



# Dialogue

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## Fostering Rebellious Reading through Young Adult Literature

Christine Kané, SDAWP 2004

In an article published in the *Wall Street Journal*, book critic Meghan Gurdon begins a persuasive piece by introducing her readers to a desperate 46-year-old mother of three wandering around the young adult section of her local bookstore feeling thwarted and disheartened. In a vain attempt to locate an appropriate book for her 13-year-old daughter she is forced to wade through hundreds of lurid and dramatic covers that only offer depictions of vampires, suicide and self-mutilation. She leaves the store empty handed from this experience crying out in despair that there was "nothing, not a thing, that I could imagine giving my daughter." Gurdon uses this single example of a well-intentioned mother to set the tone for her argument that today's young readers find themselves surrounded by images of damage, brutality, and losses of the most horrendous kinds if they choose to delve into or stumble upon the world of contemporary young adult (YA) literature. Gurdon paints publishing companies in broad strokes as profit-hungry scavengers that hide behind free-expression principles in order to spite good parenting and moral upbringings and bulldoze coarseness and misery into children's lives.

Gurdon begrudgingly acknowledges that YA literature may be useful for a small sector of teens and tweens that have experienced real-life horrors of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that may create feelings of self-loathing, induce self-mutilation, promote eating disorders or suicidal tendencies; but only because it serves as some form of validation that their experience matters and provides comfort to these readers. However, she strongly advocates that these same books in the hands of young people who have never been afflicted with these experiences will lead them naturally towards self-destructive behavior simply because they have now been exposed to it in a book. They may even believe that because the book has been published, it is popular or vogue to do so.

Following this incredibly naïve Gurdon-ian logic one would imagine that if the same well-intentioned mother of three caught wandering aimlessly through the bookstore had been offered Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* it would be an appropriate book for her daughter to read if, and only if, her daughter had experienced rape itself in real life and her daughter was able to use the literary experience as a form of therapeutic comforting and reassurance. Yet, if this mother exposed her impressionable young daughter to the content of *Scars* by Cheryl Rainfield it might actually lead her daughter to become a cutter who utilizes self-mutilation acts as a coping mechanism. This is the same age-old argument that talking about bad things or dark themes will automatically lead to the downfall of morality because it will "normalize" it and even go so far as to encourage depravity. Maureen Johnson of the *Guardian U.K.* responds to Gurdon's idea that "darkness" doesn't belong in stories by citing several historical authors that she wonders if Gurdon has ever had exposure to such as Poe, Dickens, Shakespeare, Hemingway, Tolstoy or...almost any other author, ever. Or the *Bible*, for that matter. Or the news.

The highly acclaimed YA author Laurie Halse Anderson wrote in protest of Gurdon's article on her blog by stating that books don't turn kids into murderers, or rapists, or alcoholics.

(Not even the *Bible*, which features all of these acts.) Books open hearts and minds, and help teenagers make sense of a dark and confusing world. Young Adult literature saves lives. Every. Single. Day.

Cecil Castelucci of the *LA Review of Books* blog reminds us that teenagers (and children) live in the same world that we adults do. And no matter how much we try to protect them, they see the same current events, they live through the same havoc wreaked by floods, tsunamis, murders, rapes, beatings, hurricanes, abuse, tornadoes, terrorist attacks, nuclear accidents, climate change, and more. And if they don't experience it firsthand, they might have family members who do or have. Or they read about it in the paper or see it on the news or the internet and they seek to understand the incomprehensible. They struggle just like adults do to understand and make sense of the world and of what it means to be human.

Linda Holmes, National Public Radio writer, cites that some tweens or teens are drawn to YA literature not because they have any personal

experience in abusive dating relationships or self-harm or eating disorders themselves but because they either know somebody who does engage in these acts or will at some point in their lifetime. YA literature helps prepare them to adequately handle big topics with grace and understanding that adults often won't or don't engage in often enough. Holmes acknowledges that surrounding children with books full of joy and beauty is fine, but confining their reading to those things because we are afraid that they cannot tolerate being exposed to the things they are already so often exposed to does them a terrible disservice in life.

Along with all of the many varied reasons to support the use, exposure and promotion of young adult literature—dark themed or not—cited by reputable authors in the world of YA literature that came in response to Gurdon's WSJ article, perhaps the one that strikes the strongest chord with me is that the same kids who are reading the scary, dark, and creepy stuff, the adventurous and weird and dirty stuff in young adult literature, are the same kids who, if it wasn't dark and creepy sometimes, would just read dark and creepy books written for adults (Holmes, NPR). Recounting her own childhood, Holmes noted that she was always going to read Stephen King, because she was interested in the way he talked about hope and despair, about finding salvation in other people, and about things like eating your own foot that were just plain freaking crazy pants cool.

Not reading scary, weird, dark, or dirty books wouldn't have made me a different kid. It certainly wouldn't have made me a happier kid. It might have made me a kid who read less, though.

Growing up I can honestly say that I was an avid rebellious reader. I made it a point to sneak anything and everything that someone else deemed forbidden, off-limits or too "adultish." By third grade I had already worn down a path traveling up and down the aisles of the very small children's section in our local library. Even Nancy Drew and her feisty courageous self became repetitive, predictable, and downright boring.

I distinctly remember wandering through the adult section of the library one day out of sheer boredom when a book by Danielle Steel caught my eyes. I took it out without preamble and sat down in the aisle to read. By the time the first chapter was through I had met characters that were complex, lusty, and best of all, cussing up a storm when they were passionate or angry. I was enthralled.

*Not reading scary, weird, dark, or dirty books wouldn't have made me a different kid. It certainly wouldn't have made me a happier kid. It might have made me a kid who read less, though.*

The characters were so real to me that I found myself glancing around nervously to see if anyone else had stumbled upon the greatness of this author. Would they want to fight me for rights to it? Page after glorious page, there were scenes that I may have not been able to fully comprehend, but man, was I devoted to devouring the written word. I was engaged.

It wasn't until the library doors were closing and I rushed the book up to the front desk to check out that I was met with the reality of my chronological age. I still remember the steely disapproving eyes of the balding man that declared that this was an "inappropriate" book for someone my age and I shouldn't be reading things like this? Did my mother know about this?

I remember flying past emotions of confusion, shame, and right into absolute indignation. Although he didn't allow me to check out that one isolated book, it became my mission to sneak in day after day to read that book hidden in the dark recesses of the library. Eventually, I became bolder and found ways to cover up

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### The Power of the Writing Project

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the jackets of the books I would steal off the shelf and hide behind my homework binder. By the end of fifth grade I had a vast knowledge base of sex, drugs, and rock n' roll.

My upper elementary teachers gushed about my reading test scores and reading levels. I didn't have the words to articulate it then, but what I do know now is that I was bored to tears with the stupid stories and characters that they kept introducing to me in school. The sheer amount of rebellious recreational reading I did on my own? That was a critical foundation to support my academic reading in school. My vocabulary skyrocketed simply because I chose to spend all my time reading. My writing was exceptional for elementary standards because I saw the printed word in complex ways all the time. I did not just read: I was a reader consumed by the written word.

If you were to walk into my classroom tomorrow morning you would see a roomful of fourth graders who argue over books, fight for the right to have it next, and sneak up to five or six complex chapter books inside their desk hoping no one will notice that three is the limit. These books are often from the teen section in Barnes & Noble and definitely not predictable, boring texts whose lives don't mirror the ones that they endure daily. I consistently have about thirty-two students every year who devour the written word. I spend a fortune on my classroom library every month. I make sure our books reflect real life which is messy and complex. Our books include deep rich conflicts that happen in real life. And sometimes a cuss word is thrown in there if the character is really, really upset. After all, isn't that what happens in real life?

Parents are amazed that their children willfully spend their free time reading books now. They can't seem to figure out what happened to them and why they are always asking to go to this place called Barnes & Noble? My parents are witnessing the beauty of rebellious readers at work. I've passed on my passion for reading each year to a new generation and I hope like hell that one day they recognize this empowerment and pass it on to their own kids, too.

