What encapsulates a middle school student? What inspires them to put pen to paper? How do they process the world around them and then try to write it down in their own words?

There is something to be said about being stuck in the middle of a K–12 school career. I never thought that I would be captivated for so long by any grade level, but my fifteen years of working with seventh and eighth graders has been a journey of rich, vibrant discussions along with silly antics that just make me laugh and occasionally groan. Despite those throw-away days when stink bombs were set off in the classroom or when a group of my eighth-grade boys decided to eat a Carolina Reaper pepper (to date, the hottest pepper on record), there have also been the days when I thought and wrote alongside my students as they asked me questions about my process as a writer and poet.

This dialogue has crept into so many conversations within my classroom, with my writing club, or with the summer writing camp participants I led each year. My middle school students are cognizant that I have written feverishly for many years and that I have published articles and now a professional book. I invite them in and they want to know so much. They are interested in how a writer approaches writing. They want to know how I do it as both a teacher and an author. That curiosity is at the core of being a middle school student and it makes them privy to the writers both within me and within themselves.

Teachers are in the trenches every day. We see our students’ successes and failures with each passing day. There are plenty of both—some more than others on any given day. But we accept this, knowing that it is a part of our profession. With Common Core and so many changes in the political climate, teachers face challenges in the classroom like never before. In a given school day, nearly 200 middle school students cycle through my door, and I am reminded that the uphill battle can indeed be won. I measure victory in the exchanges of dialogue with my students, in the interest that they take in our writing, and in the initiative they take to enter a writing contest or to write about something from their hearts. Middle school students do surprise you. They have the enthusiasm of a primary grade student and the substance of a high school student. When prompted, they can write honest and authentic poems, short stories, and essays.

Yet a teacher does not need to be published in order to enjoy the synergy of teacher and student writing. Writing with students can mean doing a poetry lesson and using a teacher model to showcase the possibilities of a final product. Students will be curious about how their teacher has gathered the ideas, how he or she created the poem, and how the process came to fruition. A teacher can write alongside their students as everyone creates together as a community of writers. You may also write with your class during a guided writing activity as they explore different genres. I have done all of these types of teacher-student writing activities, and I did not need to be published to do it.

Sometimes the failures of writing can be even more telling than the successes. There have been so many times where I have shared writing flop stories with my students as they learned that writing is not a linear experience, but rather an iterative process filled with beautiful language . . . and not-so-beautiful language. Students need to know
Voices from the Middle

Voices from the Middle is an elected member of the Middle Level Section.

Frances Lin is an elected member of the Middle Level Section.

these golden nuggets of writing wisdom as they embark on their complex excursions into creating and crafting writing pieces. It informs, encourages, and even soothes the risk-taking writer. Writing is all about taking risks, and that takes courage. There is nothing more satisfying to me than listening to a reluctant writer’s voice for the first time. It is truly a moving experience of heroism.

The successes really outweigh the failures, although there are both in a writing classroom. Many a poet has been born in my middle school class. These poets tend to flock around my desk for poetry pointers. One of my students challenged a poet to write on the fly to any topic because she had developed her poetry skills so well over the course of the year. The student gave her ten minutes to write a poem about toes. She accepted the challenge and produced a beautiful, minor poem about her grandmother. Students come back to me to thank me for instilling a love of writing within them through my own writing and through theirs. The most memorable experience I had was having a just-published former student send me a signed copy of her novel that she started in my seventh-grade ELA class. It was accompanied by a letter that brought tears to my eyes. None of these successes were due to the fact that I was a published author, but rather they were outcomes of writing experiences provided in the classroom for my kids as we wrote together.

There are ways of getting started on developing as a teacher-writer, although it does take some courage. As you read this article, consider submitting a writing piece about your own experiences in the classroom for Voices from the Middle. Reading this journal is the first step, and Voices readers have that down. The next step is to consider sharing your unique, teacher voice, ideas and discoveries. Voices is uniquely a journal for teachers, by teachers. As the journal of the middle level section, Voices beckons teacher-writers who are new to publishing their stories, welcoming and nurturing each submission. Teachers often say that they are not the best writers, but it is the genuine, teacher voice that is so precious. We toil in the classroom, and that hard work exudes teacher insight that can support and motivate other teachers—new and veteran.

In related service and professional work, contributing to teacher innovation is a focal point of the Middle Level Section Steering Committee (MLSSC). As a member of this committee, I can attest to the fine work that this committee does in order to make the middle school teacher more visible in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Conventions held in November. However, teacher-leaders are needed each year to serve on this committee. Committee members serve a four-year term after being nominated and elected.

Potential participants can nominate themselves through email or by physically handing the nominating committee their application at the Convention. I handed my application to the nominating committee at the Minneapolis Convention in 2014. Several candidates are selected by the nominating committee, and typically two are elected each year by NCTE members. Getting involved is a surefire way of contributing to NCTE and to the profession of middle level educators.

Think about Voices and the MLSSC as vehicles toward developing yourself as a teacher and as a writer. These are outlets that teachers may take advantage of to share in the middle level community, and I encourage all educators to consider these opportunities that are available through NCTE to advance our profession together.
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