Against All Odds:  
Implementing a Middle School Writing Club  

by  
NANCY RENKO AND MARY WEAVER

The level of excitement rose as the bus neared its destination. Despite moments of anxiety, thirty Webber middle-schoolers bubbled with anticipation. They were making the journey to Saginaw Valley State University Day Care Center where they would read their children’s stories to the preschoolers.

“Miss Weaver,” exclaimed Shynesha, “do you have my story? I want to practice it.”

She began in her delightful speaking voice, especially geared for small children:

It was a nice bright, sunny day in the land of fruit land. Princess Strawberry had just received a letter from her mother Queen Blueberry. She was so surprised and shocked at the same time. She thought her mother had died when she was just a little girl.

At the same time Donald, who was seated directly behind Shynesha, competed, reading loudly:

Boom! went the thunder. Flash went the lightning. Down came the rain. It came down so hard not even the biggest eyes could see in it.

At the university the teenagers joined the young children in small groups around the picnic table and under the trees. The lawn was covered with circles of small fries and storytellers.

The preschoolers listened in rapt attention to Janelle as she read:

There’s a boy named Willie Stoville. All people in town call him “rhyming Willie,” because everything he says rhymes. One day Willie was talking to his best friend Billy. As they walked to the school house, Willie said to Billy, “You look silly.”

“Why do you say that Willie?” said Billy.

“Because your shoes are red and your shirt looks like my bed. Look here comes Fred.”

Janelle smiled shyly as she realized how much the children were enjoying her story and her wonderful color illustrations.

Monica seemed almost as tiny as the preschool day care children who were listening to her story. She read the words that she had laboriously penned for many weeks at school. All eyes were upon her as she shared her story about the birth of her cousin, Da’Corion.

He was asleep for a long time. When he woke up he began to cry because he was hungry. He was a pretty baby. Da’Corion had a brother named De’Ondre. They are really close to each other.

Despite her small stature, she had grown in leaps during the school year. Monica was visually impaired, legally blind without her glasses. She had been in a special education classroom for most of her elementary schooling. As a seventh-grader, she was placed in an inclusive classroom, but it wasn’t until she joined
the Webber Middle School Writing Club that she began to blossom.

One of us, Mary Weaver, came up with the idea for the Writing Club while participating in the Saginaw Valley Writing Project summer institute. She wondered what she could bring back to students to enhance their learning. "I wanted my students to develop a love for writing, to immerse themselves in writing as I did during the summer institute," noted Mary. The idea of a writing club was born.

Collaborating with another writing project fellow, Natalie Tucker, we were ready to start. But how, we wondered, would we make this idea real?

"Do you really think anyone would show up?" Nancy wondered. The question arose from a feeling that sometimes overwhelmed us: that as language arts teachers, we had been fighting a losing battle, teaching writing to middle-schoolers who were consumed with other issues.

Saginaw, according to a 1996 University of Michigan study, is ranked as the seventh most segregated city in the United States. In the same year, David Rusk, an urban policy consultant, identified Saginaw as one of the twenty-four poorest cities in the country. Poverty, gang activity, drug use and the economics of single-parent families struggling to survive affected our students' academic performance.

We wondered if we were naive to try to start a club that had writing as its focus. Who would be interested in a club that did not offer the competitive excitement of sports or the fevered frenzy of a gang initiation? Would students care enough to spend their spare time writing? Would the peer pressure against such an academic activity prevent even the studious children from participation?

We knew if we didn't try we would never know the answers, so we decided, against all odds, to go for it. Webber Middle School Writing Club was to become a reality.

But other questions remained. Natalie wondered, "When will we meet?" We couldn't meet after school because the streets were not safe at the hour the students would be leaving. Mary pushed for lunch time. Nancy wondered if other activities such as Step Club, basketball, movies, or that favorite middle school noontime activity — pursuing the opposite sex — might decrease our membership. But we didn't have a choice. We agreed to try meeting during lunch hours. We placed announcements on the teachers' chalkboards, "Writing Club meets on Tuesdays in Room 216." We encouraged teachers to advertise during middle-school advisory period.

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On that first Tuesday, seven students shyly filed into room 216. Not surprisingly, these first ones were the students left out of noontime intramurals and flirting activities.

We began with an icebreaker prompt: "If you could be an animal, which would you choose to be?"

Javier asked, "How do you spell 'Jaguar'?"

"Oh! Oh! What is the name of an animal that has scales and a long nose?" asked Tiffany.

Monica just sat and watched.

So began our great adventure: creating a literate middle-school environment where students engage in discussion and share humor and learning. We demonstrated and participated with our students in reading response groups. We modeled "What do you mean..." questions and "Show-don't-tell" admonitions.

Students began using these strategies. "What did you mean when you say, 'he never made anyone feel bad'? Could you show not tell this?" Tiffany asked her partner.

One day Tashannon, a quiet, tentative girl, peeped in Room 216 to see who was there. Her hunched shoul-
ders made her look shorter than she was. Encouraged by Leslie’s ready, toothy smile and Christian’s warm welcome, she entered. After the initial group appeared, this is how most of the students joined our club, hesitantly, one at a time. The sense of community gained in the Writing Club fulfilled a deeply felt need for our little band of outsiders.

But then the character of the club began to change. A few boys, wearing Nikes and low-slung pants, initials carved into their closely shaven heads, crossed the threshold asking to join. Why did this happen? We never asked. “Why are you coming to a Writing Club?” hardly seemed an appropriate question. It may have been that by this point in the school year the regular noontime routines were losing their fascination. But we think the main attraction of the Writing Club for these kids was the lure of the computers. Whatever baggage the concept of a “writing club” might have carried was offset by the attractions of technology.

