

2023

## Respecting Writer's Identity

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### Recommended Citation

, J. (2023). Respecting Writer's Identity. *Wellspring: A Practitioner-Oriented Journal of Literacy and Language Education*, 1(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/wellspringlled/vol1/iss1/7>

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## Respecting Writer's Identity

### Cover Page Footnote

Jane has taught English & Social Studies at Fryeburg Academy for over twenty years. She is also a lifelong learner and aspiring writer.

# Respecting Writer's Identity

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It's a remarkable thing, how certain voices and language in writing open the brain to new pathways of thinking. You think you have done *the work* -- attended DEI workshops, taken multiple classes, implemented social justice practices in your curriculum, been in small group discussions with colleagues; and then you read or listen to an author, and once again, you realize it is always work in progress. This is exactly what occurred while I was listening to an [interview with Felicia Chavez](#) about her book, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*. The interview struck me; it ignited a passion and curiosity to learn more. I began to form questions about bias, identity, and processes in the ELA classroom. As an educator, I am always looking for ways to "decolonize my classroom," and add more variety and spice to the workshop experience. Naturally, I purchased Chavez's book. Like Chavez, I believe writing is a revolutionary and vulnerable act - it can change lives. And conversely, sometimes inadvertently, as Chavez points out in her interview, educators can stifle and oppress student voices and identities. The challenge for educators of writers is to be willing to listen and encourage writing and creating that emanates from the heart, perspectives, and lives of our students, giving them the freedom to find their own meaning. This takes work - it takes self-reflection and questioning how we teach and a willingness to change our pedagogy. A first step in the process is listening to our students and fellow colleagues from all communities.

As soon as Chavez's book arrived I read the preface, introduction, and 1st chapter. I listened to her words about her experiences in her writing program that were laced with toxic white privilege that silenced her. While what Chavez is writing about is not "new" material for me, Chavez's voice, personal, and passionate, invites me to explore and opened the door to a different way of looking at the material she presents - the approach to how educators "teach" writing. I was both challenged and invigorated to read more. I investigated several of the articles Chavez mentions in her book about the experience of people of color and their experiences with writing institutes and MFA programs, *not one of them had a positive experience*. I pondered: as a white woman, my experience in the writer's workshop was positive and empowering. My experience and many other white students are in direct opposition to authors like Chavez who tell their stories, her white professor using, "a black pen to cross out references to ethnicity in her essays, noting in the margins, 'You don't need to make it a race thing'" (Chavez), or how Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie shares in her TED Talk, ["The Danger of a Single Story,"](#) about her white English professor telling her, "her novel was not authentically African" (Adichie), or like Junot Díaz states in his [New Yorker article "MFA vs. POC,"](#) "shit our peers said to us (shit like: Why is there even Spanish in this story? Or: I don't want to write about race, I want to write about *real* literature.)" (Díaz), these experiences of People of color create a different, harmful picture.

Their stories made me **STOP**, and question the way I conduct myself in my own English classes and the workshop process. I think of the stories my students of color have told me about teachers or counselors changing their voices in their writing to fit white institutions. And I breathe a *small* sigh of relief -- knowing that at least I do not do this. But after reading Chavez's

first chapters and the articles, I am left feeling uncomfortable and challenged in my own ideas of the workshop process, identity, and biases. The intersections of story, identity, and meaning meet in writers' workshops, and as educators, facilitators, and mentors of our students we have the power to create an egalitarian or a toxic environment. While I understand, identity is not fixed, it is fluid, ever-changing - like circumstances in life - I feel questions emerge about how we help to shape and allow identity or oppress and stifle the identity of our young students during writers' workshops and in English classrooms. How do I uphold traditional ways of centering Euro-American writing in my classroom? Have I made enough changes to welcome all voices, if not what more can I do? Have I centered authors of color, Asian authors, LGBTQ+ authors, and other ways of writing in my classroom? While I realize I do center on authors from many different cultures, as well as always reflecting on how I can improve my pedagogy, I still uphold some traditional Euro-American ways of writing; how can I continue the process of "decolonizing" my classroom? Equally important, how do I model this work for other educators? It is necessary we find new ways to teach writing and decentralize the Euro-American standards in the English classroom and create a community that respects the multitudes of cultural voices and identities that are expressed through the arts.

