Already Readers and Writers

Honoring Students' Rights to Read and Write in the Middle Grade Classroom

Edited by Jennifer Ochoa

Principles in Practice

Students' Rights to Read and Write

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Introduction: Where We Have Been, Where We Are, Where We Are Going

I begin this book by sharing a story with you of an incredible day of school, told to me by my father-in-law, Stan Hinden, an old-fashioned newspaper man. He started his career at age twelve and submitted his last published column in July 2016 at the age of eighty-nine. He wrote most of the years of his life for many publications, including *New York Newsday*, *The Washington Post*, and the AARP digital publication. He even published four editions of his own book. Because we were both writers, and as I was seeking common ground with him early in our relationship, I once asked him how he started as a journalist. He chuckled and told me that everything—all the years, the articles, the interviews and publications, all of it—traced back to one day in seventh grade in Far Rockaway, New York, approximately 1939.

It seems that day his class had a substitute teacher, who addressed the class that morning saying, "Today you will spend the day producing a newspaper. You can decide who the reporters are, what stories you need to write, who will get interviewed, and what will get published. We're publishing your newspaper at the end of the day." And then the teacher, so the story goes, left the students to themselves. Stan and three other friends took this opportunity to soar. They spent the entire school day interviewing the other students and writing stories. Their newspaper was published at the end of the day, and the four boys truly saw themselves as worthy reporters. After relating this story to me, Stan chuckled again and said, "You know, three of us went on to become reporters when we grew up. We caught the bug that day."

I never asked Stan the standard pedagogical questions like:

- "While you boys were writing, what were the other kids doing?"
- "How did the teacher actually publish and distribute the paper at the end of the day?"
- "How did the teacher help with editing and teach into revising?"
- "What happened the next day? Did your regular teacher let you continue your newspaper?"

What struck me was that seventy years after this experience, Stan still remembered that day and could recount how it changed the trajectory of his life. This was one teacher, opening up a classroom to become an authentic place of real writers, who

wrote about what mattered most to them and their community and then published and shared their pieces with an authentic audience. Those boys knew their writing would impact their audience, because the audience of other seventh graders cared about that writing too.

I want to teach in that kind of classroom too. Don't you?

The flavor of Stan's 1939 seventh-grade day is deeply embedded in the content and intention of the NCTE position statement *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write*, published in 2014. One point in this guiding statement is practically the lesson plan Stan's teacher followed that day:

> Teachers should foster in students an understanding and appreciation of their responsibilities inherent in writing and publication by encouraging students to assume ownership of both the writing process and the final product. (p. xxv; all page references to this position statement and to *The Students' Right to Read* map to the versions reprinted in the front matter of this book)

The rest of the position statement focuses on teaching the writers in our classrooms by honoring their voices and processes and helping them get their pieces out to real audiences who care about what they have to say. This position statement calls us to provide opportunities that encourage kids to write for formal and informal purposes, and when students are writing informally, they should be able to write without fear of our red pen judgment.

Likewise, a companion position statement, *The Students' Right to Read* (NCTE, 2018), guides us to build reading communities in our classrooms that honor kids as people who read, not just people who read for school. This statement asks us to examine our teaching practices so that books are freely shared and chosen and read in classrooms. We are encouraged through this document to make sure that the faces and stories on our classroom shelves reflect the faces and stories of the kids sitting in the desks in front of us. In fact, I like to call these two position statements NCTE's Golden Rules for Reading and Writing: Teach reading and writing as you would like to be taught; teach the readers and writers in your classroom as actual readers and writers.

Throughout my nearly three decades as a teacher, I've been striving to build classroom spaces and practices that align with these two important documents. Both position statements point to our shared professional knowledge that the apprenticeship student reader-writers receive in a workshop classroom should prepare them for life as literate people. Guiding the people I teach to build literate lives

that extend beyond my classroom has always been my goal. I still have my very first copy of *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell (1987). I bought it for an undergrad methods class in 1990. When I read about Atwell's dining room table classroom, what I now understand as a standard workshop setting, I absolutely imagined that my own classroom would be just like hers (pp. 19–20).

However, while I began my career with Atwell in hand, I also had traditional ideas about being an English teacher. I couldn't quite figure out how to have kids in reading and writing workshop every day, and I saw benefit in a community of readers reading a book together. I wanted to have a robust classroom library but had only enough money to cobble together a collection from garage sales, my mentor teacher's castoffs, thrift stores, and books I had carried with me since my own young adult days. I scheduled several book talks a week, and I asked kids to share with partners and the whole class the books they were reading. But I could plan only one day a week of independent reading workshop. I didn't know about conferencing yet, but I did know that I should be talking to kids naturally, one reader to another, about the books we read. I had a sense that as a community of readers, we should sometimes read books all together as a class, as Oprah was suggesting with her national book club initiatives. And I hoped that we would use our collective reading experiences to grow as people in the world, not just as an opportunity to study literature.

