

What's Radical about Youth Writing?: Seeing and Honoring Youth Writers and Their Literacies

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In school you kinda contradict yourself and you kinda like, you know, cover up some stuff, like you kind of hide yourself in school but when you're outside of school, it's like you open yourself up. You unfold everything." A student who was participating in the Writing Our Lives after-school program shared this with me, explaining the difference in her writing experiences in and for school versus outside of school and in her personal life. As she expressed being underwhelmed and under-challenged by the school's writing curriculum at the time, she was writing her novel.

I met another student at a local stage performance of his play who was also a participant in the Writing Our Lives youth writing project. When I asked him about the role writing plays in his life, he answered: "For me, writing is like breathing. I need it to survive." He went on to complete a degree in writing and to stage his first play in New York City. He has said, "I can proudly say that I owe everything that I am now to writing."

Another student who participated in the project, who was characterized by some of his teachers as a disengaged learner and a "struggling" writer, created and maintained three websites and blogs each day. From his bedroom to his neighborhood streets, he wrote and composed music lyrics, uploaded audio files, and directed music videos.

I give these three examples to highlight the various youth writers who I meet each year through my work with the Writing Our Lives youth writing project. The project

honors those youth writers who don't seem as engaged with in-class writing, those who one student defined as the "underground writers. . . . When you see these students walking down the halls, you would never know that they were writers." Her statement is significant because it acknowledges that there are some writing practices that are expected, valued, and legitimized in school contexts, while there are others that remain invisible and are deemed less important. By extension, many youth writers feel excluded or undermined by the writing expectations of schools today.

In this essay, I discuss a few of the key ideas that I've seen in action through my participation in the Writing Our Lives project that I feel are necessary for developing and sustaining youth writing literacies. The main focus of Writing Our Lives is to celebrate "radical" youth literacies and intentionally work to challenge dominant narratives about who is and can be a writer. I do not ascribe the word *radical* to suggest that youth writing is somehow atypical, unique, or extraordinary. In fact, I use it to point to the opposite—simply put, youth are writers. What becomes radical is the refusal of the dominant narratives that suggest that young people, especially urban youth, are not writers and the creation of spaces, both within and beyond school

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curricula, that support youth literacies. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970/1982) writes, "[T]he more radical a person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to

confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them” (p. 39). I define radical youth literacies as ways of knowing, doing, writing, and speaking by youth who are ready to change the world. Writing Our Lives is an ongoing effort to leverage radical youth literacies, to validate the writing practices that young people already engage in, and to then provide a space to support those practices.

Starting with Community

Writing Our Lives began as a part of my involvement with parent and community groups concerned with the educational experiences of African American children in an urban school community. In February 2009, I participated in a community forum on the state of education in the city of Syracuse. My involvement was first as a parent of a young African American male who had a troubling experience with the school district, but also as a literacy scholar and English educator from Syracuse University. As I listened to the stories from other community members, parents expressed frustration that “Black boys don’t even go to school” and “Our African American boys don’t know how to write.” One parent said, “You are your child’s first teacher. The schools don’t teach the children anything about history. They need to know their history.” Parents and other community members discussed the importance of the Black community taking back the education of our children. We talked about the need for mentors and the importance of nurturing parent involvement in schools. Some in attendance were unaware of the failure of the local schools to educate all children. Few were aware of the local school data that reported a graduation rate hovering around 50 percent for all students but 25 percent for African American male students. To investigate this community concern further, I interviewed school leaders and community members to understand the local history of school failure for African American youth. While a problem had been identified, fewer solutions were presented. There was, however, deep frustration with the current state of education for African American children by several community members and parents, including me.

Given the social, economic, and educational disparities that persisted within my community, not unlike other urban areas in the United States, I wondered what I—a mother, a community member, and a literacy scholar and teacher educator—could do to help change what was going on in my community, in my local schools, and in the lives of young people. I was struck

by the parents’ initiative to take back their children’s education, so much so that I even homeschooled my own child for three years while participating in a community homeschooling collective. I knew that the commonly held view of Black children as nonwriters and nonreaders who were disengaged from learning was false. This was a dominant misconception, however, because of the power given to writing and other literacies that are school sanctioned and assessed. Parents and community members understood writing to be the timed writing tasks for standardized exams or the demonstration of the conventions of writing on school assignments, which is not unusual given the national focus on standards and testing and on preparing young people to be college- and career-ready. This is also not that distant from the experiences of the youth writers who make clear distinctions between writing done for school and writing done for self. Many of the young people I work with feel inept when writing for school. In this way, particular contexts and purposes for writing have a direct impact on who considers themselves a legitimate writer and whose writing practices are valued in school spaces. Herein lies the motivation for Writing Our Lives.

