

writers POWERFUL VOICES

Authors are image makers (Adichie 2009). As school librarians serving diverse student populations, we know this truth can have multiple meanings. In addition to the incredible power authors of color wield to craft authentic characters, defy stereotypes, and provide counterstories, the authors themselves embody images that give students affirmation—affirmation that they also have stories worth telling. Bringing authors of color—image makers—to our schools to speak to, and work with, our students of color is a vital piece of culturally relevant library practice.

The benefits of using authentic, reflective literature are well documented. All the reasons we collect and use diverse books also apply to bringing diverse authors to our schools. What messages are we sending to our students of color if the only authors we invite to visit our schools are white? Just as having only books with white characters on our shelves implies to our students of color that they do not exist, the same harmful message is perpetrated by having only white visiting authors. As school librarians, we must spearhead efforts to ensure that visiting authors reflect the culture and lived experiences of our students.

My school—a public alternative middle school in Raleigh, North Carolina—had the pleasure and honor of hosting Matt de la Peña for a week-long Writer-in-Residence workshop in the spring of 2016. Matt's residency was funded by the Steinfurst Artist-in-Residency Program, created by the School of Information and Library Science (SILS) at the University of North Carolina to provide local youth with the opportunity to engage with internationally acclaimed authors and illustrators. Clearly, we were stratospherically lucky to have a

Newbery Award-winning and *New York Times* best-selling author visit our school, but the effect Matt had on our students was not due to his well-deserved awards or commercial success. His impact was a result of his powerful stories, his skills as a writing teacher, and his incredible ability to connect with teens—all teens.

Our Matt de la Peña Writer-in-Residence week was particularly meaningful because we are an alternative school. In speaking about alternative schools, #EduColor founder José Vilson has stated, "We should start rebuilding the students who our system has failed" (2016). It is precisely these students "that need to sit in panels, write white papers, and have photo ops" (Vilson 2016). I would add that it is precisely these students who need to be chosen to participate in writing workshops led by popular authors. Vilson went on to say, "We need to do right by all kids, but, when we only work through the average student, we don't actually address the needs of all kids" (2016).

In this article, I describe how we prepared for Matt's visit with both whole-school instruction and dedicated activities for the fourteen students participating in his writers' workshop. I explore what I learned about the importance of engaging in extensive culturally relevant groundwork prior to Matt's visit, and about allowing the focus of the Writer-in-Residence week to be on the students and *their* interactions with Matt. Finally, I share how we leveraged this opportunity to benefit students beyond the author's visit.

Preparing for Matt's Visit

The Plan

To maximize the impact of Matt's visit, I organized our preparations along two main threads. The first

was introducing Matt and his work to all our students. Even though only fourteen students would be intensely working with Matt in the week-long series of writing workshops, I wanted all students to be exposed to him—as an author, as a teacher, as an image maker. Additionally, since Matt's visit would coincide with our school's Career Day, I wanted each student to not only get face time with Matt, but to be able to discuss his books with him.

Selecting the Books

Recognizing the importance of book ownership, SILS not only purchased sets of Matt's books for our school, but also books for our students to keep. Being able to provide books to all our students allowed Matt's visit to be more student-centered and student-sensitive. It is a reality that author visits are often tied to selling books, a circumstance that, unfortunately, serves as a sorting mechanism that determines which students get to spend time with the author. Those students able to purchase a book get face time in the signing line. Creative librarians counteract this effect by devising workarounds to limit sorting, such as allowing students to bring books purchased by the library to the signing line. Purchasing books for all students in advance removed this sorting based on who could afford to buy a book.

The novels and short stories I ultimately chose for the students to keep and for whole-class instruction are shown in table 1. Factors including themes and student-professed genre interests guided my decisions. All the texts chosen could be classified as enabling texts, identified by Alfred W. Tatum as texts that move beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include an academic, cultural, emo-

tional, and social focus that moves students closer to examining issues they find relevant to their lives (2009). Enabling texts also provide positive reinforcements of the characteristics of strong writing by being engaging, thematically rich, provocative, and able to awaken the intellectual curiosity of the reader (Tatum 2009), thus inspiring teens to write their own stories.

