

Learning to Fight Dragons

FINDING CREATIVE WRITING IN LOW-INCOME AND HIGH-MINORITY SCHOOLS



Mural at Manzanita Elementary. Picture taken in March 2002.

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in Low-Income and High-Minority Schools**

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Introduction



In the Spring of 1999, I discovered a different side to writing beyond the dreary essays I had always worked so hard to get “A’s” on. I was taking a research and analysis class required for all college freshmen, but we were not writing the five-paragraph essay I was taught in high school.

The comments coming back on my papers were, “be descriptive, take us back to this moment, what were the smells, colors, sounds? Imagine you are the birds you are writing about.” Little did I know then, my professor was an award-winning poet who was dripping her creative passion like a leaky roof on to me, a dry sponge. Near the end of the course, we finished our assignments two weeks early and my professor decided to let us write poetry. I was a woman who found she hadn’t been full at any time in her life. As soon as I started writing, the words were sharp hunger pains in my stomach that wouldn’t ease until I wrote seconds, thirds, and even fourths.

When I was full enough to sit back and let my words digest, I wondered why I had never before been taught how to write creatively. Poetry to me was like chocolate; I was an eighteen year-old who felt a Hershey’s Kiss melt in her mouth for the first time. Why was something so easily accessible never put in my hand? This question has been buzzing around my face since then, and none of my feeble hand-swipes has kept it from coming back. Through my research, I quickly understood why this opportunity had never been given to me. I grew up and attended high school in low-income neighborhoods where arts are the first electives cut from the curriculum. According to Education Trust, cutting arts from the curriculum is a common practice for many low-income schools, “Education

systems give poor and minority students less of everything that matters for classroom learning” (edtrust web page). I was lucky enough to have a supportive family who encouraged me to get good grades and attend college even though my family could not afford sending me without help.

Realizing I am privileged to have such a supportive family made me wonder how many children there are who live in low-income areas and do not feel that they have an opportunity to attend college? Will these children ever be exposed to creative writing and other arts from their elementary, middle, or high schools? These questions raised other questions: How many children could benefit from creative writing but are not being given the opportunity? Why are there not many creative writing classes compared to other forms of art for children? Who are the children who are being affected by the lack of creative writing classes? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions and others.

Finding the answers to these questions is important to me because creative writing gave me a chance to feel that I could make a change for the better in our world, even if it is a small one. I found creative writing not only as an outlet for my emotions, but also as a chance to break silences in our communities. I imagine that if every child were shown that he or she has something important to say, each child would have more hope for changing his or her life and community.

My future goal with this project is to create a non-profit organization that brings arts to schools that do not have funds to integrate arts into the regular curriculum. To gain some experience in this, I decided to look for a school in Monterey County that had



children who could benefit from learning about creative writing. With help from Banner House, a budding non-profit organization, I was able to teach a four-week class to second-grade students at Manzanita Elementary in Seaside, California. Because my concentration is Creative Writing and Social Action, the form that this project takes on is different from the usual research paper. This paper incorporates not only an historical, societal, and cultural analysis of why not all children are introduced to creative writing, but it also incorporates my own creative writing to portray the experience I had with teaching creative writing to children.

Why Creative Writing and Other Arts are Important

It is not hidden knowledge that creative writing and other arts help children to grow academically, to do better in other subjects like Mathematics, Science and English,



and to stay away from negative activities and criminal behavior. The United States Department of Education acknowledges,

Engagement in the arts nurtures the development of cognitive social and personal competencies. Arts programs can increase academic achievement, help decrease youth involvement in delinquent behavior, and improve youths' attitudes about themselves and their future (5).

Creative writing and other arts are not solely responsible for these positive aspects, of course, but they are one part of a child's life that influences them in these beneficial ways. Arts are especially instrumental to children who face oppression because of their identities, especially race, income, and ability. A *Champion of Change* report found that "students consistently involved in music and theatre show significantly higher levels of mathematics

proficiency by grade 12—regardless of their socioeconomic status” (qtd. in U.S. Department of Education 6 -7).

