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Helping Others to See

Lucy Fife

My name is Lucy Fife. I am a classroom teacher in the Saginaw Public School System at Webber Middle School located in the lower region of Michigan. My job is to help others to see, (my students, that is). From our classroom, I help them to see the world through others' written impressions, opinions, and theories. I use many techniques to achieve this, and along the way, I help them discover and formulate their own views and show them how to articulate them, as well.

My students are racially diverse and are Learning Disabled with reading abilities that are as low as two or four levels below their present sixth-grade level. They are believed by many to be incapable of higher-level thinking, such as those required for interpreting a poem.

Upon your first encounter with my students, you may tend to agree. But, if you took the time to get to know them and to understand more about how they construct knowledge for themselves, you'd know that this was not true. You would understand that their difficulty entails a slower rate of processing knowledge. In addition, they do not always know how to communicate what they have learned. And sometimes, they simply can't understand what is being taught because the way in which the teacher has chosen to teach the material and the way in which they learn and construct knowledge are different. However, due to limited communication skills, my students can't always convey this difficulty. Since they also wear the label of Learning Disabled, it's generally assumed that the problem lies within them. Many times, this will cause them to shut down. Then, if further intervention isn't made by the teacher to insure a better reception of knowledge by the students, the assumption is made that "they" (the students) cannot learn the material because it is too difficult for them.

I'm always looking for an opportunity to help make these kinds of delivery and reception connections with my students. So, while at the N.C.T.E. conference this fall, I had the opportunity to attend a workshop where other teachers had successfully made the interpretive language connection with their students in an urban California school, using a clever device to help them arrive at the poet's underlining meaning. Although their students were

not Learning Disabled, I figured that I could make the necessary accommodations and give it a try with my own students.

After going over the general introductory information for figurative language, the teachers read the Langston Hughes' poem "Mother to Son" to the students. They had the students interpret it to them and then had them re-write the poem. Next, the students had to think about the poem in relation to a particular context in their lives. Finally, they re-wrote it in that context. This made the students' comprehension of the meaning of the poem much more complete.

This was fun! The students could be creative. They were motivated. They could more closely walk in someone else's shoes. Momentarily, they could be that person! Yet, they could still be themselves and express themselves.

To adapt this to my classroom I had to:

1. Do an oral reading of the poem.
2. Write the poem on the board.
3. Evoking participation from class, interpret the poem.
4. Have them recopy the poem and put it aside.
5. Have them select something that they liked to do (for instance, play basketball).
6. On another sheet of paper, have them list all of the good things about this activity.
7. Then, have them list all of the bad or unpleasant things about the activity.
8. Have them take out the "Mother to Son" poem, looking at the structure of it, (where the good things are and where the bad things are) have them start thinking of where they would substitute items from their lists in this poem.
9. Have them make the substitutions on another sheet of paper, thus formulating a rough draft of their version of the poem.
10. Have them polish their version.

To make this work, I had to first look at what my students' needs were and what we had to work with in order to meet those needs so that we could make this a positive learning experience. I thought:

My kids cannot read very well, but they can think.

They cannot spell very well, but we have dictionaries. Never mind that they are second-

hand and are so frayed that many are missing pages.

We have an old Apple II computer, but it is missing its mouse-so it doesn't work.

We have lots of construction paper, lots of chalk, and two big black boards.

My kids all had experienced life! They knew about the ups and downs it could put you through.

Taking all these things into consideration, we got started. We worked in group sessions; the kids helped each other with ideas and words. I'd find myself acting as a recorder for kids as they orally expressed their thoughts. I have a computer at home, so I would take everyone's written ideas with misspelled words and incorrect punctuation home with me and transcribe and type them on my computer. Their papers were transformed into creative masterpieces, revealing the genuine ideas they had come up with as they interpreted the poem, constructing their own knowledge, based upon their personal life experiences.

Not everything went like clockwork. There was some resistance. You have to realize that by the time these children get to me in the sixth grade, they have acquired a lot of added mental baggage. Many of them have gotten pretty used to defeat. By this time, they feel there is no need to even try because they are not going to be successful anyway. I had three students who fell into this category right from the start. There was Roosevelt. He was the angriest kid that I had encountered this far. He talked about this activity in a negative manner from the onset. He had such defiance and anger in his voice and demeanor as he proclaimed how he wasn't going to do it. He wrote the poem down when I instructed, refusing to do anything else. There was also a bright, articulate girl named Tracey. She was my best reader in the class. She had been placed in an inclusion Language Arts class. However, she didn't want to go to it, due to a medical condition. We (meaning her M.E.T. team) didn't force the issue in consideration of some social/emotional concerns stemming from this situation. From the look in her eyes, I could tell that she really loved this activity. However, she was hesitant to reveal this. Instead, she called it dumb and stupid. And there was Adam, who did very little work. He found many ways to avoid a lesson. His motivation for the academics was very low. However, he was industrious in many other ways. So, I knew that he was thinking all the time!

In spite of the negatives, there was a contagious excitement going around the room as students related their personal experiences to the highs and lows of the Langston Hughes poem and transformed it into a personal revelation of their own. Terry and

Crystal finished first. They talked about fishing and baseball, respectively. The personal significance each sport played in their lives came out, loud and clear. I used their poems as examples of a finished product.

Tracey couldn't resist! She wanted to do her poem. And she did! I saw her face light up; I watched as she laughed and became actively engaged in the process. It was like magic! Even Roosevelt, who was not going to complete the activity, had a transformation. He became quite eager to go through the other steps. Adam, never completed the poem. However, he became more involved than I had ever seen him. He wrote a story and designed a wonderful pop-up card for his mom for Mother's Day. This may not have been a success to others, but it was to me, simply because he was engaged and focused. And most importantly, he finished his task and it was creative and well done.

