

# *Literacy for All*

ISSUES IN TEACHING  
AND LEARNING

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## CHAPTER NINE

# *Some Things We Know about Learning to Write*



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In this chapter, I focus on learning to write during the secondary school years, especially for those students who are behind in their reading and writing skills and who are not succeeding in school. These students may enter high school never having read a whole book or written any extended prose; they may have spent their time in school in the lowest academic tracks, and they may be in danger of dropping out of school. Using findings from recent research, I offer a vision of how classrooms and schools can form and reform themselves to help these students increase their literacy skills and become participants in the academic conversation.

I focus on a low-tracked, multiethnic, inner-city, grade-9 classroom in the United States, in which formerly low-achieving adolescents, under the tutelage of master teacher Bridget Franklin, begin to reach high literacy standards.<sup>1</sup> Bridget's class was one of 20 that collaborated on a research project comparing learning to write in schools in Britain and the United States. As part of the research, about 500 inner-city students in grades six to nine exchanged their writing and served as audiences for one another for an entire school year. Half of the classes were in London and half were in the San Francisco Bay area. For the writing exchanges, each U.S. class was paired with an age-appropriate partner class in England. For example, Bridget's grade-9 class was paired with Philippa Furlong's Form 4 (grade-9) group. Alex McLeod at the University of London Institute of Education, along with teacher Ellie O'Sullivan, coordinated the British end of the exchanges, while I coordinated the United States end as well as the entire project. The goal of the research was to look at teaching writing in the two

countries, from the points of view of research teams, teachers, and students on both sides of the Atlantic to get some new ideas about how best to meet the needs of all of our students. The complete results of the research are published in *Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures* (Freedman, 1994).

In the San Francisco area we worked with varied kinds of classes, but we decided intentionally to work with some of the lowest tracks and to try to design activities to help students move out of these tracks. The majority of students in Bridget's group, 68%, were African American, and 80% were members of some minority group; they also were mostly male, 79%—a mismatch with the demographics of the school, which was 50–50 male/female and 50% minority—not atypical for low-tracked U.S. inner-city classrooms. Bridget was acutely aware of the injustices of the tracking system and has worked tirelessly to convince administrators in her school and her school district to abolish it. She has been somewhat successful and has written a great deal about her work with “detracking.”

In Britain, mixed-ability classes are more common, and Philippa, Bridget's partner for the writing exchange, taught a mixed-ability group. The demographics of Philippa's class matched those of her school. Both her class and her school were composed of about 50% Afro-Caribbean students and 25% white students. The remaining 25% were bilingual children of families from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and the Mediterranean. At the time of this research, Philippa was in her fourth year of teaching the same group of students; she began teaching them when they entered her school in Form 1 (U.S. grade 6).

As was the case for Bridget's and Philippa's classes, students in all of the paired classes in the study exchanged writing across the academic year, with the paired teachers and often their students working together to make their writing programs for the year center on the exchange activities. For a year-long curriculum, it was critical to move beyond pen-pal letters and to center the exchanges on a variety of types of writing. The idea was to exchange substantive pieces of work that would be of interest to students in another country. Although personal writing was encouraged and even facilitated, the main academic business of the exchanges was to provide an occasion for students in the two countries to write substantial pieces for a distant, but real, whole-class audience. The writing included, for example, autobiographies, books about the schools and communities, fiction and poetry, essays about books students had read, and opinion pieces about important and often controversial issues. The paired classes frequently decided to engage in parallel topics for writing.

The writing exchanges provided a theoretically sound curricular framework, including meaningful and varied types of writing for a peer audience. They were designed to support the cross-national study and also to engage the student writers. However, like all activities, they are insufficient to stimulate writing growth. Theoretically sound activities are necessary but

provide no panacea. Rather, deeper principles guide the implementation of theoretically sound activities, and it is the adherence to the deeper principles that leads to academically successful classrooms. In the next section, I offer a brief description of the strategies that I found key to a successful writing exchange and that I hypothesize underlie effective practice in the teaching of writing. This section is followed by an illustration of how Bridget puts each strategy into practice.

## STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING WRITING

The first strategy for Bridget (as well as for other exchange teachers) was to integrate the students' social worlds and their academic worlds. The exchange was designed purposefully to break into the peer network and to make literacy something that would be respected and valued, something “cool” to do. Ogbu and others (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1974, 1985, 1990) have identified social forces that work against disaffected students. Most problematic is the fact that the peer group disdains school success and rejects students who do their school work, making them social outcasts. Given the adolescent desire to be accepted, it is crucial to reverse this dynamic. As part of the writing exchanges, we encouraged sharing student culture, including rap music and graffiti tags (secret names the students use with one another and in the graffiti writing they do, often in public places). We also gave students a role that we hoped ultimately would have status in the peer group; the students were enlisted as fellow researchers, as partners with the university team and their teachers in finding out how schooling in England was similar to and different from what they experienced in the United States. As researchers, the students' opinions were valued because they could contribute important information to the study itself. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the exchange enlarged the social world of the students, in the case of Bridget's group, to include a mixed-ability class from another country with many students who were deeply engaged in school and in literacy activities. This enlarged peer group weakened the deleterious effects of the tracking system that is so pervasive in U.S. schools. The result was that Bridget's students were curious about the students in England, and they wanted to be recognized and valued by them. But interactions occurred only through writing. In the end, Bridget engaged students academically by intermingling their academic and social worlds.

A second strategy Bridget used to support her students' emerging interests in literacy was to structure her classroom both to create a whole-class literacy community and to attend to the needs of each developing individual. She allowed different students to write in different ways, depending on their needs. At the same time she provided a space that was

welcoming for groups of friends, to the point where her students and their friends in other classes often "hung out" in her classroom during lunch. She also had a number of successful strategies for involving usually noninteracting parents and bringing them and their voices into the classroom.

Bridget's third strategy was to maintain high expectations for her students and to provide a kind of instruction that would help students to meet high standards. To move the exchange from activities in which students just practiced writing to activities in which they improved their skills, Bridget used the writing that came from England to help her students analyze, talk about, and then practice what makes a piece successful and what appeals to a distant audience. She then helped her students incorporate features that were missing or that were not effective in their own pieces. It is important to note that Bridget and the other teachers at her school were working with University of California, Berkeley Professor Rhona Weinstein on a project in which they studied their expectations and the effects of those expectations on their students' performance (Weinstein et al., 1991).

Bridget's fourth strategy was to involve her students in activities that they cared about by working together with them to craft the literacy curriculum. She neither turned over curricular decision making to the students nor left them out; rather she and her students decided jointly what projects to do to send to England. As part of this process of joint decision making, Bridget watched to be sure her students were taking on increasingly challenging tasks, both in substance and scope, as the year went on.

## SCENES FROM BRIDGET FRANKLIN'S CLASSROOM

### Integrating the Social and Academic

How did Bridget merge the students' social and academic lives? Although it was not a letter-writing, pen-pal exchange, the program began with letters, many of which were more social than academic. Through these letters, the students began to develop social connections within their own class and with the British class, that both allowed them to get to know the needs of their audience, to trust the audience, and to feel safe communicating with it. It was these social relationships that formed the base for future, more traditional academic work.

When the U.S. students wrote their letters, they had not yet received letters from England. Bridget recalls that, "They wrote a very safe, kind of formal letters. . . . That's just how they felt that they were supposed to write" (Interview, December 13, 1988). As Easy E., a student in Bridget's class, confirmed, "I mean people were, we were at first, um, we were like, tightened—tightened up, you know" (Interview, March 21, 1988). Indeed, Easy E.'s letter seems tight:

Dear Girls and Boys in England,

My name is Easy E. and I am 14 years old and I love to play sports like football, basketball, and track.