Creative writing, specifically, helps children to give voices to their feelings as well as teaches adults that children have important things to say. Patrice Vecchione, a local poet of Monterey County, says,

By writing poetry, children... free their imaginations... . Through poetry, we can also find out a lot about who our students really are. We don't find out about their humanity and inner life from a math problem. They write things in a poem they'd never just tell you (Bunch 1 & 2).

As adults, we often forget that children have relevant thoughts, questions, and epiphanies just as any other human being. We don't often remember that children have problems too—we tend to think that they don't have any responsibilities to worry about so their lives cannot be as hard as our lives are to deal with. The truth is, children might have an even tougher time with the hardships of life because they cannot always understand why something is happening. Creative writing gives children the chance to open up in ways they might not otherwise do, to think about life and people in new ways, and to give voice to their everyday lives and difficulties.



What Are You Really Doing?

*For the teacher who asked this question
after I introduced the writing class*

I've built a tiny world in my heart.
The people in my heart travel
through veins, vessels, arteries,
looking to understand every part
of my body, but they always return

to the center, core, *corazon*.
My heart people work together,
keep their earth alive,
swim on white blood cells,
sew scabs over cuts,
extend hands full of oxygen,
greet each other with hugs,
dance together to the beat
of their homeland.
What I'm really doing is
trying to share this world,
teach children to dance
with their own hearts,
bring my heart people
to exist beyond my body,
live in hands of presidents,
popes, kings, queens,
in the mouths of every child.

Creative Writing in the Classroom Now

Robert Down Elementary as a Case Study. Before I decided to teach



creative writing to a group of second grade students at Manzanita

Elementary, I wanted an example of how creative writing in a

classroom can work. I learned about a special creative writing program

being taught at Robert Down Elementary in Pacific Grove and decided to interview one

of the second grade teachers, Judy Wills. She showed me how the creative writing and

poetry workshops operate in her classroom.

Through funding from their school's state tests, a local fund called PG Pride, and through a state award for their test scores, Robert Down Elementary was able to have a local poet, Patrice Vecchione, come to their school and give poetry and creative writing lessons. Many teachers do not feel comfortable teaching creative writing to their students because it may not be one of their strengths. Having a local poet come in who is familiar with teaching creative writing is an invaluable asset to the whole school.

Judy Wills adopted the creative writing workshop into her regular curriculum for several reasons. She describes the program as something each teacher can work with using his or her own style. Her personal mission of the writing workshop is not only to provide her students with an opportunity she never received, but also to incite the children's imaginations so that they want to "write more" (personal interview). Wills feels that the students benefit from the creative writing workshop because not only are they learning their basic writing conventions such as spelling and grammar, but also "creative writing makes them less afraid of other types of writing." In his paper, "Workshops for Adding Creative Writing to Class," Robert Retherford reiterates Wills' point when he says, "Writing creatively can ease students' performance anxiety and boost their willingness to learn" (2).

Wills describes the writing workshop as a process. The children first start with writing in a journal. Because their journal is seen as their own private place, the children do not feel as inhibited by what to write, and they are not as concerned with spelling their words correctly the first time. The next step for the children is to come up with an idea for a story or poem. They are taught basic components of creative writing such as similes,

stanzas, or paragraphs (although at the second grade level, they do not have to know the actual terms). Once the children are ready to start writing their poem or story, they are given big sheets of lined paper to write their story or poem on so that they can go through an editing process. They are each given a “Self-Editing Checklist” that Wills created with the following steps:

- _____ I have read my story to myself.
- _____ I have made changes that were necessary after reading my story.
- _____ I read my story to my Response Group and have made changes that were recommended.
- _____ Check for missing Capital Letters
- _____ Check Punctuation: Periods .
Question Marks ?
Exclamation Points !
Quotation Marks “.....”
- _____ I looked at the times I used “and” or “then” and crossed out the ones I didn’t need.
- _____ Spelling: Use your quick word book, a dictionary, the word wall, the room, or a friend to help.
- _____ I picked _____ to look over my story with me.
- _____ I am ready to conference with my teacher.
- I may now publish my book.