The seven shy students became leaders who basked in the knowledge of understanding how the computers functioned and how words came alive on their papers. Rakeesha showed the new club members how to change fonts and print sizes, causing a deluge of imaginative design. We had to restrict student creativity by allowing them to print only one copy, as they tried artistic renditions of every text.

Suddenly our ranks were swelling. Word got out that the Writing Club was FUN!

Unlike a class, the pressure was off. Students could come with their friends and stay away on the days they needed to do something else. If they were absent for two weeks, they would be welcome on their return. There were no grades. Students could choose their own topics, try out different types of writing, experiment with dialogue, and generally be creative. We maintained a casual atmosphere which allowed conversation to occur and friendships to emerge, and most importantly we fostered a spirit of community. What went on in Room 216 became transformational.

The promised trip to Saginaw Valley became a great motivator toward nudging students to show up and complete their work. It was the early birds who got first crack at the computers, but beyond that, our shared goal of a successful performance at the day care center had a dramatic and positive effect on the group's energy level. As we looked around the room, we saw twenty students reading their pieces to each other, drafting on the computer, editing each other’s work and helping each other to expand computer skills. We watched as Karim proudly read his draft, “How Snakes Are,” to a group of seventh-grade boys. We became aware of our audience. “Jennie, your story is good but too long. You have to shorten it because little kids won’t be able to listen to fifteen pages,” observed Debra.

Meanwhile our computer guru Rakeesha was showing students how to cut, copy and paste, real tools for revision. We realized that we could let the students lead.

Rakeesha surfaced as a genuine leader, asking engaging question about other students’ work. She became the “coach” for some of the children who sometimes struggled with their thoughts and words. She helped Jennifer shorten her piece, and more than once smoothed out writing problems by showing students how to put a quote in the story or how to find the right adjective.

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Monica, the girl who at our visit to the day care center was to write about the birth of her cousin, now dedicated her time to typing the “Preamble to the Webber Middle School Constitution” because copying other people’s words was what she thought writing was. She desperately wanted to belong.

Although the Writing Club began with quiet, serious students, it became a noisy workplace with the addition of students like Roosevelt, a highly creative boy who could never sit still. He was always up and down, bouncing around and talking incessantly, except when deeply engrossed in drawing pictures of cars, portraits of people or beautiful renderings of a bridge. Jenny, on the other hand, was full of questions. She wrote volumes such as her fifteen-page cat story entitled, “The Life of Lau and Friends.” Her biggest
challenge was to keep the essence of the story while reducing its length. Another student, Henri, was a tough, street-smart kid who never completed a writing assignment in his language arts class. His children’s story was about a penguin who was a child’s pet. Illustrating his story with a lively penguin gave him the focus to produce his first finished piece. Meanwhile, Ahmand, who was very vocal, practiced eerie noises to go along with his ghost story.

Our students made another great leap forward when we brought in a “writer in residence.” This was Diane Boehm, a children’s book author with writing project affiliations.

Diane read with wonderful expression, making her children’s story come alive as she shared it with our students. She taught the students to illustrate their completed stories for young children. She showed samples of trade books with wonderful pictures, explaining how the drawings and words came together on a page. Now that students were making pictures, Roosevelt, who had previously been up and down in his seat, became quiet and focused. Jerome delighted other students with his colorful drawings. When Monica saw other students illustrating their stories, she searched for a picture to share with the group. Since drawing did not come easily for Monica, she brought a photograph of her new born cousin. Rakeesha suggested that Monica write about her cousin and she did. For the first time, she went beyond copying text and composed her own words. She discovered her voice.

A few days later, the youngsters at Saginaw Valley State University Day Care Center listened as Monica and other club members read their stories. Soon their voices were joined by the giggling sounds of preschoolers enjoying André’s poem, “The Boy Who Ate Saginaw”:

There once was a boy, his name was John.
Instead of mowing the grass, he ate the lawn...

Why can’t you be normal and go catch frogs.
I wonder what happened to Scruffy, our dog?
Don’t eat the house, that’s my rule.
You already drank all the water from the swimming pool.

Look! That kid just at the mall.
He just swallowed Saginaw.

The preschoolers laughed while the middle-schoolers beamed, their smiles infectious.

If we had ever entertained any doubts about the success of the Writing Club, they now vanished, melted by the warmth of our students in this celebration of writing. Despite the image with which our school was saddled, our students proved they were not just an underachieving, gang-oriented group of teenagers. Rather, they were a caring group of writers. Students came to the Writing Club because they found an accepting atmosphere in a safe environment away from the usual lunchroom chaos. The lure of technology pulled them in, but in the end it was the belief that they had something to say, their growing confidence as they established their voices, that transformed their views about writing and themselves.

Roosevelt went on to write an essay about Shirley Chisholm which took third place in the nation in a contest sponsored by the National Peace Foundation. Monica became aware of the power of words and the joy they can bring. She came to love writing so much that other teachers complained because she was working on writing stories in her science and math classes. She wrote poems about friends, family, and, much to their delight, classmates who sometimes became the main characters in her stories.

As pleased as we were about our success with the Writing Club, we were glad to be finished for the year. Our students had been so involved in the final project that we had munches sandwiches during lunch time editing conferences for two solid weeks, as we helped students publish their stories for the Saginaw Valley trip. We enjoyed our lunch hour on Monday, finally getting a much deserved break. But soon the principal’s voice over the PA interrupted our leisurely meal; “Ms. Weaver, Mrs. Renko, Mrs. Tucker, you have about ten students in Room 216 for a Writing Club meeting.”

We laughed. Were these students early for next year’s meeting or were they unaware that Writing Club was over for the year? Somehow we knew that next year Writing Club would return—back by popular demand.

Nancy Renko and Mary Weaver are both members of the Saginaw Valley Writing Project.