One important aspect to remember is **language is an essential part of identity**. Historically, "the U.S. rose to power as an expansionist force that colonized Indigenous and other language-minoritized communities of color in part through the subjugation of their languages" (Seltzer & de los Rios 3). Indigenous peoples were stripped of their language and black slaves were not allowed to read or write. Andrea Bear Nicholas from the Maliseet tribe uses the term "linguicide, a method of stripping culture from Native Americans" (Nicholas as

cited in *Dawnland Voices* 113)., a process used in the residential boarding schools for children taken from their tribes in the U.S. and Canada. When Native peoples did write, Siobhan Senior, editor of *Dawnland Voices*, states, “among the many forms of violence that Euro-Americans have inflicted on native peoples, there is editorial violence...(10). These practices are still alive -- take a look at the ALA list of banned books around the United States, the majority of banned books are Black, Hispanic, Latino, and LGBTQ+ authors. As mentioned earlier, this practice of “editing” is still practiced by teachers, and as a result, silences non-Euro-American voices. When teachers edit too heavily it changes students’ intended meaning and, while it is essential to guide and mentor our young students through the editing and revision process, it is also crucial that we do not edit out who they are in the process.

Reading and writing are inextricably linked. In “Writing to Learn,” Maxine Greene shares that our stories, the stories we read and hear from others, how we “incarnate, learn [about] what it tells us” (Greene 3), can help to understand what is true - and for some positive and uplifting and for others disempowering and toxic. It can be disempowering if students don’t “see” themselves in writing, whether fiction or non-fiction. As I meander deeper, reflecting on identity, language, and unconscious biases in relation to where I teach, an independent high school in rural Maine, with 25 countries represented in the student body, our school is a complicated mix of students, local students, students from other states, and students from around the world, each replete with their own stories, cultural identities, languages, and biases. I feel some relief as I think about the student art on my walls and the variety of books on the shelves in my classroom. Students need to see themselves reflected in the literature they read, as well as gain exposure to others' lived experiences. Stories have the power to transform lives.

We all have personal stories that have shaped us into the people we are. Writing our stories can help to clarify, give transparency, and allow us to find meaning in our stories. Finding meaning in life helps to uncover the complexities of identity and the writers' workshop is one path to that excavation. Over the years, I have often been struck by my seniors' comments, regardless of where they are from, during writers' workshops - they don't feel like authentic writers and certainly do not see themselves as authors; author is a word for professional writers. Another alarming aspect is most students do not feel confident in their writing skills, even as seniors. Writing has been prescribed for them, just like a prescription for medicine -- they follow teachers' orders and do not take ownership. While there is no one formula for writing, students still don't feel they have agency. This is a problem. How educators help students to uncover meaning and find their voices in writing is an area that is powerful and often difficult terrain. As educators, many of us have finished years of schooling and feel we have more authority over the knowledge we teach. And in turn, students see the teacher as "the authority," many times leading to danger in this authority to clamp down and stifle students' voices as writers. People of color, Asian people, LGBTQ+ people, and indigenous peoples are particularly sensitive to this fact, especially if their teacher is white.

Many of the young students of color I have spoken to speak to their exhaustion from changing their language, code-switching, to suit their fellow classmates and teachers. In her article, ["Words Matter: Language-Affirming Classrooms for Codeswitching Students,"](#) Andrea Castellano defines "codeswitching as the act of alternating between languages during conversation." Castenello points out that it is still a culturally pervasive belief that black language is more like slang and is considered inferior in comparison to standard white English.

Many of my black students feel the need to conform to a mostly “white” school and feel that if they speak too loudly or outside the parameters of what is considered OK they are often shut down. Other forms of language that do not fit the criterion of standard English are also stifled in classrooms, and students are asked to speak and write in English. Castenello quotes Clara Vaz Bueler, “‘Prohibiting, depriving, barring someone from using their language(s)/linguaging of choice is linguistic discrimination, including for educational purposes. Language is identity’.” It is not just students of color who may feel this way. When students who speak another language are not allowed to “process” using their own language in the English classroom this can reduce confidence and stifle voices. The challenge becomes how we embrace the multicultural writers’ workshop (and all classrooms), while in this process respecting and nurturing students’ identities in the classroom.

