

100 words: Becoming an advocate one essay at a time

This article highlights how implementing a particular writing experience fosters the development of relationships between students and teachers.

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Being an advocate for young adolescents is as critical now as when *This We Believe* was first published. Being an advocate means actively keeping students' best interests in mind, building strong and positive relationships, and then creating supportive and caring learning environments for all students. Much attention over the last decade has emphasized the need for rigorous and relevant curriculum for adolescents (Caskey, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011). However, relationships, the third "R" in this group, remains one of the most critical components when advocating for adolescents (Beaty-O'Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010; Mo & Singh, 2008).

Despite the focus on implementing rigorous content standards, building relationships with students cannot be overlooked or set aside in planning and developing instruction (Klem & Connell, 2004). Teachers need to understand students in a more personal way than just as learners of content in order to develop meaningful relationships with students. This means deeply understanding the typical and enduring needs of adolescents, and the specific needs of students. In essence, advocating for students means understanding them as individuals, how they see the world, how to help them develop strong and positive self-concepts, and then using these understandings to improve learning experiences in the classroom (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Parker, 2010).

However, understanding what it means to be a young adolescent becomes increasingly more difficult

as social, societal, political, and environmental factors change in our world. The challenges facing adolescents today are not the same challenges that most educators faced when they were adolescents. The ubiquitous access to technology and social media is but one example. Understanding students as individuals within the classroom may help with planning and instruction, but it also may help teachers better understand students' families and communities (Eccles, & Harold, 1996). Thus, educators need to be continually aware of the unique and localized needs of adolescents in their classrooms. In doing so they may more effectively create safe and supportive learning environments, better support students as individuals, and attend to the unique cultural differences (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Reflection in 100 words

Gaining a deeper understanding of my students as individuals, as members of various groups, and their cultural ties seemed overwhelming at first. Yet, with the use of a simple and short essay, I was able to quickly understand how they viewed the world around them and their role within it. I decided to ask my advisory class, students I saw for two 30-minute periods each day, to respond to the following prompt: Describe in 100 words, what is it like to be your age? This prompt was given only once within the first couple of months of school after several weeks of working closely with these students and developing their trust and respect, though it could be repeated throughout the school year. I told them that I

wanted to better understand what life was like for them so that I could learn to be a better teacher.

When the time came to assign the essay, I informed the class that their responses would not be shared with anyone they might know—parents, classmates, or other adults at school. As such, in order to continue to respect this anonymity, students are not referred to by name in any of the responses below. I shared my belief that sometimes adults do not understand what teenagers experience in life and school, and that by better understanding their perspectives, I could then make better decisions on how to meet their needs as their teacher. Needless to say, their initial responses and reactions included many rolling eyes and groans, yet students quickly began writing. I had expected to get no more than half-hearted responses with only momentary glimpses to the answer of the question I was trying to understand. What I got in return was an insight into their lives; so full of honesty, joy, sorrow, wonders, and heartbreak that it changed my approach to teaching.

Even though I gave this assignment to my advisory classes over the course of several years, 15 essays have been purposefully chosen to share as they were richer and more vivid in content and displayed a greater depth of internal reflection. This is not to say that the other essays are unimportant. In fact, every essay helped me understand individual students better, but the portions shared represented common themes across most essays. Furthermore, for some students, this essay was more of a task than an opportunity to share their personal beliefs and perceptions, and their responses often lacked details or insights to support me in the goal of the essay.

Student responses

While each student's essay clearly voiced his/her own experiences and perceptions of being a young adolescent, there were several common themes. These themes dealt with relationships, identity, and an awareness of their changing selves, transitions to adulthood and life beyond school, and an optimistic hope for the future. What follows is a summary of each of these themes, including actual text from their essays, followed by a discussion of how understanding these essays informed my teaching.

Relationships

Relationships are paramount in the lives of adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Within the essays, students often

wrote about three kinds of relationships; those within peer groups, intimate couples, and with their parent or family. Each of these seemed to play a unique role, and while not every student wrote about all of these types of relationships, at least one was mentioned in each essay highlighting the importance of relationships across their lives.

Peer groups

Many students highlighted the roles and influence that their peers had in their life, "You have a reputation at this school and your actions can improve that or kick you." Feeling a sense of belonging with particular groups was often a thread running throughout their responses. One student wrote:

Trying to get into the 'in' group isn't really worth it and as long as you have friends (true friends) around it is ok, after figuring it out for like a year. We have to be careful of what friends we have and if they're worth being friends with.

Finding "true" friends was a tremendous concern for many. Another student wrote:

My friends always help me but I'm not sure how many best friends I really have. I mean, I talk to people but I always wonder how they view me. I just want people to just stop with the drama. I kinda don't think that'll happen so I call it the impossible wish.

