The students have brought their journals to class, ready to share the piece of writing they have completed on the topic of "Challenges." Two relatively new students sit among them, and one of them, Emir, is already gaining the label of a "troublemaker." He has spent a good portion of his writing time reading the Writers Matter book in the back of the classroom and jotting a few things down in his notebook. I have not seen much from him academically, and, quite frankly, I don’t expect much from him today.

The students begin to share their journal entries. Some elect not to share. Emir’s turn. He starts to read to us about his family background. He then reads a line that adds an incredible gravity to the room: he tells us how his father was murdered on the day that he was born. He goes on to tell us that his father was a drug-dealer. He begins to cry. He pauses for at least a minute (I cannot remember how long it took, I simply remember the class being arrested in silence). He goes on. At some point, he stops reading from his journal and begins simply speaking to the class. He tells us how his uncle used to provide him with gifts at Christmas time, and when he began to understand that his uncle was getting the money for the gifts from dealing drugs, he asked his uncle about it. His uncle told him to know his place, Emir explains. He tells us how he is afraid of ending up like his father and his uncle. He says that sometimes his mother compares him to his father.

He stops, and the class is completely silent. After a few minutes, I encourage the students to walk over to Emir and put a hand on him if they’d like. Shortly after this, other students, some who have already read, open up about deeper, more personal challenges they have faced, especially in regards to their family.

This experience is, for me, the essential stuff of the Writers Matter program. Writers Matter has been a tremendous component of the writing program I have implemented this year. This is my first year teaching Writing to middle school students, and I knew that I would be using a "Writing Workshop" model (based on Nancie Atwell’s work) where the majority of the class is spent with students writing in the genre of their choice on the topic of their choice (The program is not as "free-form" as it sounds: Students are required to write in every genre taught (although this doesn’t always happen) and to bring at least two pieces of writing to publication each month.

That said, I knew that helping students to find topics that mattered to them would be the most challenging part of implementing the workshop: students are used to being assigned a topic, not assigning themselves a topic!

The Writers Matter program helped a great majority of the students find topics that matter to them. The program is geared toward enabling students to actively think about the things that, subconsciously or consciously, are on their minds. As Joan Didion writes and guest writer-speaker Peter Nichols told my classes, writing enables students to discover what they’re thinking and what they believe.