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The Ability to Effect Change: The Utility of Language and
Literature in 826LA's Young Authors' Book Project at Mendez High School

As I started my fellowship, the two questions I remember being asked over and over again were: "What exactly is 826LA? What is its purpose?" As I explained 826LA's absolute dedication to helping students in the Los Angeles area with their writing, their goal to inspire a love of language that will last throughout a lifetime, I received a lot of positive responses. I could tell, however, that many of the people I was talking with dismissed 826LA as simply another tutoring center, one with admirable programs, but nothing too out of the ordinary. People did not seem to grasp exactly how extraordinary 826LA is, not simply their numerous workshops and events, but the incredible ability to transform perceptions, even lives, through their mission to bring literature and language to life. As the Publishing Fellow for the CSULA/826LA Fellowship, I was involved in many writing projects, but the one that had the greatest impact on me was the Young Authors' Book Project. Over the course of this project, volunteers work with high school students to conceptualize, write, edit, and publish a book, working to develop their voices and gain the ability and confidence to tell their stories as well as to critically examine their own lives as they relate to the 1945 landmark *Mendez v. Westminster* case which desegregated schools in California.

I have always been convinced in the power of language, in the incredible ability the written word has to effect change. As an English major, it would be impossible for me to enjoy, to say nothing of passing, the classes I have taken at CSULA over the past several years without this. Yet, my belief in language and literature's utility, in its sheer *power* has grown infinitely throughout this project. I have watched high school students discover, not simply an appreciation

for language, but an awareness of its infinite potential to change the world around them.

Throughout the course of the project, I worked with a variety of students, some of whom struggle with their classes and whose writing skills are several grades below their actual placement in school, students who admit that they have all but given up on school. Yet, by the end of the project, these students recognized that, through their writing, they had a voice; they gained an ability and platform with which to speak out against injustices in their community. This project has truly made me see how an effective use of language can do more than earn a passing grade in a class, but can effect change in the community, in the world, but also in perceptions of oneself.

The site of this year's Young Authors' Book Project, Mendez High School in Boyle Heights, is named after, perhaps, one of the most important families in California history. The Mendez family, along with the Palomino, Guzman, Ramirez, and Estrada families, filed a class action lawsuit against the Westminster School District, suing the school district for the unfair and unjust segregation of their children, as well as all children of Latin American descent, into "Mexican schools" throughout California. California's history of segregated schools started in 1923 when Roosevelt, a new school, opened up less than five hundred feet from the old school, Lincoln, in El Modena. Ostensibly, Roosevelt was build in order to address overcrowding at Lincoln, yet Mexican-American students were "pushed into the older and inferior facility [of Lincoln] to keep them separate from the Anglo students in the new school" (Arriola 173). On the heels of this segregation immediately followed further acts of discrimination. The Mexican schools, separate from the "Anglo" schools which the white children were allowed to attend, were blatantly underfunded and understaffed. Students were crowded into run-down classrooms which lacked the necessary supplies for students to learn. Often times, there would not be

enough desks for the students to sit at, to say nothing of the books; the few books provided were often several years out of date and in high states of disrepair.

However, it is the different curricula taught in the white and Mexican schools which most poignantly illustrates the vast inequalities inescapable in any segregation. The schools which children of Mexican and Latin American farm workers attended focused classes, not towards an expansion of the mind, to an awakening of the intellect, but instead to the most limited range of knowledge; students were taught the skills *others* believed they would need to succeed in life. They were placed in industrial, vocational, and domestic help classes which were scheduled around agricultural and farming seasons. Students were prepared, “not [for] the academic, [but] more the vocational” aspects of life, claims Sylvia Mendez, daughter of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez (qtd. in Rojas 31). What little education provided to these students was often cut short as “many Anglo educators did not expect, or encourage, Chicano students to advance beyond the eighth grade” but instead concentrated on, “as one district superintendent put it, ‘help[ing] these children take their place in society,’” a place which was most definitively inferior to that of the Anglo citizens, a place which legal and social forces ensured offered little hope of escape (Arriola 173).

It was these blatant and unapologetic acts of oppression which the Mendez family challenged in their lawsuit, filed on March 2nd in 1945. In 1946, Judge Paul McCormick handed down his decision that “segregation on the basis of race or ancestry was a violation of California state law and therefore violated students’ right to equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution” (McCormick 17). In his closing remarks, Judge McCormick raised questions about the validity of “separate but equal,” a sentiment first established in 1896 in the US Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. McCormick’s ruling,

however, stated that where there is separation, there can never be equality (Wollenberg 179). Society could do well to remember McCormick's judicious philosophy because de facto segregation, often rooted in income inequality and other racially motivated factors, has, in most cases, simply replaced the de jure segregation struck down by McCormick nearly seventy years ago. The Mendez family's courage and conviction, their determination to fight for equality, for a future for their children has had a tremendous impact on other civil rights cases, including *Brown v. Board of Education* which ended segregation in schools across the United States, a case for which *Mendez v. Westminster* served as legal precedent. .