My colleague always says the lessons and theories in TESOL and EAL are for all teachers and students. One way to adopt practices that welcomes all voices and identities is to read the current research from TESOL, Teaching English to Speakers from other Language, or EAL, English as an additional language, programs. In my research for this essay, I found the theory of translanguaging, a way of teaching that embraces the idea that language is dynamic, fluid, and a social construct -- yes, the light bulb burned brightly after reading several articles. While translanguaging is a pedagogy<sup>1</sup> that stems from TESOL, it is applicable to all English classrooms. Translanguaging is about communication, and sees language as fluid and not separated. Translanguaging moves educators from a monolingual lens to a lens that views the

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that while this pedagogy’s focus is on bi-lingual learners, it allows for respect and encourages the multifaceted aspects of speaking, listening, writing, and reading.



multi/bilingual classroom as the norm, not the deviation (Seltzer & de los Rios 2). “It assumes that language is always changing, that we are all language learners, and are also creators of language” (Espinoza et al 9). When there is genuine, honest communication with and between students results in more productivity and clarity. According to Constant Leung in [“What is Translanguaging,”](#) when using translanguaging in the classroom, “you use whatever linguistic resources are at your disposal and your students' disposal, to communicate. You don’t need to stick to the named language”. For example, last year my sophomores read a complicated article about an author, and I found a Spanish translation for my Spanish speaking students. This allowed them to better understand the material, communicate with their classmates, and also allowed them to write more fluently about the subject. Furthermore, when students are discussing a piece of literature, all students are allowed to use language that is comfortable for them, sometimes they switch from their home language<sup>2</sup> to standardized English. In addition, when writing rough drafts students are encouraged to use their own language when formulating their ideas, as this helps to clarify and organize their thoughts. Afterward, they can “translate” into English, and educators can mentor and guide them through the process of editing and revising. They gain more meaning as they switch fluidly from one language to another. The process creates community, a safe space, and respects students’ identities, perspectives, and stories, allowing them to find their own meaning empowering them, and giving them agency in the classroom.

As educators it is crucial we take a deep dive into our own biases surrounding the

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<sup>2</sup> Home language - this refers to all ways in which students speak. This includes students first language and any vernacular that is not “proper” standardized Euro-Centric English.

English language and the “proper” ways to speak and write, as well as reflect on the types of literature we are engaging within our classrooms. One way in which we can start our reflections is to think about our own relationship to writing and reading. The Southern Maine Writing Project’s assignment, a learning autobiography about reading, allowed me to see how privileged I was to have parents who valued reading, and also reinforced the power of reading to support my emotional life; reading literally saved my life. Teachers can do the same with writing, and there is an excellent writing reflection assignment<sup>3</sup> (see footnote below) in *A Translanguaging Pedagogy for Writing: A Cuny-NYSIEB Guide for Educators*. Chavez offers four reflection questions on how educators inherited their teaching of writing, see footnote<sup>4</sup>. In addition, we can ask ourselves: do we center varying types of text from differing cultural perspectives? Another way that teachers can explore their own biases is to reflect on their own internal responses to students who do not speak or write using standard English practice. Specifically focusing on the divergent responses for varied types of students: students from different countries, Black students, Asian students, White students, LBBTQ+ students, and Hispanic students. These responses can inform an educator of where they may need to do some work on biases and unconscious expectations. Language is a core ingredient in one’s identity; if we are imposing the idea whether consciously or not that a person’s way of interacting with the world and making meaning is inferior then we oppress their identity. It takes courage and honesty to look! However, it is prudent that teachers are not alone in their

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<sup>3</sup> See page 6 for the assignment: <https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/TLG-Pedagogy-Writing-04-15-16.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Chavez teaching writing inheritance questions: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IIYsZihoRD\\_2gGUm9nd22jqpVsVb4Ke3vqK27b-CE0g/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IIYsZihoRD_2gGUm9nd22jqpVsVb4Ke3vqK27b-CE0g/edit?usp=sharing)

own island classrooms. It is important to discuss and share these reflections with other educators to bring about change. Reflection<sup>5</sup> needs to be an ongoing and deepening process.

Furthermore, it is important that teachers walk their talk. In our current social climate, it is time to counter the idea that there is one traditional way of speaking and writing standardized English and that it is superior to other forms of expression. It is unjust and delegitimizes many other ways of speaking and writing -- oppressing the identity of people of color, indigenous people, people who speak another language, and people who come from different social classes. Seltzer and de los Rios in their article, "[Understanding Translanguaging in US Literacy Classroom,](#)" state it is crucial to:

develop a multilingual ecology in school buildings and classrooms. In order to normalize and celebrate the bi-/ multilingualism of a school community... to design culturally, racially, and linguistically affirming instruction ... make shifts in literacy assessment practices...Provide professional development that further develops and engages a translanguaging stance. (5-7)

One of the facets to remember is that schools are a microcosm of the wider community, region, state, and country, and ultimately part of the global landscape. Allowing students to communicate and write in the language they are familiar with or comfortable with provides dignity and respect for everyone. It does not delineate one way of communicating as superior.