As suggested by the teachers in the workshop, after I had typed the poems, I had the students cut out their poems and glue them to rectangle-shaped pieces of construction paper, slightly larger than the size of their poems. This created a frame for the poems. Afterwards, we had them all laminated. Then, each student had a permanent pocket-sized version of his or her poem. The poems were presented to them during a program we had showcasing their successes for the school year.

Here, you can read on and share in the life experiences of my students as they demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the core message Langston Hughes certainly intended to convey. I'm sure that if you could have been observers in these two classrooms at the time these interpretive language sessions took place, you would have seen many of the same things going on. Kids were interacting, actually looking engaged with the material, teachers were facilitating, and an author from the past came to life. There was lots of action, yet lots of learning as kids were absorbed into the magic! One room was in California, while the other one was in Michigan. One room was with regular education students while the other room was with Learning Disabled students. Some things were done differently to help the students gain access around an added barrier in the room with the Learning Disabled. But all in all, many things were done quite the same. Enjoy, as you read and see how others saw.

Model:

"Mother To Son"

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,
 And boards torn up,
 And places with no carpet on the floor-
 Bare.
 But all the time
 I've been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's,
 And turnin' corners,
 And sometimes goin' in the dark
 Where there ain't been no light.
 So boy, don't you turn back.
 Don't you set down on the steps
 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
 Don't you fall now-
 For I've still goin', honey,
 I've still climbin',
 And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 -Langston Hughes

Student Versions:

"Mother To Son"
 Well son, I tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no round ball.
 It's had out of bounds,
 And foul balls in it,
 And blocks made,
 And places where I couldn't get through.
 But all the time
 I've been a running on
 And duckin' and dodgin',
 And makin' shots.
 And sometimes, winnin' against the odds when
 It seemed there wan't no way.
 So boy, don't you hit that rim.
 Don't you sit warmin the bench, 'cause
 You find its kinder hard to make a shot.
 Don't make no foul ball, now-
 For I've still runnin', honey.
 I've still makin' shots,
 And life for me ain't been no round ball.
 -Tracey Paschall

"Mother To Son"
 Well son, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no good catch
 It's had broken lines
 And crooked poles,
 And places with no fish at all-
 Empty.
 But all the time
 I've been a reelin; on,
 And getting' nibbles,
 And loosin' bait.
 And sometimes fishing in the dark where there ain't
 been no light.
 So, boy don't you turn back.

Don't you fall now-
 For I've still going, honey,
 I've still fishin'.
 And life for me ain't been no easy catch.
 -Terry Ervin

"Mother To Daughter"
 Well daughter, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no home run.
 It's had strikes in it,
 And foul balls,
 And bad calls,
 And umpires that don't play fair-
 Cheaters.
 But all the time
 I've been a hitting on,
 And getting' kicked,
 And getting' pushed,
 And sometimes winning games when
 We didn't even stand a chance.
 So, darling, don't you turn back.
 Don't you just sit on the bench sulkin'
 'cause you struck out'f the game.
 Don't you fall now-
 For I've still battin', honey,
 I've still pitchin'.
 And life for me ain't been no
 Home run.
 -Crystal Rivera

"Mother To Son"
 Well son, I tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no easy
 Cross to bare.
 It's been a rock road with
 Bends, and crooks in it,
 And sometimes no path at all-
 Untrodd'n.
 But all the time I've been a holdin' on,
 And reachin' for God.
 And sometimes makin' a way when there
 Hain't been no way.
 So, boy, don't you turn back.
 Don't you slip into Satan's den 'cause you
 Find it makes the way 'pear easier.
 Don't you lose your faith-
 For I've still believin', honey,
 I've still prayin'.
 And life for me ain't been no easy
 Cross to bare.
 -Tyra Gates

"Mother To Daughter"
 Well daughter, I tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no three-way call.
 It's had answerin' machine messages
 And caller I.D.

And busy phone lines.
Can't get through. But all the
Time I've been a dialin' on
And sometimes reachin' my cousin
And makin' plans, and runnin' up
The phone bill so high, till it
Touches the sky.
So daughter, don't you hold back.
Don't you hang up the phone,
'Cause you find it kinder hard
To get through.
Don't you sleep on the phone, now-
For I've still talking, honey,
I've still dialin',
And life for me ain't been no
Three-way call.

-Brittney Donald

"Father To Son"
Well Son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no smooth,
Corporate-elbow finishing move.
It's had perpetrators
And sellouts all in it!
Losers-
But all the time
I've been wrestling on,
And delivering rock-bottom
Finishing moves,
And winning matches.
Even when it seemed I
Didn't hardly stand a chance.
Helping
So son, don't just lay there,
When you are pinned down
To the ground, 'cause you find
It kind of hard to get loose!
Don't you quit, now-
For I'm still going,
I'm still delivering rock-bottom's
Here and there!
And life for me ain't been no smooth,
Corporate-elbow finishing move.

-Cornelius Johnson

"Mother To Son"
Well son, I tell you:
Life for me ain't been no
Box-office smash hit.
It had some
Hard times, crooked deals,
And smashed dreams.
But all the while,
I've been like a
No-limit soldier
Makin' videos,
Starrin' in movies,

And sometimes havin' to live
A hard-knock life!
So, boy, don't you get soft, now.
Don't you player-hate
'cause, now I'm livin' large and
sellin' CD's,
drivin' my tight car
with diamonds in my ears,
and life for me ain't been no
box-office smash hit.

-Roosevelt Aron

About the Author

Lucy Fife, a Saginaw Bay Writing Project Participant, is a teacher researcher and frequent conference presenter. She is a member of the Leadership team of the Urban Sites Network of the National Writing Project.