Yet, despite this incredible victory over practices of segregation, prejudice, and discrimination, very little is known today about the case, the Mendez family, and their legacy. Valencia discusses this lack of recognition and awareness in "The Mexican American Struggle for Equal Educational Opportunity in *Mendez v. Westminster*: Helping to Pave the Way for *Brown v. Board of Education*" and claims that "few people in the United States are aware of the central role that Mexican Americans have played in some of the most important legal struggles regarding school segregation," including, but not limited to, *Salvatierra v. Del Rio Independent School District*, (1930) *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District*, (1931) *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District*, (1948) *Gonzalez v. Sheely*, (1951) *Hernandez v. Texas*, (1954) and that even "scholars of race relations, including some legal specialists," know little to nothing about these cases (390).

Perhaps this lack of recognition plays a part in the ever growing social, economic, racial, and cultural divides occurring across the United States. It seems as if every day brings with it new and increasingly horrifying accounts: stories of white police officers taking the law into their own hands when it comes to people of color, politicians in our nation's capital discussing

the need to deport all “illegals,” a term which not only criminalizes those who come to America only seeking a better life within our borders, but also strips them of their humanity, turns them into “aliens” whose very existence is illegitimate and unlawful. With every new story of racism, of hatred and violence, the threat of desensitization looms closer; society is becoming numb to these horrendous reports. It no longer sees individuals, brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers, grandparents and cousins, but a continuous stream of numbers, a running total of deaths, arrests, riots, victims and perpetrators, masses blurring into obscurity. For every narrative in which the individual is recognized, there are hundreds, even thousands more going untold, lives and tragic deaths sliding into invisibility. This lack of recognition is what *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice*, the book published by Mendez High School students through 826LA’s Young Authors’ Book Project, attempts to address, for if people are unaware of a major movement in history, a movement dedicated to bringing an end to segregation, to inequality and prejudice, to judging and dividing people based solely on the color of their skin, then is it any wonder that we are still fighting for the equality the Mendez family sought over seventy years ago?

It is vital for this fight, this struggle for equality and justice to continue, for it seems we still have a long way to go. The students at Mendez High School, the school named after the incredible Mendez family, reported knowing little about the school’s namesakes at the beginning of the project. The school’s student population is more than ninety percent Hispanic and Latino, suggesting that the de jure segregation ended by *Mendez v. Westminster* has simply been replaced by de facto segregation. These issues, and so many more concerning race, inequality, poverty, crime, and hatred, were all brought to the students’ attention through 826LA’s Young Authors’ Book Project, as students were asked to critically examine their own lives for instances of injustice and write about what they observed.

As I began this project, I had absolutely no conception of what I was getting into. I had no idea that throughout the course of my fellowship with 826LA and my work with the Mendez High School students there would be days when I would sit in my car after volunteer sessions and simply break down into tears, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually defeated by what I had learned about the students' lives that day. Nor could I have imagined the complex whirlwind of empathy, anger, righteous indignation, and even absolute fury that I witnessed on the students' faces as they began the difficult journey to critical consciousness, to a recognition and awareness of the world around them, facing injustices they had previously accepted as part of life. Yet, for every one of the days when I felt like I was not making a difference, when I felt as though perhaps it might be better to go through life blindly, obliviously unaware of the pain and suffering which can comprise so much of our lives, there were days when my belief in the power of literature, of language and the written word, infinitely expanded. I watched the students from Mendez High School gain, not only a voice, but the platform and confidence with which to utilize that voice to speak out against instances of prejudice and discrimination. In their finished book, students discuss not only the *Mendez* case and the fight to gain equality in education, but explore the ways in which this essential and fundamental fight is still ongoing, not only for equality in education, but equality in all areas of life.