In direct response to the concerns of students, parents, and community members expressed in those community forums, I began holding free writing workshops at local community organizations and public libraries. The student interest was high, especially among African American males, with twelve to fifteen students attending each workshop. Because of this interest, I collaborated with local community youth centers and university sponsors to host a youth writing conference that was attended by more than 100 students. Since that first conference in 2009, I continue to work with community, school, and university partners to offer an annual youth writing conference, Saturday mini seminars on writing, after-school writing programs, and summer writing institutes for youth writers in middle and high school.

“I am a [blank] writer”: Seeing Writers and Reimagining Success

Over the years, I have been asked to articulate the “impact” of Writing Our Lives. How do I know that it is successful? How do I measure its effectiveness? To answer those kinds of assessment questions, I had to first go back to my initial reason for starting the project. I wanted to create spaces where youth writers define, understand, challenge, and use writing in and out of school and where they are critical ethnographers of their own writing lives. I wanted to offer writing events for youth writers to be

leaders of writing instruction for themselves, teachers, peers, and members of the community.

In thinking about what I could do to be a part of community transformation efforts, I also drew upon my passion for teaching and for writing. I reflected on how literacy shaped my life as a young African American girl growing up in inner-city Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I gave voice to my lived experiences and reimagined my life through writing poetry and fiction. I also saw writing as a way to access greater opportunities. I was a skilled essayist, and my writing won many competitions and scholarships toward my higher education. Like many of the youth writers I meet, I, too, credit everything that I am now to writing. In many ways, this work is deeply personal.

The goal of Writing Our Lives is not and has never been to quantify writing outcomes. I am not able to provide traditional measures of academic success or literacy achievement, such as higher test scores. Inherent in some of the assessment questions posed to me is the assumption that programs like Writing Our Lives should positively affect students' writing achievement in school in a way that improves their test scores. While I cannot provide quantitative data or evidence, nor do I want to, I often respond by pointing out the importance and significance of young people being "seen" as writers and taking on writerly identities. Such questions undermine youth writing identities and do not recognize their writing competence, especially youth from urban communities. In this way, programs intended to be progressive, like Writing Our Lives, are expected to help urban youth learn how to write and score higher on school assessments.

The opening exercise of any Writing Our Lives workshop or event asks students to select an adjective that characterizes the kind of writer they are. I ask them to complete the statement: "I am a [blank] writer." This exercise presumes their writing competence and assumes that all youth are writers. They cannot be exempt from the identity of *writer*, even if they see themselves as a "bad" writer. Our starting point is that our writing community includes everyone. We are *all* writers; from there, we move forward. Writing Our Lives requires a reframing of measuring success. Its success is not measured by moving the needle on school assessments, though I could and would argue that when school curricula, pedagogy, and assessments are based on seeing youth as writers and presuming their writing competence, optimal writing outcomes are possible. So, the question is not: how does Writing Our Lives improve

student writing achievement? Instead, the question becomes, how can schools create and sustain teaching and learning opportunities that recognize youth as writers and leverage their writing competence?

Youth Writing for Change

One way to answer this question is to honor and respect youth-led and youth-centered writing practices. In our after-school programs and youth writing conferences, we aim to cultivate spaces for students to write with the understanding that they come to us already writing.

Their writing is often directed and driven by the everyday

experiences in and with their local and global communities. Writing is one way that students can give voice to their experiences and think critically about how their personal perspectives are part of a broader dialogue. In a 2015 article, Josanique Everson, a youth writer who participated in Writing Our Lives, Reba Hodge, a

graduate student and workshop facilitator, and I wrote about the importance of 1) holding time and space—whether in classrooms, community centers, or online—to support youth literacies, and 2) listening to and valuing the perspectives of youth writers (see Haddix, Everson & Hodge, 2015). We drew on our personal narratives and conversations to share an example of what happened when Josanique called for social action and change; when her call was heard by supportive adults in her community, and when her writing contributed to moving a school reform agenda forward. Josanique leveraged her use of digital tools and online spaces to voice her concerns about issues of racial violence and police brutality in her community and what she saw as a direct relationship to violence and racial inequities she witnessed in school.