As one can tell right away from this checklist, the students are not only learning about spelling, grammar, and punctuation, but they are also being taught how to find answers for themselves by using the resources around them. The teacher is the last person

they go to—this is not just to teach them independence, but it is also because they might feel more inclined to listen to their peers’ suggestions than an adult’s suggestions. Wills says she is “continually amazed” not only by the insights the groups have for each child’s piece, but also by the work that is produced by each child.

A Visit to Manzanita Elementary. A person could not tell from the school buildings or the wonderful teachers and administration at Manzanita Elementary that it is located in a lower-income area and has less resources for its students. I was not surprised that they did not have funds to support creative writing workshops in their classroom, but I was impressed by how they used the resources that they did have. They have a large after-school program in the cafeteria where children get help with their homework, they have computers in the library (even if they’re out of date), and the classrooms are full of books for the children to read.

What makes Manzanita Elementary different from Robert Down Elementary is not just that it’s located in a lower-income neighborhood in Seaside, but also that the children who attend the two schools are mostly not from the same ethnic backgrounds and are not given equal chances. Because Pacific Grove is a high-income area and 85 percent of the children at Robert Down are white, most of the children are born into a culture that prepares them for the type of questions that are on the state tests. 95 percent of the children at Manzanita are considered minorities, with the majority of them being African American (Education Data Partnership Home Page). Much of the money given to schools is based on the taxes people pay on their homes, and therefore, schools located in lower-income neighborhoods, where less people can afford to own their homes, are not given

enough funds to support many classes and programs that will enhance students' creativity. Due to institutionalized racism that has existed in our country since its beginning, it is a sad fact that low-income areas are where many people of color live and fewer whites live (Bullard 446). It automatically follows that people of color are more affected by the lack of creative classes as well as other programs their schools are denied.

While individual teachers at Manzanita can decide to implement creative writing into their curriculum, they do not have extra funding to receive guidance from a professional writer. They also have to focus on the children getting higher scores on the state tests in order to receive more funding. It is for these reasons that most of the students at Manzanita will have less opportunities to be exposed to arts, will be more likely to get involved in negative activities, will have less of a chance at getting higher scores on the state tests, and will not be given as many chances to speak for themselves and their community.

Even Children Have Dragons

For G. We all miss you.

From the very beginning, your story was a poem,

*If you give a Dragon
a glass of water,
If you give a Dragon
a glass of water,
He'll cry out fire.
He'll want to blow
fire at you,
but he will blow
steam at you.*

I never thought about it until
you didn't come back, until your
mother took you to a safer place

away from the father who used his fists.

I never thought you would know a
real dragon, I just believed that you
had an imagination that would fill
Lake Superior, that your dragon
would eventually be slain.

I never thought that the reason you pulled
the wings from ladybugs was
to keep them safe in your hand.



H.

A little brown face looks up at me

Her eyebrows pushed together

I'm sorry we made you sad, Miss Erin.

She is one of the few children

who tried to listen today,

did not run around the classroom,

write ASS on the blackboard,

giggle when I scolded.

She is sorry for something she did not do.

I wonder as she bends to help me clean

up the plastic straw covers, empty juice boxes,

crushed pretzels in the carpet, tries to lift a chair

onto a desk only inches shorter than she,

I wonder at a child who told me,

I didn't get to eat today
when I handed her an apple, then said
this is so yummy as she bit into its green skin.
I pick up ten other apples, uneaten,
remember the other day,
she wouldn't throw away a granola bar
that had dropped on the ground,
sand covered its edges, but she held it
in both hands, savoring its rough
oatmeal touch, as other children threw theirs
to the ground, crushing them under shoes.