And while I believed I should be helping kids learn how to write literary essays about these books, I also had a notion that when we read books together as a class, kids might do amazing work if they were able to design and execute their own responses, which might be pieces of writing or pieces of visual art or music or even books they wrote themselves. I had a sense that kids might be more interested in what they were writing if they were able to pick their own topics. When possible, I tried to structure assignments so that kids could pick what they crafted. Every time I did that, they were more invested, and their work was a truer representation of their understanding and abilities. And I knew that real publication was ultimately the goal. I became good friends with our school district's printing office, and at least twice a year we published a book. As a new teacher, my early years were a good mix of a traditional ELA classroom with a generous amount of workshop time supporting all of the reading and writing we did together.

Over the years, I have learned so much about the myriad ways I can respect my students' rights to read and write as *real* readers and writers, not just as people who read and write for school. In recent years, however, as new mandates and resulting structured curricula and assessments came into my classroom, I recognized just how difficult combining a workshop setting with a mandated curriculum is—and often, I ended up forsaking "dining room table teaching" for fitting in lessons that met state and local mandates. For instance, every year I try to run the

same kind of amazing writing groups that my teacher colleagues at the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP) create during our Summer Invitational Institute, but for many years, my classroom writing groups were a total flop. An NYCWP colleague, Alie Stumpf, and I were lamenting about our very weak student writing groups, and we realized the big difference between summer writing groups and school year writing groups wasn't the obvious one—that one group had teacher participants and one group had kid participants. The difference was much more significant. First, in the summer, the teachers *chose* what to write, which pieces meant something to them and which pieces were so important to share that they wanted to keep writing until they were nearing a feeling of "really good." And second, the teacher writers knew that they were going to share the pieces publicly with the rest of the summer group. Their writing was going beyond their notebooks to an audience that mattered to them.

How much this differed from our classrooms in the time of curricular mandates! Despite all we were learning in the summers, the kids in our classes were not choosing their own topics or writing for real audiences. Rather, they were often sharing their individual drafts of the same teacher-assigned prompted essay during writing groups. Not surprisingly, the conversations weren't rich and helpful, because everyone had almost the same essay, using almost the same evidence. The writing group feedback was thin and dull because, truthfully, there wasn't much to say. And their writing, with the exception of a quick "publishing party," during which students shared pieces of their work briefly, often planned as a gallery walk of drafts, wasn't really celebrated or experienced by interested readers. Publishing parties were most anticipated because of the snacks served. The kid writing groups didn't work because, even though the student writing was based on standards and grade-level expectations, it was not owned by the kids, so the kids didn't have much to be invested in when revising or sharing. Alie and I realized we didn't need to teach the kids better; we needed to create better writing invitations/tasks/assignments that met standards-based guidelines, but that also asked kids to write individual, original pieces that they cared about writing and sharing.

The notion that kids write better and are more interested, invested authors when they own the writing is a tenet at the core of *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write*. Even though I had been teaching for many years, and this tenet was the main principle I had previously used to guide my practice, I'd forgotten about it as more strident expectations from outside agents directed my classroom work. This internal dissonance doesn't happen just to teachers like me, who've been teaching for more than twenty-five years, or to newer teachers like Alie, who learned to be a teacher in the early 2000s. I think this happens to all of us. And as new guidelines and expectations wall in our classrooms, it's quite easy to slowly

transform our classrooms from places like Atwell's dining room table to Standards and Test-Prep Central.

In 2002, when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act became No Child Left Behind, and school funding was tied to standardized test scores, many of our ELA classrooms turned into tight spaces built around the conformity of test prep. The goal was high scores so that schools could measure their adequate yearly progress (AYP) and meet the levels the states laid out as successful and, therefore, funded. Even schools that used a workshop model included mini-lessons filled with reading skills designed specifically to help students pass tests. And writing workshops often became workshop in name only as the focus narrowed so that everyone was writing the same piece and working on the same author craft moves at the same time. Reading and writing workshops became standardized workshops. And in 2009, when Race to the Top funding and the Common Core State Standards took over curricula, ELA classrooms narrowed even further. Writing assignments were mostly argument based, and reading choices were nonfiction or literary texts that focused on "close reading" for meaning. Those of us who had been teaching in Atwellesque classrooms for years found ourselves in a pickle. How could we keep teaching in ways that we knew instinctively and experientially helped kids grow as readers and writers, when the curriculum mandates of our schools and districts, and eventually our country, had transformed so that the practices of authentic workshop classrooms were deemed unable to produce college and career readiness in our children?

NCTE was formed more than 100 years ago to address this issue—how to continue teaching what you know to be best for students when your school has decided otherwise. Leila Christenbury reminds us in her chapter "NCTE and the Shaping of American Literacy Education" in *Reading the Past, Writing the Future* (Lindemann, 2010) that in December of 1911, the sixty teachers who came together to imagine a professional home for English teachers agreed "to create an organization that could give voice and power to oppose the status quo" (p. 3). In fact, through NCTE's policy and belief statements, our organization has continued to support English teachers ever since. These organizational documents not only help NCTE at large to make decisions about how to develop new programming, join other like-minded organizations in political influence, create products, and plan meetings, but the policy documents are also the belief basis for the community of teachers who make NCTE their professional home.

