

## Youth-Led and Youth-Centered Writing: A Practice of Healing

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### Preface - Our Why

As people of color, we found it difficult to obtain agency and express ourselves in our schooling experiences. As students, we were either taught one specific way or our opinions and perspectives were not validated in the classroom. As an African American girl, Tiffani oftentimes did not see a reflection of herself in fairytale stories. Many times the voices of Black girls are silenced due to the stereotypes of Black girls not being seen as humans. Based on her experiences, Tiffani believes students of color need their perspectives embedded in their learning to create a space of healing. Chris, an African American man, grew up in a predominantly white middle class suburb where he was forced to connect with the culture and perspectives of his white peers over his own. Esmeralda, the daughter of Mexican immigrants and raised in a Spanish-speaking home, was seldom given learning opportunities in the classroom to draw from her cultural and linguistic knowledge and experiences. In college, when these opportunities were presented, Esmeralda explored her identity as Mexican-American and cultivated a deeper understanding of her background. These collective schooling experiences demonstrate the need for youth-led and youth-centered writing practices for underrepresented students.

As educators, we want to focus on a strategy that provides that agency that we missed as students, as well as honor the perspectives of all students. Youth-centered writing has the power to bring students' experiences to the forefront. This pedagogical practice can be adapted by PreK through 12th grade classroom teachers. It outlines the importance of youth-led and youth-centered writing in the classroom. Through the intentional incorporation of such writing, students are given the opportunity to engage in critical thinking and action, and claim and explore their identities as writers. Youth-led and youth-centered writing can also serve as tools for social transformation and action in the classroom and beyond. Guided by theory, we present the need for youth-led and youth-centered writing and provide a diverse list of prompts that can be used in the classroom for students to begin writing, either individually or collaboratively (see Appendix A).

### Introduction

Oftentimes, teachers teach literacy and writing from their own voice or lens, which is often a product of the ways they were raised and taught, and their experiences. This can create a disconnect between the students and teacher because students' shared and lived experiences (schema) are not the same. Students may come from different backgrounds and grow up in different contexts (environment, time period, background) than the teacher. This can be problematic when teachers come from privileged backgrounds and are teaching students in disadvantaged schools and communities.

Teachers can create a disconnect in the classroom, whether directly or indirectly, by incorporating specific classroom activities and teaching that students' voices and perspectives do not matter. Oftentimes, students in disadvantaged areas and students of color are taught and learn from a perspective that is different from their reality. As a result, students who do not believe their voice or perspectives matter can disengage from their work and from the class. As educators, we have heard (and may even say), "This is important! You will need this later in life!" while neglecting the lives that students are living right now.

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## Transparency for Transformation

The pedagogical practice we present requires teachers to be transparent about their own identities as individuals and educators, and their teaching practices. Through transparency, teachers explore how their own positionality informs their teaching and interactions with students. Similarly, teachers must take the initiative to learn about and understand students' races, cultures, languages, and communities. Only when this occurs can teachers encourage students to think critically about their own lives and implement meaningful writing activities for students to reflect on and express their personal experiences.

The idea of transparency is reflected in Garcia and O'Donnell-Allen's (2015) *Pose, Wobble, Flow*, which provides a pedagogical model for teaching English Language Arts in ways that are culturally proactive and responsive. Garcia and O'Donnell-Allen highlight the importance of a teacher's commitment to their students as well as to social transformation. "Everyone is part of the system, and we all have to push back against it if we are going to transform it," they state, reminding teachers of this responsibility (p. 20). They urge teachers to reflect on their identities, recognize how racist and oppressive practices impact them and their students, and what they can do to dismantle these practices alongside students. With transparency, teachers can employ an informed teaching stance that stems from both their realities and the realities of their students.

By collecting, creating, and disseminating counterstories through youth-led and youth-centered writing, teachers can learn from and uncover valuable knowledge about students who are often seen as threatening, arrogant, disdainful of authority, or uncontrollable. Youth-centered and youth-led writing puts students' lives at the center and encourages them to think critically about their lives, the world, and how they intersect. Simultaneously, the more youth-led writing activities teachers design to embrace and reflect students' identities, then the more likely students will be active participants in their writing and transform their understanding of themselves and the world.