History of Inequality in Schools



There is a reason why schools like Manzanita are given less, and there is a reason why low-income neighborhoods are where more people of color live and less white people live. These inequities have been built into our government, into our communities, and into our schools since Columbus first landed on this continent in the year 1492. He viewed the Native tribes as lesser than he, and he automatically started bringing them into slavery, “Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold” (Zinn 4). Years later in 1776, the people who were starting a government and setting up laws were white men, many of whom were rich and owned slaves. The laws they made were biased, and many laws that were made after them continued to be biased towards people of color, white women, and the poor (Zinn, 74).

What does this have to do with how our communities are set up today? Because of biases and inequities written into law, affluent white men have always had more power than anyone else in this country. When our public school system was set up in the United States, it was based on schooling practices of White Anglo Saxon Protestants. This was only one culture among many, and yet early political leaders felt the ideal country would be one that was based on one set of traditions, culture and language (Larson and Ovando 8). Because of this belief, educators felt they were aiding other cultures by trying to “assimilate ethnic and racial communities into White Anglo Saxon Protestant norms” (ibid 9). This practice has succeeded in that many people today do not know much about the culture their grandparents or great-grandparents were born into.

Assimilating other cultures to the dominant white norm is only a part of the societal model that has been set in our country. Even with trying to create this type of “melting pot,” people were not and still are not given equal chances. The reason why most low-income schools in California are also where many children of color attend is because of a long history in what George Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness” (62). People were racially categorized not to preserve all cultures, but rather to preserve the white culture. If differences could be named, then they could be written into laws. This is essentially how California, known as a culturally diverse state, has become so segregated. Lipsitz gives an example of how people of color were excluded from certain neighborhoods,

The Federal Housing Act of 1934 brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens... but overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Agency’s (FHA) “confidential” city surveys and appraisers’ manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color... By

channeling loans away from older inner-city neighborhoods and toward white home buyers... the FHA and private lenders... aided and abetted segregation in U.S. residential neighborhoods (64).

Because of this Federal Housing Act as well as other laws and practices, children are not being given equal opportunities in the classroom.

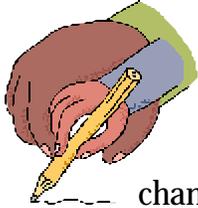
If I hadn't

*For the African American woman
who asked if her other daughter
could join the class late*

If I hadn't been standing outside,
four bags – full of pencils, writing pads, markers,
green apples, juice boxes – surrounding my legs,
waiting for the principal to show us our room,
if five children hadn't come up to me,
interrupted our conversation with,
What are we doing today, Miss Erin?
Can I have a juice now?
What are those things in the bags for?
Do I have to wear a nametag?
Can I be in your group please?
If I hadn't been worrying that we might
not have a classroom that day,
if I hadn't forgotten to introduce myself,
shake your hand, look you in the eye,
if I hadn't been white, and
you hadn't been black,
would you still have walked away that day,
humphed through your nose,
muttered under your breath,

would the history of our skin colors
still have kept us from becoming friends?

The Creative Writing Class at Manzanita



Going to Manzanita Elementary knowing why the children were not being given the same opportunities as the children at Robert Down, I had several idealistic goals set for myself. I went there hoping that I could make a change for the better in the children's lives by giving them a chance to write creatively. I knew that this was going to be a challenge especially because it was my first time teaching, but I was not prepared for how difficult the process was going to be. None of the books on teaching poetry and creative writing that I read beforehand and during my time at Manzanita were much help in teaching me about different cultures and different writing styles. The books could not prepare me for a few students who came to the class expecting it to be a cursive writing class and when they realized it was not, they were so disappointed that they refused to write in their journals. I was not prepared for children who could not sit still for one minute, who had great stories to tell but were not able to concentrate long enough to write down their thoughts. My lesson plans did not reflect time spent trying to find a classroom for the children each week.