In 1936, NCTE President Dora V. Smith pointed to a belief that underlies the two position statements guiding this book. Smith wrote that our goal as English teachers is to:

> educate each pupil in terms of *his own uniqueness within the context of the group*. All this has special import for the curriculum. It cannot be done adequately if the aim is the reading of specific books by every member of the class, mastery of a set number of rules by all pupils, or attainment by everybody of specific standards in speech or writing. (qtd. in Christenbury, 2010, p. 2)

It's almost as though Smith was laying the groundwork for *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* and *The Students' Right to Read*.

At this point in education history, we know enough about how people learn and process new information and skills to recognize that for students to thrive, pedagogical differentiation is necessary. Kids need to be able to choose, at least sometimes, what they'd like to read. Students need to decide, at least sometimes, what and how they'd like to write. These two policy statements lay out for teachers exactly what we believe as an organization student readers and writers have the right to be able to do in their ELA classrooms. These statements give teachers the community backing of our organization to create opportunities for students to choose their own reading materials without regard for levels or curriculum mandates. Students have the right to see themselves in the books that are offered in classroom settings, both as independent reading choices and as larger group reading choices. Students have the right to be in conversation with other readers and place whatever they are reading in the context of their own experiences as well as the current world situation, and to use that literature to empower them to action. Students have the right to read for pleasure, without being graded. Likewise, kids have the right to write about what matters to them and about what they know of the world. They have the right to choose the form they'd like their pieces to take. They have the right to write in multiple languages, for real audiences, for purposes they deem important. And students have the right to write for fun, using their own voices.

No matter what a school district's ELA guidelines and programming consist of, the teachers in the school district are the means by which the guidelines and programming are delivered to students. Teachers build the classroom community that allows all students to thrive and grow. And middle school is a space where creating community is vitally necessary and very difficult. Middle school is a time in a kid's life during which the differences between self and other feel huge and unmanageable. Middle school friendships and allegiances can change drastically from morning homeroom to lunch. For middle school ELA teachers, reading and writing are great community builders. As a middle school kid, finding yourself in a book or saying who you are in the writing you share with others can help you manage the differences you feel between yourself and other kids in your school and in the world. Reading and writing for middle schoolers are inexorably intertwined as individuality-shaping and community-building tools. And middle school ELA

teachers are the people who help kids learn to use those tools through the reading choices and writing variety their classrooms offer.

Teachers who are continuing to build classrooms around the practices laid out in *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* and *The Students' Right to Read* sometimes have to enact those practices in the spaces in between the curriculum they're currently expected to teach and the curriculum they know will truly help kids become lifelong readers and writers. And far too often, teachers are doing this work without the professional support of their schools. Because so many of the professional development offerings at district and school levels have narrowed to argument writing and close reading, teachers have increasingly been turning to the grassroots PD that is emerging on social media. Currently, thousands of teachers across the country utilize Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms to connect with other teachers and literacy leaders and authors. A look at my Twitter feed for an hour confirms that everything NCTE lays out in the policy statements this book focuses on is also the focus of what teachers are talking about and trying to include in the work they do with students. And when they can't get support at school, they seek the support of other teachers they know virtually. There are dozens of weekly and monthly Twitter chats hosted by organizations such as NCTE and the National Writing Project (NWP) and the International Literacy Association (ILA), as well as offerings by online communities such as the Nerdy Book Club, the Educator Collaborative, and the #EduColor community that support and guide and highlight the work that teachers around the country are doing. When I engage with other teachers online about my practice and visit their classrooms through their posts, I feel like I'm part of a close community of people all over the country. These are teachers who dismantle the status quo of classrooms built around packaged curricula, stagnant assignments, unexamined canonical texts, and narrow ideas of children as readers and writers. This virtual community focuses on teaching kids to be thoughtful readers and writers, moving our country forward into a future that includes everyone's experiences and voices.

In this book, I hope to re-create that feeling of virtual support that I and so many others are finding in social media. I invite you, in Part I, to look at *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* and *The Students' Right to Read* as the Golden Rules of Reading and Writing. Think alongside me to consider these policies not as policies, but as the backbone elements of a common middle level classroom structure: the workshop setting. Notice how the elements of the policies support the conditions for learning in reading and writing workshops. And finally, you will be able to spend some time in two classrooms that employ the workshop setting to support the middle school readers and writers in those classrooms.

In Part II: Intervisitations, you'll have the chance to meet several teachers who are using their classrooms to promote students' rights to read and write in ways that help kids grow as lifelong readers and real writers with important ideas to share. The teachers open their classroom doors and invite you in to see various practices that fall within the guidelines of these two NCTE policy statements. At the end of each visit, I share what I noticed and ask you to think about what you might borrow for your own classroom.

In Part III: Shifting Our Shelves, you will have a chance to think about the need for inclusive and varied human experiences to be found on our classroom bookshelves. Then middle grade author and cofounder of the We Need Diverse Books Foundation (WNDB), Ellen Oh, shares the history of WNDB and who she was as a kid reader of color herself. Next, children's literature scholar Kristin McIlhagga answers frequently asked questions (FAQs) about how to examine our own classroom libraries and transform them into places that push boundaries and include kids who are too often invisible in more standard texts.

