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Teaching Writing in an Urban Setting

The meaning of the phrase “urban education” isn’t always clear to everyone. One may wonder “what makes urban education different than any other type of education?” or “What makes a school an urban school?” According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban schools are typically classified as schools located in the cities. NCES categorizes schools into four categories based on their population, size, density and location in relationship to a city. This classification system is known to be an ‘urban centric’ classification system (“Urban Schools”). There are four categories that the NCES uses to classify schools, they are: city, suburb, town and rural. Urban schools (that typically are classified under the ‘city’ category) “are then broken down into three subcategories based on the Census Bureau’s definitions of urbanicity: Large: Inside an urbanized area and principal city with a population of 250,000 or more. Midsize: Inside an urbanized area and principal city with a population of 250,000 or less. Small: Inside an urbanized area and principal city with a population of less than 100,000” (“Urban Schools”). Basically, urban schools are located within large cities or close to largely populated cities (“Urban Schools”).

In addition to the technicalities that make up an urban school, there are many statistics that describe the environment and population of urban school. It was found by the NCES that urban students are twice as likely to be living in poverty than suburban students (“Urban Schools”). Urban schools also typically tend to receive less funding than suburban schools since school funding in America is based on the property taxes (“Savage Inequalities”). Urban schools are typically populated by students of minority populations such as Latino and African American backgrounds. Many of these schools that are located in these urban cities are extremely segregated. According to Jonatahan Kozol’s (2005) report “Still Separate, Still Unequal: American’s Education Apartheid,” it was found that much of the enrollment in these schools located in cities such as New York, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland etc. were densely populated with black or Hispanic students (less than 10 percent of the population is white). This basically means that many of these schools are segregated by race. Although this segregation may not be considered intentional, it is still evident and occurring due to where students and their families live. Many of these schools suffer from bad conditions and a lack of resources as well. Since funding is lower at many of these urban schools, rough building conditions, supplies, and resources is common amongst urban education.

Many wonder why students in these urban schools tend to perform at lower levels than the rest of the students in America. Is it because of the poverty rates amongst the students? The lack of funding? The segregation? Bad teachers? Bad students? Lack of supplies? The blame can be easily placed against any of these accusations but instead of placing blame, teachers must continue their efforts and work hard to ensure that each and every one of their students are receiving quality education, regardless of if the school is urban or not. Teachers must be able to see that kids are kids regardless of where they live, go to school, their socioeconomic status, race etc. and that they deserve the best education possible. Students deserve more than just training them on how to perform well on standardized tests. Urban students, already being at somewhat of an educational disadvantage with less funding per student at their school, a lack of resources in some cases and higher cases of poverty, they deserve a well rounded education filled with pertinent information to their lives for every subject, including writing.

Teaching writing to students is something that sometimes may get overlooked by some educators working in an urban setting. This negligence of writing begins at an early stage of a student’s education. “Teaching writing in elementary classrooms is particularly difficult in urban schools where the literacy focus is often placed exclusively on reading. Finding ways to squeeze in effective writing instruction, although challenging, is possible for experienced teachers (Dyson, 2003; Manning, 2000). For beginning urban teachers, learning to teach writing is often neglected to prepare children for high-stakes testing and to meet policy requirements” (Pardo 378). With high stakes testing that focuses mainly on math and reading, these beginning elementary teachers are focusing more on reading and math instead of writing or any other subject. The lack of attention given to writing can create wrong impressions for the students about the importance of writing. This can set students behind and disable students from developing a connection to writing.

Urban elementary students not receiving the proper training or exposure to writing becomes even more problematic as their education progresses because “in urban contexts there is a disconnect between students' worlds and the world of school” (Pardo 379). This disconnect does not mean that students are unable to write or learn. Instead, it means that these students do not feel a relation to the traditional methods or standards of education and writing. Urban students naturally have other forms of writing that they practice, typically stemming from their cultural backgrounds that do not usually match the way that writing is traditionally taught in schools. This distinction between traditional writing forms and techniques and these students’ cultural forms is where the disconnect stems from. Students have different values and expectations of what writing is and what writing means to them.