Whole-School Instruction

I chose class sets of Matt's powerful picture books—Newbery winner *Last Stop on Market Street* and *A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis*—to facilitate whole-class instructional sessions. The classroom teachers and I integrated Matt's work across the core curriculum, studying figurative language in *Last Stop on Market Street* during English language arts (ELA) classes and exploring WWII history in *A Nation's Hope* in social studies classes. Additionally, the

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students in all the core ELA classes participated in literature circles around the short story "Believing in Brooklyn" (sixth and seventh grades) and the novel *The Living* (eighth grade).

While the whole-school instructional thread allowed every student to connect to Matt in advance of his visit, it also allowed me to integrate into the core curriculum texts that were representative of our students' lived experiences. I have found that having an author visit makes it easy to incorporate inclusive texts into classroom instruction. Once diverse books are used in the

course of instruction and teachers see their impact, the titles find a permanent home. This is another way school librarians can chip away at the traditional literary canon and challenge the normative position of whiteness in the curriculum. Our students' right to inclusive resources shouldn't end in our school libraries—we have to make use of inclusive resources a reality throughout our schools.

A final facet of our whole-school preparation for Matt's visit was incorporating art projects related to Matt's novels into ELA classes at every level. Not only did these

Grade Level	For Students to Keep	For Whole Class Instruction
6th	Guys Read: Thrillers (Walden Pond Press 2011) containing Matt's short story "Believing in Brooklyn"	Last Stop on Market Street (Putnam 2015) A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis (Dial 2011) "Believing in Brooklyn"
7th	The Living (Delacorte 2013)	Last Stop on Market Street A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis "Believing in Brooklyn"
8th	The Living	Last Stop on Market Street The Living
8th-Graders Boosting to 9th Grade within a Single School Semester	Mexican WhiteBoy (Delacorte 2010)	Last Stop on Market Street

Table 1. Matt de la Peña titles purchased.

projects offer another entry point for students to learn about and respond to Matt's novels, the art also provided visual excitement when displayed throughout the school.

Writers' Workshop Students

For the second thread, I needed to prepare the fourteen students who would be working with Matt for a week of intense writing. As school librarians, our programming priorities are, of course, situated in the culture and practices of our schools. As my school functions as an academic recovery program, some teachers were resistant to the idea of the fourteen workshop students being pulled out of core classes during Matt's visit. Additionally, I needed to procure dedicated time in the students' schedules to work with them in the months leading up to the Writer-in-Residence week. Luckily, I had full administrative support and was able to use data to justify the time these fourteen students would be spending in novel discussions; the data supported both the transformative power of literacy and the ways that positive racial and ethnic identities lead to academic success (Hanley and Noblit 2009).

Frequently, the dialogue about youth of color and literacy is solely focused on raising test scores. While this outcome may be important, we can never neglect the true reason we want young people's lives to be enriched with literacy: to improve life outcomes. Ernest Morrell's words provide a powerful framework

for our work with students. "Literacy is not just about decoding text. It is about becoming a superior human being that can act powerfully upon the world" (quoted in Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012, 6).