In Part IV: Reconsidering Composition, I invite you to think about the standard composing or writing process many teachers use to guide our writing practices in schools: what each phase of the process generally looks like in a middle grade classroom, as well as ideas that might help you reconsider those phases to include more writer-centered practices like those suggested in the policy statement.

Finally, Part V: Shoulders to Lean On and Arms to Link With, offers a look at the ways teachers are utilizing social media to create grassroots professional development that promotes students' rights to read and write freely and authentically. The different sections in this part will help guide you in creating your own virtual professional learning community and highlights specific online spaces you might be interested in including in your PD work. In particular, there are several active monthly Twitter chats that teachers turn to in order to engage with other teachers and literacy leaders on issues of labeling books and readers, how much choice should be included in reading workshop, ways to help kids write what they know, and the impact of choice and voice in and publishing of kid writing. Many professional groups host blogs or support leaders who regularly tweet and retweet smart thinking in the field of reading and writing with students, or about creating classroom spaces that promote authentic literacy. And thousands of teachers engage in conversations about reading and books on Facebook literacy pages based on popular and vital professional texts. Part V can help you begin to craft a professional learning network (PLN) based on virtual professional development that supports your belief in students' rights to read and write.

In addition to teaching full time in a middle school in New York City, I teach graduate students how to be ELA teachers. When I ask them why they want to be English teachers, they almost all say because they love to read and write, and they want to share that love with their students. The graduate students I teach imagine classrooms like my father-in-law Stan's seventh-grade classroom on the famous day of the substitute teacher: a place where writers, who happen to also be middle schoolers, are set free to write about what matters most to them, and to share that writing with their peers. The graduate students imagine classrooms like Nancie Atwell's dining room table, where they sit around chatting about books they're reading with other readers. I think that in teaching, all the business parts of school can easily take us away from that core love of being readers and writers and sharing that love with the kids in our classrooms. *NCTE Beliefs about Students' Right to Write* and *The Students' Right to Read* bring us back to that love. These policy statements frame for us how to create classrooms that encourage reading love and writing love authentically. My hope is that this book will help guide you in doing this literacy love work in your own classrooms.

Part I
The Golden Rules of Reading and Writing: *The Students' Right to Read* and *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write*

Some questions for you—before you read this chapter:

Where do you do your most comfortable reading?

How do you decide what to read next?

What happens when you don't really like a book? Do you abandon it, or keep going until the very end?

When you finish a book, how do you mark the occasion?

When do you read?

Do you have any series you're attached to? Any favorite authors or genres?

For me, my most comfortable reading takes place in my cozy living room, with blankets, or on my deck. Deciding what to read next for me is a challenge; my TBR (to be read) list is actually a whole wall of bookshelves. When we go on vacation to Cape Cod in the summer, I've been known to bring upwards of thirty books so I have choices, and please don't suggest a digital reading tablet; I'm a reader who likes to turn paper pages. I'm kind of bad at abandoning . . . it's more like I let the

book languish. (Currently there's an Ann Patchett novel on my bedside table I've been "reading" for three years.) When I finish a book, I add it to my Goodreads page, but I also tell everyone I know if I love it. I might post on Facebook my adoration for the book, and if it's a kid's book, I immediately give a book talk to my classes. I have been known to still occasionally read a James Patterson or Patricia Cornwell mystery, but my dad and I share a love for Dan Brown novels, so we don't miss a chance to get anything new he writes. And when my grown-up book club gets together, we spend half our time trying to decide what we'll read next based on recommendations we've gotten from our greater reading circles. I look to my network of virtual teacher-scholar friends to give me reading suggestions that support my goal of antiracist and antibias being in the world and in my classroom. And of course, I have a huge stack of professional development books I can't wait to read and implement in my teaching.

As a reader, my reading life is rich with habits and choices and rituals. I bet yours is too. How do reading lives look in your classroom, though? What would your students say about their reading habits and choices and rituals?

And what about writing—how would you answer these writing questions?

Where do you do your most comfortable writing? Is it the same place you feel most concentrated and productive as a writer?

How do you decide what you'll write?

What is your composition process? How do you get started and how do you keep yourself going? Do you share with trusted readers along the way?

What about when you finish a piece? Is the piece just for you, or do you share it with a reading audience?

Do you have any genres you gravitate toward writing? Any genres that make you squirm and feel stuck?

And what do you do when you're writing and you feel stuck?

I have very specific processes that work for me to get words on the page. I wander around looking like I'm doing the dishes, driving, folding clothes, simply sitting, but actually, I'm composing whole paragraphs in my head before I'm ready to begin to write them on paper or into a document. In fact, I played around with three different ways to begin this chapter in the last two weeks before I settled on what you're now reading. All of that drafting work happened in my head as I was going about my days. I also like to draft and revise and edit by paragraph as I go. I've tried writing whole drafts of pieces and then going back to revise and edit, and it just doesn't work as well for me. And if I'm planning, as I did with this chapter and others in this book, I like to use webs; planning webs match my internal writing process the most closely. Please don't ever ask me to do an outline, because I just won't do it. When an issue arises in the world that feels important to me, I

often take to social media and write bloggish kinds of posts asking big questions and offering my ideas. And if you ask me to just write, like "write for pleasure," I'm almost always going to craft a poem.

