

information and ideas for K-12 Language Arts practitioners

OWP Retreats!

By Laura Gosh Mahler

Let's celebrate a job well done and plan for an even better future! This was the invitation at the recent Oakland Writing Project Retreat in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The Retreat brought together over 30 people with widely varied connections to OWP; it also featured leadership from Gloria Dukes, who traveled from the Coastal Georgia Writing Project to lend a hand. Participants set out to develop new leadership, celebrate the Project's impact, and plan for the future.

University and public schools. He explained the program as a bridge between the University and the community, and that the relationship between OWP and the program could be expanded upon. Many participants had ideas of ways that they could capitalize on this opportunity in their teaching.

Then it was time to roll up the shirtsleeves to develop specific proposals for the roles and responsibilities of the various positions in

And the trouble is if you don't risk anything you risk even more.

-Erica Jong



Georgia's Gloria Dukes discusses the future of the Oakland Writing Project with Sheryl Perlmutter and Laura Schiller.

Teacher-consultants spent two days undertaking various tasks. First, they introduced themselves by exploring and acknowledging the personal and professional connections that had been made through OWP. Some were moved to tears when expressing the difference that the Oakland Writing Project has made in their lives. Many explained that it was a place to make new friends, to work together with others who had similar goals, and to find their professional voices. It was life and career altering to many. After the introductions, participants were invited to become part of the new OWP Leadership Team.

David Scobey, Director of the Arts of Citizenship Program at the University of Michigan, spoke briefly about possible connections that could be made between the

OWP. Specific tasks and requirements were solidified the roles of co-director, Advisory Council member, associate directors, élan and technology liaison, while ideas to improve the Summer Institute, recruitment strategies, mentoring programs, ongoing support, and youth programs and projects were planned.

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One of the many future plans was to expand youth programming to include more locations for summer writing camps. Creating camps in multiple locations throughout Oakland County's districts will allow for greater accessibility and more student participation.

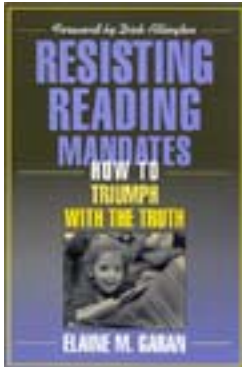
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Professional Book Review

By Maureen Young



*Resisting Reading
Mandates: How to
Triumph With the Truth*
By Elaine M. Green
Heinemann, 2002

President Bush's plans for literacy and education, "No Child Left Behind" and "Reading First," have been praised and applauded by many. What educator would want to argue with the desire to accommodate every student? After all, as part of the education system, isn't that the goal we all aspire to accomplish? So why are these federal programs so controversial? Edith Garan's recent book, *Resisting Reading Mandates*, addresses the manner in which the government intends to accomplish this plan: through systematic phonics instruction and decodable textbooks along with multiple testing of sub skills, and of course, purse strings attached to success and failure for school districts.

Garan has subtitled her book *How to Triumph with the Truth* because she disagrees with the limited definition of instruction in literacy in "No Child Left Behind" and "Reading First" programs. She waded through the 500 page document called *The Report of The National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read*, usually referred to as the NRP report, to analyze for herself, as well as for the teaching community, why the government has taken such a narrow view of reading instruction. In her thorough review, she discovered that only two members of the fourteen-member board had any direct involvement with teaching children to read. What's more, in looking for an answer, only a narrow view of research methodology was considered.

She was skeptical of the federal government's interpretation of the document, so she scoured the NRP to find the good points that were overlooked. Her book is comprised of questions and answers using the NRP report to advocate a broader look at literacy. Her analysis of the report uses direct quotes to support knowledgeable educators who understand that there is no quick fix for the broad range of intellectual, environmental, and socio-economic factors that children bring with them to the classroom. Garan's book would be useful to the teacher being pushed to a narrow band of rote instruction in the name of "No Child Left Behind" or Reading First who needs to find support for using a range of reading and writing strategies based on the student needs in his or her classroom.

Maureen Young teaches and facilitates professional development at Troy High School.

Retreat

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The Summer Institute group developed strategies to increase participant diversity. They discussed ways to market the program to open up participation to districts that have not participated in the past. Possible criteria for acceptance to the Institute were discussed. The possibility of creating a group for past Summer Institute participants to continue the work started was also explored.



Ida Turpin and Nicole Johnson listen as colleagues discuss the Oakland Writing Project's future.