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## Youth-Led & Youth-Centered Writing

Youth-centered writing is a practice designed to place value back on students and their stories, and promote healing and social transformation. This practice includes prompts designed for students to write from their point of view and provide their personal perspective. It aims to help

students see themselves as writers by valuing their stories. It removes the racist and biased teaching practices that exist in many classrooms as well as give voice back to the marginalized students and the students who do not see themselves as writers. Haddix (2018) writes that youth-led and youth-centered writing is a practice that validates students' personal experiences while leveraging their writing practices that they already engage in (p. 8).

Youth-led and youth-centered writing aligns with cognitive constructivist theory in its emphasis on students' cognitive processes as they bring their own experiences and understandings of the world to bear on texts. Students' learning is built on what they already know and have learned to support them as they grow as learners and writers. Through these writing opportunities, students are able to develop and strengthen their skills, and apply the necessary skills to their individual needs and interests. Students' learning is actively based on what they already know and have learned. Youth-centered writing honors and embraces their funds of knowledge and focuses on building on students' schemata or personal experiences. As a result, students are enabled to consider the types of writing they want to engage in and the types of writers they want to become.

With this practice, teachers have an opportunity to bridge community literacy practices with school expectations. "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" (Haddix, 2018, p. 10). Youth-led and youth-centered writing is a practice that transcends ethnicity, religion, region, race, culture, social class, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. This practice can be implemented and practiced in all grade levels and in all content areas, and there are many ways teachers can incorporate youth-led and youth-centered writing into their daily practices. Some examples of implementation include supporting students in responding to events that have occurred in or outside the classroom, engaging and connecting content with their experiences, or reflecting on their own lived experiences.

It is not enough however, to just provide students with the opportunity to engage with these practices to only check off a box or to appease administrators. Youth-led and youth-centered writing needs to become a common practice that is embedded constantly in the classroom. There are two components that need to be commonplace when implement-

ing this practice. Teachers must: hold time and space—whether in classrooms, community centers, or virtually—to support youth literacies listen to and place value on the perspectives of youth writers (Haddix, 2018, p. 10).

In accomplishing these components, teachers must first show that they themselves are writers and therefore, must also model the practice for students. Secondly, teachers must honor and respect youth-led and youth-centered writing practices. This includes being open to hear students' voices, even if they differ from the teacher's. Lastly, all of these components need to be done with the protection of a safe environment. A safe classroom environment honors students' own perspectives and biases as well as allows them to express themselves without worry, punishment, condemnation, or disrespect.

In order to create and navigate these writing spaces for and with students, teachers must examine and tackle the “why” and “how” of their work. Teachers can ask themselves, “Why should I incorporate youth-led and youth-centered writing practices into my class, and how?” Undoubtedly, students should be at the forefront of these teaching practices and decisions. In addition to recognizing the challenges that exist and impact students across different spaces, teachers must be proactive in addressing them.

Youth-led and youth-centered writing is informed by critical race theory. Critical race theory explores how both privilege and power function within a culture and society, and in turn, impact the lived experiences and realities of all racial, social, and cultural groups. Not only is this theory grounded in questioning white, male, and heteronormative ways of knowing, but it also calls for understanding how different

are diverse and applicable to all students, but most importantly, they are culturally relevant. They encourage students to consider the intersections between their identities and the world around them, and examine and challenge social and systemic structures. Through the following prompts, teachers and students alike recognize the value that each individual's story presents.

Handsfield & Palinscar (2016) highlight the theory's attempt to identify and dismantle “color blind” ideologies, and in this case, teaching practices and writing. “The value placed on the voices and realities of those who have been marginalized also relates to CRT's critique of color blindness, which erases the voices of people of color under a false pretense of assumed sameness” (p. 95). Youth-led and youth-centered writing intends to demonstrate the contrary and exemplify the ways in which students, particularly students of color, do not stand under an umbrella of shared experiences. They each have a unique narrative to write about and share, despite similarities across race, culture, and language.

