

# Their Words, Your Voice

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*“This is the middle. / Things have had time to get more complicated, / messy really. Nothing is simple anymore.”*

—Billy Collins, “Aristotle”

I love beginnings. I’m skeptical of endings. But living is done from the middle. Yet we teachers don’t always like to talk about the middle of our work, often opting for origins and conclusions. We are excited to talk about the pretty pictures of beginnings, the ideas and ideals that are still crystallized. They’re the plans that haven’t been upended yet, the designs that haven’t been interrupted or gone awry. The endings give us our stories. Whether it’s retracing the steps that lead to magic or the reflective insights when it all goes wrong, endings give us the arc.

The middle, though, is the most human of all of our work. It turns a tension into a pathway and an uncertainty into forward motion. It’s where we leave our beautiful plans on the desk and pay attention to the people. It’s what my fourth-grade teacher, Mary Lou Myers, did whenever it was time to write: she sat beside us and wrote too. It’s what I do when I purposely try to make sense of a poem I’ve never read before *with* my students as an act of flattening the teacher-student hierarchy and meeting each other as readers and learners. Teaching from the middle means teaching with vulnerability in the hope of progress over perfection.

When I envisioned curating this column, I thought about the *middle* of our work and the voices we most need to center us there, those of emerging teachers—the ones who have had just enough time for things to get more complicated and messy. I wanted to honor the space of in-between by situating

us precisely there. I went to my bookshelf and pulled down some of the voices that set me out on this journey twenty years ago. I pulled a few passages from our history as ELA teachers, from some of the greats whose shoulders we certainly stand on today: Nancie Atwell, Donald Graves, and Leila Christenbury. Then I invited our newest voices to respond to them. Here’s what happened.

From Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle*, 1987, pp. 74–81

I begin by modeling my own writing for the big, obvious reason—to start establishing myself as a writer who teaches writing and probably has some idea of what she’s talking about. But I’m also hoping my kids will begin to see how writing is idiosyncratic . . . I begin by modeling stories of personal experience because that’s where I hope my kids will begin, by looking for the significances of the events of their own lives. . . . For this same reason I always model a story I can’t write.

Kristin, a sixth-grade ELA teacher, shares the same sense of “a writer who teaches” that Atwell has championed for decades in her response:

Several years ago, I also began making a point of modeling writing for my students. Not only does it establish me as a writer, but more importantly I think it shows my students that being a writer is difficult. When we just show students finished and polished pieces they get the false idea that writing is easy, and when they struggle as a writer they think it’s because they aren’t good at it. Modeling my writing lets them into the process and allows them to

Voices  
from the Middle  
Series

see strategies I use to overcome roadblocks. It may leave me feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable at times, but it also helps create a sense of community of writers who are all in this together. This passage was written when I was six years old and becoming a writer myself. I love the timelessness of its message and how we can still use it today.

Kristin reminds us that being “in the middle” is being part of the timelessness of discomfort. It’s why lesson plans alone rarely do the teaching—people must: we teach in the nuance of someone else’s struggle, not in the perfect execution of a plan.

Donald Graves challenges us not to expect the literature to do the teaching alone, either. Too easily, we can slide into becoming “assessors of reading” or “experts of literature,” but neither of those roles land us squarely as teacher. Here, Graves suggests a teacher is more like a conduit, a path-widener for learners to *live* literature on their own terms.

**From Donald Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, 1983, p. 75**

Teachers have their own ways of surrounding the children with literature. They surround the children according to their own interests, whether it is choral speaking, story telling, role playing, informal drama, or story reading. Teachers have different strengths and backgrounds that can be used to enrich their presentation of literature in the classroom. But the provision of literature is not a passive event for children. At every turn the teacher seeks to have children live the literature.

Meghan, a fourth-year teacher, connects Graves’s wisdom to her own classroom:

Language arts is about guiding students to discovering literature that helps them learn to love themselves and the world around them. This is impossible to do when a teacher is only thinking of him/herself when choosing texts for students to engage with in the classroom. We must consider all elements of diversity and work toward feeding and fostering the diverse populations in our classrooms and society. Therefore, it is the teacher’s role to develop rapport with each individual student in order to understand the backgrounds and interests of each student. Then, we must use this knowledge as well as our vast knowledge of literature to place books that speak to each student individually. The goal needs to shift so that students are living in LITERATURE. From all voices. From their own

voice. That is where understanding and change stems from.

Meghan’s voice is crucial as she advocates for going beyond all the ways we as teachers interact with literature, but she also emphasizes the ways we must pay attention to how *all* of our students interact with language and can live the literature from their own experiences, not just through ours.

