Friday Institute Education Brief
The Power of Youth Voices: Bringing a Publishing Curriculum to Your Classroom

“With or without an accent we should speak up with no fear.”
- Andrea Zavala-Cervantes, LCI student author

*The Voices of Our People: Nuestras Verdades*

Over the past four decades, civic engagement, defined broadly as being involved in one’s communities, has declined in North Carolina and in the broader United States. Meanwhile, researchers have found that civic engagement can help make communities more economically resilient and engaged citizens are also more likely to stay in a community and actively contribute to a community’s growth. In North Carolina, only 26% of citizens surveyed report volunteering and engaging in community service. As many as 1.1 million young North Carolinians, our state’s next generation of leaders, may have limited opportunities for civic engagement. As a result, many marginalized communities are missing out on a key source of ideas and solutions to difficult challenges.

At the same time, the power of youth and their voices has drawn increased attention and awareness to significant social and cultural issues in the U.S. and internationally. Young activists have taken center stage as we follow the collective voices of youth in the Black Lives Matter movement and the individual voices of youth such as Mari Copeny, who drew national and presidential attention to the water crisis in Flint, MI, Greta Thunberg in her global leadership of the climate movement, and Autumn Peltier who directly addressed the United Nations to advocate for clean water access for First Nation communities. These young people used their voices to advocate for those who have been ignored and to promote a better world.

The Literacy and Community Initiative (LCI) increases youth civic engagement through a university-community partnership supported by the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation and NC State’s College of Education. The LCI strives to examine and empower student voices, especially the voices of underserved and underrepresented populations. This initiative partners with three community-based organizations, Bull City YouthBuild, Juntos NC and CORRAL Riding Academy, and centers on a publishing curriculum in which students in these organizations write, publish and share stories about their lives as they participate in public discourse and activism. Our research focuses on examining student narratives to investigate the confluence of
youth as student, teacher, storyteller and activist. Through the publication process, young people amplify their experiences, ideas and perspectives in narratives to be shared with others.

Following our model of Write, Engage and Lead, LCI explores the role of student advocacy through the process of student writing, public speaking, public listening and acting. The LCI curriculum, framed around critical perspectives, encourages students to write about societal issues that mean the most to them and their community members, offering a safe space where youth can feel interconnected with their communities.

Practical Suggestions
Based on our research findings, we offer practical suggestions for middle and high school teachers, pre-service teachers, and school leaders for implementing a writing curriculum that focuses on youth advocacy and community engagement.

- **Write:** When implementing a writing curriculum, start by asking: "Why write?" and give your students voice and choice in their writing tasks by considering themes, topics and genres that are intentionally designed to meet their needs. Consider varied genres such as poetry, narrative, memoir, essays, letters, multimodal creations and autoethnographies. The key is letting students express themselves, their lived realities and their communities. See our curriculum guide as an example here.

- **Revise and Edit:** After each writing task, give students a chance to edit their own pieces through guided peer reviews, whole class workshop models or individual conferencing. Use posters, steps and guidelines for editing, offering concrete and practical steps for this process. Focus on meeting your students where they are.

- **Publish:** There are various self-publishing resources available online for teachers or individuals should you want to create a finished book. However, sharing your students’ work online, at your school library, with other ELA classes, or even for a parent's night can achieve similar effects of amplifying your students as writers and advocates for their community. See an example of published work here.

- **Celebrate:** After publication or sharing their work, make time to celebrate students. We recommend that teachers always leave time for these community-building moments in their classrooms. See an example of a celebration here.

- **Engage and Lead:** Create and organize opportunities for your students to share their work beyond the classroom. What community spaces are available for a public reading? Who do your students want to invite to hear their voices and learn from their stories? How can the community learn from your students? See an example of our LCI students’ podcast here.

To support the communities we serve and to help spread the messages of our student authors, we have created Reading and Discussion Guides and Educator's Guides for our student publications.

About the Authors

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