What about you? How do you live your writing life? How is your writing life different from the writing lives you help students shape in your classrooms?

In becoming familiar with the *The Students' Right to Read* and *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write*, the two policy statements that guide the teaching and learning in this book, I have come to think of them as the Golden Rules of Reading and Writing. In other words, these two documents help teachers center their teaching of reading and writing in ways they might like to be taught or treated as readers and writers themselves. Both documents help teachers think about how to create classroom spaces, pedagogical structures, and teaching strategies that afford the students in their classes the most opportunities to read and write in the ways readers and writers behave in the real world.

Systems and structures in a literacy classroom that allow students to grow their literacy in the most natural ways can take many forms. In the middle grades, often we see these practices take the form of a workshop classroom. Although workshop literacy classrooms can look vastly different, and can even be structured around a purchased program, some common features tend to appear in most workshop-based classrooms. Following are the distinct phases most workshop classrooms move through on a particular day. If you've experienced workshop classrooms either as a teacher or a student, these "parts of a workshop" will sound familiar.

Mini-lessons. Most workshop days begin with a mini-lesson that offers direct instruction about some aspect of being a reader or a writer. During the mini-lesson, the teacher models a strategy or behavior or skill that will expand the students' repertoires as readers and writers. Often, students then practice or integrate into their own work whatever they've learned during that particular workshop session. Sometimes this takes the form of a quick-write and sharing out, and sometimes as one or more book talks by the teacher or other readers in the classroom. In this way, the student reader-writers have the chance to apprentice alongside others who are learning and with a seasoned reader-writer teacher.

The mini-lesson portion of a workshop varies greatly. In some classrooms, it's a skills-based time situated within a larger writing or reading unit of study. For instance, if the whole class is participating in literature circles based on historical fiction, the mini-lesson might focus on how to manage historical vocabulary that might be confusing to a reader's comprehension. In other workshop classrooms, the mini-lesson is authentically student driven. Perhaps the teacher realizes that

many students are choosing to write narratives that include dialogue, and so the mini-lesson is direct instruction focusing on how to punctuate written dialogue. Either way, the job of the mini-lesson is to help grow students' literacy skills through the knowledge of a more skillful reader-writer, the teacher.

Time to work. The largest chunk of a workshop session is the student work portion. In some workshop classrooms, kids work with partners or in groups or on their own, putting into practice the ideas they gained from the mini-lesson. In this format of a workshop session, the teacher strategically moves through the classroom, listening in, observing, and conferencing with groups or individuals. This is the portion of the class during which students are doing the work, and the teacher is adjusting their teaching to the individuals in the class and to their understandings and abilities.

In other workshop classrooms, like those Nancie Atwell highlighted in her beloved workshop book, *In the Middle* (1987), and then broadened in *The Reading Zone* (2007) and subsequent editions of *In the Middle*, readers are all engrossed in reading different books, and writers are all engaged in various writing projects of their own choosing. In these classrooms, the working portion of the class is time for readers and writers to work on their reading and writing, and the teacher is meeting and conferencing with kids individually or in reading or writing partnerships. For instance, if two kids choose to form a mini–book club around a favorite author's newest book, the teacher might meet with that partnership to check in on progress, comprehension, and engagement. If the workshop is a writing workshop, the teacher might be meeting with several individual writers and simply asking, "What are you working on? How can I help?," thereby differentiating teaching writer by writer. In his book *How's It Going?* (2000), Carl Anderson helped me think about how writing conferences can be structured to be the most helpful for individual writers. While a teacher is doing this, two or three students might be meeting in a writing group to share their work, ask for feedback, and suggest next steps to each other.

Time to share. In the final moments of most workshop classrooms, the whole class comes back together and readers and writers share their work in some way with the rest of the class. This sharing might take the form of a Say Something circle, which Kylene Beers explores in *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do* (2002, p. 105). During a session of Say Something, everyone in the class is expected to share an idea about what they are reading with a small group of other kids. Generally, the teacher doesn't respond but instead listens in as groups share, and then uses that listening in to plan further conferencing with individual readers. Alternatively, the students may be on a more formal sharing schedule, especially during a writing workshop, with different kids knowing ahead of time that today is their day to share a piece they are working on, either as a completed piece or as a means

to gather feedback for revision. In some classes, the teacher might give students an exit slip that asks them to account for what they accomplished that day, as well as their plans for next steps or homework. These reflections and plans might be shared out at tables or with writing groups. In other classrooms, reading partners and writing partners share out the interesting work of their peers for the rest of class to hear.