I still catch myself thinking "that's not the proper way to say or write that," or wanting to choose all the texts we read in class when I know student choice is key, I see my Euro-

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<sup>5</sup> Chavez preliminary survey about teachers curriculum choices:  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rpgYMOc7bTcFoh\\_xe3Fz\\_m\\_onfvYDDnvgkFeH0hF5k0/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rpgYMOc7bTcFoh_xe3Fz_m_onfvYDDnvgkFeH0hF5k0/edit?usp=sharing)

American privilege and authority. Personally, I plan to create a living digital archive<sup>6</sup> of multiple contemporary authors and artists. Like many schools, our school is on the trajectory of “decolonizing the curriculum” through DEI work and reflection, and many educators like myself use many of the suggestions mentioned, it is time to bring these ideas forward in our classes. We have work to do. Felicia Chavez reminds us that:

Writing [and reading] is hard, physically, mentally, and emotionally” (48), and “writing is a relationship with the self, after all. It’s a ritual of tuning in and listening to the language inside of us. Those words are power. Power to make sense of ourselves, by ourselves, independent of the system of white supremacy that tells people of color that we have no dignity, no history, no art, no voice. (98)

Chavez’s words are blunt and truthful and for many will be hard to digest. For white educators, it is crucial to acknowledge and explore their own racial identity. In addition, she stresses the importance of mindfulness in the writers’ workshop process [and in any classroom] for both educators and students, reminding educators to listen and take on the novel approach of nurturing emotional care and to respect the process as much as the product. Developing relationships with our students, listening between the lines to them, and “engaging in real dialogue” (47), will guide educators in what our students need. Equally important in this process, white educators need to listen to what their Black, Asian, Hispanic, Latino, LGBTQ+, and Muslim colleagues are saying by having conversations, reading books, and listening to

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<sup>6</sup> Living Archive: “A dynamic living archive of pDF’s by historical and contemporary writers of color, women, queer, differently ables, and gender-nonconforming artists, interspersed with electronic links to photo essays, graphic essays, spoken word poetry, stand up comedy, audio essays, video essays, [music]’ (101). Chavez’s list of authors can be found on her website: <https://www.antiracistworkshop.com/resources>

podcasts by these authors. Chavez stresses that we need to add authors of color, Asian authors, LGBTQ+ authors, and Indigenous authors to the body of the Western Canon, not replace one set of authors with another. She quotes Toni Morrison from *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*:

I do not want to alter one hierarchy in order to institute another. ... More interesting is what makes intellectual domination possible; how knowledge is transformed from invasion and conquest to relevance and choice; what ignites and informs the literary imagination, and what forces help establish the parameters of criticism. (109)

Pairing texts from the traditional white canon with authors of color and indigenous authors from the same time period offers students a more realistic cultural, inclusive picture.

Introducing young contemporary artists of music, fiction, non-fiction, poetry art, creating a “living archive” of material. The goals are to decolonize the classroom and to represent the plurality of the global landscape in our classrooms -- creating inclusion!

It is key to stress no one is speaking about getting rid of instruction about the craft of writing or editing when there are errors that need fixing, what all the authors are highlighting is to decentralize any one language as superior and to empower students to use all the resources available to them to further their learning, understanding, and communication (both written and oral) and give students choice in what they read and how they write. When we focus on the craft of writing/speaking and what it has to teach us by moving away from binary critical judgments about the writing as “good” or “bad” to nurturing questions about meaning and craft we support all our students' growth as authors (Chavez). Many of us have already incorporated a little, some, or all of these changes. On the other hand, for many educators, this

switch in thinking and acting in the writing classroom will be uncomfortable, however, if we want all our students to find meaning, “own” their work, and write authentically it is essential we allow and respect the multilingual ways of speaking, writing, and communication in the ELA classroom and writers’ workshop. Remember this work is an ongoing process, reflect with curiosity, not judgment; this allows for openness and change. Finally, when we “mentor students in how to command their own voices” (90) it decolonizes the classroom, centralizes the students, nurtures and respects the students' identities.

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