Involved in this project were students from all over the educational spectrum; there were students who were excited to begin, students who were eagerly seeking a chance to discuss their community and their perspective of both its strengths and weaknesses. There were also students who seemed to have absolutely no conception of what 826LA was talking about when volunteers asked them about instances of injustice in their daily lives, students who claimed that racism and injustice were no longer aspects of life in 2015, especially not in liberal and culturally diverse

California. There were others who had absolutely no interest in writing anything at all, students who admitted that they thought school, writing, and this project in particular were a waste of their time because, as one student told me at the beginning of the project, “nothing will ever change.” However eager or reluctant though, each student had a story to tell, a story which is published in *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice*, tales which range from entertaining to heartbreaking, tragic to uplifting, all beautiful and insightful chronicles about their lives within the community of Boyle Heights. Works included in the book describe students’ experiences of being told that they were not welcome in America, being told to go back to their “own” country, times when students were told that they were worth less than “true,” meaning white, Americans. Students write about having their families torn apart by immigration statuses, by brutal, shocking gang violence, about being pulled over by the police and treated as though they were criminals, simply because of the color of their skin. Others discuss observing their entire culture, their national heritage, language and traditions be dismissed, looked down upon as though they were inferior, even meaningless. There are stories about being bullied and about being bullies, about struggling to survive in a world that seems, at times, greedy, cruel, and chaotic, about foster families and broken families, as well as tales about families, friends, and communities coming together with resilience and determination, in love and laughter, in song and strength.

Many of the voices in *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice* discuss encounters with the racism and hatred that still exist in today’s world; these voices, however, do not present a dry textbook-esque overview of America’s tarnished history of slavery, violence, and discrimination, nor do the voices seek to exaggerate and exploit instances of racism for entertainment value as we all too often see on the nightly news. Instead, these voices are imbued with energy and vitality, powerfully impacting the reader; they are voices ringing with strength, endurance, and

heart, voices as dynamic and engaging as any writer studied in a college class. Some of the experiences are told with a quiet strength and determination, others with a pulsing fury that flies from the page to confront the reader, others with righteous indignation. In all cases however, the powerful and dynamic writing strikes a chord, prompting the readers to look deeper into their own lives with the same critical consciousness the students in *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice* utilize to examine their own world.

Some students chose to interview activists and social leaders, including Sylvia Mendez, whose family started the fight for equal education in California in 1945. Sylvia Mendez has spent her life traveling around the world, sharing knowledge and spreading awareness about her family's struggle, about their determination and courage to fight the gross miscarriage of justice they observed occurring in California schools. She also talks about the need to continue the battle for equality. In an interview with student Yareli Rojas, Mendez explains that “‘right now, this is an example, this school, named after my mother and father,’” is an example of an ongoing injustice because “‘it’s almost one hundred percent Latinos. What does that tell you? We are segregated. We’re not integrated in this school’” (33). Mendez believes that “‘racial inequality right now is so rampant. We are more segregated right now than we were in 1947. Schools segregated, housing, jobs; we have not met Martin Luther King Jr.’s dreams. We are far from them’” (34). Her solution? Students like Yareli Rojas, like all the Mendez High School students participating in the Young Authors’ Book Project with 826LA. Mendez claims that “‘that’s why I love to talk to students. So maybe one day they can find a solution to this de facto segregation that we have right now’” (33).

The key will be to find their voices, as they do through this project; Sylvia Mendez claims that she believes her greatest gift is the “‘ability to go out and speak,’” to use her words to

share her experiences with others, to inspire within them a desire for change, for justice (qtd. in Rojas 38). Throughout this project, I was able to watch students discover their voices, to share their voices, not only with the volunteers and other students working with them, but with the world through their published words. All the stories contained within *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice* are incredibly powerful and compelling. One student wrote about being shuffled from foster home to foster home, feeling rejected and lonely, as though “I was broken in pieces inside of me” because no one wanted her (Ramirez 88). She reports feeling as though everyone she met judged her for “what was in my file, for what my parents did in the past,” for who her parents were (Ramirez 88). At the end of her essay, she pleads with her readers to look beyond the surface, to see beyond the color of her skin, beyond her past, to truly *see* her. These words had a profound effect on everyone who heard them. At the book release, Ramirez was one of a select number of students to read from her essay. Her fellow students, their families, teachers, and volunteers looked at her with respect, in awe of all she had survived and her determination to change her life. We were no longer simply looking at Madison Ramirez, the girl who we thought we had gotten to know over the course of the two month long writing process; instead, through her story, Madison offered us all a glimpse at her private life, an insight into her secret, silent struggles, and in doing so, opened our eyes to the real individual. We were truly *seeing* her for the first time.