I've played football and run track for a team but I've never played basketball for a team.

*(He concludes)*

I would like to know if any of you girls or guys have any plans to come to America and visited.

I would like to know something you think that makes your school special. Here at El Cerrito High School we have our own radiostation.

Your friend . . .

Easy E.

Slightly more adventurous, another student, Geya, writes:

Hi, My name is Geya Anderson but mostly everyone at home and school calls me Gey. I am a black afro American and I am 5 ft. 2 in. I have black hair that goes down to my neck. When I was small I had very long hair but as I grew up it kind of broke off. Most of the time I still wish I had long hair but I know that if I keep it up my wish just might come true.

*(Then after describing her family, she writes)*

You know I would like to ask you something now if I am kind of making you angry then I apologize but I would like to know if you have any black people out there. The reason I am asking is because I only see the other color on T.V. and I was just curious.

Geya's question about whether there are blacks in England and her comment about the absence of black people on English television provoked a profound discussion in Philippa's class about the representation of blacks on English television, one that continued all year.

Cool J. sums up the U.S. students' initial sense of the English audience at this point: "They're so far away, I was thinking of them like aliens" (Interview, March 10, 1988).

Then the English letters arrived, and the students "over there" were suddenly no longer aliens. Most important in opening the social connections was the following letter from Titch:

Hi to all you funky def people, in 9th grade, it's Titch.

I will start by telling you a bit about my self, I am 14 years old and will be 15 years on January 2nd. . . .

I go to an school called Hampden Jones, I am in the 4th year [which just started].

I suppose its quite good fun, doing our project and finding things out for your self.

At the moment we are doing course work for are New exam, GCSE.

In England our years are different from the ones in America, we have years and you have grades.

Well enough about school, ill talke about the things I do!!!

I love going out with friends espeacially travlling.

I Also Love raving at Jams [parties].

That brings me on to another point. I am one person who canot do with out music.

Especially, Hip Hop, Soul, Reggae. I hate heavey metal and all of that pop.

You must write me, who ever I am speaking to???

I have been to America, New Jearsy It was beautiful. When I grow up I would love to come over and live. [I]Hopefully] England is not bad, I suppose most of the time its pretty cold, Apart from that its okay

oh before I forget I am also an freaky person, well me and my couson Louise she is in the same class and is also writing a letter to you all. We wear really freaky outfits. As for the hair, our hair, well that's freaky too.

I do suppose your freaky too who ever you are?

I have got an Tag, it is Pride

thats what I am know as

Anyway I will hope

ill here from you.

[address] Here my address

again.

Love ya

Titch

xx

Although from Philippa's point of view Titch was not the most eloquent writer, she spoke to her audience quite well. Philippa reported that Titch was the only student in the class who had needed special help with her skills. Titch was masterful, though, at establishing common ground with Bridget's students—through her use of language, her musical tastes, her love of parties, and even her love of the United States. Titch made herself so likable and real that many of the grade-9 boys in Bridget's class fell in love with her, quite literally, and several of the U.S. girls became jealous. No teacher could have given the academic plans for the exchange as effective an endorsement as Titch did when she wrote, "I suppose it's quite good fun, doing our project and finding things out for your self"; or when she pleaded, "You must write me, who ever I am speaking to???"

Easy E. stressed the importance of Titch's letter as well as several other British letters to his class's attitudes and to their immediate comfort and identification with this new audience:

At first . . . I wasn't really interested . . . I guess everybody, you know, we just took it like an assignment . . . you know, we gotta do this for a grade

. . . She [Bridget] explained it, but I guess, we didn't really catch on until after, you know, we got letters from England, and everybody was like wow! . . . So we really like got into it, and we started telling them about like what we do out here, and it was really fun. But like in the first beginning, I guess we were just like, you know, we were just, you know, we'll do what she says 'cause that's what she wants.