When the blogosphere blew up in response to Gurdon's article condemning YA literature in June 2011, I was most grateful for the reminder from author Sherman Alexie's blog stating that books—violent and not, blasphemous and not, terrifying and not—were the most loving and trustworthy things in his life. He doesn't pretend to know the complexity of every student's life and he certainly doesn't write to protect them. It's far too late for that. He writes to give them weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters. He writes as an author in blood because he still remembers what it felt like to bleed.

My core values as an educator will never be based upon the standardized testing that marginalizes my student's lives or naïve wishes to shelter them from a world that is more complex than any author could ever capture in words. I show up every single day to dispel the myth that our youth—especially our African-American and Latino youth—are not engaged in school. Because if we are honest with ourselves and we truly want our students to be engaged in school we can not wait for state or national mandates to support our students. It is up to us as their mentors in the classroom to provide real ways to be engaged, inspire them to rebel against this current educational system, and exceed low expectations others hold for them in society and beat every roadblock put in their way. I'm planning on doing this one passionate, consuming, rebellious reader at a time.



# Congratulations

## SDAWP Fellows Summer 2011

### **Nicole Bradshaw**

Flying Hills Elem  
Cajon Valley Union

### **Jan Jarrell**

San Diego City College  
SD Community College

### **Holley Schooley-Calvo**

Capri Elem  
Encinitas Union

### **Matt Jewell**

Ada Harris Elem  
Cardiff

### **Jeni Cass**

San Diego Global  
Vision Academy  
San Diego Unified

### **Cynthia Larkin**

Morse High  
San Diego Unified

### **Amy Mody**

Albert Einstein  
Academy  
San Diego Unified

### **Cynthia Cox**

Lexington Elem  
Cajon Valley Union

### **Barbara Montfort**

Quest Academy  
La Mesa-Spring Valley

### **Rachel Curtze**

Child's Primary School  
Private

### **Cherie Firmery**

Del Rio Elem  
Oceanside Unified

### **Zenaida Moore**

King Chavez Primary  
San Diego Unified

### **Holly French**

Cajon Valley Middle  
Cajon Valley Union

### **Abby Robles**

Del Sur Elem  
Poway Unified

### **Kim Fruscella**

Hillcrest Academy  
Temecula Valley

### **Jacob Ruth**

Cajon Valley Middle  
Cajon Valley Union

### **Darren Samakosky**

Pt. Loma High  
San Diego Unified



# On Rereading Some of Gary Bradshaw's Writings

Frank Barone, SDAWP 1977

Writing fools. My friend Gary and I wrote like fools. At the sight or mention of a metaphor we would capture that magic moment by splaying words upon the page and then watch as they formed themselves into a poem. If we heard or saw a word or thought of an idea that intrigued us, we would surround that word or idea with suitable companions until we had developed a short story, a one-act play, or an essay with a beginning, a middle, and an end that satisfied our curiosity and our thirst.

Like fools, we obsessed ourselves with words, searching for them in the books we read, the movies we saw, the dramas we attended, the music we heard, the journals, magazines, and newspapers we scanned. We even found words along the green fairways of the golf courses we played on and discovered words in the mouths of guest speakers at the conferences and workshop we participated in. Some words spoke to us from within a soccer ball or a basketball and demanded we give them a voice others could hear and relate to. I found quite a few words in the moon and stars while Gary would ride the surf and paddle toward shore with words that clung to his body and hung from his board.

We lived for words. They grew into our passion and became our pleasure. We had fun watching them crawl or race along the lines of our writing notebooks, seeing them shape themselves into castles and caves, neighborhoods and back yards, and quite a few classrooms.

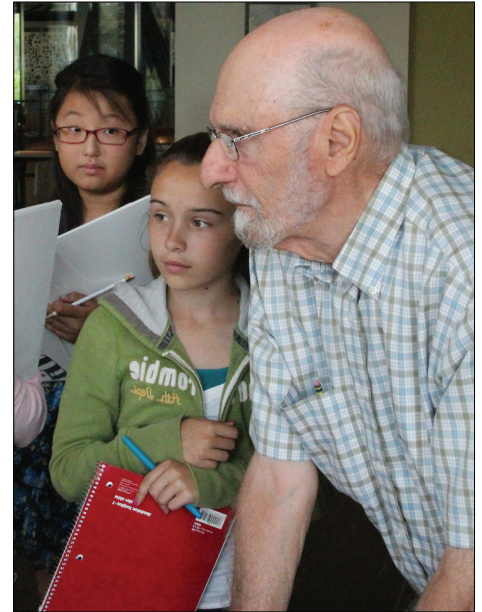
Gary and I wrote prolifically, to challenge the status quo, to solve problems, explore possibilities, expose injustice, proclaim truths, and celebrate the beauty that surrounded us. Our writing could be tinged with humor, or streaked with irony or satire, but in every piece we wrote one could find the joy that came from putting imaginative and honest words upon the page.

Writing fools? Yes, we wrote like

fools, but more than that, we wrote as friends. And that friendship continues every time I reread some of Gary's writings.

In Memory of Gary Bradshaw,  
SDAWP, 1981.

(Pictured right, Frank Barone signs autographs after speaking to a group of students during Young Writers' Camp 2011.)



while some settled into sentences

yesterday i wrote just to sound like myself

i felt absent in my penmanship

like all these feathers in the ink

weighing me down so i could not fly

but i shook off that black in splats

they landed flat on the canvass

some slipped and dripped

curving to cursive making letters

while some settled into sentences

there is more being said that at first is intended

i am all about stretching before long walks

i am all about putting down all the talk

see actions make words

and the movements a rotating world

all i have is this time before—the damns flood again

i got a rushing feeling that in the drown there is a crown

and i'd like to wear it once just so that I can put it down.

*Darren Samakosky, SDAWP 2011*

# The *Myth* that Intelligence and Hard Work *Equal* Success

Cherie Firmery, SDAWP, 2011

It was one of many activities that we participated in during SDAWP's Summer Institute; I knew the Monopoly game the other participants and I were playing was planned to teach us about "Systematic Unfairness"—we had read several articles and participated in protocols designed to make us aware of the existence of societal structures which breed inequities. Many who are successful assume it is the result of their high intelligence and hard work and that those who have not achieved levels of success are less intelligent and don't work as hard. This notion is nothing new. It may have evolved from America's earliest days when promoters of the colonies such as Captain John Smith promised wealth in return for hard work. Nevertheless the idea persists today.

The central protocol for the Monopoly game was that players did not begin the game at the same time. Two players were chosen to start playing first. They neatly organized the community chest and chance cards in the center of the game board. The money was distributed between the two and the properties were neatly arranged in rows. The players rolled the dice while three of us watched. Those of us who had played before reminisced on past games played, noted how landing on free parking could change the game, and affirmed that Atlantic Avenue was good property to own.

Once the players had traveled around the board a few times and purchased four or five properties each, two more players were added to the game. They jumped in optimistically and were eager to receive their startup money. The game continued with players buying properties as they landed on each new available space. Finally, once the

second group had begun to accumulate a few properties, the last player was added to the game and it was me. I knew Monopoly well enough to know that my chances of winning were slim. I quickly inventoried my options and my attitude, but before I was allowed to buy any property, the game was called to an end.

All players were instructed to make a mental note of the appearance of the table. Properties and money were out for all to see, and it was clear that those who had the longest playing time were the most successful in terms of owning the greatest number of properties. The second group amassed less wealth than the first, while the final group had cash, but no properties. Monopoly players know that in order to win the game one must have property, free and clear.

Those of us who participated in the game knew that the game paralleled what we had been reading about and what we observe in our society. The last player to join the game represented the poor. The second

*...children who live in poverty will need forces working in their favor in order for them to transcend socioeconomic status...*

pair of players to join in the game was demonstrating the middle class, and the first invited to play were the wealthy. The lesson was that there are systems that allow some citizens access to success while others are left out.

Systems and institutions are forces which control access. And while they limit some, they benefit others. An example of such a beneficiary is one of the world's wealthiest men,

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell asserts that a system of fortunate events acted in Gate's life and helped him to achieve the position he holds today. The first advantage he had was that he was born into a wealthy family. His socioeconomic status gave him access to private schools with computers and resources lacking at other institutions. Another advantage he had was that he was born at the right time in order to participate in the dawn of the computer age. It is interesting to note that three of the most recognized names in the computer industry, Steve Jobs, Bill Joy, and Bill Gates, were all born within one year. Gates and Joy had access to computers when almost no one else did; they each enjoyed nearly unlimited programming time and were able to log over ten thousand hours of programming time in a relatively short amount of time, the equivalent of ten years of "practice" in seven years (Gladwell).