The biggest surprise that I faced was realizing that even though I went to Manzanita believing that I had some understanding of what these children went through, I came to realize that I went there with more assumptions and biases than facts. I assumed that the children who chose to take the class would all have an interest in creative writing. I assumed that each child would be able to write a story or poem. I assumed that

each child would connect with the stories I brought to read. I assumed that the children would want to share stories about their own lives, and to talk about their feelings. I found out that not all of these things were true. I realized that when I bought books to read to the children, I didn't buy any that would reflect the heritage of the African American, Asian American or East Indian children. I realized that some adults do not even understand the emotions that they themselves are feeling, so how are seven-year-olds supposed to explain their feelings when they don't have the words to use?

The more class sessions that went by, the more I began to accept that not all of my goals were going to be achieved. Not all of the children left the class with a story of their own, but I let myself accept that they all at least had a group story to take home. I did not connect with all the children, but it felt good to get hugs from those I least expected. There was not enough time for the children to go through an editing process, but perhaps now they will not be as afraid of writing as they might have been. Most of their stories did not give voice to their life challenges, but hopefully they will realize that they have a voice to use in the future. I could not change the fact that these children still do not have the same resources as children at other schools, but I believe that this experience will give me guidance to making changes in the future.

What is an Emotion?

*For my father, who helped me
see the humor in this situation*

I stand in front of twenty children
ages seven and eight, but I only
see dragons ten mountains tall,
teeth red with blood, long as houses,

feet covered with silver scales,
tongues of firebombs. My stomach
is kneaded dough. The dragons' eyes
stare at me, I know I must speak.

What is an emotion?

The dragons' heads tilt,
one raises his left wing slowly,

Like when you move?

The dragons get smaller.
They look up at me from desks
only two and a half feet tall,
silver caps on their teeth, shoelaces
untied, voices like crickets.

Um... no, that's motion.

*E-motions are like feelings. Who can give
me an example of a feeling?*

Ten hands raise, ticking back and forth
at the highest speed of a metronome.

I pick a boy who sits by himself,
his mouth opens in an "O." *Um,*
a feeling is...I feel tired?

The other children yell, *I know, I know!*

I stand at the blackboard,
the chalk between my fingers like
twenty horses dragging my hands.

I try to write. I want to say,
an emotion is like an animal that lives inside us,
when we are hugged, we feel like kittens
with their mother. When our sister takes
our toys we feel like roaring lions.

*When our friends ignore us, we feel like
puppies in a cage, but instead I
find the words are bigger dragons,
their breaths of fire drown my pleas.*

Journal Entry March 11, 2002



“Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong,” a teacher once said to me. “You’ll just end up getting hurt.” My mind flashes back to this teacher as I sit across from an eight-year-old girl who refuses to write.

The table between us is a mile wide as I try to communicate with her. She reminds me of a tiny supermodel; her hair is newly braided, her jean jacket crisp and stylish. Six class sessions have gone by and A. has not written a single word in her writing book.

I wonder what I have or have not done to keep A. from writing. Perhaps I do not know enough about her African American heritage to connect with her. I realize the books that I’ve read to the children are full of Spanish words, Mexican culture. I did not buy any books that A. would feel a part of. Can I fix this mistake? I had hoped that working with her one-on-one would help her to open up to me and show her that I care, but here she is staring at me, not answering my questions. A. probably knows more about me than I do about her. She can see my faults, my white skin, is hurt that I always mispronounce her name. Why should she respond to my little efforts?

“Would you like it better if you tell your story to me out loud and I write it down for you?” I ask, grabbing a pencil.

Finally, she nods. I smile and look at her “Planning My Story” sheet that I had created for all the children, hoping to help them get their story started. Under the question, “Are there any other characters in my story?” A. had written “no” with about thirty “o’s” written after the “n.”

“I see there aren’t any other characters that are going to be in your story.” I point to the long trail of “o’s” and laugh. A. smiles. With her right pointer finger she trails the “o’s” sounding them out loud. “Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.” It reminds me of one long ring of a large bell.

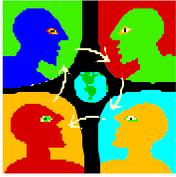
Three other children come towards A. and me, wanting my attention. One wants to know how to spell “return,” another wonders why the girl in her group story has a different name than the girl in her individual story, and the third child hands me his “book” without any illustration and says, “I’m done.” As I try to speak to each one, I can feel A. in front of me withdrawing again. When I turn back to her, she is coloring on the white board.

