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Understanding Life: Senior Perspectives in Creative Writing

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Life into Fiction: Understanding Upperclassmen Perspectives on Lifelong Themes in Creative Writing

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Abstract

Although high school is meant to prepare students for the “real world,” it is difficult to determine what knowledge about life students possess at graduation. Learning about how upperclassmen understand and think about life experiences provides educators with greater knowledge of how to meet their maturing needs. This presentation examines how upperclassmen from a Creative Writing class view life themes that came across through their writing. This study was completed using a qualitative self-study approach and included varying data collection methods, such as field notes, informal classroom discussions, and student work. Research has shown that student conceptions of life experiences are varied but developing during senior year. The findings indicate that students benefit from collective discussion since it promotes sharing varied experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. The findings of this study suggest the values of understanding senior beliefs so that educators can widen student perspectives in a safe environment.

Research Questions

- How do junior and senior students in a Creative Writing class perceive and reflect upon about life experiences?
- What lifelong themes are most prevalent in student writing?
- What opportunities does creative writing provide for student reflection, self-examination, and identity building?

Student Case Study

One female student demonstrated a higher level of critical thinking by drawing upon multiple themes in a single piece of writing. In her short story “Viper,” she explored consequences, love, and the perceptions of oneself and others. The following is a selection from her piece:

Participants

- **Who:** 12 senior and 1 junior students (6 male, 7 female) of white ethnicity
- **What:** Upper level Creative Writing elective where students experimented with poetry and short story writing
- **Where:** A rural community in central Illinois



Methodology

Data was drawn from the following sources:

- student work
- lesson plans
- personal reflections and field notes
- informal feedback

Lessons were taught that encouraged students to explore current perceptions on life and more fully develop a sense of self through poetry and short story writing.

Preliminary Findings

By examining samples gathered from two poetry units and four short story units, four life themes that were most prevalent in student writing:

Home/Family

Students are dependant on their families, but have complex feelings of rebellion as they strive for independence. Students are also nostalgic for childhood memories of simpler times.

Exploring Consequences

In seeking independence, students face mature situations, which include making decisions about using alcohol or drugs. Student work examined how bad choices may lead to harmful results, suggesting that students are undergoing an adjustment of values.

Love/Relationships

Sample work showed a spectrum of thoughts towards love and relationships. Students crave more serious companionship as they view themselves as more mature adults. Surprisingly, none wrote about heartbreak, perhaps not experiencing it yet or not ready to share.

Perceptions of Self/Others

Student work examined contradictions between how people view one another and how one views self. Student work suggested a disconnect between reality and perceived reality, so the idiom “don’t judge a book by its cover” can apply to all human beings.

...The people walking by amused me...they never actually looked at each other or me...but I guess with coal painted eyes and blue spiked hair, people will avoid you anyway...

A man...walked out with a gym bag in hand...a guy that I would never think twice about...I will accept this challenge...He just kind of stared at me, so I let him take me in...

“I need a ride downtown, and you, my kind sir, are going to help me.”

...I was looking for a shiny little sports car...he was walking up to a bike...I can’t think...it was a fully built black on black Harley...

...My heart leaped in excitement. Maybe momma’s boy and I had something in common...