There is no question as to whether Bill Gates was hard working or extremely bright, but he had advantages that few others enjoyed. He was part of an elite group in which he admits, "If there were fifty in the world, I'd be shocked" (Gladwell). Gates benefitted from a series of favorable events which helped to catapult him into superstar status.

It is rare for people to escape their original social status. Generally, the class that you were born into is where you will stay for life (Colombo, 320). Intelligence and hard work alone are not enough to el-

evate one to the next level of the socioeconomic ladder; however, to many of us this reality is in contrast with what we have learned to accept as part of American culture: We pride ourselves on being citizens of a country that people risk their lives to reach. We are a country of hope and opportunity. We identify with the idea that anyone can pull himself up by his bootstraps and rise out of adverse circumstances. We think that if we simply work hard enough,

and are determined, we can achieve success. Yet, sadly, this is not true. It is a myth.

Some use the stories of individuals like Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey and Cesar Milan as proof that individuals are not static in their social status, but able to change their life's circumstances through hard work. However, on closer scrutiny, we often find that several favorable events acted on behalf of these individuals. Stories of pulling oneself out of poverty are extremely rare and it takes much more than intelligence and

## *They will need teachers who continuously seek out methods and resources to improve their craft in the name of student achievement.*

hard work (Colombo). The United States views itself as representing a mostly middle-class society. The difficulty with believing that intelligence and hard work are enough to position us in the middle class is that when failure ensues, we then blame the individual and assume the reason for poverty is the individual's lacking in some area. We oversimplify both causes and effects of the forces that act on people in poverty. We maintain that Bill Gates is the wealthiest man in America because he is intelligent and hard working. Conversely, we connect poverty with poor intellect or laziness. We minimize or forget entirely about favorable circumstances that made positive differences for individuals such as Bill Gates, Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, or Cesar Milan.

In the Monopoly protocol, I was last to enter the game. I knew that the odds were stacked against me, but I couldn't give up. If I gave up I would have no chance to win, so my only option was to try. Winning would have required more than events working in my favor—I would need luck. I could have used the start-up money and negotiated deals to buy mortgages for pennies on the dollar with people when they got into trouble, but the game was called before I could enact that strategy. I was somewhat relieved when the game ended because I knew my chance of winning was a long shot.

We are reminded that students who

come from poor families live within systems that keep them there. Society minimizes their strengths and maximizes their deficits: such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, gender, and citizenship. Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, and Cesar Milan represent some of these perceived "deficits," but despite them, these individuals made it. Was it because they were intelligent and hard working? I would say no, because there are people just like them with similar qualities who didn't make it—they simply didn't have the same good fortune. Nearly

one of every eight people, and one in five children below the age of six, live below the official poverty line. They are there because they have not had opportunities nor good fortune (Colombo, 2007).

It is clear that children who live in poverty will need forces working in their favor in order for them to transcend socioeconomic status, and educational experiences play a key role. In his book *The Shame of a Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Jonathan Kozol points to areas that need to be improved. Added to Kozol's findings are statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2007.

- Teachers with three or fewer years of experience are twice as likely to be in schools with a high level of minority enrollment, than in schools with a low level.
- Fourth-grade students who are Black or Hispanic are much less likely to be in schools where the same teacher who started the year were there when the year ended.
- Black and Hispanic twelfth-grade students are more than twice as likely as White students to be in schools where six to ten percent of their teachers are absent on an average day.

- Class sizes of minorities were likely to be larger, and yet receive the greatest benefit from reduced class sizes.
- Classes with higher percentages of minorities were less likely to assign research on the Internet than students with lower percentages of minorities.
- Classes with higher percentages of minorities reflect a lower percentage of students who have computers available in classrooms than when compared to schools with smaller percentage of minorities. It must be noted here that not all minorities live in poverty, nor are all students from low socioeconomic status (SES) minorities. While most agree that social status and minority status are separate it has been common practice for researchers to combine the two, and many minorities do remain in the lower portion of the socioeconomic spectrum (Firmery, 2003).

To counter the above statistics, children living in poverty need dedicated, experienced, and seasoned teachers. In order to break free from poverty, they must experience favorable circumstances, including a system of education that does not view them as being deficient. They will need teachers who continuously seek out methods and resources to improve their craft in the name of student achievement. Students need teachers who know that no matter how good their lesson plans are, there is no substitute for the quality instruction that the regular classroom teacher is able to provide; they know the specific needs of each student in the room. Students will need advocates who find it unacceptable to for students to experience overcrowded classrooms. What would be unacceptable in a high SES school must be unacceptable in a low SES school.

Finally, another point that must be addressed is how high stakes testing is affecting the learning and achievement of students in minority groups.



A teacher friend once quipped, “How many times does a student need to be told that they are not achieving before they quit trying?” Nearly ten percent of our students in the U.S. are second-language learners and yet it is mandated that all students be tested in English—even when they are not yet proficient in their second language. While the graduation rate of the population as a whole is rising, high school exit exams are causing ELL dropout rates to increase and graduation rates to decrease; thus, the gap between the two groups is widening (Menken). It is more important than ever for educators to stand up for all students, to recognize the inequalities that exist, and create fortunate events that students will remember as they navigate the obstacles between themselves and their futures.

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# Why Should I Trust You? A Place to Begin



Jan Jarrell, SDAWP 2011

A wild horse,  
his body tenses and bucks  
eyes rolling,  
seeking escape  
or flesh to bite  
we hold him,  
takes two of us most nights  
my muscles squawk  
with the strain  
of holding my baby,  
my scared little boy  
Fear that  
looks like  
feels like  
is  
rage

When I first met Elijah, my son, he was four years old. We were on the blacktop outside the Baptist church where his foster dad was pastor. He was carrying the scrapbook my partner and I had made for him. It introduced us, our home, and our bunnies. “He’s been carrying it around all weekend,” the social worker told us, “showing it to everybody.”

He looked up at us with his sweet brown eyes and said, “You’re a mommy, and you’re a mommy. That’s two mommies.”

“What do you think about two mommies?” I asked, nervous.

“I like two mommies,” he said. Then he took off for the jungle gym.

In adoption class, they tell you that you will get a honeymoon period before your wounded child begins to test you, to see if you will really commit to him. With Elijah, that wasn’t the case. We got tested from day one. And I am not talking about some little pop quiz; no, his was a screaming, yelling, kicking, kind of test that went on for years.

I remember one time, early on, Carol and I huddled together, locked in our bedroom, making desperate phone calls to other adoptive parents, as he raged outside the door, pounding, demanding to be let in. Yet, I also remember when Carol read *The Little Drummer Boy* that first Christmas,

and he whispered, “I used to be hungry, too.” And, how years later, he revealed that when he first moved in, he checked our closet for belts. He found some, but decided that we only used them to look “fancy,” and not for whipping kids.

Elijah has taught me about the power of human emotion, the will to survive, and how our past experiences are present in our bodies, shaping our thoughts and reactions. I try to keep his lessons present as I teach my community college students, many of whom are wounded, with challenges that would knock most people down.

Marlena, an Argentine immigrant, withdrew from class because her American husband was beating her. She had decided to flee to a shelter instead of finishing the semester.

As a child, Christian’s mother had moved him to Tijuana after the LA riots erupted in 1992. There, he was taunted as a “rich boy” before he returned to high school in the U.S. where he was labeled “special ed.” and “a troublemaker.”

Markos had once escaped a pack of lions in his native Ethiopia by jumping into a river.

Ivette immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager in the trunk of her pimp-boyfriend’s car. It was years before she could free herself and her daughter.

Kevin’s home was raided when he was fourteen. The Migra ripped his mom from the house while she was taking a shower. He didn’t see her for over a year.

Sometimes students share their struggles through their writing or in conferences, sometimes not at all. Yet, I try to keep in mind the burdens that they may be concealing. After some of these experiences, one might think that college would be easy in comparison. The reality is that many students, even those who

have experienced success in school or life, often question whether they deserve to be in a college classroom, if they have what it takes.