The way they wrote their letters, it was really like I mean they were our friends, and we didn't even really meet them. I mean it was you know they was talking to us and I was like, I mean, you know, I never . . . expected nothing like it.

They did basically what we did, but it was just, you know, they were in a different country and stuff. And it was just like it was another me over there. (Interview, March 21, 1988)

So all of a sudden the British audience went from being "like aliens" to being "like another me over there." Quite a transformation. Ice T. devoted a special section of his autobiography to Titch. He drew a picture of a rose on the computer which he surrounded with small hearts and on which he wrote, "FRESH YOU ARE LIKE A ROSE." Also in the middle of his autobiography, he wrote a quite protective note to her:

I hope to get a letter from Titch because she is freaky. My friend Easy E. and all the boys in the class really like Titch but someone should tell her that freak means a whole different meaning in America than it does in England. It does not mean what you think it means—out here it means that you like to have sex a lot. I hope you are not mad at me for telling you this.

The students were playing with multiple meanings of the word *freak* that were then common in the popular culture, including those in the then popular song, *Superfreak*, by Rick James.

Like Ice T., his friends Cool J. and Easy E. also discussed feeling an immediate closeness to the students in England once these letters arrived. Cool J. went a step further to emphasize the positive effects on his writing: "Now I . . . feel like I know some of the people over there—you just open up and write to them" (Interview, March 10, 1988).

Bridget used the exchange to draw her students in socially. This kind of writing was fun for them. They were motivated to write, and they saw a function for writing in their lives. They were comfortable bringing in aspects of their youth culture and telling about their homes, and they were definitely enlarging their social networks. The next challenge was to transfer their enthusiasm to more traditionally academic pieces of work.

### Meeting Individual Needs and Creating Community

To attend to her students' individual needs, Bridget allowed students to be drawn into the exchange in different ways. Although she worked hard to create a safe community, she also accepted and made room for students' different ways of learning. It certainly would have been easy to let the social, vocal, and enthusiastic large group of black male students take over, but Bridget saw other students who were responding differently, who did not feel an immediate closeness. These students were allowed a slower route to getting to know the British students. Geya, who was open at first, became more cautious in her responses than the boys. A loner in her own class, she took time to warm up to the students from abroad. Although less "tight" than Easy E. in her first letter, Geya began the year feeling much more comfortable with Bridget as an audience than with her peers in her own class or with the students in England. Bridget built on this:

From the very first she [Geya] wrote really long things. Now that's not true of her papers for them [the British students]. But when she writes stories for me, or she writes summaries or something, she really takes her time.

She's just terrifically shy, and that's very inhibiting with her writing when she's writing for somebody else, but when she's writing for me, I think she really, she wants to please me a lot. (Interview, February 24, 1988)

Given the diverse ways the students were responding to the British audience, how did Bridget allow for the differences? How the students composed their autobiographies provides an example. First, they worked in class on computers and the computers offered the students an opportunity to collaborate if they wanted to. Easy E. describes how they helped each other:

She [Bridget] wanted, uh it [the autobiography] to be perfect I guess. And so everybody was okay okay, I'll change this and you know so it was, I mean everybody helped each other out and stuff. And so then we got on the computers, and you know we were thinking about, oh I think I should change this and you know we were asking each other for help and everybody was helping each other. . . . We were having fun I mean, cause I get—I—no— think I can speak for everybody when I say um, most of—most of the kids in the class we never did nothing like that. It just—we just got into it and it was exciting and we wanted to keep it going, keep going. (Interview, March 21, 1988)

Cool J. confirms this collaborative spirit:

In my class, Run helped me. You know me and him we'd—we would always work next to each other 'cause we both sports fans, so we talk

about the hoop game or—and you know I'd ask him—you know we'd—we'd just helped each other out. I'd ask him how you spell this and how should I put this and it went the same for him. We helped each other a lot. (Interview, March 10, 1988)