Another important aspect of the retreat was the goal of cultivating new leadership in an attempt to plan for eventual successors to the current leadership. Many of the leaders at OWP recognized the need to keep OWP summer participants involved after the month-long institute ends. Specific plans for mentoring future Summer Institute participants were developed in order to continue the connections between teacher-consultants and OWP.

"It was invigorating, and it made me excited to start collaborating again."

As the retreat drew to a close, participants signed themselves up to take on new responsibilities to continue the work of OWP feeling revitalized and looking towards a promising future. According to Nancy Nankervis from Clarkston High School, "It was invigorating, and it made me excited to start collaborating again."

Laura Gosh Mahler teaches at Clarkston High School.

A Peek Into The Classroom

SLAM Visit

By Kathleen Hayes-Parvin and Jim Haugh

He scissored his feet, crouched and covered, dodging the blows of a phantom foe. He bobs, weaves, and, with a calculated patience, waits for his window. Then-BLAM! A bone-crushing roundhouse brings the bout to an abrupt end. Fists thrust to heaven, he bounces in rhythm with his chant, "MATT-TY D! BOOM-MA-YAY! MATT-TY D! BOOM-MA-YAY!" The crowd echoes the chorus-spoils for the victor.

This is no pugilist, but a poet and a performer. Matt Dagher-Margosian prefaced his piece by confessing that he was often picked on at school. He was different- and as every school kid knows, different is NOT good. He wrote the poem with the Greatest in mind-Muhammad Ali. The fighter's talent made him champion; his confidence made him legendary.

Matt admired him, he explained, but not so much for his fists as his wits. The performer recalls the poetic bravado of Ali in this piece about clobbering the specter of self-doubt.

Seventy-five sixth graders sat wide-eyed, riveted in our library. They had certainly heard poetry before, but never like this. The beat, the powerful language and the rhyme scheme, gave it a gritty, cool flavor. What's more, this new poetry bore a striking resemblance to their beloved hip-hop.

Pioneer High School teacher Jeff Kass and four of his student-poets journeyed from Ann Arbor to Southfield last November, stunning 200 Birney Middle school students with the possibilities of poetry. Andy Chen's piece, "Azn Baller," with its fast-paced onomatopoeia and sports theme was a crowd favorite. Ariel Adamson and Kelsey Cauley, both with softer, more subdued styles, shared works about a little girl growing up fatherless and a September 11th retrospective- more contemplative, but no less powerful.

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Upon our first introduction to this genre, we knew this would be the snare that would capture our kids. It was last July, at the University of Michigan's School of Education, where Professor Ann Ruggles-Gere and Jeff Kass joined forces to bring together teachers and high-school students to co-teach a class entitled Making American Literatures. At the conclusion of our week together, Jeff generously volunteered to visit during the coming school year.

We began laying the ground-work early in the year. We knew Jeff and his students' performances would inform our teaching and energize our students. We wanted them to see that poetry was not dusty or archaic, but rooted in their lives and experiences, much like rap and hip-hop. Performance poetry is powerful-the sound, the rhythm, and the theatrics. Jeff's students were sure to inspire the love of language and a motivation to craft it. We welcomed the opportunity for the high-schoolers to work with our middle school students on pieces.

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Though many of our students may not be interested in taking their work to the stage, the poets' performances demonstrated that every voice has value and that, when language is carefully crafted, that voice, whether small or large, is powerful.

Kathleen Hayes-Parvin and Jim Haugh teach at Birney Middle School in Southfield.

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Invitations and Celebrations

By Cathy Fraga

The Invitation

The idle chatter of sixth graders transformed into silence as poet Ayodele's rich timbred voice wove its spell in the classroom. Normal activity ground to a halt as students sat transfixed, listening to his descriptive poem "Home." This was their introduction to slam poetry and they delighted in the sound of it. It took three replays before they could begin to focus on how the piece was crafted. It was this lesson, and the ones that followed, that would spark their attempts at similar writing.

The most powerful lesson came in the form of a visit from an amazing group of Pioneer High School students and their English teacher, Jeff Kass. More than ninety middle school students and their teachers sat in the library as these performance poets spoke from their hearts about the significant events in their lives, allowing us a more intimate look at who they really were. Their cadence acted as an ebb and flow; tugging on the younger

students' imagination and willingness to risk it all the next time they sat down to write. Little did they suspect that the opportunity would soon present itself.