It was found that urban students tend to find writing types such as journaling, diaries, letters etc. more closely related to their culture. “Camitta (1993) uses the term “vernacular writing to describe the literacy practices of urban African American adolescents that ‘conform not to the norms of educational institutions, but to those of social life and culture’ (p.229)” (Mahiri and Sablo 165). Since urban students already have writing skills relating to other forms of writing, it is important for a teacher to know how to channel their skills and interest in order to continue to produce writing. Urban students do have writing skills and are involved in literacy, the only issue is the disconnect between what they know and use along with what state standards expect from students. This disconnect must be overcome in order for students to truly engage and learn writing in the context that school standards expect. This paper will examine various ways to teach urban students how to write while attempting to truly engage them with relevant material.

It is very important for a teacher to understand that “schooled literacy is radically different” from urban students’ “youth’s home literacy, especially for those students who struggle academically for many years.” (Lacina 78). In order for educators to help strengthen writing instruction for students “teachers must provide multiple voices and texts which mirror the multiple literacies of urban youth” (Lacina 78). By doing this, educators will be able to provide various examples and methods of different types of writing, attempting to keep the topics and themes relevant for their students. This will help to connect the home literacies of students to the literacies that they are expected to learn at school. Teachers must find a tunnel to integrate the two literacies.

In order to provide multiple voices and texts that mirror the literacies of the urban youth, teachers must immerse themselves in the urban culture and attempt to understand it, even if it is not a part of their personal culture. In order to do this, teachers must be able to engage with students, understand their interests, their personalities, their background etc. in order to connect with students and understand the literacies of the students. By attempting to understand and converse with students on a more personal level, the teacher will be able to build bonds and trust between themselves and the students. Most of the time, there will be a divide between a student’s and a teacher’s culture. This personal divide between the student and teacher relays into the way that students learn as well.

The cultural differences between some of the students and teachers can truly effect how students learn to write. “At the present time, minorities represent less than 12.5 percent of the nation's teaching force. The majority of prospective teachers are white females, which stands in sharp contrast to the backgrounds of the students they teach (Coballes-Vega, 1992). And the trend is not expected to change. The percentage of high school graduates entering college indicating education as their major field of study is declining. Clearly, Caucasian teachers are and will be teaching students of color” (Laine, Laine and Peavy). Due to this contrast in backgrounds, it was found that “the actions of teachers may diminish participation among minority students and build resentment because their actions are culturally incongruent” (Laine, Laine and Peavy). Although this incongruence is most likely unintentional by the teacher, it still exists. In order to defeat the incongruence, teachers must find ways to connect to urban students through various means. Teachers must show that they actually care and are invested into the students and their education.

In order to extinguish this disconnect and alleviate some of the cultural incongruence, teachers must practice a very common theme in teaching writing to students: educators must be able to truly engage a student in writing while building a bond of trust between the student and themselves. Teachers must attempt to form meaningful relationships with these students in order to relieve disconnect and truly have responsive students. It cannot really be taught how to build trust between teachers and students. Teachers must be able to understand their students and connect with them based upon each student’s individuality and culture, leaving all prejudice and judgment behind. It is okay for a teacher to immerse themselves in a culture they are unfamiliar with. This helps to build trust between the students and teachers and helps to prove that the teacher is not judgmental and open to new ideas of identity and culture. If a student cannot connect with or trust a teacher, it will be more difficult for them to respect the teacher and respond to the teachers teachings.

In addition to creating a connection with students, teaching relevant concepts and lessons are very important for the urban youth. These concepts must be engaging and critically relevant to students’ lives. Relevance is key. Zenkov & Harmon argue how “in our urban setting and in many others around the United States, where high school dropout rates regularly exceed 50% and the majority of adolescents are living in poverty, youths’ criticisms of school and their disengagement from traditional pedagogies suggest a voice in the traditional high school curriculum (which many students perceive as irrelevant to their lives) and a reasonable but often deterministic perspective on school” (Zenkov and Harmon 576). When students do not see that the work they are doing is relevant to their lives, they disengage and do not care about it. It is the teacher’s job to be able to adapt their lessons in order to use relevant materials to teach students to write. Writing can be taught with the use of various tools that can relate urban students to education.