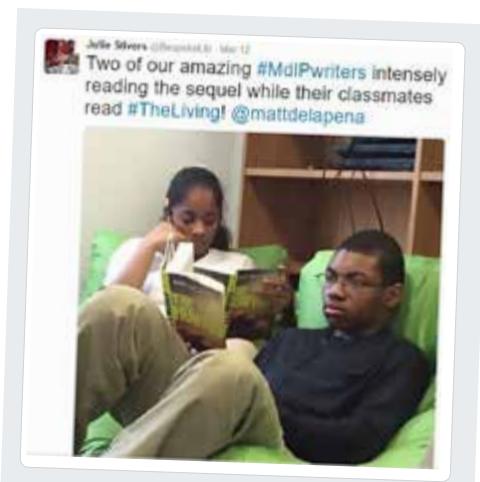
I was adamant that interest, not school performance, be the main factor in choosing the students who would participate in Matt's writing workshops. I did not even want reading levels to be factored into the selection process, as reading levels are not associated—should not be associated—with a capacity to think or discuss big ideas. Therefore, I created an inventory to gauge interest; we gave it to all seventh- and eighth-grade students in December 2015. I administered the survey in ELA classes after we watched an interview in which Matt talked about *The Living*.

Using the results from the interest inventory and working in collaboration with the ELA teachers, I created two groups. Due to scheduling difficulties, I eventually created two reading electives—one each for seventh- and eighth-graders—thus balancing the needs of the teachers with the enrichment opportunities that being part of the Writer-in-Residence program offered. In the two months leading up to Matt's visit, I met daily with alternating elective groups and was lucky to also have the support of our eighth-grade ELA teacher who joined in that group's discussion. In both electives we read and discussed ideas from the novels—from issues of

power, class, and microaggressions in *The Living* to unpacking ideas on identity and race in *Mexican WhiteBoy*. As Carole King has pointed out, teens benefit from discussing literature—with an educator and with each other—as it helps them develop meaningful interactions with the text (2001). We also discussed how swearing—in the "context of literature"—could add relatability and gravitas to writing. The students enjoyed hearing me swear in the course of reading a passage—and loved that I trusted them enough to do the same. Sometimes, at the end of a long day, I trusted them to do so very loudly.

To foster a sense of community and identity, I created a hashtag for our groups—#MdlPwriters. I wanted the students to feel connected to Matt before he arrived and also to start seeing themselves as writers, a powerful label to wear. Conversely, I wanted Matt to feel allied with his future writers—and all of our student readers—and I reached out via Twitter with pictures and stories in advance of his visit (see figure 1).

Talking about logistics is not nearly as exciting as hearing about the



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Figure 1. Tweets building interest and connection prior to Writer-in-Residence week.



Figure 2. Cohort of eighth-grade writers with Matt.



Figure 3. Matt and the seventh-grade writers.



Figure 4. Matt coaching one of our eighth-graders.