For each of these students peer relationships were important yet their uncertainties about finding and maintaining positive and supportive relationships were equally apparent.

However, within this struggle to find acceptance came "choke drama," the local vernacular meaning a lot of problems and pressures from their peers. "People arguing, getting into fights, and losing friends. Most of that is caused by the stupid things you do. Like teasing or making fun of people or making trouble for no reason. I wish we would stop doing this." Many students wrote about feeling unsure how to handle and deal with the pressures from their friends. This uncertainty led many of them to try things that they may not have otherwise tried under different circumstances. "You'll come face-to-face with obstacles that you may not know how to handle, sometimes there's more pressure on you to do certain things to make you fit in." For example, "you get pressured too much to smoke, drink, and a lot of other things." In these responses it is apparent that peer

groups have led some students to “choose” unhealthy and potentially damaging lifestyles. The first time I read these 100 word essays, I was unaware that these issues were so prevalent in so many of my students’ lives.

Many of these students were aware that their choices within their peer groups may not have been the best choices. But they often felt confused on how to deal with these situations and thus kept things “bottled up” or “buried inside” for fear that others might judge them in a negative light and thus lose these relationships. For example, one male wrote about feeling confused on the choices he should make. He said:

I don’t want to tell anyone how I really feel but I want to be popular; so you fight, act all cool, and do drugs. And there are times when you feel sad but you don’t want anybody to know so you just cry when you’re alone, so they would think he’s a tough guy who doesn’t cry.

Pressures from peers also impact identity as is clearly indicated in this passage. This male seems to indicate that he has made choices that he is not exactly happy with but did so because they were part of the social norm within this peer group. It seems likely that under different circumstances, and with different peer groups, different choices may have been made. As indicated in the responses above, the influence of peers groups cannot be understated.

Couples

Peer groups also influenced the types of relationships students maintained. Specifically, there was a clear sense that more intimate couple (i.e., boyfriend or girlfriend) relationships were expected even though they may not have been welcomed. One female indicated, almost as an afterthought on the subject, “Oh! And another thing I have to make sure I have time for a boyfriend.” Many students casually talked about boyfriends and girlfriends as being a natural part of middle school, but some clearly were unhappy with the imposed “need” for such relationships. As one student stated, “Everyone always judges you with the person you are going out with. It’s irritating, I know.” Some even indicated that the stress and pressure from these types of relationships caused depression and stress leading to thoughts of personal harm or the need to find some other means to remove themselves from the situation. This idea was reflected by a student who wrote, “I have heard that some 13-year-

old girls cut themselves just because they have boyfriend problems. I do not know if this is true but it is scary. Some 13-year-olds even run away from home.” Reading this was initially troubling and I did share this with the school counselor who then followed up with the student. However, knowing the seriousness to which students felt about relationships of this nature, I soon began paying closer attention to relationships between couples. If it was clear that there was trouble in a relationship and a student was withdrawing from the class that day I would talk with them to let them know it was fine not to participate at that moment but also encouraged him/her to come in and get additional assistance later on, which was frequently done. I also informed the school counselor of the situation. Respecting students’ wishes to not participate and working closely with the counselor helped immensely during these rare but serious instances.

The underlying notion with couple relationships was that there was a direct expectation from some peer groups to be involved in this type of relationship, but the implications extend beyond just immediate peer groups. Adolescents are very adept at paying attention to peer norms. Thus, even if a student’s peer group does not convey such an expectation, the norm within the larger school context is still clearly conveyed.

Family relationships

Even though peer relationships were discussed in essays, many of the students also wrote about the strenuous relationships they often had with parents or other adult family members. One student wrote about the pressures felt from the expectations and norms established at home:

My parents are extremely overprotective and they want to kinda plan my future. They tell me things like, ‘I’m too young, no relationships, no F’s,’ and I’m fine but it gets on my nerves when they repeat it over and over. I get really annoyed because they have such high expectations for me.

This student seems to understand the expectations of the family but a greater sense of autonomy is also present. It is as if the student is saying, “I get it. Just let me take care of things.” One male wrote about the frustration he felt from his relationship with his parents and feeling inadequate as a result of the message he felt was being conveyed by his parents. He wrote, “They’re always putting me down; calling me a failure. Growing up in the ‘wrong path.’ They don’t understand I try so hard

to make them proud and impress them.” This student was one of the higher achieving students that year in all of his classes yet he felt as though he was not doing well enough. Supporting parents and families as they help their students navigate adolescence matters greatly (Epstein, 1995; NMSA, 2010) but this might also mean that teachers take a complementary role in helping students understand the larger picture in school. Such helpful teachers assist young adolescents separate grades from future potential, thereby not confusing or inflating these two very different measures.