The opening line of my college's mission statement reads, "San Diego City College has as its highest priority student learning and achievement." It goes on to state that ours is "a multicultural institution committed to providing open access to all who can benefit from instruction." Furthermore, we aim to meet "the diverse and ever-changing educational, cultural, and economic needs of the urban core and surrounding communities of San Diego." Our mission is a wide embrace. It reflects one of the most important primary reasons why community colleges were created in this country in the first place—to serve the community, to give all comers an opportunity for higher education. The painful reality, however, is that most of our students fail.

*Sometimes students share their struggles through their writing or in conferences, sometimes not at all. Yet, I try to keep in mind the burdens that they may be concealing.*

This year, after a six-year study of community college students, the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at Sacramento State University issued a report, which contained a slew of shocking, even heartbreaking statistics. Of the 250,000 students tracked, only one-third had completed a certificate or degree or had successfully transferred to a university. Of those who began with transfer as their goal, 23% had achieved their objective. The numbers for Black and Latino students were even more dismal; only 20% and 14%, respectively, had transferred after six years (Bensimon, Dowd, and Wong). Across the

state and at my own college, on average more than 30% of students who begin a course, any course, fail. For some courses and disciplines, that rate rises to 50% or higher. We have been living with this seemingly immutable reality for years. Why? Undoubtedly, the challenges and barriers that our students face are many, complicated, and overwhelming. But, how can we accept this contradiction between our mission and our reality? Through the accreditation process, we recently reaffirmed the principles and priorities that our mission statement expresses. No one suggested casting our net more narrowly. If we believe in our mission, how can we be complacent?

Rebecca J. Cox's 2009 book *The College Fear Factor: How Professors and Students Misunderstand Each Other* presents an interpretation of the results of four studies detailing the experiences of community college students and teachers. She conducted dozens of interviews across the United States at 34 campuses over a five-year period. Her conclusion is that fear is at the heart of student failure. Early in the book, she analyzes the causes of this destructive fear.

The many students who seriously doubted their ability to succeed, however, were anxiously waiting for their shortcomings to be exposed, at which point they would be stopped from pursuing their goals. Fragile and fearful, these students expressed their concern in several ways: in reference to college professors, particular courses or subject matter, and the entire notion of college itself—whether at the two-year or four-year level. At the core of different expressions of fear were the same feelings of dread and apprehension that success in college would prove to be an unrealizable dream (26).

According to Cox, many college professors do not see fear as the core issue. Rather, they see students who are unprepared for the rigor of college, and who are unwilling, in some cases, to do what is necessary to succeed. Kim Brooks, an English professor, recently expressed her frustration in an essay for Salon.com; she "felt overwhelmed to the point of physical paralysis by all the things they [her students] don't know how

to do when they come to college." These "deficits" within the students make some question the inclusiveness of community colleges. Yet, Cox's research suggests that faculty complaints about student preparedness are an old trope in higher education and not exclusive to the community colleges. As a first step, she urges us to accept students as they are and to acknowledge their fears and anxieties.

*My son has taught me that trust grows slowly, imperceptibly. But, when you look back, it's there.*

Cox goes on to argue that successful college teachers exhibit three qualities that help to mitigate students' fear. First, these teachers inspire confidence because they are experts in their field. Second, they maintain rigor and high expectations. Third, they convince students that, indeed, they do belong in college. Students often express this critical trait as teachers being able to "come down to their level." For me, this is the place to start. It is the beginning of trust.

My son has taught me that trust grows slowly, imperceptibly. But, when you look back, it's there.

So, every day I enter my classes with a purpose. I am working to earn my students' trust. Small gestures. I learn their names in the first week. I write a promising syllabus (as opposed to a punishing one), thank you, Ken Bains. I find ways for them to experience success early on—a low-stakes writing assignment or a collaborative piece. We build community. I make time for individual conferences. Mainly, I strive to show up with the belief that they all belong, that the class is better and richer because they are in it. My students, Marlana, Christian, Markos, Ivette, and Kevin—all of them—challenge me to reject complacency, to fight for the beautiful (yes, beautiful and



honorable) mission of the community colleges, to make it mean something in my classroom today, right now. I have no magic toolkit, no easy solution. I do not believe I can “save students,” nor do I see that as my job. I am simply working to reframe how I perceive my students and to reinvent the classroom dynamic. For a few hours each week, this is our space, our time. You are not alone; your success is my assignment too.

Elijah is eleven now. Every day we learn to trust a little bit more in this family we’ve created together. We trust, we love, we heal. It takes time.

“Do my wings, Mommy.”

I rub the tight spaces  
between your  
shoulder blades  
sing songs,  
and you tell me  
what you want  
for breakfast  
The hallway light is on,  
closet door latched,  
dog hugged  
under your arm  
and you sleep,  
my baby,  
most nights

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## Guiding Teaching and Learning: *Rubrics in Action*

Becky Gemmell, SDAWP 2001

“When you’re watching *Dancing With the Stars* or *America’s Best Dance Crew*, how do you know if a performance is good?” I ask my beginning dancers a week before they take their first performance test.

First, they think about their own ideas and then discuss them with a partner. Next, I ask for volunteers to share so that we can generate a class list. I use the think-pair-share strategy to help support English learners and students in special education in my mixed class.

They rattle off answers as I frantically try to capture them all on the board:

“If they know what they’re doing.”

“If they’ve got attitude.”

“If they’re doing the moves right.”

I ask, “Couldn’t we group some of these ideas together?” and as a class, we begin to categorize using different-colored markers.

“What I see here are three distinct categories that we’re going to call Knowledge, Expression, and Technique,” I observe, supplying them with the academic language that represents their thinking.

By building on students’ prior knowledge of TV dance competitions, through discussing their ideas about effective performances, and by introducing academic vocabulary, students better understand the rubric that I provide, which means they will have a better understanding of expectations before their assessment. As a result, they perform better.



I use a similar procedure to introduce rubrics in other classes. In journalism, for example, we read and discuss a number of columns and editorials before going over the opinion-writing rubric and before they write their first opinion piece. Models of successful outcomes and mentor texts provide concrete examples for students to emulate; rubrics provide the descriptors for achievement on student assessments.

Rubrics help set clear expectations and guide students. By using rubrics consistently over the course of a year in conjunction with portfolios, students can track their own progress. Formative assessment allows us—teacher and student—to focus on continual and meaningful improvement.

Finally, students self assess. After watching their videotaped dance performances, for example, my students write about what they executed well and what they need to improve upon next time. They set goals for the subsequent unit and assessments. Their reflections help them take ownership of their achievement and rubrics help me fairly and accurately measure their progress.



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*Writing is...*

Writing is the gem  
that the gold miner found  
Writing is the gentle tide  
splashing against the shore  
Writing is the hummingbird  
sucking nectar from the flower  
Writing is the flower in bloom  
Writing is life

—Colin Chamberlin

*Dale Hallow Lake*

You pack the supplies,  
Load them onto the boat,  
Then motor on out  
To green waters vast.

The shale-covered shores,  
Broken up by trees,  
Great bald eagles nest  
In their green boughs.

"Throw over a line!"  
You latch onto friends,  
Making a private  
Floating RV park.

Take out the bread,  
Make a sandwich,  
Sit 'round and laugh  
With your family.

Dive into the lake,  
And swim to the shore,  
Amble up the rocks,  
And throw skipping stones.

Now the sun sets,  
And lights up the lake,  
You head back to the dock  
Water-logged,  
hungry and tan.

—William Griffith

Being fearless makes you invincible.

—Aleksandra Skanlon

*Always do more than you're told.*

—Jacob Li

Life doesn't fit in six words.

—Anonymous





## Snow Globe

In a little glass world  
perfect white snow falls  
and is still.

Each precious snowflake  
is an idea.

The crystal liquid  
they flow in is inspiration.  
Icy glass encases them both.

Shatter the snow globe  
and let the inspiration spill out  
like a bubbling fountain.  
Snowy storyline glinting out  
here and there.

Take shattered bits of glass  
and meld them into a few bits  
of porcelain character,  
and let your beautiful sculpture  
of novels and storytelling  
step into the light,  
wearing the silk of poetry  
and the lace of the sky.