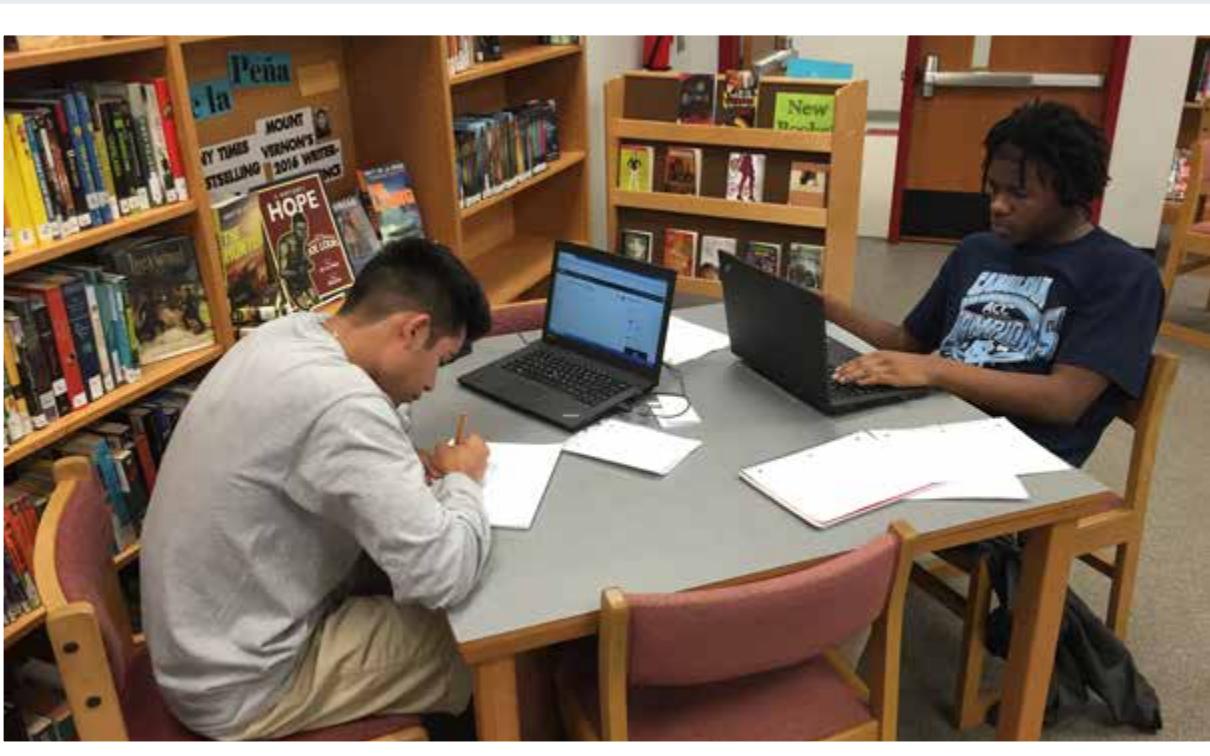


Figure 5. Eighth-graders immersed in their writing.

#MdlPwriters, but attention to logistics and preparation helped make Matt's visit go smoothly. As librarians hosting a Writer-in-Residence, our job boils down to:

- making sure visiting authors reflect our students and the wonderful reality that is our diverse world,
- preparing students so they are familiar with the author's work and flooding the curriculum with the author's diverse literature,
- using culturally relevant practices in classes and groups to examine the author's writing,
- assembling writing groups—and any other opportunities for face time with the author—within an equity framework, and
- ensuring that the entire experience is student-centered.

When we do our job effectively, we are then able to *get out of the way* and watch the entire amazing experience unfold.

Writing with Matt: "Writing Is an Act of Bravery."

The fourteen writers who chose—and were chosen—to participate in Matt's Writer-in-Residence workshops are the stars of this story. Our eighth-graders were F., M., A., H., K., L., and K. (see figure 2). Our seventh-grade group was comprised of N., K., S. (the only sixth-grader in the group), T., T., H., and B. (see figure 3). They were readers. Dreamers. Thinkers. Writers. It's not possible to overstate the power of the creative and brave voices the #MdlPwriters displayed during the course of Matt's Writer-in-Residence week.

Each group met with Matt for two sessions a day on a rotating schedule so that the same students were not pulled from the same core classes each day. Each writing session included whole-group discussion but also time for individual coaching from Matt. Matt talked with our teens about high-level issues and did writing exercises that he had previously done with college-level students. Part of a culturally responsive library practice is having high expectations for our students and believing in their ability. It was wonderful to watch Matt connect with our students in this way (see figure 4). Our students (see figure 5) rose to every task he gave them—including some that he had never before done with middle-school students. The students' writing was incredibly powerful and overwhelmingly personal as shown in figure 6. Many school staff wanted to observe—and understandably so—but to respect our writers and their voices, we kept the groups private. This policy did not make me the most popular person in our school, but adhering to a student-centered framework was my top priority. Keeping the groups private was always worth any pushback I faced.

The first writing exercise Matt did with both groups was centered on a piece of micro-fiction and then a two-word writing exercise. The two words that our students used to describe their lives were incredibly powerful. For everyone in the room they were unforgettable: *Picket Fence*—from a student who misses her mother and

The Bolted Tombs by M.

U Know
Secrets
Darkness hidden
from
the
light.
Nowhere
to go.