Developing identity

Adolescence is a critical time when many struggle to develop a strong sense of identity (Jackson & Davis, 2001; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010) and begin to critically think about life beyond school. Many of my students wrote about the social process of learning about themselves; hanging out with different groups of people and trying to understand their role within these groups. One student wrote, “Loners, nerds, populars, geeks, backstabbers, *@?&, etc. labels are put to everyone and I don’t know yet, but I hope it isn’t like that at high school.” The frustration of thinking that he has to belong to only one of these groups is evident in this male. While in others, the frustration has led some to give up on even trying, “After a year of finding where I belong I don’t bother any more I just go with the flow.” The extent to which they actually “go with the flow” or not is uncertain but the recognition of this fact suggests much about their growing acceptance of their own identity. Another male, a quiet student who only seemed to associate with a few other male students, wrote that “We worry about our looks. We always want to look okay.” While many young adolescents feel as though everyone is watching and critiquing their every move, some students do not outwardly show this. By reading this reflection I am able to further understand this student who rarely said more than a couple of sentences to me at any given time.

Perhaps the response that resonated the strongest with me came from a student who outwardly appeared the most secure, resilient, and comfortable in her own skin. Her revelations, however, helped me to begin to understand the internal struggles that she was experiencing, just like many of her peers. She wrote, “I feel like I have a lot of ‘faces.’ I think I’m trying to find my real ‘face’ but I guess for the mean time I’ll keep

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switching.” Of all my students that year, she was the one that I thought had a strong sense of self.

Other students were keenly aware of their developing bodies. They recognized the physical ends to their childhood. At the same time however, the newness of these biological changes forced them to consider and/or reconsider actual and possible identities past, present, and future. One boy wrote, “It feels weird because when you turn 13 it feels like you are still 12. Then when you go through puberty and you feel really weird because you get hair in places, you feel taller and stronger.”

Another student seemed to capture the fluctuating emotions associated with adolescence. She commented:

Being 13 could be fun and kind of rotten...it’s exciting at first but then it turns on you. You feel so much older but then what sucks is that we are going through stages. At this age we’re young adults or should I say young adolescents...idk [I don’t know].

The students’ developing understandings and feelings about growing up are clearly evident. One comment by a very outgoing and energetic female, one who was active in a variety of after-school groups and openly talked about her youth group at church, wrote:

I like being a teenager, I have more responsibility and get to do more things but some things go wrong sometimes. We don’t even expect it. Girls getting stuffs boys don’t, having a boyfriend/girlfriend, breaking up, mood swings, having fights, even growing. Being me right now is...confusing.

Developing a healthy identity is critical for adolescents’ affective development (Erikson, 1968) and for many of my students I was not aware of the extent to which they struggled with this aspect of their lives. Or as one of my students put it, “finding out who is good to hang out with, and who’s not a good role model, and who you want to be, and who you’re going to be isn’t so easy.”

Transitioning to adulthood

For many students, the understanding that they would need to be more serious in making choices for life outside of school offset the excitement of being older and having more freedoms and responsibilities. Such uncertainty created anxiety, confusion, and frustration for many students. One female seemed to spin down the proverbial rabbit-hole thinking about life after school. She wrote about her confusion of still feeling like a child in some ways but understood that soon substantial decisions would need to be made:

I felt like I was the same girl (on the crazy world called earth) but to think that you are getting close to high school, college, getting a job, getting married, having kids and one day die. It makes you crazy to think what's going to happen next.

One of the boys who displayed a “tough-guy” persona and acted as though school was the last place he wanted to be wrote that “When we are done with school we need to be thinking about getting a job, getting a home to live in, and you have to start a life with someone.” Even for this boy, he was aware that there were expectations of him; school may, or may not, have been a place he wanted to be but he realized that there were decisions that needed to be made and greater responsibility to take on after school.

Nearly every student talked about the stress they felt in life. While they often talked about the things that caused them stress (i.e. school, family, and relationships) many of them made a connection that stress was “a part of life” and that they “better learn to deal with it.” In essence, they were making a connection that part of transitioning into adulthood required them to deal with stressful situations on a regular basis. “I can’t name one person who has been in so much stress. Stress is part of life. Problems are part of life so I guess I have to get use to it.”

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Often students talked about wanting to get support or guidance from family members or other adults, but they felt as though older generations did not understand them; this in turn caused a great deal of stress. One female who seemed to have a strong relationship with her parents—

both frequently attended school events and often commented on how proud of their daughter they were—wrote that “everyone (as in adults) says ‘being a teenager is nothing to be worrying about,’ when a teenager tells them about a problem. But honestly, I don’t think they understand or care as much as we do.” While to me it was clear that her family was supporting her in many ways, to this female, adults in her life struggled to listen and to understand things from her perspective. This taught me that I needed to listen more to all of my students.