—Autumn Lane



## Fire

I spit sparks with fury  
I devour wood with my flaming touch  
I wave my flames of flickering danger  
over the cowering coals  
heated up by the blaze of my steel grip  
breathing out remains of logs  
while I dance to a sharp beat  
My hair hisses when it touches wind  
all ashes scatter and I expire  
I leave only a pile of smoldering ash  
I give you heat  
but if you want to get rid of me  
I have my secret  
Water will vanquish me

—Lenni Elbe



## Dream

By the windowsill  
I lie dreaming,  
my final falling,  
skyward bound.

—Jeffrey Huang



NI DE AQUI  
NI DE ALLA

NEITHER FROM  
HERE NOR  
FROM THERE

CYNTHIA COX  
SDAWP 2011

I have recently had an accumulation of experiences in life where I had to do some thinking about life and death. Death was much closer than ever before and sat next to me at meals to chat for a while. How lucky I felt to have grown inside a culture that played with, mocked, and joked about death. Though we migrated to the United States, my family still has several calacas, or skeleton figures, around the house. These are dressed in charro outfits and play mariachi music while the skinny Catrinas ride atop equally skinny skeleton horses with their ridiculously large feathered hats and toothy grins. I adore them all like I adore my uncles who would crack jokes at funerals because there was nothing more one could do about it. This cultural training was going to help me in the next months of thinking about death and the foundations of being human as I began to consider what goes into forming our identity and what makes us see things this way or that. While death did not consume my every thought it did prompt me to frame my thoughts in the simplest terms, to look for that which is foundational to all of us.

Having moved to the United States at age 10, I went through a process of assimilation that ultimately left a piece missing in the formation of my identity. Every adolescent experiences changes and an identity formation when they reach a certain age.

Children and adolescents who migrate to a new country have par-

ticular issues in the process. Studies of adolescent identity show that, "...young immigrants experience very strong cultural conflicts as a result of their perceiving to need to choose between two cultures...Because of their experience in school and the community, minority adolescents confront complex physiological issues related to ethnicity" (Mejía, 2007). Interestingly Mejía points out that the process of acculturation has a different effect for children below 12 years old than those from ages 12 to 20. While chil-

I WENT TO A BILINGUAL SCHOOL AFTER ALL,  
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dren under age 12 tend to assimilate to the new culture, those that are older and have firmer roots in their home culture tend to have a greater amount of dissonance and conflict in their identity formation.

At the age of ten, I was uprooted from sub-tropical Puerto Vallarta and brought to arid San Diego. My family knew this was going to happen and we had been forewarned that by the time my brother and I reached an age where it was time to go to middle school and high school, we would move to the United States and continue our education there. It was a good plan and my parents made us aware early of the culture in which we would be submerged when the time would come. I was luckier than most immigrant students. Books and novels were hard to come by and

very expensive in Vallarta. There was not one book store in town and the shelves in the library were toothless grins; holes abounded. The library opened once a week. To make up for this deficit, my uncle, who would come visit from Los Angeles once every two or three years, would always bring books in English. I was raised on the *Babysitters Club* series, *The Secret Garden* and *The Little Princess*. The only literature I had in Spanish—and this did make up the bulk of my reading—were comic books. These you could buy at the checkout line in the Super or the big grocery store.

The English language was not entirely foreign to me. I went to a bilingual school after all, though my brother re-

cently reminded me that the bilingual program was staffed by whatever English speaking teacher came in to town and wanted to work. It could be a math teacher one year, an art teacher the next. Basically, whoever decided to spend a year or more in the sub-tropics with a desire to teach would give us some English exposure.

When it was finally time to pack up and head North, nobody was entirely surprised. We had been forewarned and my parents foresaw no issue because we read in English, went to a "bilingual" school, were straight—10 students (the equivalent to straight A's in the U.S.). My parents thought, or at least wanted us all to believe, that the process of acculturation would be quick, seamless, and easy.

In we went with all hopes high to a school in Chula Vista, California in 1990. I was 10 years old and dropped into an English-only sixth grade classroom. I kept thinking about the word “easy.” My parents thought this would all be *facil*. I was an expert reader, mathematician, and participated in all performances at our school in Mexico. I was either top of the class or second to top. I shared the spot with my best friend. But now, I found that my reading skills were mediocre at best. I had watched the Disney channel and could follow story lines from TV shows, even sang right along with the Disney movies, but school was a completely different register and pace. In class I found myself initially leaning further and further forward to try to pay attention and make meaning. I became excessively aware of body language, change of pace, and other’s reactions. *What are we doing now? What are they taking out? Has the subject changed? Why was that funny? What does the teacher need us to do now?* The spoken language seemed rapid-fire and was not going to help me, so I would survive with all that I knew of reading people non-verbally.

My parents love sharing with pride the story that I got an award the very first month we were in the U.S. It was a citizenship award and I am guessing I got it for being so attentive; I could not be anything else. While struggling to make meaning, I was given the added assignment of helping my friend Beatriz. She had just arrived from Mexico, too, but she knew less English than I did. I had tested out of remediation classes but Beatriz had not, so she would get extra help. This was the challenge in front of me and I was up for it. With my parent’s Do-what-you-can-to-succeed and I-believe-in-you attitude and an acute awareness of how they had sacrificed leaving family, friends and a great business, the challenge to succeed was on. This was all for us; we had better recognize that.

I would do whatever it took to survive, but I was looking for more than just survival: I wanted to succeed. I had grown accustomed to success in

Vallarta to know that I wanted to do well again. All the way up through my days at UCSD, I never reached the same levels. Whether it was my lack of language that I was not able to catch up quickly enough or something else, there was always a hurdle and I had to push stronger than my friends. In high school, my best friends were in the coupled English/History AP course telling me about their amazing projects and field trips which I did not get to enjoy because I was in college preparatory courses, one level below AP. It was not until my junior year that I decided to lobby for myself because nobody else was going to do it. I walked into the counselor’s office alone and asked that I be placed into the AP English course my senior year. I had jumped through the hoops, I had assimilated. Why couldn’t I participate at this higher level? I had done what was

WHILE DEATH DID NOT CONSUME MY EVERY THOUGHT, IT DID PROMPT ME TO FRAME MY THOUGHTS IN THE SIMPLEST TERMS, TO LOOK FOR THAT WHICH IS FOUNDATIONAL TO ALL OF US.

required of me and nowhere near afraid of hard work. My adolescent identity was being formed and shaped based on academics, community service, and my involvement in the tennis group.

Passing the AP Spanish class was the first marker in my life that signaled to me that I had lost something in the process of moving to the United States. I did not get a perfect score in the AP Spanish course. My parents and I had thought that the foundation of Spanish for the first ten years of my life would be there forever and the minimal use of Spanish would not have much impact. But I was falling behind in my first language and I had noticed it when visiting with cousins in Mexico.

Where were my roots? They never disappeared entirely but they sure were suffocated under the To-Do list of how to make it here. The only time I spoke Spanish between the ages of 10 to 17 was to speak to my mother or to get a certain point across to my brother better understood in Span-

ish. This usually came in the form of jokes and sayings, slivers and remnants we held on to of our happy childhood before we migrated. I think my parents and I were both in denial. I was losing my ability to communicate with my family and we had explained it away as part of being a non-communicative adolescent. I was losing my ability to communicate with my mother.

Trips to Mexico from then until the present have been awkward. Although I decided to study Spanish Literature at UCSD as a minor, it was still evident to me that when I was with my family in Mexico my Spanish was nowhere close to being up to par. I had also missed all of the slang and was stuck in an odd space of having academic Spanish, that of the Spanish Lit. classes, most readily available to me. This register would not fly well at family functions. I didn’t quite fit in anywhere. Ni de aquí ni de allá. Neither from here: nor from there. I’ve heard this phrase describe me more than once.

Again I tried to form my identity through things that did not explicitly consider my first culture and language. I wanted to know the universal, that which is true for all of us. Because of this drive I got a degree in Human Development and was even a couple courses away from getting a minor in African Studies. I was still tiptoeing around coming back to my culture; was it too far away now? Did I just want to be an international, universal being, feeling the same everywhere because I did not entirely belong anywhere?