I begin to doubt myself again. Maybe I’m not a very good teacher. Maybe what I thought was important isn’t always what’s most important. I wanted to show these children the wonder of words. I wanted to let them know that they could write about anything, that their imaginations are a good thing. Maybe before I can show children the joys and importance of writing, they have to know that they are important to me.

Conclusion

Although creative writing and arts is only one area where inequity is depicted in schools, it is an important aspect of a child’s growth and an example that helps us realize

why these inequities are occurring. Understanding why things are occurring is one of the



first steps in knowing how to make our school systems more equitable.

One of the largest obstacles in making positive changes in our school

systems is that inequities are too often accepted and not many people

realize what is happening around them. Larson and Ovando, in their book, The Color of

Bureaucracy: The Politics of Equity in Multicultural School Communities write,

White educators, in particular, are often not awake to many of the disparities existing in our society, much less in our schools. Because we have lived with inequitable systems for so long, we have come to see the inequalities they create as evidence of some natural social order (2).

It is hard to see something happening when it is not happening to us, which is why it is easy to ignore that some children are not being given equal opportunities.

What can we do to try to change the politics and laws that keep children from having a fair chance? We can create non-profit programs that bring to children tools they might not otherwise have access to, but in doing so, we cannot forget to look at the start of the problem before trying to help. We need to educate the educators, help all people understand what is behind the inequities and understand that they can work to change them. If principals and teachers listen to the parents, the people in the community, and are open to multicultural and multiethnic ways of being, then they can help to make the schools where they work to teach all truths. Most importantly, based on my own research and experience, once children are given chances to speak for themselves, they show us that they are strong and capable of surviving the situations life puts them in. Children have ideas that can change the world, understand life in ways we have forgotten. Let us listen to them.

I Hear Poems in Their Lives

I listen to all the rumors, the hanging
facts of the children's lives, and I see
a young boy leaning over a piece of paper,
writing about fighting Pokémon characters,
not mentioning that his father used the belt
on him again last night.

I see two sisters who were born minutes apart,
J. is three feet tall and weighs 30 pounds,
J.A. is four foot five and weighs 120 pounds.
They do not sit next to each other,
say *this is my sister* or hold hands.
Their other sister has a different last name,
a different father. She lies to me, tells me
I didn't get a snack, so she can bring one home.
I don't ask her why, hand her the bag.

I see a boy laying his head on a desk
covering his story with his deep breaths.
If I ask him why he's falling asleep, he might say,
I was up playing video games all night.
No one tucked him in,
made sure his teeth were brushed,
saw that he had eight hours of sleep.

I see eight children who do not know
their mothers or fathers, they have
a parent or two in prison,

they are raised by older sisters, brothers,
or sick grandparents.

I see these things and know
that poems are in these children.

I hear their pencils moving like windmills on water
sending ripples to edges of fields,
learning to fight their dragons every day.

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APPENDIX

Capstone Prospectus

Section One: Description of topic

Working Title of Capstone Project: Creative Injustice: The Lack of Creative Writing in Low-Income and High-Minority Schools

The topic for my capstone project is the lack of creative classes, especially creative writing, being offered at schools in California that are high-minority and schools that are located in low-income areas. The main question I want to answer is how can we bring more creative classes to schools that cannot or do not otherwise provide them? I believe that given creative outlets, children will do better not only academically, but also socially at school and at home. The problem is that because much of the money given to schools is based on the taxes people pay on their homes, schools located in lower-income neighborhoods, where less people can afford to own their homes, are not given enough funds to support many classes and programs that will enhance students' creativity. Due to institutionalized racism that has existed in our country since its beginning, it is a sad fact that low-income areas are where many people of color live and fewer whites live. It automatically follows that people of color are more affected by the lack of creative classes as well as other programs their schools are denied.