As students create works of writing based on their lives and experiences, they are dismantling the false veil of color-blindness and reclaiming their voice and agency in their narratives (Handsfield & Palinscar, 2016, p. 95). They also begin to associate themselves with writing and embrace their work, primarily because it is presented to them in a culturally relevant manner. Students develop their identities as writers within their classrooms and communities, and as intended, they come to realize that we all write. Not only can youth-led and youth-centered writing provide opportunities for social transformation, but it can also provide opportunities for healing.

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people construct unique understandings of “truths” in response to the world around them (Handsfield & Palinscar, 2016, p. 92). Through youth-led and youth-centered writing, teachers and students alike inspect the intersections between their identities and their work.

Incorporating youth-led and youth-centered writing in the classroom allows students to claim and share their narratives, especially those that are not privileged or dominant within society. As Handsfield & Palinscar (2016) state, “Critical race theorists question how and why some stories, or ideologies, become dominant and assumed to be coherent. In addition, this prompts those informed by CRT to place a high value on stories, in particular those told by people who have been marginalized” (p. 95). The writing prompts we provide

### **Writing to Heal & Transform**

Youth-centered writing is a healing practice, and the healing journey for young writers begins when they examine and understand their identities and positionalities in the classroom and beyond. Students can begin by transforming their experiences into action and expressing how they feel through their writing. In writing about their culture and personal journeys, students will also explore and confront aspects of their identity and experiences that may generally be overlooked or silenced. This contributes to students' healing, as they embark on their journey of creating and finding themselves.

When educators implement lessons that focus on students' experiences and cultural relevance, students will

have the opportunity to heal. Sociocultural-historical theory opens doors for students to write about their experiences and helps other individuals understand the importance of diversity in writing. Educators should include writing that relates to cultural and historical activities. When teachers provide a culturally inclusive classroom, students will see themselves represented in a more positive light rather than negative.

The healing process is important in youth-led and youth-centered writing because it builds connections across communities and stems from supportive environments. This collective component of healing is important because the healing process may open up the doors to uncomfortable conversations about issues such as racism, criminalization, and oppression in different spaces. While the writing is centered on the individual student, the healing process can begin at the intrapersonal level but extend beyond.

Healing in youth-led youth-centered writing is important because it acknowledges the wounds that students are facing each and every day. Teachers can provide healing to students by embedding students' voices in spaces that are creative and safe for every student. Healing continues when schools provide a curriculum that uses a wide array of texts and incorporates writing activities that relates to students' backgrounds. The final step in the healing process is to transform students' wounds through their writing and action. Students can transform themselves by telling their own stories through youth-led and youth-centered writing.

### Conclusion

Teachers, administrators, and parents may read about this practice and provide pushback on how this is positioning teachers. They may ask, "Where is the focus on grammar?" as well as, "How will this improve students' grammar?" The ideas of youth-led and youth-centered writing are stressed by Haddix (2018), who argues, "Students must have opportunities to write in multiple ways, for multiple purposes, and in multiple genres (p. 11)." It is through the practice of writing in multiple ways and for multiple purposes that teachers can focus on grammatical rules and sentence structure. As students write about their experiences, teachers will be able to teach grammar in a way the student can understand.

Youth-led and youth-centered writing opportunities must be available to all students and engage them in critical thinking and action. Through these opportunities, students can claim and explore their identities as writers, partake in social transformation, and set forth on a journey of healing. To incorporate these writing opportunities, it is fundamental for teachers to create and incorporate culturally inclusive material. This is key for students to embrace their identities and experiences, and examine and expose systems of oppression. Just as the classroom serves as a community in which they

participate, teachers and students also form part of larger networks and systems. For these reasons, and in the name of collective healing, transparency in the classroom is fundamental. When students' identities and experiences are acknowledged, valued, and respected, that is when the healing process can begin.