A
Fighter
hidden
from
the
fight.
I wonder what's

N
E
X
T
Where
will
I
go?

Still smiling,
No emotion to show.

Figure 6. M.'s poem. 8th Grade #MdlPwriters.

viscerally remembered a moment sitting beside a fence with her eating ice cream. *Flashing Lights*—from a student who described living in a home where it felt like everything could change in an instant, as quick as a light turning off. *Never Fixed*—from a student who felt that as soon as one part of him was fixed—a physical injury or a family problem—something else would get broken.

One of our seventh-grade writers would not participate in the two-word exercise, and I was afraid he was going to stop coming to the workshop sessions. At the end of that first day, Matt had the students work through an exercise in which they supplied the end of a story in which a woman needed to be "talked

Having an author visit is a powerful way to construct and inspire that culture of reading throughout a school!



off a ledge.” Literally. Each student’s story was impressive. When the student who had previously been resistant shared his piece, it was so good, so well written, it blew me away. More impressively, it blew Matt away! Matt told me later that it was amazing writing—truly incredible for a first draft. He shared with the student that it was some “bad-ass writing.” That student shared that compliment with everyone

he could—and rightfully so! What a powerful affirmation to carry.

The success of the entire program, however, could be illustrated in just one student—in just one moment. One of our eighth-graders has experienced more hardship in her thirteen years than most of us will in our entire lives. She is tough. Sweet. Stoic. And full of talent.