It would be easy to let Easy E. "speak for everybody," as he says he can do, to hear only his positive message. But Rose, for example, when asked if she worked with anyone at the computer, replies, "No. Um I do better by myself" (Interview, March 2, 1988). Geya, too, in keeping with her caution about a peer audience, describes her difficulties composing publicly at the computer:

Every time I get ready to write, or to type or something, everybody would try to come over my shoulder and look and I don't like that. . . . They just come and watch and try to peek at my stuff. Say "Don't look, get away!" And I'll be hiding with my hands. They just trying to steal my stuff. . . . They nosy. They want to know what I do. 'Cause I'm a loner, and you know, I like to—I like being by myself. And they just want to know what my business is, "Yeah that's my business, get away!" (Interview, March 21, 1988)

In the same interview, when she was asked, "Is there anybody that—that you—you let share it with?" Geya replied quickly, "Ms. Franklin."

Bridget took care to allow students with academic needs as different as Geya's and Easy E.'s to find their own ways into writing in her classroom.

### High Standards and High Expectations

Bridget's third strategy involved maintaining high expectations by providing time for explicit talk about what makes good writing and by encouraging the students to become conscious of their decisions as writers. She quite deliberately used the British writing to help her students analyze and articulate for themselves what makes writing effective—to help them develop metacognitive awareness, to know that they know general principles behind effective writing. Then they began to imitate the effective styles. As they talked about the British work, the U.S. students discussed the qualities that made the British autobiographies interesting and made the U.S. students as readers feel that they actually knew the British writers. Bridget writes in her journal:

I noticed that as I went along it was easy to point out things about effective writing to the kids. The British kids who write the most interesting autobiographies were those who *showed* not *told* and who gave enough background information to make themselves clear. Those whose stories were mere lists of places and events received the poorest

ratings by my students. We talked a lot about the students that we liked best from what they wrote and the students we felt we knew best (usually one and the same), and we discussed why we had those feelings. The kids clearly got the point that they need to “jump off the page” in order to engage their reader.

Bridget helped her students anticipate and meet the needs of the British students, encouraging their attempts through their writing to gain entry into the social lives of the distant class while at the same time working with her class to take the academic steps necessary to write to a general rather than an individual audience.

Finally, Bridget worked with her students to make curricular decisions. This negotiation of activities is something that was less common among the U.S. teachers than among the English ones. It was also a fully articulated theory in England. In the United States, we tend to talk about student-centered curriculum in which we individualize instruction. Teachers in England tend to reject the term “student centered” because to them it does not take into account notions of community. Although Bridget did negotiate with her students, it is not something she or any of the U.S. teachers talked about, nor were their negotiations part of a well-developed theory. The teachers in England explained clearly what is involved in their kind of negotiation. They also showed how their notions of negotiation differ from what most U.S. educators think about when they conceptualize a negotiated curriculum:

It's not like . . . within that negotiation there's complete anarchy . . . There's a certain level of negotiation which is between them and myself about choosing something which, yes, is interesting, but also sometimes it's choosing something which will stretch them as learners. And so you're working together to develop and push them to higher standards and to produce better material and, and more interesting work. (Interview, British teacher, Fiona Rodgers, August 20, 1992)

There are clear roles for both the teacher and the students. There is no giving up of power; rather, both teacher and student gain power. The teachers in England stressed the importance of their students' assuming responsibility, but they agreed that their students had to be taught to assume responsibility gradually across years of time. Since British teachers usually keep the same group of students for 2 years or more, this gradual exchanging of responsibility was supported in England in ways that it is not in the United States.

The British teachers also agreed that students learn to write by practicing a variety of types of writing—but only when they are motivated to do so. They saw it as their job to set contexts to motivate their students. The most motivating contexts, these teachers believed, spring from the

community of learners in the classroom. For this reason community building is valued over individualization. The teachers in England explained that each child does not have a different program of study because that approach devalues the role of the classroom culture and in particular the way discussions, activities, and frequently writing are motivated by the interaction of students with each other and with their teacher.