Although my large focus is California, I decided to look at schools in Monterey County that portray institutionalized racism and privilege in order to use them as an example. I visited Robert Down Elementary in Pacific Grove and interviewed a second grade teacher, Judy Wills, who has established creative writing in her classroom as a way to teach her children not only how to use their ideas creatively, but also to teach them cursive, spelling and other mechanical skills. Judy Wills, as well as a few other teachers at Robert Down, learned how to teach creative writing through a local poet, Patrice Vecchione. They were able to pay her via funds from the state for the children's high test scores, as well as other types of funding from the community. Because Pacific Grove is a high-income area and 85 percent of the children at Robert Down are white, they are given more privileges such as money from the state to be able to afford a large arts program (Education Data Partnership Home Page).

After visiting Robert Down and realizing how privileged it was, I automatically wondered whether elementary schools in lower-income and higher-minority areas were able to provide their children with such an advanced arts program. Manzanita Elementary in Seaside is located in a low-income area and 94 percent of the children are considered minorities, with the majority of them being African American (Education Data Partnership Home Page). While individual teachers can decide whether they want to implement creative writing into their curriculum, they do not have extra funding to receive guidance from a professional writer. They also have to focus on the children getting higher scores on the state tests in order to receive funding. With help from Banner House, a budding non-profit program, I have decided to teach creative writing, using the Robert Down technique, to a small group of second graders from Manzanita. The purpose for this is to provide the children with something they might not otherwise have, as well as to show that their writing skills can improve through creative work.

This topic is important to me because I grew up and attended high school in a low-income neighborhood. There were no creative writing classes offered at my high school and it was not until I started attending college that I realized I could use my writing, beyond book reports and other essays, to help create social change. As a white woman who grew up poor, I have been able to see some forms of institutionalized oppression being played out in my own life. I have taken this experience as a learning opportunity and have been able, I believe, to see beyond my life and realize how many people's lives are affected by the institutional and personal "Possessive Investment in Whiteness" as George Lipsitz calls it (61), that is ingrained in our society.

Section Two: Major learning Outcomes and Criteria

I am planning on using MLO 2, "Research Skills," in order to find background information and facts to back up the points I want to make in my capstone project. This is a necessary step because in order to know what I'm talking about, I need to know as much information out there on my topic as I can find.

Another major MLO that I believe is necessary for my capstone project to be successful is MLO 7, "Historical Analysis." This MLO is important because I need to

incorporate historical facts on why our political system is set up the way it is today and how people's lives have been affected by this set-up in order to understand why there is such a problem in our schools today.

I am also using MLO 8, "Creative Writing and Social Action," because it is the main theme throughout my topic. I plan on using my learned skills from this MLO to teach creative writing to the children at Manzanita Elementary. I also plan to incorporate their creative work, and perhaps some of my own, into my Capstone paper.

Section Three: Research Questions

1. What is some of the history behind the demographics of schools in California today?
2. How are race and class interconnected in the web of oppression and inequality?
3. What is some of the history of creative writing in the schools?
4. How does creative writing enhance the learning skills of children?
5. What are some of the reasons why creative writing and other arts are put at the bottom of the list of important curriculum at many schools in California?
6. In Monterey County, what are some of the main low-income areas and high-minority and schools, and, within those schools, who attends them and what programs are offered?
7. In Monterey County, what are some of the main high-income areas and schools and within those schools, who attends them and what programs are offered?
8. In those schools with less funds, what are some of the test scores, academic successes, and amount of college-bound students in comparison to students attending schools with more allocated funds?
9. How does the tax system work to provide funds for schools?
10. How can we provide creative writing and other arts to children without as many privileges?

Section Four: Working Bibliography

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Section Five: Research Plan

I have already done some preliminary research on statistical and demographic information regarding schools in California and Monterey County. I also have a little information about where school funds come from. The librarian helped me plan where I

can find more information regarding how creative writing and arts positively affect children's learning processes as well as how race and class inequalities are played out in schools. I have found a couple of books and have ordered a few journal articles from the online database ERIC, an educational resource. I am planning to look at the educational web links provided by the library. I am also planning to interview the principals and some of the teachers of Manzanita Elementary and Robert Down Elementary.