In an article by Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, the technique of using hip hop to engage students in writing is used effectively. It is argued strongly that “Hip-Hop music is the representative voice of urban youth, since the genre was created by and for them” (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 89). By using Hip-Hop, there is a “bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics. Hip-hop texts, given their thematic nature, can be equally valuable as springboards for critical discussions about contemporary issues facing urban youth” (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 89). This use of hip-hop can also create discussions that “may lead to more thoughtful analyses, which could translate into expository writing, the production of poetic texts, or a commitment to social action for community empowerment (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 89). Since urban students are typically interested in hip-hop, they will be more apt to discussing, analyzing and understanding writing through this medium. There are many hip-hop song lyrics that can easily be adapted and used in creating an engaging writing lesson.

Another example of how to engage students and create relevant writing assignments for students is using photos to capture student experiences. In the article *Picturing a Writing Process: Photovoice and Teaching Writing to Urban Youth,* a method is practiced using a ‘photovoice method’ that “allows middle and high school students of diverse backgrounds and living in poverty to document via photographs and accompanying reflections what they believe are the purposes of school, the supports for their school success and the barriers to their school achievement” (Zenkov and Harmon 575). This project is called “Through Students’ Eyes” and it allowed the teachers “to explore our students’ relationships to school and school literacy and to reconsider our pedagogical and curricular practices” through writing (Zenkov and Harmon 576). Students took pictures and then explained “these photos in paragraph-length writings, which they revised for clarity and writing conventions in one-on-one conferences” (Zenkov and Harmon 577). This project allowed for open ended questions “supported by one-on-one and small group discussions and writing conferences—provided youth with the freedom to develop wider and more personal sets of ideas” (Zenkov and Harmon 578). It was found that “students are more willing to engage with writing tasks if we use images as starting points and an ongoing focus” (Zenkov and Harmon). This project allows students to connect their personal lives with writing done in school. Students took pictures of people who motivate them in school, things that disable them from learning, and various other things that relate to their lives. This gave students the freedom to be creative while allowing students to open up to their teachers and other classmates through writing and photography. Giving students the freedom to explore their writing in ways they feel relevant to them seems to help engage students in writing tasks.

There are various ways to teach writing by using relevant themes and concepts that are interesting and engaging for students. Teachers can incorporate poetry, music, sports, etc. or allow students the freedom to choose what they are writing about. Teachers must be able to create probing and relevant prompts for students when engaging them with writing otherwise there will be a disconnect between the student and the course work.

In addition to keeping material relevant for students, it is also important to give students specific details of what is expected of them. Specific guiding principles should be given to students. According to “Gilbert and Graham (2010), adolescents must be taught a variety of types of writing, and strategies for writing, in order to be ready for college or for success as literate writers” (Lacina). Kittle (2008) uses a technique where she models various types of writing in front of her class. She does this by using a projector and actually demonstrating the steps that she uses to construct a piece of writing. This is helpful because she is able to talk to her students and inform them of her process and thoughts while writing. By doing this, Kittle is able to show students different techniques and strategies while going through her process of drafting a piece of work. It was found that teaching writing strategies is extremely helpful for struggling writers.

Lacina (2012) highlights three main guiding principles that teachers should teach their writers. The first principle is to teach students explicit writing strategies. Students must see these strategies modeled in order for them to better learn writing strategies. “By providing explicit instruction on how to create a beginning that hooks the reader, a middle that tells the story, and an ending that provides some type of closure, the sixth graders were better able to organize and draft their ideas” (Lacina 79). Since some of these urban students may not have been exposed to a certain type of writing that is expected of them, it is important to demonstrate and inform the student what their goals are for their piece of writing and expose students to what the writing should look like. The next guiding principle mentioned in the article is to write collaboratively. Students should be given the opportunity to learn writing “collaboratively in the planning, drafting, revising and editing stages of writing” (Lacina 78). Having students write collaboratively has been proven effective. “Studies have shown that when students help one another with an aspect of their writing, this collaboration has a positive impact on the quality of the final writing product” (Lacina 80). By allowing students to work together, they will be able to experiment writing ideas and view other students’ techniques while receiving feedback from their classmates. The third guiding principle offered is to ensure that students have a specific product goal. “By providing students with a specific product goal, teachers present students with a reachable writing goal and characteristics of what the final product will look like when completed” (Lacina 80). It is important for students to have a clear image of what their work should look like. Giving students a model of a product goal is an effective way to ensure that students are all working towards a similar goal. Teachers can offer guidance to students in order to ensure that students can reach their goal and obtain success with writing. By allowing students to see that they have achieved their writing goal, students can become more confident with their writing and want to write more.