If a student is not motivated to practice and master certain types of writing, teachers in England consider it their failure in setting motivating contexts. Unmotivated students are never expected to write on a topic just because it is assigned; rather, they are expected to do a different activity that *is* motivating. For example, in a grade-8 equivalent class taught by another of the teachers in England, Peter Ross, his very able student Dickens (a pseudonym he chose) only wanted to write stories. Peter saw it as his job to try to interest Dickens in doing other kinds of writing. In his interviews early in the year, Dickens commented about what he called “factual writing”: “In my opinion that's pretty boring. . . . I prefer being inventive.” As the year went on, he spoke about his teacher's role in motivating him to want to do other sorts of writing. The class wrote books about London for U.S. readers, and Peter, who had formerly led walking tours for tourists, took his students on some local trips to help them gather material for this “factual” writing.

I like what I'm doing now, about writing about London because I think the way Mr. Ross planned that was to make it interesting to start with, like taking us all round London to see, you're taking in all the sights . . . I think we treated that day out not as a school trip but sort of more of a leisure trip. I think that might be the way Mr. Ross planned it. So that we'd be more interested in it when we came back.

Peter used the force of the classroom community, in particular the community adventure of touring London, to motivate Dickens as well as his other students. By the end of the year Dickens had reached the point of believing that “factual writing” was okay, depending on what type of writing it is:

I think it depends for me on the type of information writing it is. Cause what I don't like doing, what I hate, really hate, about English, is when you have to read a book and then write about five pages on it. I can't stand that. That's awful.

We left Peter with the challenge of getting Dickens excited about writing about books.

Across the varied exchanges, those classrooms that followed this philosophy of negotiation of the curriculum were most successful with this underachieving population of students. This kind of negotiation both

honors Delpit's (1988) call for explicit instruction and the call of those who talk about empowering students. But it is a different kind of "empowering" than we talk about here in the United States. Basically, teacher and students work as a team, with each having important decision-making roles and with the assumption that students have to be taught to assume these roles.

### SAMPLING WHAT THE STUDENTS ACCOMPLISHED

As the social writing continued, Bridget helped her students to produce a number of serious academic pieces. For his holiday paper in January, Cool J. wrote about the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In an interview, Cool J. expressed his strong motivation for writing on this topic. First of all, he was frustrated with some of his fellow students' attitudes about their heritage, "Most of the blacks in the class and in that school, you know, they just walk around like it ain't no big trip, you know." Cool J. believes strongly that it is important to recognize those who have come before us and the contributions that they made to our present society. He writes the following heartfelt words about his thoughts on the occasion of Dr. King's birthday:

I celebrate Dr. King's birthday by just thinking about what he did for me. Dr. King didn't want to be remembered for all the awards he won and his education, but for what he did for his people. Times aren't as bad as they used to be, but in some parts of Southern America blacks are still treated like \* @ %. Last year in Georgia blacks got together to march (led by Reverend Jesse Jackson) in an all-white county in honor of Dr. King. The whites didn't want the blacks to march. The whites threw rocks and sang "go home nigger's." But blacks kept on keeping on.

Dr. King won a lot of awards. One of the most famous was the Nobel Peace Prize. Dr. King touched a lot of people's lives. Because of Dr. King Reverend Jesse Jackson is running for the democratic spot for the upcoming presidential election. Rev. Jesse Jackson isn't the first black person to run but, the first to have a national campaign. In Arizona which is a state in the U. S. their governor didn't want to honor Dr. King's birthday. I'm kind of upset that it took from 1968 to 1983 to honor Dr. King's birthday.

I hope you like what I wrote to you. And I would like to hear from a black student and hear what he or she knows or has to say.