The turning point came in my studies at UCSD. I did begin to hear about and read about identity issues and systematic ways that certain groups are prevented from coming in to play the “American Game” equitably. From my newfound knowledge about why the other Latinos at my high school were being grouped in remedial courses and why I only knew of one Latina who was in AP courses and she didn’t even speak Spanish, I started to gain some awareness and gather some feeling of camaraderie and empathy for

these other students who had not made it. This propelled me into the field of education and in particular, the field of bilingual education. It was time to reconnect with my language roots. Too much time had been lost, too much sitting quietly trying to fit into a system that did not entirely fit me, and too much time hoop jumping and assimilating to what others thought I should be. It was time to reconnect with my language and my roots.

BUT WHEN WE ARE TALKING ABOUT A LANGUAGE, A CULTURE, TAKING THEM AWAY IS TAKING A PERSON'S OWN IDENTITY AWAY AND THIS IS HIGHLY DESTRUCTIVE.

I am currently employed in a school that decided to honor primary language instruction but only to a certain extent. If you speak to the principal, to the bilingual facilitator, and other bilingual teachers here it will be evident that we all wholeheartedly want what is best for students. Where we have divergent viewpoints is in what we all think is best for students. We house an early exit bilingual program at our school. This means that hopefully our students have been in the bilingual program since kindergarten to receive primary language exposure and by the time they reach third grade, they will be taught in English about 90% of the school day. The following year, when they are fourth graders, they will be in English-Only classrooms. Though the hearts of administrators and teachers want this to be an additive program in which students learn to be biliterate and hopefully keep their primary language and culture, the program is intrinsically meant to take the students as far as it can with their primary language and use the primary language skills to learn English, only English, for the remainder of their schooling. This is not true biliteracy. Parents as well as students are receiving a mixed message about the value of their language. Yes, we want to preserve their primary language but only as a bridge to get to English. In our school after third grade that bridge can be burned.

It very much hearkens to Chela Delgado's article, *Freedom Writers*:

*White Teacher to the Rescue* (2011) in which she bemoans movies that show the white female savior figure coming into a classroom of underperforming, minority students. In the article she poignantly points out how the movie had students learning Hip-Hop lyrics and music not for its own sake—its artistic intricacies and cultural significances that would resonate with the students—but as a way to get them to learn Shakespeare. The study of Hip Hop

was the bait to hook the students and reel them into Western culture's ideals of what good literature is, much like primary language instruction in an early exit program is the bait and hook to get student to learn English.

THIS IS NOT TRUE BILITERACY. PARENTS AS WELL AS STUDENTS ARE RECEIVING A MIXED MESSAGE ABOUT THE VALUE OF THEIR LANGUAGE.

In an early exit program a child's primary language is strengthened so that the mother language can help in the acquisition of English. This is not a maintenance program and by that I mean that the program does not honor the language as something that should be maintained throughout the student's life. Rather it is a scaffolding, a *calaca*, a stepping stone to get students to English. Scaffoldings and stepping stones are necessary and primordial parts of learning something and some can, and should, be taken away later. But when we are talking about a language, a culture, taking them away is taking a person's own identity away and this is highly destructive. When we are talking about a person's language, culture and identity, education should be additive not subtractive.

The systematic denial of a person's primary language can be seen as passive aggressive coercion. A denial stoked by the fires of a national legislature that focuses on a single

high stakes test given indiscriminately to all students who have been in the educational system for more than one year, with no regard to their primary language abilities, and with penalties for low performance regardless. In the case of early exit bilingual programs parents are promised biliteracy for their children, but in third grade the bilingual rug is pulled out from under them to see if they remain standing, to see if they can keep their balance on their own.

If we promise biliteracy that commitment is lifelong. It is a commitment to honor a language, a culture, and an identity. The rug was already pulled out from under my feet and I alone made the commitment to reinstate it. With the help of others, as a bilingual educator, it is now my turn and I have already made the commitment to ensure that children who come into bilingual education remain standing with their language, their culture and their identities in-

tact. We should not allow the blocking, stunting, replacing, or decimating of a language, most especially once we have promised it through a bilingual program. Such acts would lead us to ethical issues concerning deception and at worst, could be considered cultural genocide.

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# Fall Conference—2011

## Creating Possibilities for Today's Student



The SDAWP conference committee hosted its largest audience yet when close to 120 fellows and friends joined us in September. Co-director Christine Kané opened by challenging participants to think about the rapid pace of educational change, emphasizing that teachers must be life-long learners.



There was something for everyone in the break out sessions. Susan Minnicks shared her work with mentor text while Mindy Shacklett discussed strategies for writing across the curriculum. Laura Smart met the needs of teachers of younger students as she talked about fluency, and Janet Baum shared ideas for conferring. Co-presenters Divona Roy, Jason Parker and Heather Bice engaged upper grade teachers with their talk on academic writing. A Writing in the 21st Century strand offered a technology twist. Janet Ilko, Jacob Ruth and Holly French engaged participants with iPods, and Valentyna Banner, Janis Jones and Ann Zivotsky had participants making one-take movies with Flip cameras during their session on digital media.



Our next conference event will be held in March when Fellows from the 2011 SI will share their inspirational work. Look for information about all of our upcoming events on the SDAWP's website and Facebook page.



## PROJECT NOTES

**Kudos to Jacob Ruth!** Cajon Valley Middle School teacher Jacob Ruth (SDAWP 2011) has been known to engage students by rapping history lessons, and this unique teaching method earned him an Inspirational Teacher award from NBC San Diego. He was featured along with his students in a recent broadcast.

**Congratulations** to Warren Williams (SDAWP 1984) who recently retired from the Sweetwater Union High School District after 35 years of teaching. Throughout his career, Warren taught English, history, and photography, and he also coached football. In retirement, he plans to golf, fish, read, write, travel and coach football at Oceanside High School, his alma mater! In addition, Warren wants to develop a web site that will serve as an education watchdog and will provide information that will help inform the public about public education. Happy retirement, Warren!

**Stay in Touch** The SDAWP website has been updated!! And we have a new URL: <http://sdawp.ucsd.edu>. Come check us out and let us know what you think. If you are an SDAWP Fellow and would like to get regular updates about upcoming SDAWP and other local education events, please send us your email. Visit our website and go to the 'Contact Us' link, or email us at: [sdawp@ucsd.edu](mailto:sdawp@ucsd.edu). We would love to add you to our eList!!!

**"Like us" on Facebook** for SDAWP news and event information. Links to writing resources and research articles are posted daily, offering a wealth of ideas for curriculum design and implementation. [www.facebook.com/SDAWP](http://www.facebook.com/SDAWP)

Dialogue, Winter 2011-12

# Dialogue

## Call for Manuscripts

**Spring 2012 Issue  
Submission Deadline:  
March 1, 2012**

## Writing in the 21st Century

### e-Write: The Marriage of Technology and Writing

The union between writing and technology is a reality that some of us have fully embraced, while others of us remain on the sidelines, seeing the nuptial between the two as an oxymoron.

We're interested in hearing about how technology has transformed your classroom. How has technology enhanced writing in your classroom? In what ways does the use of technology hinder or amplify student learning? What have you learned from your students about the need to omit or integrate technology into your classroom?

Show us your concerns about the intermingling of the two or celebrate how bringing technology into the classroom has supported writing, manifesting a higher level of the writing process. What ways have you creatively imbued technology in the classroom?

*Dialogue* would like to receive your work or the work of your students. Submit a story of student success, a strategy for implementation, or a personal essay on your teaching experience.

Email all manuscript submissions, suggestions, letters to the editor and/or Project Notes to

Jenny Moore at  
[jenny4moore@hotmail.com](mailto:jenny4moore@hotmail.com)  
or to Stacey Goldblatt at  
[moonbeam5@cox.net](mailto:moonbeam5@cox.net)

# That One Kid:

## The Struggle to Provide Quality Instruction for Your Most Challenging Students

Barb Montfort, SDAWP 2011

I'm going to throw down a challenge. I'm willing to bet every one of you has seen, met, or taught a student who thwarted you, challenged you, maybe even made you wish, just one time, that they would be absent for a day. We've all had that student who makes us question our ability to teach, who demands our attention, disrupts the learning of their classmates on a daily basis, and is never, ever absent. Of course we teach our tootsies off for them. Of course we give them extra attention and time whenever we can. Of course we want them to succeed. But when, for one reason or another, we have a break from them, we can't help but breathe a small, perhaps guilty, sigh of relief.