It can be tempting to see the pressures that plague our classrooms today as unique to us. While it is true that teachers and classrooms today face growing demands that threaten to undermine our work, it’s also true we aren’t isolated under this weight. We’re connected to a history of dissenters and truth-tellers, of advocates and compelling voices. It only takes this passage from Leila Christenbury’s “love letter” to the profession to remind us of our connectedness, not our singularity.

**From Leila Christenbury, *Making the Journey*, 1994, p. 5**

These are tough times in which to be a teacher. Issues of curricular control, of teacher salary and status, of student behavior, school funding, test scores, community involvement, swirl everywhere and threaten to overwhelm even the most dedicated. For English language arts teachers the constant battle over what subject areas are of most value, how much writing we can squeeze into a crowded schedule, and how we balance the teaching of skills with the excitement of reading and talking about literature complicate the picture. Despite these issues, you have decided to make the journey, to be (and to continue to become) an English language arts teacher. For that decision, you have my respect, and all of us in the classroom welcome you into the profession. It is exhausting and exhilarating and important work, work that is as enduring as it is difficult.

Teaching is the central defining truth of my life, the core and heart of my identity. For you, too, teaching may become that important and that sustaining. Not for the complacent nor for the fainthearted, making the journey toward being and becoming a teacher is an adventure of the first order.

Christenbury’s words resonated with Brooke, an eighth-grade literacy teacher early in her career:

I don’t remember a time that teaching was ever posed to me as an easy path. Nor do I remember anyone ever sharing stories about a great teacher who was not also described as tireless or passionate or dedicated. The common thread between teachers of any subject and teachers of English is a draw toward

complex questions with no one right answer and an enthusiasm for identifying and pulling at intricacies.

The passage made Caitlin, a middle school teacher, think about the trajectory of growth she shares with her students:

I am learning and growing as a teacher hopefully at the same rate my students are learning and growing as writers and thinkers. Teaching the power of words is certainly not a profession for the “complacent nor for the fainthearted.” Maybe, though, it can be a profession for those of us who read and write ferociously, cheer and high five vehemently, and can overlook the occasional comma splice in honor of the beautiful writing on either side.

It’s that beautiful writing and the power of story that Sally, an eighth-grade language arts teacher, believes will help teachers persevere:

It can be disheartening to be in education if you listen too closely to the news, so it’s important that we tell our own stories. I love how social media has become a place for educators to share and promote the amazing things happening in our schools and classrooms. Every single language arts teacher I know got into the profession to inspire, to encourage, to educate. . . . and have persevered to make a difference despite any challenges they’ve encountered. It’s easy to stay the course when our work is incredibly meaningful and our students are discovering their world and their own stories through reading and writing.

In each of these responses, I’m struck by the call for connection, by the sense that the way to “live the middle” is to be sure you’re not doing it alone. And for those who may be unsure if our emerging teachers, just crossing the threshold into complexity, are ready, you only need Hope’s voice to assure you:

*I do not think this is a tough time to be a teacher. I think it is an essential time to be a teacher.*

Teaching for me is also the defining truth of my life. As a third year teacher, I learned early on that people would tell me that my passion would fade. That my students would anger me. That teaching is too difficult. That I could not sustain my love for the classroom forever. Passages like [Christenbury’s] remind me that teaching is not something that occurs outside of me but rather is found deep within. And thus, it will always be the defining truth of my life. There is no end, no starting point, no way to shed my teacher skin. Teaching is simply all around me and within me.

I do not think this is a tough time to be a teacher. I think it is an essential time to be a teacher. Teenagers are broken. From their hearts to their homes, few of them lead whole lives. Without fail, the holes in their lives are patched and stitched together with books and notebooks and conferences and poems. English teachers are healing the kids who are falling into the cracks of this crazy, overwhelming, ugly world we often live in. Through reading and writing I see teenagers stand up straight again. And through all of this, all I am doing is living within my truth. How beautiful is that?

Indeed, Hope. How beautiful *is* that?

Teachers in the middle need voices from there. If you’re an emerging ELA teacher and are interested in sharing your story as part of this column this year, please reach out. I can’t wait to hear from you!

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## REFERENCES

- Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Christenbury, L. (1994). *Making the journey*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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## 2018 NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award

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**Yolanda Gonzales** from The Joe Barnhart Academy, Beeville, Texas, is the recipient of the 2018 NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts Award. This award recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers of grades 6 through 8 who have demonstrated excellence in teaching English language arts and inspired a spirit of inquiry and a love of learning in their students.

The award will be presented at the Middle Level Luncheon during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas. Learn more about Yolanda and how you can nominate an outstanding educator for the 2019 award at <http://www2.ncte.org/awards/outstanding-educator-middle/>.