In an interview, Cool J. says that this piece of writing "came from the heart . . . I thought about all he did, not just for blacks, but for everyone, you know. He was a good man." When asked if he had to choose just one piece of his writing to go to England, which would it be, Cool J. replied that he would send the Martin Luther King Jr. piece rather than his own autobiography because "Little Cool J. you know they can wait to know about

Cool J." Dr. King is already famous, and "because it is a different country maybe they should know about him."

The English research team reported that Cool J.'s essay had a great impact on the students in Philippa's class. When the holiday papers arrived, the students in England sat in groups of three or four reading, and Philippa invited each student to choose one to read aloud to the class. Tootsie, after reading Cool J.'s piece, announced to the class that she was going to read this one aloud and that she was going to write to Cool J. about it. Tootsie's need to respond to Cool J. was so urgent that, encouraged by Philippa, she wrote on the back of a letter Philippa was preparing to send to Bridget:

To Cool J., I'm just writing a short message to say that I thought your essay on the national holiday of Martin Luther King was very interesting and that I agreed with your point that it took them from 1968 up to 1983 before they decided to honour the many great things that he did. Not only for black Americans but for people all over the world.

Cool J. proudly volunteered, "I received a note from Tootsie. She said she liked it and appreciated how I wrote it, and she agreed with my point that it took from 1968 to 1983 just to honor his birthday" (Interview, March 10, 1988).

In her February letter, Philippa reported an enthusiastic response of the English students to the U.S. holiday essays, crediting the exchange audience—and by implication its cross-cultural aspect—with dramatically heightening motivation for writing in her class. Cool J.'s friend, Easy E., informed the U.S. researchers that the English kids especially liked Cool J.'s piece because "he wrote about Martin Luther King, and you know, they don't have that holiday so, they were interested in that" (Interview, June 10, 1988).

When the holiday papers arrived from England, Ice T. recalled that "Miss Franklin lined us up in like a circle, and she passed one out to everybody, we all read it, we read it out loud." It is important to note here that the students needed support reading; otherwise they would not have been able to take advantage of the metacognitive opportunity or to make the social connections. It is not easy to read and appreciate students' writing that comes from another country, and students need help on multiple levels.

As the year went on, Geya began to write to the English students with the kind of trust she had placed earlier only in Bridget even though she remained too shy to open up to her U.S. peers. We see here the "pay-off" Bridget got for allowing Geya her own way into the exchange. For the Shakespeare assignment—to help students connect to the motivations of *Romeo and Juliet*—Bridget asked each member of the class to write about a rash deed of his or her own. Geya told about a truly rash deed of her own, cutting school when she was 12 to go off with a 21-year-old man. Geya hoped the English students would learn from her mistake even though she emphasized that she did not actually do anything really bad.

Easy E. who wrote about his father's rash deed explains how he differentiates between audiences now:

Like if I was talking to um Ice E. or Rex or you know, just one of my friends I be with everyday, just you know, writing a letter to them, you know and you know we be together everyday, so I would say, man wasn't that crazy what my father did, you know and have it you know where they you know, man that was, man I would never do that, you know and have em so you know they would probably laugh, and say you know just you know, something really different because you know, I be with them all the time. This is just some of like a way you know you can make em laugh, so you can just write something. (Interview, April 28, 1988)

Finally, some of Bridget's students wrote moving responses to controversial issues papers from their English correspondents. For example, Geya, now fully engaged, wrote a response to a piece arguing against abortion. In her response, which was longer than the original piece, Geya concurred that abortion is basically wrong, but after a brief paragraph in which she states this point and qualifies it, she quickly moves on to discuss her feelings about teenage pregnancy. She marks this shift in concern: "Now on the mother of the child that is having a child is a different matter, not the murder part but the taking care of the child part." She later reveals:

... all the girls that I know are pregant and are 13-17 yrs. old it seems to me that they are just saying I don't care anymore so getting pregant is the first answer to their supposibly problem and I just don't think it is fair It just hurts my heart to see all the young people getting pregant and don't have a red cent to take care of it.