Following their dynamic presentation, two of the visiting performers, now turned writing mentors, were brought into the classroom. Under their guidance and inspiration, we began to examine, from a very close and personal perspective, the question, "Where are we from?" The results of those efforts are included in this publication. As with any work in progress, the students have occasionally revisited these attempts with the intentions of tweaking it or just to recall a time when their voices reached a different audience. We would like to thank Jeff Kass and his performing group of high school students for their help and encouragement with the reflective types of writing, and for the lasting impact it has had on us.

The Celebrations

Living Upstairs

I'm from living upstairs above my cousins.
I'm from creaky stairs and no cable TVs.
I'm from a place where guns go off and lives are cut short.
I'm from my mom and dad being as beautiful and handsome as butterflies.
I'm from a place where girls show off and act all hot like the sun,
But what they need to know is they are not.
I'm from sunny days, dark days, cloudy days and boring rainy days.
I'm from a place where my little brother talks non-stop,
Like someone plugged an Energizer battery into him.
He keeps going, and going, and going.
I'm from sleepy heads, wet beds, and heads hard as rock.
I'm from a place where my favorite rapper Eminem first started out,
Where cars are built, where Motown started and where we have the Renaissance every day of the week.
I'm from a place, I'm from a place,
I'm from a place called Detroit.

-Antwine Johnson



Antwine Johnson busy at work.



Desiree Davis spices up her writing with colorful illustrations.

Mississippi

I'm from Mississippi
 Where in the middle of winter right before you get cold,
 Another burning sun comes in.
 Where chicken is a daily meal,
 Where when you go to school, it seems you've gotten dumber.
 I'm from a place where tornado season lasts almost all year . . .
 A place where thunderstorms are daily,
 Where you can't get anywhere without getting hot.
 A place where there are 36-hour churches,
 Where the thieves steal, liars lie, players play,
 And ballers cross other ballers.
 I'm from a place where the poor get poorer and the rich move
 out.
 Where the famous are spoiled and the anonymous get jealous.
 I'm from the freestyle ghetto.
 I'm from Cold Springs, Mississippi.

-Jairus Fuqua

Where I'm From

Where am I from?
 I'm from a place where my dad is always gone.
 In order for us to live my dad earns money from
 A pretty easy job, or so someone would think.
 He's from traveling in this country . . .
 Hawaii, New York California, and more.
 He's from traveling out of this country . . .
 Africa, China, Korea and more.
 I'm from a place of wanting my dad to come home.
 Come home from the base, from the military, from 7-11.
 I'm from a place called Happiness when he does come home.
 My eyes burn from holding back the tears when I see him.
 My eyes burn from holding back the tears when he surprises
 me with the gifts he brings.
 I open my presents the same way I tear down my bed when
 I'm mad,
 With sheets everywhere.
 I make a big O with my lips to show my surprise with those
 gifts bought just for me.
 But do you know what the best gift of all is?
 Seeing my dad again.
 Where am I from?
 I am from too many moments of missing my dad.
 -Desiree Davis



Lynndon Carter uses class writing time to look up words to inspire his poetry.

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Commentary

By Sherri Masson

As my sons left home I began to fill the void they left with work I didn't think I had time for when they were young. I marched on Washington D.C. as part of the Million Mom March, a demonstration organized in the wake of the Columbine tragedy to protest the easy access to guns in this country. To stand in one location with 750,000 like-minded individuals was an empowering, heady experience that permanently changed me. I marched in honor of my fifth grade class and wore a t-shirt with all of their names on it. I believed then, as I do now, that I was doing something on behalf of children. Surely the world would be a safer place if there were fewer guns. The statistic that nine children a day die from gun injury in the United States was chilling and haunted me as a teacher, parent and citizen. What I didn't know then, and would only begin to know as I waded into this movement, was that a solution to this national tragedy was part of a tangled web of political and social traditions.

I marched in honor of my fifth grade class and wore a t-shirt with all of their names on it. I believed then, as I do now, that I was doing something on behalf of children.

Since the march, I've become educated. I'm less naïve about the realities of how things operate in a large system of political favors and wealthy special interests. I now realize it's not about the safety of kids. It's about power and fear—much bigger issues than putting safety locks on guns or mandating better background checks. My first reality check came when I became involved in the petition drive led by a group who call themselves "People Who Care About Kids." We stood outside in sub-zero temperatures collecting signatures to overturn a bill passed in the middle of the night by a lame-duck legislature in 2000 and signed into law by Governor Engler. The law was in response to the National Rifle Association's agenda to make every state a shall-issue state where concealed carry permits would be issued to anyone, regardless of their need. Hundreds of volunteers took to the streets to collect enough signatures to get it on the ballot so Michigan citizens could decide for themselves if they wanted thousands of additional guns in the general population. Unfortunately, the fact that 270,000 people signed the petitions (more legal signatures than any other drive in history) didn't matter. A small appropriations bill had been attached, making it illegal as a ballot proposal under the Michigan Constitution. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. As a result, thousands of guns were registered to average citizens in Michigan within the first three months after the law went into effect.