Section Six: Form of Capstone Project

I plan on the bulk of my project being based as a research paper, but with incorporation of creative writing since my concentration is creative writing and social action. I have an image of passages from poems or short stories (both my writing and others) as openings to chapters. I also plan to use Robert Down Elementary and Manzanita Elementary as case studies.

Sample Materials Used at Manzanita Elementary

Description Charades

These following pictures are examples of cards I created for a description game. One child at a time was given a card and they were supposed to describe what was on it for the rest of the class without saying what it was. They could give simple descriptions, but we encouraged them to use descriptions like “It’s as big as _____,” or “It smells like _____.” The rest of the class had to guess what was on the card. The purpose of this game is to get the children to become more familiar with similes and using description in their writing.



A Mad Lib that my supervisor, Kristin, and I created for group stories. The children were split up into three groups, about seven children for each group leader. In order to keep it fair, each child took turns at providing an answer for the blanks. The purpose of this activity was to give the children ideas for their own story. Then each group leader read their group's story to the whole class. I typed them up and included them in the children's final books.

(Name of story, chosen when finished)

**Step 1. Choose names for two main characters: Person _____
Elephant _____**

Step 2. Explain that you'll be asking the children questions, and you'll use the answers to create a story. Follow the cues below.

Beginning

Read the first part of the sentence and ask "how big is an elephant? As big as a what?"

-Yesterday, (character name) was walking to the library when a pink elephant as big as a _____ stepped on his/her right big toe.

What do you think the elephant said when he stepped on _____'s toe?

Let's describe an elephant's trunk. It's as long as a WHAT?

-“_____,” said the pink elephant, scratching his head with his pink trunk as long as a _____.

What is something nice _____ could say to the elephant now?

Name a part of an elephant.

-“_____” said (character name), reaching to pet the pink elephant's _____.

-Then (character name) and the pink elephant, (name), became friends.

Middle

-(Character name) and the pink elephant decided to walk to the library together.

What is the name of one of your favorite books?

-“I'm going to check out (name of book),” said (character name). How about you,

(name of elephant)?”

Let's think of something an elephant would like. What kind of book would he check out?

-“Well,” said the elephant, “I like _____, so I think I’ll check out a book about _____.”

We're going to describe steps now. Steps can be as high as WHAT?

-They reached the front steps of the library which were as high as _____.

What is a good name for a librarian in this story?

-(Character name) and (elephant name) were climbing up the steps when Mrs./Mr. _____ the librarian ran outside.

-“No elephants in the library!” she/he scolded, waving her/his glasses in the air.

Ending

We're going to describe the elephant's face when he is sad. We're going to say that his face hangs down. So... his face hangs down like what? What is something that hangs down?

Now we have to think of a place or thing that an elephant would go home to see.

-The pink elephant's face hung down like a _____ (examples in case they get stuck: willow tree, wet sock). “Oh well,” he said, “I guess I’ll just go home to my _____.”

What is another part of an elephant?

What would (character's name) want the elephant to do?

-“No, (elephant's name),” cried (character name), hugging the pink elephant's _____. “I want you to _____.”

-So (character name) and the pink elephant decided to _____ (can be something long or short).

Now we're going to describe how happy they are. They were as happy as...

-They were as happy as _____ and (character's name) and the pink elephant (name) were friends forever.

Planning My Story. This is an outline I created for the children to fill out in order for them to think more about their story before they wrote it.

Planning My Story

My name is _____

My Character is a _____

My Character's name is _____

The color of my Character's hair is _____

My Character is wearing _____

My Character likes to _____

Does my story take place a long time ago, or does it take place today?

Are there other Characters in my story? _____

When my story starts, my character is at _____

What happens to my Character or Characters? _____

Pages for the Children's Stories

Title

Written and Illustrated By

