their ideas and opinions are interesting and meaningful to others, and can be part of a larger, public conversation” but also “shows them they can do something real with what they have learned” (44). In some cases, this act of empowering students to express their voice and display their words to the public can be life changing - either putting them on a new path or even having their work published nationally.

Students can showcase their work in multiple ways, and instructors can give them as many choices or opportunities as they would prefer. The important piece is that students are provided opportunities for feedback and reception of their work on a larger scale beyond the eyes of their teacher and peers. A few options are as follows:

- Publishing an anthology of student work in a schoolwide newsletter or virtual website
- Creating a YouTube channel to share performances of student readings
- Submitting student work to essay competitions (such as the *New York Times*’ Youth Essay Competition the narrative prose pieces are selected from)
- Create a TikTok account to share short videos of student performances
- Schedule a public reading or performance for families, teachers, peers, and community members to attend
- Enter students into local Louder Than A Bomb slam poetry competitions or create a school slam poetry team to compete nationally

Appendix on Implementing Common Core Standards

Reading Literature Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

Writing Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.5

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1-3 up to and including grade 8 here.)

Speaking and Listening Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.3

Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and relevance and sufficiency of the evidence and identifying when irrelevant evidence is introduced.

Appendix on Implementing Social Emotional Learning Standards

1A Identify and manage one's emotions and behaviors.

1B Recognize personal qualities and external support.

1C Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.

2A Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.

2B Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.

2C Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.

2D Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflict in constructive ways.

3A Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.

3B Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.

3C Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.

Appendix

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