Many say there have not been any problems since the law's implementation, but when FBI statistics show so-called "law-abiding citizens" who purchased their guns legally commit 90% of gun deaths in America, it's difficult to believe. Half of these deaths are suicide and the other half, homicides. 75% of the victims are shot by people they know. Very few criminals walk into a gun store to purchase guns. Most get their guns from illegal trafficking. But because the gun lobby continually defeats any move to pass laws that trace the ownership of guns used in crimes, we can only speculate on how many lives would be saved with ballistic fingerprinting.

Historically, we know that fear is the most effective way to control a population. It started before September 11, but that event whipped things into a frenzy. The gun lobby no longer needed to worry about us "moms." With the help of the media, there is such an atmosphere of fear in this country people are arming themselves at an unprecedented rate. Fear seems to dominate reason on many fronts.

In spite of the fact that survey after survey shows most Americans favor common sense gun legislation, as individuals, most are afraid to be vocal about this basic public safety issue. Incredibly, even our greatest advocates for children, teachers, often shy away from public debate. The Million Mom March has been working with the non-profit group PAX on an educational campaign called ASK. This campaign advises parents that there are guns in 40% of the homes in this country, and many of those guns are loaded and not locked up. It urges parents to ask when their children go somewhere to visit or play, if the homeowner has unsecured weapons in the home. This seems like a reasonable question to ask along with the other questions we ask when our children go to a friend's house to spend the night, etc. It is amazing to think that some schools find this a controversial program and are afraid to support it.

I've often been asked to explain why I have such a passion on this subject. I'm not sure I know the answer. I remember watching the film on television of a young boy hanging from the window at Columbine High School and I immediately thought of my own boys. Not long after that event, a six year old shot another six year old in Flint. And I spent a morning in my classroom crying with a colleague and asking the question, "What can we do?" Sometimes life carries you in directions you never could have anticipated. I have always been an advocate for children in my work as an educator, but I found myself being given the opportunity to go beyond my own community.

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Celebrations

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D-Town

I'm from the D-town,
Formally known as Detroit.
I'm from a place where it is overpopulated.
I'm from a place where I hear gunshots every night.
I'm from a place where there is never any lemonade stands.
I'm from a place most people call the ghetto of Michigan.
I'm from the home of many superstars
Such as Eminem, the well-known rapper,
Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin.
I'm from the place where music basically started.
I'm from Detroit.

-Lunden Simpson



Brittany Hawthorne works on her writing.

Too often we pass up those opportunities. So often we as teachers get so beaten down with state and federal mandates, curricular and extracurricular demands that we're sure we can't possibly squeeze another thing into our growing list of everyday expectations. But as we sort through it all, are we forgetting to speak on behalf of our children? Where are the voices of indignation as we see our curriculums moving away from inquiry-based teaching toward programs that keep all kids marching in the same line? How can we equip our students to be participants in democracy if they don't now how to question and investigate? Since when are thinking, creativity and choice NOT basics? Where is the outrage when it comes to defending the minds of our children? Where is the outrage when we find out that there are 27 consumer product safety regulations for teddy bears and NONE for firearms in this country!

We miss those opportunities to stand up for our kids when a climate of fear and intimidation, legitimate or media-induced, sends us into a fetal defense position and, thus allowing the wheels of greed and special interest to move forward unimpeded. I see too many of my colleagues working hard in their profession but feeling powerless to stop the current trends, whether in education or in gun-violence. The reluctance to get involved and become agents of change is, I believe, rooted in an over-powering fear of not being considered a "team-player"-even at the expense of our children.

How can we equip our students to be participants in democracy if they don't now how to question and investigate?

Fear and the silence that it spawns may be the way of things at the moment, but history also bears out the power of progressive thinking when voiced by articulate leaders. Those of us in the front line of education and child advocacy must become those voices or risk the possibility that ALL children will be left behind.

Sherri Masson teaches a Brooks Elementary School in Huron Valley.

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