The reality today is that violence and trauma are an endemic part of the everyday lives of our young people. Every day, instances of violence are normalized in the lives of young people. They see and experience violence on multiple levels—physical, verbal, emotional, intellectual, through media, through bullying. They are aware of violence against immigrant youth, against Black and Brown youth, and against transgender youth. The work that we do in Writing Our Lives can serve as a site of healing and for resisting and working against violence. Through Writing Our Lives, we aim to offer opportunities for students to write about their experiences, to tell their stories, and to participate in the global conversation. Several of our workshops draw

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on digital literacies, which is especially important given the ways that social issues are communicated in digital and online spaces. Youth writers in the workshops are encouraged to post their ideas and thoughts as comments on websites featuring essays and news stories about current events. They create blog sites where they contribute articles raising awareness about social injustices and inequities and offering solutions to the problems.

Ultimately, I understand that teaching and curricula can harm and cause further trauma, or they can affirm, heal, and honor humanities. Writing Our Lives has been a deliberate action to write, teach, and learn for and with youth writers, especially in a time when their lives are often devalued and disrespected. I remain inspired by the work that provides educators—anyone working in and with youth-led spaces—with curricula and pedagogical tools that help create and sustain sites of humanization and racial justice. I am committed to creating teaching and learning experiences that support the literacy practices that young people already have but that are often hidden in the shadows of school expectations. Writing Our Lives is one way that I am able to honor this commitment.

So, What's Radical?

When I first began offering Writing Our Lives workshops, I often questioned whether the work was making a difference. Writing Our Lives provided youth writers a space to showcase their writing interests and talents. It celebrated what I always knew and believed—that young people love to write in many ways, for many purposes, and for many audiences. Yet, I could not say for certain how the work I was doing with young people in out-of-school spaces directly impacted their writing experiences within school spaces. I was concerned with how the same student who maintains multiple blog sites or performs spoken word poetry at local open mics or writes music lyrics in his free time could be characterized as a nonwriter or a disengaged learner based on academic measures.

While Writing Our Lives is a project situated within community spaces, I also want the work to inform writing pedagogy in schools where young people spend the majority of their time. In this way, Writing Our Lives is as much about youth writers as it is about the support and professional development of teachers and community leaders they encounter each day. The curriculum and pedagogy of Writing Our Lives

workshops can and do live within classroom spaces, and there are specific ways that teachers can encourage and facilitate collaborative and community-engaged writing practices among students. In my teacher education classes and professional development workshops with current and future English and literacy educators, I stress the following guiding principles for any writing program:

- Teachers must be writers.
- Students must see themselves as writers.
- Teachers must cultivate spaces for students to write.
- Students must have opportunities to write in multiple ways, for multiple purposes, and in multiple genres.
- Teachers must honor and respect youth-led and youth-centered writing practices.

I also advocate for a definition of writing that moves beyond writing for the test or for school-sanctioned practices. It is paramount that youth writers learn about and witness the writing processes of everyday writers in their lives and communities. We all write. Teachers have an opportunity to bridge community literacy practices with school expectations.

I began this essay by questioning what is so radical about youth writing. I frequently receive shocked expressions when I share with people that more than 100 students attend a Saturday event just to write or that there are times when the majority of the participants in a workshop are Black boys (Haddix, 2009/2010), as if what we are doing in the Writing Our Lives program is somehow “radical.” What I know for sure is that seeing youth as writers, presuming their writing competence, and believing their stories is essential to successful literacy outcomes. What I know for sure is that as the adults in their lives, we need to make sure the space is there—in the classroom and other physical spaces or online—and then get out of the way. What I know for sure is that young people are affected by the social and political issues in their communities, locally and globally, and that they have opinions, questions, and concerns. It is *not* radical that youth are writers. What becomes radical is their persistence to get their stories out in spite of prevailing narratives that suggest that they are not writing or that they do not have anything to express. As we say in Writing Our Lives, “The youth will lead the revolution.” They will do so raising their voices, their hands, their pens, and their smartphones.

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Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE’s Conference on English Education offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. Moffett, a great champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal must include

- A cover page with the applicant’s name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant’s current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher’s practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the researcher and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant’s teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2018 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, at cee@ncte.org, Attn: CEE Liaison. Proposals must be received by **September 19, 2018**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett’s scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.