However the sharing occurs, this portion of the class is essential for two reasons. First, the sharing makes public the idea that readers and writers are always in a process of learning and growth and production. This is how reading and writing work outside of the classroom, making this portion of the class time mirror authentic practices of readers and writers. Second, the publishing of writing for an audience other than the teacher lends an urgency and seriousness to classroom writing tasks, which often feel artificial. Sharing, and ultimately publication, of student writing offers student writers the opportunity to experience the impact their written works have on authentic readers.

The phases of a workshop structure in a literacy classroom are well known and widely utilized in some way by many middle school literacy teachers. Delving a bit more deeply into the structure of a workshop classroom reveals several elements that remain present both in workshop teachers' minds and in classrooms. In fact, one of our most beloved writing teachers, Donald Graves, wrote in *A Fresh Look at Writing* (1994) (something Tom Newkirk and Penny Kittle later captured in their book, *Children Want to Write* [2013], about the work Graves did with young writers) that the "*conditions* for learning" are essential in a classroom space (pp. 58–66). The conditions for learning spelled out by Nancie Atwell in her workshop classroom are what allowed students to thrive as readers and writers while she was their teacher. Graves goes on to cite the essential conditions in a writing workshop classroom that help apprentice student writers grow. He names conditions we could all develop in our own classrooms.

Likewise, in *Reading in the Wild* (2014), Donalyn Miller with Susan Kelley wanted to ascertain the habits in the reading lives of "lifelong readers." They surveyed hundreds of adult readers and found that most lifelong readers share several characteristics, or conditions, in their reading lives that help them identify as people who are, in their hearts, readers. Both of these sets of practices (see Figure I.1)—the conditions Graves writes about for developing a writing workshop classroom and the self-identified characteristics of the lifelong readers that Miller and Kelley surveyed—honor the essence of *The Students' Right to Read* and *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write*.

FIGURE I.1. Authentic literacy habits for reading and writing workshops. (Quotations in the left column are from Newkirk and Kittle's *Children Want to Write* [2013]; quotations in the right column are from Miller and Kelley's *Reading in the Wild* [2014].)

Donald Graves Suggests Conditions That Encourage Good Writing	Donalyn Miller and Susan Kelley Suggest Characteristics of Lifelong Readers
• Time: "They need daily writing time to be able to move their pieces along until they accomplish what they set out to do" (p. 59). • Choice: "Children need to learn how to choose their own topics when they write" (p. 60). • Response: "At the end of each class, time is set aside for sharing students' writing and their learning experiences during their writing" (p. 63). • Demonstration: "When you actually take your own text and put it on the chalkboard . . . and show your students how you read it, they will receive the clearest demonstration of what writing is all about" (p. 63). • Expectation: "To have high expectations is a sign of caring" (p. 64). • Room Structure: "The writing classroom requires a high degree of structure. . . . Teachers help the room to be predictable" (p. 65). • Evaluation: "I expect them to be prepared to tell me about their work and how it is going. This gives them practice in dealing with the structure of evaluation of work in progress" (p. 66).	• Dedicate time to read: "They spend substantial time reading in spite of their hectic lives" (p. xxiii). • Self-select reading material: "They are confident when selecting books to read and have the experience and skills to choose books successfully that meet their interests, needs, and reading abilities" (p. xxiii). • Share books and reading with other readers: "Reading communities provide a peer group of other readers who challenge and support us" (p. xxiv). • Have reading plans: "Wild readers plan to read beyond their current book" (p. xxiv). • Show preferences for genres, authors, and topics: "[W]ild readers often express strong preferences in the material they choose to read" (p. xxiv).

Below are elements of both reading and writing workshop structures and practices that you can use to honor *The Students' Right to Read* and *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write*.

Elements of Reading Workshop You Could Accomplish to Honor Students' Right to Read

Maintain a Rich, Full Classroom Library

- Make sure you have full shelves or baskets of books that look new and interesting to middle school readers. Readers in the world love new and exciting looking covers and often don't want to read books that are ripped and torn.
- Make sure the books in your classroom library have varied levels. Include books and series that may even seem "too young" or "too easy" for middle

school kids. Readers in the world love revisiting favorite authors and series when new books are published. Reading over the years across a series or author is a perfectly normal behavior for readers in the world.

- Likewise, make sure your classroom library includes books that may have characters who are older, perhaps in high school, and are grappling with some of the difficult life experiences teenagers live through. Even though books that are written for older teens may seem challenging, often middle school kids are up to the complexity of young adult books and are hungry to read about how teenagers navigate the world as they get older. Readers in the world use stories to help them live through experiences they haven't yet had but may one day face.
- Make sure that your classroom library is filled with stories by and about traditionally marginalized people. The more books you have by authors who have experienced elements of the story themselves, the better . . . this is called #ownvoices (Duyvis, 2015). Readers in the world often seek out stories told by authors who have lived the stories themselves.
- Make sure the kids in your classes have access to books that represent the "real world," that show all aspects of lived human experience. Readers in the world use books to transport themselves to new experiences and places and also to be reminded of themselves. As well, readers in the world use books to build compassion and empathy for people who have different lives from their own.