**...we have inadvertently sent the message that it is poor behavior that gets attention. Good behavior gets a star on the chart, a pat on the head, or a toy from the treasure chest.**

In classrooms less loving and forgiving than ours this student (we'll refer to him as male for simplicity) might be asked to sit in the corner, or away from the class—either to help him focus, or to keep him from distracting others. He may be given work to complete and consequences for not completing it. After we've tried everything we can think of to help him change his behavior, we may have to resort to sending him to the office. He continues to get out of his seat without permission, not have his notebook at his desk for journal time, fall out of his chair, and flick his neighbor's ear during silent reading time.

A philosophy termed the “kids do well if they want to” philosophy, defined by Ross W. Greene in his book *Lost at School*, guides us to design interventions directed at motivating such students, providing incentives and rewards for desired behaviors and consequences and punishments for undesired or maladaptive behaviors. Greene observes that we create elaborate systems, plans and contracts to convince him to behave appropriately. These plans often involve more work for the teachers (point sheets, tally marks, detention), and despite the extra time involved, often show negligible results. These types of interventions rely on the principle that if the student could be made to understand right from wrong and could be motivated to complete the work given to him, his behavior would turn around.

Taking Greene's “if they want to” model further, our most challenging students end up missing our best teaching, our best work. They are often given shortened tasks to complete, set apart from the classroom activities, or even sent out of the room for “reflection.” While the class as a whole is engaged in rich and fulfilling activities or much needed social interaction at recess, our “misbehavior” is counting tallies and earning stars, trying desperately to be the version of himself he thinks we want him to be. Once he realizes he can't be that person, he may begin to defy the expectations set for him. He knows the rules by heart, he knows exactly why he's in trouble, he just doesn't know how he got there. His behavior escalates as he fights the system that he could not master. This leads to more interventions and more feelings of inadequacy—for both the student and the teacher.

This is a sad illustration to be sure. However, I'd like to encourage you to flip your lens on this picture. Set aside the construct that “kids do well

if they want to” and imagine instead a “kids do well if they can” model (Greene, 11). Assume, if you will, that this child is motivated. After all, he's at school every day, right? Assume also that he understands right and wrong. He's been told time and again what is expected of him. And finally, let's agree that if punishment worked for him, it would have worked by now. If this student could, he would be doing exactly what we asked of him, and punishing him further isn't going to change that.

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I've seen the hairs on the back of teachers' necks stand straight up on end at this thought. They sputter and shake their heads. They feel guilt and stress and maybe a little defensiveness. It takes a push to view the situation from this new perspective. Perhaps his unwillingness to complete the reading worksheet is a form of communication. Perhaps he doesn't know how to do what he is supposed to do—either academically or behaviorally—and he reverts to what he knows gets him attention. Perhaps, and this is a tough one, this kid demands so much attention because acting out is the only way he knows how to get it. We have, through our “kids do well if they want to” thinking, put so much time into their challenging behaviors, we have inadvertently sent the message that it is poor behavior that gets attention. Good behavior gets a star on the chart, a pat on the head, or a toy from the treasure chest. Poor behavior gets flushed cheeks from the teacher, re-directions often accom-

Dialogue, Winter 2011-12

panied by a lecture, laughter from peers. Sadly, all of the time we put into the misbehavior of these students leads only to more time spent dealing with further misbehavior.

Instead of assuming that we can correct his behavior by paying attention to his misbehavior, let's assume that he simply does not have the skill set he needs in order to be the student we are asking him to be. That leaves us with two choices: We can either teach him the skills he needs, or change what we are asking of him. I suggest both—a radical change in how we deal with misbehavior, and a change in the behaviors we expect from all students.

### **Dealing with Misbehavior Strategic Ignoring**

Strategic Ignoring is based on the idea that, to a high degree, behaviors to which we typically react can be ignored or nearly ignored. Rather than give extra attention to poor behaviors, thus reinforcing the idea

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that poor behavior gets attention, we ignore them. We show through our non-attention that poor behavior doesn't work. When there is no misbehavior, the student takes part in the regular class routine. When the student uses misbehavior to meet their needs, the behavior is ignored.

Does this mean it is okay for a student in your classroom to misbehave? To distract others? To make poor choices? No. I am suggesting that at the moment of the misbehavior, you can ignore it. Or, if absolutely necessary, give the least obtrusive redirection possible considering the severity of the misbehavior. Rather than give the bulk of your attention to a stu-

dent for his misbehavior, and rather than give the next largest amount of your attention when he shows moments of appropriate behavior, give all of your best attention and skills to the students in your classroom. Assume that he wants to be where the learning is, where the attention-grabbing, interesting, fulfilling activities are. Create a learning environment so inviting that he will want to be a part of it every second possible. Show him that maladaptive behaviors aren't a part of your classroom environment, and that exhibiting those behaviors simply leads to NOT being a part of it. Exhibiting pro-social behaviors means he gets to join in the extraordinary learning that is going on around him.

If the classroom environment is stimulating, provides rich learning experiences, and is a safe and supportive place to be, he will want to be there. As I'll discuss later, all behavior meets a need, and while the needs and behaviors won't magically come to a halt, you have started to communicate clearly through your actions that misbehavior is not an effective communication tool in your classroom.

The next most obvious question might be, when is it okay NOT to ignore misbehavior? I'm going to push the envelope on this one too (are you sensing a pattern here?). I call them the Three Ds—Danger, Destruction, and Disturbance. First, danger—if there is imminent danger of injury, stop that from happening. Second, destruction—if the student is causing actual destruction, jump right in. Third, disturbance—if the behavior you see is well-known to cause a large disturbance later (either by escalating or by inciting other students to take part) then react. Otherwise, ignore, ignore, ignore.

If a student is tapping his pencil, ask yourself if anyone is in danger. Is pencil-tapping known to escalate into dangerous behaviors? Is the pencil-tapping simply bothering you or someone else? Then distract the pencil-tapper with something else for the time being (more on this later). Don't give undue attention to the tapping. Attention to the behavior communicates exactly that: misbehavior begets attention.

### **Imperceptible Interventions**

What do you do if the behavior can't be ignored? If the one of the Three D's pops up, or if you simply can't ignore the pencil-tapping a moment longer? You take the smallest step necessary to alter the behavior. Think small. Think tiny. Think imperceptible.

**If the classroom environment is stimulating, provides rich learning experiences, and is a safe and supportive place to be, he will want to be there.**

Let's go back to our pencil tapper. He ceased tapping his pencil when you asked him an intriguing question about his new shoes (Imperceptible Intervention #1). Now he is leaning back in his chair. He is certain to fall. You think of the Three D's. You agree with yourself that this behavior might be dangerous. What is the smallest step you can take to stop it? You ask the student to go get something from the book shelf. He does and is no longer leaning back in his chair (Imperceptible Intervention #2). Take it one step further. On the way back to his seat he leans down to tap the head of a particularly large and angry classmate. Danger? Yes, possibly. What is the smallest thing you can do? Call his name, ask for the item he picked up from the shelf (Imperceptible Intervention #3). The student will find himself back in his seat, not leaning, not tapping his pencil, and having done a favor for the teacher. It's a win all around.

### **Incompatible Direction**

Okay, I'll admit it. Sometimes the smoke-and-mirrors approach of the Imperceptible Intervention isn't enough. Either the student catches on, or worse yet, he just doesn't catch the nuance. In these cases, go for the Incompatible Direction. Ask him to do something that is incompatible with the behavior he is exhibiting. For example, let's say that our pencil-tapping, chair-leaning, head-flicking student has returned



to his seat and resumed the tapping and leaning. You try to redirect with an Imperceptible Intervention and the tapping and leaning continues, only now augmented by the poking of a peer in the arm. Tapping. Leaning. Poking. This is only going to get worse. Here is where you give the Incompatible Direction. Give a direction that will, by the very following of it, stop the behaviors. Ask him to run an errand for you. Ask him to open his book to a certain page. Ask him to reach up and grab a book off the top shelf. Whichever you choose, he is no longer tapping, leaning, or poking. This gives you time to either redirect him or change the environment. Incompatible with what he was doing before, he has now followed your direction and again, it's a win.

