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I, Too: A Culturally Responsive Expression of Teacher and Student Writing

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I, Too: A Culturally Responsive Expression of Teacher and Student Writing

Author Biography

Tiffany Lewis is the Coordinator for Culturally Responsive Learning for the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Opportunity in Henrico County Public Schools. Prior to her current role, she worked as a high school English teacher at her alma mater, where she taught standard, honors, AP, and collaborative classes for grades 9, 11, and 12. Tiffany is a product of Henrico County Public Schools. She has a Bachelor of Science in Communications from Old Dominion University, a Master of Arts degree in Organizational Communication from Marist College, and a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Reading Specialist from the University of Virginia.

Tiffany's reach extends beyond the classroom, as she has presented on the state and national levels at the Virginia Association of Teachers of English (VATE) Annual Conference and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention. Tiffany has also designed secondary English language arts curriculum and has trained educators across Virginia in her role on the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) English Steering Committee.

Tiffany has a passion for authentic, culturally responsive teaching, grounded on equity, diversity, and inclusivity, all the while, providing enriching opportunities for students to explore English language arts with their own voices and in their own time.

Kevon Merritte is a senior at Varina High School in Henrico County Public Schools. He is planning to attend a four-year university in fall 2021.

Haley Novak is a senior at Varina High School in Henrico County Public Schools. She is planning to attend a four-year university in fall 2021.

Prior to my current role as a Coordinator for Culturally Responsive Learning, I served as a high school English teacher at my alma mater. Until the 2020-2021 school year, my K-12 teaching experience included English 9, English 9 Honors, English 11, and English 11 collaborative. Entering the 2020-2021 school year, I anxiously awaited my turn at AP Literature and Composition. I challenged my proximity and positionality to such a responsibility. Would I really be able to teach *AP*? Who would I have to become to teach *AP*? How much of me would I have to submit and restrict with *AP* students? Nevertheless, I pep-talked myself into the new task the only way I knew—in truth. I accepted that my only sure contribution to success would be premised on my accountability as a reflective practitioner, and furthermore, that my students' success was directly connected to my own. When approaching the AP Literature and Composition curriculum, I intended to be purposeful in planning meaningful, authentic lessons that would lend to students' organic expressions and interpretations of texts.

As my AP Literature and Composition students navigated our first poetry unit, I attempted to enliven the curriculum by tasking them with composing their own *I, Too* poems, utilizing the original version of the iconic poem, *I, Too* (1926), by literary legend, Langston Hughes, as a mentor text. Contrary to some, I ascribe to the belief that a student's aptitude does not negate the student's need for affirmation, demonstration, and footing. With that said, in my own pedagogical truth, I intentionally extended my reach to encompass all students with a culturally responsive approach to teaching—yes, even those students taking advanced-level courses. Cultural responsiveness suggests the practice of welcoming and incorporating students' lingual and cultural backgrounds as assets to the learning environment in an ultimate effort to elevate the curriculum to support students in *wanting* to achieve academic excellence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this case, specifically, I decided to scaffold for, yes, my twelfth-grade AP Literature and Composition students, by providing my own exemplar of Hughes' *I, Too*. I encouraged my students to consider the influence of their own voices through the voice of the speaker, as they understood the difference between the poet and the speaker as two, separate influences in the poem.

I truly believe my students are brilliant and deserve to be recognized. They, too, deserve to see themselves reflected in literature. They, too, deserve to explore the complexities and intersectionality of literary characters and voices. They, too, deserve to make mistakes and to correct them, as once stated by educator, Marva Collins, "...if I can't make a mistake, I can't make anything." Our class mantra, "The goal is growth," was what led the inception

and the actualization of these poems. By modeling my own version of the assignment, my students expressed their inspiration to demonstrate a similarly developed level of writing. I attempted to prompt their pursuit of academic excellence in this assignment by intentionally assigning a poem by an African-American poet, written almost a century earlier, and by honoring his composition in a way that was both authentic and particular to my own lived experiences and to those of colleagues whose own lived experiences correlate.

Essentially, our poems may resemble a formative assessment, of sorts, to the progression, regression, or stagnation of the social identity and capital initially addressed by the speaker in Hughes' text. Furthermore, when reflecting on Hughes' poem, as an African-American millennial and an educator, I can only ponder the significance of *I, Too* on my own presence in the K-12 English language arts classroom. I like to think that Hughes' efforts contributed to my 'seat at the table,' ergo extending through my instruction and delivery to include seats for all of my students and when, seemingly, there are no more seats available, to equip them with the tools needed to build their own tables and to craft their own chairs.

Like plants, when watered, properly lit, and adequately positioned for space, they grow—not by sight, as it is nearly impossible with the naked eye visibly to note every inch upward the leaves and stems extend. Rather, we know growth has happened when after walking away and returning, the living is still alive, is colorful, is equally strong and limber, and is reaching upward and outward for whatever space in which it exists. My students are those plants. Their writing is the extension of their lived experiences—oxymoronically simple, complex, eloquent, raw, mature, and yet unripe. This is real writing, in the way, I can only hope, Langston Hughes intended.

***I, Too* by Tiffany Lewis (adapted from *I, Too* by Langston Hughes)**

I, too, teach English.

I am the browner teacher.
They prefer I switch codes
When the on-lookers enter,
But I translate,
And eradicate fearlessly,
And free neatly.

Next time,
I'll discern them
When the on-lookers enter.
Nobody'll wish to
Say to me,
"You're so articulate,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll experience the true power of liberation
And be repentant—

I, too, am English.

***I, Too* by Haley Novak (adapted from *I, Too* by Langston Hughes)**

I, too dream beauty.

I am the pearlier Orient
They ask me to fit their standard
When boys scan the crowd
But I maintain
And smile resolutely
And speak impenetrably.

Hereafter,
I'll be glaring
When boys scan the crowd
Nobody'll try
To bark at me,

“You’re pretty for a Filipino”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll search for my soul
And be lost—

I, too am beauty.

***I, Too* by Kevon Merritte (adapted from *I, Too* by Langston Hughes)**

I, too, am intelligent.

I am the thug student.
They prefer me to take lower level classes
but I reply
with good grades
and a determined approach.

Next time,
They’ll be speechless with how gifted I am
And nobody’ll dare tell me
“take lower level classes”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll witness the true power of intellect
And be dumbfounded

I, too, am intelligent.

References

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