Empowering Young Writers: The Writers Matter Approach

By
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This book is dedicated to the thousands of students in the Philadelphia region who have benefitted from the Writers Matters approach and to our Writers Matter teachers who strive, everyday, to empower their students to write. We also give special thanks to the School District of Philadelphia for its unwavering support of this initiative since 2004 and all the other participating schools in the Philadelphia region.

“The program has helped me find me; it was like an open door waiting for me to jump out of it. It stretched my mind, body, and emotions.”
(7th grader, 2010).

With Chapter Contributions from the following Writers Matters Teachers:

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The Writers Matter approach is an adaptation of the Freedom Writer’s Program created by Erin Gruwell, who authored a book entitled, *The Freedom Writers Diary* (Gruwell, 1999). Gruwell’s work with inner city high school students, using journal writing as a primary tool, had a huge, positive impact on her students. Through narrative journal writing that focused on personal life journeys and experiences, Erin’s students transformed themselves into highly motivated writers, which, in turn enhanced their overall academic achievement. The program diminished cultural barriers among her students, and increased high school graduation rates. Many also pursued postsecondary options and graduated from college. Although the Freedom Writers Program has won acclaim for its outcomes with one subset of inner city, high school students, little is known about why the program resulted in this level of success.

Our goal was to develop a more structured approach to writing instruction for younger students, based on Gruwell’s earlier work, and to improve upon it through research. The Writers Matter approach was launched in a middle school (grades 5-8) in the fall of 2005 to discover ways to improve the fit between English curriculum, state, and Core Curriculum Standards for writing instruction. Our research focused on writing skill development in the context of observations of other important areas, such as the students’ personal growth, enhanced ability to understand others, and broader connections to the world. These results have continually guided our implementation and change efforts since that time. Our intention in writing this book is to share our current thinking about why approaches like Freedom Writers and Writers Matter have such a profound impact on younger and older adolescent lives in writing skill, personal, and social growth and to provide practical suggestions for using this approach.

This book is an outgrowth of our work since the publication of *Voices of Teens: Writers Matter*, written by Michael Galbraith and Robert Vogel and published in 2008 by the Middle School Association. As we continued to implement and study the effects of this approach on participating students as well as gaining valuable feedback from teachers, we concluded that Writers Matter has many different integrative facets that require further discussion and exploration. For example, we realized in our work with teachers that establishing a positive classroom environment is crucial to the success of this approach, as well as a need to strengthen the writing component. Thus, this book expands upon many of the practical aspects of this approach introduced in the *Voices of Teens: Writers Matter* book, to include a strong rationale based on research and theory as well as to guide prospective teachers and their administrators to a greater understanding of the Writers Matter philosophy.

All forms of writing are important, but personal narrative writing stimulates personal reflection and fosters enhanced critical thinking skills (Dewey, 1933; McClean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). As this book will show, students are empowered to write because of the focus on free expression and connections established between the curriculum and their personal lives. Although many of the Writers Matters classrooms are urban, we believe that this approach will work in any classroom since adolescent issues are universal.