In addition to the above three guiding principles of writing, it is very important to teach students the writing process. By teaching students the writing process, they will have a formula to refer back to about the steps and functions of writing. By showing students the basic steps of the writing process such as planning, transforming ideas into writing and revising, students will be able to use these methods while creating their own writing process.

During the entire writing process, teacher feedback is crucial. “Most proponents of the process approach to writing instruction have generally concluded that teacher feedback and the opportunity to revise written work based o this feedback are key to students’ development as writings” (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura and Valdes 2). By using this feedback to revise, students are able to continually rework their ideas and writing in order to become better writers. It was found that “with teacher assistance and feedback, students gradually develop the skills necessary to view their own work critically, revise it, and become better writers” (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura and Valdes 2). The type of feedback that teachers leave on a students work is also very important. In order to benefit the student best, teachers must respond to students’ ideas instead of just responding prescriptively to students’ work. “Researchers have generally found that during the revision process, teacher feedback about content (i.e., comments that encourage students to add, delete or restructure content) as opposed to teacher feedback about surface features (i.e., word choice, spelling, grammar, punctuation) is associated with higher quality compositions” (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura and Valdes 2). It is important to offer students specific and valuable comments relating to the content of students papers instead of just worrying about their punctuation and grammar. It was found that “teacher comments and corrections of student work were the ‘major vehicle for writing instruction’ (p.90)” (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura and Valdes 2).

Making comments on a students work also allows the student to know that teachers are taking the time to actually read and understand what they are writing about. This can also help to empower the student to create better writing or more focused writing. By giving students the opportunity to receive feedback and revise, they will be able to produce better works of writing. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to examine their struggling writers and help them through other methods.

According to Kittle (2008), it is important for teachers to approach student work with respect. The teacher has “two roles as a reader of student work: one, to hear what the writer is communicating, to listen well, to consider and respond to the thinking in the piece, and two, to help the writer communicate it with as much grace as possible” (Kittle 212). By actually listening to what the writer is trying to convey as opposed to just fixing their errors, a teacher can gain the students trust and help the student be more involved in writing. A teacher should not chop up a student’s work with loads of surface corrections and expect the student to become a better writer and to produce better work.

Kittle also focuses on the concept of ongoing revision. This concept allows students to continually revise and edit their work with the opportunity to receive a better grade on it. In addition to revising their pieces of work, Kittle has her students write a small passage of how this draft was better than the previous. By doing this, students are able to continually learn from a piece of work instead of just setting it aside after they receive their grade. This gives students a bit more freedom with their writing to try new techniques and ideas. Since students will be given the opportunity the revise a piece of work, the pressure is alleviated and freedom is given for students to produce work that is meaningful to them. It was found that not all students rework their writing to submit as a revision but the ones that do, tend to benefit with a new grade.

Feedback can also be considered assessment for students. Assessment does not always mean a test or a grade; assessment can be examining where a student stands with their work and offering helpful comments to help students produce better work. This assessment can also help teachers find struggling writers and work with them differently than the other students. Students can also work collaboratively in order to assess themselves and their peers. By giving students guiding principles, providing continuous feedback and assessment and allowing for revision, students will be able to rework and understand the processes of writing.

Overall, regardless of if a student is learning in an urban setting or not, all students need to be truly engaged with the writing they are doing in order to progress and have a connection to their work. All students also need to feel that their writing is purposeful and relevant to their lives so they can take ownership of their writing. Although many urban students have outside factors that may affect the way they learn, teachers must understand how to give students the opportunity to channel those factors and use them in their writing.

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