Other students seemed to clearly understand the importance of being a good student in middle school as it would help them be better prepared for their futures. With that said, they also thought that some of their teachers had a hard time understanding what it was like to be a student and this caused them a great deal of stress, too:

School is so stressful I know I need to stay in school for a good future but it’s a lot of work. Some teachers don’t even understand. A couple of times I broke down crying because of all the stress. This may sound dramatic but it is the truth!

Students who excelled academically as well as those who primarily only struggled made similar comments. One boy who continually struggled said, “School is so hard right now. It didn’t used to be so; I am worried about what is going to happen when I graduate. I don’t even know if I will graduate.” Another male also commented, “I just wish teachers knew how hard we work. Being a teenager is also a little challenging because you are not a kid anymore and you don’t want to ask stupid questions.” In both cases, my initial understandings about these students, before this assignment, were not accurate.

Hope for the future

Despite the confusion, uncertainty, and stress that students felt, there was also an overwhelming sense of something greater ahead for them. Their optimism, despite their occasional sense of feeling overwhelmed, left me inspired and in awe. To feel so confused and emotionally drained yet to smile and exhibit resilience is powerful. One female whose parents had just gone through a divorce, which was very difficult for her, wrote “I had a harsh past but things are getting better now...slowly, but it’s happening, I just know it.” Another student wrote about their emotional ebb and flow perspective about the future quite simply. “So I think to be 13 is to have lots of stress and responsibilities but being 13 is like a surprise every day! Exciting :) I can’t

wait to see what tomorrow brings.” One other boy simply commented, quite succinctly, “Life is what you make it. So I better make it good.”

New learnings

More than anything, these essays gave me an opportunity to better understand the lives of my students and allowed me to know them better as individuals within the larger classroom context. I learned that assumptions made about students in class were by no means accurate or complete. Each student faced different challenges and while some students were very open and forthcoming about the struggles in their lives, others were not.

After reading these essays I became more empathetic, patient, and learned to better listen to students; to listen to what they said and not just what I heard. I learned that even the toughest students had kind and gentle spirits within and that even the most organized and highest achievers longed to connect with others, including adults. More than anything, I learned that in order to be an advocate for each of my students, I needed to listen and learn from them about what it means to be an adolescent; I needed to understand what it was to see life through their eyes.

After learning about the stress and pressures they felt associated with school, both in terms of academic work and peer relationships, two major changes occurred. First, I developed a culture of collaboration regarding major assignments, deadlines, and group work to encourage participation as well as to help students feel less stressed. Second, our classroom became another place for students to interact in a socially safe environment during their free time to build positive relationships.

Culture of collaboration

The understandings gained from students also transformed my instructional practices. Several new classroom policies were adopted. One policy that students appreciated greatly was that quality work turned in late was better than “junk” on time. Knowing that students often felt substantial pressures from various sources such as home, after-school events, and school, I accepted late work if it demonstrated better learning. This does not necessarily mean that they could turn in work whenever they wanted, though; rather, “appointments” were scheduled at regular and weekly intervals to gauge their progress.

Students were also consulted on deadlines for projects. When it came time to work on a more extensive assignment or project, and after the guidelines and outcomes were shared with the students, we co-created a timeline of when different portions of the project would be due. Students also co-created the rubrics for these projects. In doing so, students were able to reference deadlines in other classes and help plan around these other obligations to reduce their stress. Using a collaborative learning approach (Horn, 2008; Reed & Groth, 2009) I was better able to create opportunities for success in mathematics.

Another change to my practice was the increase in small group and partner assessments (Roberts & Billings, 2009). Different partnering structures were used so that students would meaningfully interact with different students throughout the week, not just their closest peers. Even on quizzes, students had in-class opportunities to confer with a peer about the mathematics being assessed and make changes to their work before turning it in. In order to reduce the chance that students would simply copy answers from their peers, I adjusted the assessments to focus on mathematical process instead of just answers. That is, the rubrics were weighted to value reasoning, logic, and explanations. In essence, our work emphasized the process of learning, meeting student needs, and not decontextualized answers.

Creating safe environments

An “Open Door” policy was also implemented to create another setting on campus where students felt safe to express themselves, interact with others, and build positive relationships with their peers (Brinegar, 2010). Students were allowed to be in my classroom during any of their free time (i.e. recess and lunch). Students might come in to do school work but more often they would come in and talk, play games like chess, or do puzzles together; many students ended up becoming closer friends during this time. Even though I often had different things to do during this time, I made a point to say hello to each student who came in. On occasion, I would help with the puzzle or have the honor of losing a game of chess. True to the ideal middle school, I sought to create a safe and inviting space on campus that allowed students to connect and interact with their peers and adults.