Incorporate Real-World Reading Habits and Structures into Your Classroom Time

- Make sure, as much as your school environment allows, that you let kids choose to read whatever they want without strings attached or guidelines. All the while, ensure that you are continually introducing kids to exciting new book choices. Readers in the world use many sources of recommendations for what to read next, but they don't usually base those choices on reading levels or how much reading growth a book will help them achieve.
- Make sure you give authentic time for reading in your class. This time could begin with a mini-lesson that focuses on some aspect of authentically reading books and the behaviors readers in the world utilize in their reading lives. Then move into independent reading time. Kids should just read during this time. Anyone walking into your classroom when this is happening will see real readers reading. Consider reading for pleasure reasonable and valuable homework. Readers in the world often end their days with reading before they go to sleep.
- Make sure you help kids keep authentic records of what they have read and what they plan to read next. Readers in the world often do this by keeping

notebooks of books finished or logging into websites like Goodreads.com to help them keep reading records. Also, understand that some readers don't choose to do this detailed record-keeping, but their reading lives are logged into memory and noted through great conversations with other readers.

- Make sure you "un-school" reading workshop as much as possible in a school setting. Obviously, reading workshop is a place where readers do the work of reading to grow as readers. And, obviously, because it's happening in school, teachers need to document growth for the kids in the class. But as you develop structures to gather data and monitor reading workshop, try to make those structures as close to ways that readers in the world manage their reading lives. Approach reading conferences with the interest of one reader talking to another reader about books. Don't grade amounts like numbers of pages or minutes or books. Instead, ask kids to record these amounts so they can see for themselves how much they've grown. When asking for reading responses in writing, ask the kinds of interesting questions that readers ask each other about books. Give kids lots of opportunities to talk about books with one another, in the way readers in the world share what they're reading with other readers.
- Make sure you are modeling, in all the teaching moves you make during reading workshop, being a reader in the world yourself. It is a legitimate teaching plan to move beyond conferencing and read while students are reading. Laugh out loud when your book is funny. Cry if a moving scene would naturally cause you to feel deeply. It's even teaching kids how readers in the world read if the timer goes off to end independent reading, and you say, "Five more minutes, please; I need to finish this chapter!"

When kids describe their reading life in your classroom, they should be filled with the book joy and excitement readers experience in the real world. When kids in your class describe their reading accomplishments, they should be talking about all the books they've loved or abandoned, discussing their favorite authors and series and books, and suggesting, one reader to another, great reads they think other people might also enjoy.

Elements of Writing Workshop You Could Accomplish to Honor Students' Right to Write

Provide Varied Writing Opportunities

- Make sure you support the philosophy that writers write for a variety of purposes and in a variety of genres. Writers in the world write for many reasons: sometimes to create new, imaginative pieces to share with the world; sometimes to add their voice to larger societal conversations; sometimes to engage in formal correspondence; sometimes to meet a formal

task like a test, application, or grant; sometimes to informally share ideas with friends and family; sometimes just for themselves. You can intentionally provide all of these writing experiences in your classroom as you move through days and the entire curricular year.

- Make sure you offer students many low-stakes writing opportunities. These opportunities help students build daily writing habits, increase their writing stamina, and offer them chances to try out ideas and genres that may be new to them. Students have the right to write without being assessed on all of their writing attempts. All school writing does not need to be graded, just as all professional writing is not written for publication. Writers in the real world often have a daily writing practice that is a time and space for them to keep their writing habits fresh and offers them a place to simply make note of the world and their observations. Sometimes more polished pieces are born of the daily writing and observations, but that is not the goal of daily informal writing. Likewise, having the opportunity to simply play with words and genres and forms helps writers discover what and how they want to give voice to ideas they may want to share more widely.
- Make sure you honor many different composing processes. Writing is an individual endeavor. When we expect every student to follow every step in a particular order in a composition process we have designed for the whole class, we don't honor writing brains that organize ideas and compose writing differently than the standardized process often expected of a whole class. Writers in the world generally follow some path of gathering ideas, writing drafts, sharing drafts with other writers, revising, and eventually publishing for many to read. But writers' processes often look very different from each other. In a series of mini-lessons, you could share multiple ways to collect ideas or begin drafting. You might share many organizing plans. But then let kids choose which process works best for them individually, thereby honoring who they are as writers.
- Make sure to give kids the chance to complete a writing task in various ways. If you are teaching argument, understand that poetry often argues a point, as do lyrics or graphic writing. If you are teaching narrative writing, understand that narratives might be memoirs or fictional stories. As well, when asking kids to write to a prompt, offer multiple entry points or variations as opportunities for writing to the prompt. In this way, the deep thinking of multiple writers is honored, while at the same time giving you the chance to closely analyze the thinking and writing they've done about the particular topic of study. When given a specific prompt or task, writers in the world make careful decisions about how they will approach that prompt or task so that they are able to maintain their own voice and style.
- Make sure, as often as you can, that you open up the writing spaces in your classroom for the middle school writers to pursue their own writing projects, projects they have imagined, conceived of, and designed on their own as writers. Writers in the real world pursue writing projects that interest and

excite them and that offer them opportunities to take risks in composing and sharing their voice.