Another student shared his perspective of injustice, not on the national or community level as other students did when discussing police profiling, gang violence, or immigration issues, but instead spoke about being bullied by the very students surrounding him in the classroom. I felt as if at any moment I might simply shatter, might simply break down into uncontrollable sobs as he described the pain, humiliation, and heart wrenching loneliness he

experiences daily, as he choked out that he “just wanted a friend, that’s all” (Garzon 142). It was truly one of the most devastating moments I have ever experienced. Throughout the project, I had the chance to work closely with many of the volunteers, nearly all of whom shared having similar experiences with students. They spoke about hearing stories that are absolutely heart breaking, stories which, at times, caused them to flee from the room as soon as the student left, stories which horrify anyone with a heart. Yet, each volunteer reported having to persevere, to push through the grief, sympathy, and sorrow at being witness to such pain in order to help the students develop their writing because these true experiences of agony and anguish, of injustice, prejudice, and discrimination simply *must* be heard, these stories *must* be told. It is the only way there will ever be any hope for change. As the student spoke, the uncomfortable shifting in seats, the nervous laughter that had first greeted Alonso’s words vanished as an absolute silence fell over the group. I could see a change come over the other students; guilt, shame, horror, and empathy were reflected on every face. It was this change, this emotional recognition of what they had done, the pain and suffering they had caused which gives me hope, hope that the students will change, hope for the future.

That is what this book, what the Young Authors’ Book Project represents: hope. Within each of the students’ stories run similar threads, threads of strength, tenacity, resilience, and courage to resist and challenge the injustices life will throw at each of these students; at the core of each essay, however, is hope. Hope that their words will have an impact on others, will awaken a critical consciousness and awareness in others as this project has done for them, hope that their words will bring light and change in the darkness. This project has had an immense impact on the students. At both the beginning and the end of the project, students were asked to complete a survey which questioned them about how they felt about writing in general, their

writing ability, and the effect that writing can have on the world around them. Before the project started, the majority of students reported that they felt they were not very confident in their writing ability, and that they did not believe that writing had much power to effect change. Over forty percent of the students reported that when a writing assignment becomes too challenging, they were more likely to give up, even if that resulted in a failing grade. The results from the survey administered at the end of the project differed drastically. More than three-fourths of the students reported that their feelings towards writing had changed, that they actually enjoyed writing now. Eighty-nine percent of the students replied that, though this project was difficult, more mentally challenging than they could have ever predicted or imagined, they stuck with the project, throughout the emotional highs and lows, to complete their piece for the book. Perhaps the most incredible shift in the student responses, however, was regarding confidence; over ninety percent of the students claim in the ending survey that they now felt confident in their writing ability.

Mr. de Leon, the teacher 826LA partnered with on this project, claims in the afterword to *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice* that it was “a real special thing to see these young kids morph into accomplished writers,” but these cognitive skills, perhaps, were not the only changes to occur in his students (243). In addition to invaluable communication skills, study after study has shown that having confidence not only makes students more motivated and has a profound effect on their achievement in school, but also makes them happier overall. However, these students have also gained something much more elusive and intangible: a belief in the power of language, in their own power to create change through their words, in their own voices. Nearly eighty percent claimed that their belief in the power of writing had grown immeasurably through their experiences with 826LA and the Young Authors’ Book Project, claiming that this project

has brought them to new heights of social and critical consciousness about their lives and the world around them. It is truly literature, language, the power of the written word which has opened the students' eyes; many students reported that, after the project, they began to question aspects of their lives, injustices they had previously considered quotidian.

Throughout the project, students discussed Edmund Burke's statement that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing," and Martin Luther King's claim that "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." They took from these incredible words inspiration; but more importantly, the students transformed this inspiration into action. Through the liberating power of the written word, these students discovered their voice. They stood up and spoke out against injustices which have remained in the dark, hidden and silent for too long. Their words shine a light into the shadows of today's society, into the crime, poverty, racism, discriminations and injustices which hover unnoticed with the cloud of idealized conceptions of America as the land of opportunity where all men are created equal, as the land of the free. Their book, *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice*, is a clarion call to their fellow students, to their families and community, to the world at large, offering not only enlightenment, but the hope that, if we simply speak out, if we, like the students, discover our voices, we can truly change the world.

Perhaps most importantly, though, is not the enlightenment of their fellow students or of their readers, but a self enlightenment, a recognition of their own power, spirit, and resilience. One student remarked at the end of the project that, beyond all the hard work, the long hours, the emotional rollercoaster encompassed within this project, the most incredible moment of the entire journey, the moment that will stick with him throughout his life was the moment he discovered that "our voices matter." This recognition of the power he held within himself, the

ability to speak out against injustice, against violence, against hatred, the ability to effect change is the first step, the most vital step, towards change. With 826LA's help, the students discovered throughout the project the almost indescribable power and affect that language and literature can have, the written word's incredible ability to empower those who utilize it. It was through their written works that students from Mendez High School first started to critically examine their own lives, to look beyond the routine and ordinary to truly consider the world around them. It is language which opened their eyes, their hearts, and their minds, the written word which first facilitated a belief in themselves, a belief that their opinions, their experiences, their lives, and, most importantly, their voices matter.

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