She concludes that the parents of such pregnant girls must take some blame for their daughters' predicaments and goes on to write about how thankful she is that her mother watched, warned, and looked out for her:

I am so lucky without even knowing it and as soon as I go home today I'm going to thank my mom so much and tell her much I love her and that I'm so glad she taught me the strings and glad that she shows me that she loves me. I believe that if the parents was there when the child needs them then this can prevent alot of pregancies. Don't You Think So!!!!!!!!!!!!

This writing ends with 13 exclamation points.

In his goodybye letter, Easy E. reviewed his writing across the year and explains how his views about the exchange shifted:

I've been looking over some of the papers that I have wrote at the first part of the year and I wound out that I like most of them but some parts

I feel different about like when I said wrighting to you would be just another assignment for me.

When I first made this statement I didn't know how much fun it would be to write to you guys. . . . once I new my way around the school and started to meet more and more new people I started to feel good about myself and I really got into writing to you guys.

Fittingly, Geya, whose needs might have remained invisible in many classrooms, included a tribute to Bridget, an important last word that provides an essential insight into why Bridget's students seemed, across the board, to get so much from their exchange:

You know what I like about going and being school is my teachers I never knew of a teacher being so understanding and noticable as I noticed with my English teacher Mrs. Franklin I mean I noticed when she is really concerned what happens to most of her students that tries to help themselves.

Geya, the loner, was allowed social entry into the academic life of this very social exchange just as the more sociable Cool J., Easy E., and Ice T. were.

At the end of the term, Easy E. talked about how he would transfer what he learned in the exchange to his future efforts at writing. When asked whether he could apply what he learned about writing for the exchange to writing for school next year, Easy E. reflects:

I was writing to some friends, and so then I cared, about what I was writing, and . . . then you know that slowed it down, and you know I took my time, and you know I got it all. Finished and, that would be, a way I would write to a teacher, I would make sure everything's, you know . . . best as it could be.

## CONCLUSION

Implicit in this chapter are four recommendations for reforming classrooms to meet the needs of low-achieving students. The recommendations center on the following four basic strategies that Bridget Franklin and other exchange teachers illustrated through their practice:

1. Attend to the students' sociocultural worlds as well as to their cognitive processes; intertwine the social and the academic.
2. Look carefully at ways to reorganize classrooms to allow students flexibility as they write while at the same time provide them with the supportive structures they need. This involves creating a safe, community-centered classroom that binds a group of students together but that also

meets individual needs. Such community-focused classrooms attend to individual needs but move beyond student centeredness.

3. Uphold high standards by challenging students to tackle increasingly complex tasks and by providing them with the explicit support they need to meet these challenges. Attend to both process and product, to fluency and accuracy.

4. Share curricular decision making with students; both teachers and students should have strong voices and substantial input into what happens inside the classroom.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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#### NOTE

1. All teachers, schools, and students are identified by pseudonyms.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# *Young Writers: The People and Purposes That Influence Their Literacy*



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From their communities, to their families, to their classrooms, several factors influence young writers. At the center of children's forward movement, however, is their own desire to learn. Their teachers, friends, and parents strive to keep their children's passion for learning alive. As young writers become increasingly able to evaluate their own surroundings, and the role writing plays, their ability to write, talk, read, and think expands.

I begin this chapter with two pieces written by young writers, one by a very young writer and one by a child who is more accomplished. Then I fill in the difference between these two writers with several examples of children's writing and show what teachers, families, and friends have done to help the children grow as learners.

### TWO YOUNG WRITERS

#### Jessica

At the age of 3, Jessica decided to write a book, stimulated by the many books her parents had read to her. She tore the only piece of paper she could find into small sheets so her book would have pages, and created a title page (see Figure 10.1).