#### **Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence [ABC]**

Behavior is, quite simply, a response to stimulation or the environment. More than that, behavior is communication. The behaviors of a student give you information. If a student is quiet, his eyes are focused on you, and he is intent on what you are saying, that behavior tells you he is engaged. If a student sharpens his pencil, that behavior shows you that his pencil needed sharpening. If a student sharpens his pencil, then

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sharpens his pencil, then sharpens his pencil, that tells you something else. This is when you apply the ABC model. Antecedent—what happened right before the behavior occurred? Behavior—what was the behavior in factual terms? Consequence—what happened as a result of the behavior? Notice this is not a punishment. It is simply what happened as a re-

sult—facts only. Let's apply this to the pencil-sharpening student:

A—The student was handed a math worksheet.

B—The student went to the pencil sharpener, sharpened his pencil, returned to his seat. He did this multiple times. He did not talk to anyone as he did this, and returned to his seat.

C—The student had a sharp pencil. The student did not work on his math worksheet.

We now have an idea that the math worksheet may have impacted his behavior. If we deal with the math, the pencil sharpening may lessen.

Let's look at this same situation with one small change. The student is handed a math worksheet, he completes the math worksheet, then proceeds to sharpen his pencil repeatedly. While doing so he stops and talks to his classmates. Each time he sharpens his pencil, he chats with a peer for a moment while sharpening. The consequence of his behavior looks different now. Now it appears that by sharpening his pencil he is accessing peer interactions. Our intervention for this will be different. We might assign him as a helper for another student, or engage him in a task with peers. We are showing him how to meet his needs effectively.

#### **Teach Replacement Behaviors**

So, the behavior has been identified, the Three D's have been assessed, the Imperceptible Intervention and the Incompatible Direction have been utilized. There is an important final step: Provide a replacement behavior for the student. If you take a behavior away—a reaction to a stimulus—you cannot reasonably accept that the student will cope without the satisfaction the behavior provided. You need to teach the replacement behavior. For example, imagine you are trying to quit drinking caffeinated soda. You've realized it is bad for your health, it keeps you awake at night, and it makes you grouchy. You decide to quit cold turkey. Each time you are thirsty you tell yourself "no" in a very stern voice, and you refrain. You do this successfully for...a day? Two days? A week? Then you convince yourself you are go-

ing to die of thirst and crack open an ice-cold caffeinated soda. Your plan didn't work because you didn't provide a replacement behavior for your soda drinking. You forgot that all behaviors meet a need. Caffeinated soda satisfied your thirst, kept you awake, and made you feel refreshed. You tried to deny yourself all of that in one go. Next time, try a replacement beverage. Perhaps a refreshing sparkling lemonade?

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Apply the same principle to our pencil-tapping, chair-leaning student. He is accessing something by tapping his pencil and leaning in his chair. Perhaps he is accessing attention; perhaps he has a need to keep his body moving; perhaps he craves sensory stimulus of the tapping and leaning. Use the ABC model to identify what function his behavior serves, and identify an appropriate replacement behavior, tapping on his leg, using a soft koosh ball, sitting on a cushion that allows him to lean his body. Try them out! See what works. Take the time to teach the new behavior, and provide opportunity to practice it. Change won't happen in one day.

#### **Changing What We Expect**

The tide is shifting from the traditional attitudes of teaching—the idea that students need to conform to the teacher's expectations toward the certainty that we are, in fact, responsible for educating every child. We must challenge our thinking and our own memories of what school was like (chances are we were successful students who played the game well and fit neatly into the boxes) as well as look at whether what we are doing is working or not. The strategies I describe are a common core of best practices agreed upon by behavior analysts—with a little tweak-

ing and renaming of things as I have used them in my own classroom. In order to meet the needs of our students, we must not only change the ways we deal with misbehaviors, but we also reexamine our classroom practices and attitudes.

We expect students to sit when they are told, We expect students to listen when we talk, no matter how long we talk. We expect students to follow our directions. We expect them to raise their hands, to listen when others speak, and to play nicely on the playground. To be sure, we expect an awful lot out of kids, and most kids will meet our expectations. But some kids, and I would argue more and more kids, find themselves unable to adhere to these expectations. Their brains demand more input,

**For me, at this point in my career, the students that exhibit these behaviors are my daily norm. They have been sent to me as a last-ditch effort before sending them to court schools, day treatment programs, or expelling them from school.**

their hands call out for action, their bodies defy stillness. No matter how hard we might try to mold them into our classroom structure, their very being resists it no matter how much their hearts want to please you.

For me, at this point in my career, the students that exhibit these behaviors are my daily norm. They have been sent to me as a last-ditch effort before sending them to court schools, day treatment programs, or expelling them from school. They have not yet entered high school and they are faced with the clear message that what they are doing is not acceptable (truthfully, it probably isn't). What did I do to deserve this? I asked for it. Begged in fact. These students have a richness of character, a zest for life, and a resilience that will make your heart break. I work to provide them a

place to learn to navigate the system that wasn't made for them.

If you walk into my classroom, you might find it chaotic. Often, it will be a little loud, there may be students sitting in odd places, there may be students working on different projects, and there may someone sitting off to the side, hood up, arms crossed—clearly and defiantly not doing what he's been told. Someone may have a koosh ball at his desk, and many will be tapping while they work.

Visitors often give me suggestions:

"You know, I always require my students to sit in their chairs with both feet on the ground."

"It's better if you make them raise their hand before talking."

"You should make him take his hood off."

"You should remove them from the class so they don't disrupt the learning of others."

"If he was more motivated, he would do the work."

"You need to tell these kids that they won't always have it so easy."

To them I say (calmly, and refraining from climbing high onto my soap-box): If those things worked, these students wouldn't be here. If punishment and strict rules of engagement worked for them, they would be sitting in a classroom in their own school. If we want something different for them, we need to try something different.

If those visitors stay longer, they begin to see. They begin to see that learning is happening. Students are developing their innate skills and connecting with their strengths. Yes, Jimmy likes to sit sideways on his chair with his feet on my furniture. True, Vinnie has a flair for the dramatic and can be found with his hood up in the back of the room on a daily basis. Absolutely, Aaron likes to sit in a box while he works. Eventually, Jimmy will learn when feet-on-furniture sitting is okay, Vinnie will use drama appropriately, and Aaron will... well... he'll still sit in boxes. He really likes it.

Resources:

Greene, Ross W. *Lost At School*. New York: Scribner, 2008



**MUSE BOX**

**Jenny Moore,  
SDAWP 1999**

One of our colleagues asked her 7th grade Humanities students to write letters to themselves that she would then mail back to them ten years later. This past summer, with the help of Facebook, she was able to return letters to about forty 23-year-old former students. She heard from many of them after they read their own correspondence. One young woman wrote, "If I wrote a letter today to my 13-year-old self, it would say in it that I am doing exceptionally well and I am happy, healthy, and thriving. That I would eventually find confidence in my looks but more importantly in my brains, my talents, and my ability to be independent."

What would you include in a letter to your 13- or 18- or 25- or 40-year-old self? How would you reassure or update an earlier version of yourself? What wisdom would a more youthful you impart in return?

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## Calendar of Events

### Invitational Summer Institute (SI) 2012

#### Application deadline

January 9, 2012

#### SI Group Interview

January 21, 2012

#### SI Orientation Days

April 21 & June 9, 2012

#### Summer Institute

July 5 - 27, 2012

UC San Diego

### Save the Date SDAWP Spring Conference

March 3, 2012

UC San Diego

8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

### Reading Like a Writer K-12

This 3-session workshop series will introduce teachers to the idea of mentor text—using high quality writing from a variety of authors to support, engage and enable all students to take ownership of their writing.

Tuesday evenings

January 10, 2012

January 24, 2012

February 7, 2012

4:45 p.m. - 7:45 p.m.

\$195.00 for the three session series or \$175 each for teams of three from the same site.

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