Provide Varied Ways for Writers to Share Their Writing

- Make sure you offer low-stakes opportunities for students to share pieces that are in process. This might take the form of a trusted writing partner or writing group with which the writers share drafts to gain feedback from peers. You might also ask kids to pick one small portion of something they've just quickly written to share with the whole class so all the writing voices in the classroom are briefly heard. You might ask students who yearn for constant teacher feedback to pick one paragraph or stanza from a draft in progress to use in a conference with you. In this way, writers have the opportunity to receive encouragement and suggestions from you but aren't hindered by too much teacher feedback before a longer draft is ready for revision. Writers in the world often share pieces of drafts with writing groups or writer friends to showcase their writing projects and to get developing feedback from peers.
- Make sure you approach revision conferences as an interested, wondering reader. Instead of offering only suggestions for what could be changed, added, deleted, or edited, you might consider simply asking questions the piece makes you wonder as a reader. Teaching specific mini-lessons around how to include reader feedback in revision of a piece will help make the

revision sharing you ask kids to do throughout writing projects be purposefully included as they continue to compose. Writers in the world share pieces in progress with the intention of getting feedback that will help them make their writing stronger and clearer for future readers.

- Make sure you honor and teach the idea that audience drives many specific writing moves and choices writers make when composing. Writers often compose pieces to be shared, and often have clear ideas about intended audiences for their pieces. In this way, writers alter their language, form, grammar, details, and tone based on whom they anticipate reading their pieces. When offering revision mini-lessons, specifically teach editing and revising for audience. Make clear that writers in the world are able to intentionally break standard language rules so that their pieces have an authentic tone readers will appreciate.
- Make sure you provide publishing opportunities that have audiences beyond yourself as the teacher. The reality for middle school writers is that the teacher is their expected audience; kids write for teachers for most writing tasks. Therefore, teachers are a fairly low-stakes audience for kids, even when the teacher's assessment affects a kid's grades. When the circle of readers widens beyond the teacher or a panel of teachers to other kids—in the writer's own class, other kids in the grade or in the school, or even wider, to readers beyond the school—students' urgency and interest in composing an engaging piece of writing heightens. Writers in the world spend lengthy amounts of writing time composing pieces they expect to publish for a wide audience to read. They try to achieve interesting, clear writing for the benefit of an audience of readers they care about. Providing spaces for publication will help student writers care about their writing in a more professional way.

The goal is for kids, when recounting their writing experiences in your class, to remember being encouraged to own their pieces as real writers through the composing choices they attempted and you respected. As they reflect on writing with you, they should remember how you took their writing seriously as a reader, not just as their teacher. You want them to leave your classroom understanding that writing can be for both self-satisfaction and reflection, to meet strict academic tasks, or to share their voice and ideas with a wide, interested audience. And teachers want students to remember fondly having had opportunities to compose for all these purposes.

While neither *The Students' Right to Read* nor *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* specifically mentions workshop-based classrooms, a careful reading of the elements of each shows that the flavor of a workshop classroom is inherent in both. Scholars in our field have guided us for decades through their writing and teaching

about workshop classrooms. We learn from scholars such as Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, Donalyn Miller, and so many others as we plan, structure, and manage our own workshop classrooms. But we can also look to neighboring classrooms in schools all over the country to see how other teachers create workshop classrooms.

The following vignettes allow us to visit two middle school workshop classrooms, one in New York City and one in rural New Hampshire. Carole Mashamesh shows us the possible daily structure of a reading workshop classroom, and she allows us a glimpse at how she has built a huge classroom library. Linda Rief, whom many of you may know through her multiple books on workshop teaching, reflects on what to do when standard, tried-and-true workshop practices fall flat. If you are new to workshop teaching but like the two policy statements and think this teaching structure makes sense to you, these vignettes will give you ideas about where to begin. If you've been teaching in workshop classrooms for years, these vignettes offer some new ideas that will help you continue to build, as well as provide a model of how to reflect and revise your workshop practices.

To help all middle school educators encourage their students to build literate lives both within the classroom and well beyond it, veteran middle school teacher Jennifer Ochoa has brought together middle school teachers and teacher leaders, children's author and We Need Diverse Books cofounder Ellen Oh, children's literature scholar Kristin McIlhagga, reading and writing workshop teacher-author Linda Rief, and censorship expert Millie Davis to examine current middle school literacy practices that support students' rights to read and write.

By showcasing their experiences and activities, and positioning NCTE policy statements—*The Students' Right to Read* and *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write*—as foundational guiding documents, Ochoa and her colleagues prove that even in today's standards-driven environment, authentic reading and writing practices can create literacy-rich middle school classrooms.

As a bonus, teachers who don't have strong support in their schools to implement these practices will find a myriad of suggestions for developing a virtual personal learning network—a grassroots professional development tailored to their needs and interests—that will support them in their efforts to help kids as readers and writers.

Jennifer Ochoa is a middle school teacher at The Patria Mirabal School in New York City and an adjunct professor at Lehman College, City University of New York.

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