### References

- Garcia, A., & O'Donnell-Allen, C. (2015). *Pose, wobble, flow: A culturally proactive approach to literacy instruction*. Teachers College Press.
- Handsfield, L. J., & Palincsar, A. S. (2016). *Literacy theory as practice: Connecting theory and instruction in K-12 classrooms*. Teachers College Press.
- Haddix, M. M. (2018). What's Radical about Youth Writing?: Seeing and Honoring Youth Writers and Their Literacies. *Voices from the Middle*, 25 (3), 8-12.

## Appendix A

### General Introductory Prompts

These prompts can be used to create a classroom culture of transparency as well as provide opportunities for students and teachers to understand each other.

**Implementation & Goal(s):** Since the prompts are applicable to various contexts, they can be implemented for different purposes and at various points of the year, such as the beginning of the school year or a unit. They can be used to prepare students for a particular lesson, establish and cultivate a classroom community, and encourage teachers and students to learn about everyone's experiences and perspectives.

- Based on your experiences, do you think school is important? Explain why you feel this way.
- Do you consider yourself a writer? Why or why not? Who would you define as a writer?
- Do you think it is harder to be a kid now than it was 50 years ago? Explain why you feel this way.
- Name a time something or someone made you feel really happy or excited. What made you feel this way? What made this experience special? Explain.
- Name a time something or someone made you feel really mad or angry. What made you feel this way? How did you react? Explain.
- Based on your experiences, describe the physical and figurative spaces in which you have felt seen, valued, and respected. What did the space look like? Who was present?

### Racially/Culturally Specific Prompts

These prompts can be used to explore students' ideas of race and culture in the classroom. These questions are by no means a stopping point, but they are designed to promote students' voices in the classroom and create a culture of transparency.

**Implementation & Goal(s):** Since these prompts may require more complex and thoughtful responses, teachers and students can dedicate generous class time to them. The prompts can be used and answered in conjunction with a text, a film, or a historical event. The goals are for students to identify their positionality within our society and examine and discuss race, gender, and power dynamics in the United States and around the world.

- Based on your experiences, do you believe that racism can be eliminated?
- Why do you think there is poverty in this country? Explain your thoughts.
- Based on your experiences, do you think schools treat girls of color unfairly?
- Based on your experiences, why do you think Black and Brown students are more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts?
- Have you ever wondered why minority students' stories are not generally embedded in school literature?

### Current Event Prompts

Events are always unfolding and writing activities should reflect these changes. These prompts are not only designed to continually promote a culture of transparency but to incorporate events that happen daily and have students respond.

**Implementation & Goal(s):** These prompts can be used with and adapted to any current events. Teachers can implement these prompts to discuss and debrief with students on what is occurring in the country or the world. The goal is for students to write about the event—their thoughts, opinions, feelings, experiences—as they are unfolding in real time. The prompts are meant to encourage students to identify and process what is occurring and how they are responding to it.

- Based on your experiences, do you think police do more good than bad? Explain your thoughts.
- Based on your experiences, what has been the hardest part about the year 2020?
- Do you believe there should be a law in place that forces people to wear a mask in the COVID-19 pandemic? Explain why or why not.
- What was your first thought when Donald Trump was elected President in 2016? Why did you feel that way?
- What was your first thought when Joe Biden was elected President in 2020? Why did you feel that way?

### Content Specific Prompts

These prompts are designed to get teachers to think of ways to engage students in their content area. The prompts are student-centered and should allow students to voice their opinions and experiences. These questions may lead to greater social issues in education and are designed to reveal students' thoughts and emotions in their responses.

**Implementation & Goal(s):** These prompts can be implemented across different content areas and can be modified to the classroom context and students' grade level. The goal is for students to articulate and share their stance on these topics. Teachers can implement these goals to gauge students' stances and complement learning materials.

- Do you think reading is fun? What is your favorite book?
- Based on your thoughts, will learning algebra help you in your future?
- Based on your thoughts, is it "cool" to be good at math? Explain why or why not.
- Based on your thoughts, should physical education be removed from schools? Explain why you feel this way.
- Based on your thoughts, will science help save our environment? Explain why you feel this way.
- Based on your thoughts, does United States history focus on people of color? Explain why or why not.