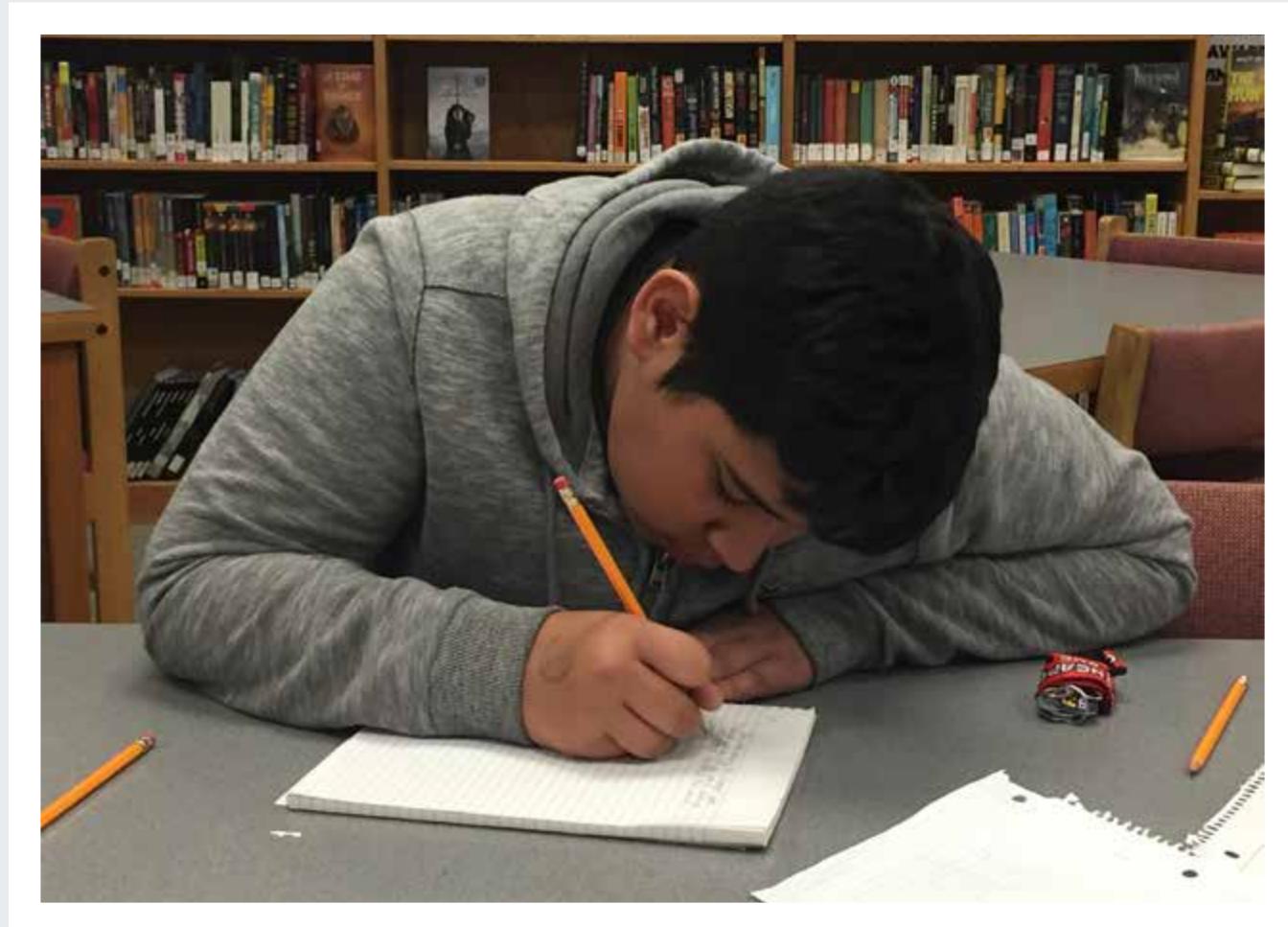
After reading one of her pieces, Matt

told her that if she finished it, he would publish it on his blog. She sobbed. Sobbed. And then picked up her pencil and started writing. She wrote for the rest of the year. She’s in high school now. She is still writing.

The Benefits Continue

Because it had such an impact on our school, even after the Writer-in-Residence week ended on Matt’s last day, we were still feeling its effects. The picture in figure 7 was taken immediately after Matt had left us on Friday of that amazing week. On Monday, K. brought in *eight pages* he

Figure 7. A seventh-grader writing after Matt had left.



had written over the weekend. We were in such a post-Matt creative swoon for the rest of the entire school year that we were literally drawing on the library walls, and I decided to simply call my fourth-quarter elective "Create."

In August 2015 when school started last year, one of our eighth-graders told me that "he does not read. Ever." In spring 2016 right before Matt's visit, the same student handed me his copy of Matt's novel *The Living*—all 308 pages of it—and told me he had "read it all." At fifteen, it was the first book he had ever finished. His rationale: "Well, you kept reading it in class, and I knew Matt was coming, and I wanted to find out what happened. And now I need to read the sequel!" An educator's role is never about forcing a student to read but rather inviting the learner into a community of readers (Morrell 2002). Having an author visit is a powerful way to construct and inspire that culture of reading throughout a school!

To attempt to measure any changes in our writers' confidence and comfort levels related to a variety of literacy factors, I had created a writing and reading self-efficacy assessment instrument to administer to our writers both before and after their reading elective and Writer-in-Residence experiences. All of our writers chose a higher value to describe their writing ability after Matt's visit.

Our principal was so impressed with hearing about our experience and seeing the effect it had on our students that he pledged enough precious budget funds for this school year to support another Writer-in-Residence experience for the 2016–2017 school year.

Concluding Thoughts

How many students get opportunities like these? Certainly not enough. For students in alternative or academic recovery programs, perhaps even fewer than in more-traditional schools. José Vilson speaks truth when he describes teaching students: "We can only show them love at the moments we have them, and help them create safeguards that deter their worst detractors" (2016).



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Giving our students the space to empower themselves through creative writing and expression can be a powerful contributor to creating those safeguards. Providing these growth opportunities is not an extra part of our library practice—it is our library practice! Thank you to SILS and Matt de la Peña for helping to create these safeguards with our amazing #MdlPwriters.

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