

Tenth graders worked with lower school students to **revise** classic children's books to be more inclusive and reflective of their values. In the process, they found belonging with each other.

BELONGING ON OUR BOOKSHELVES

BASEBELLA

THE MYSTERIOUS MOTHER'S DAY MUSE

RIYA

THE GIVING TREE

BY MITZI MOCK

Our story begins where many good Nueva stories do: Someone shared an idea and someone else said, “Yes, and...”

At the start of the spring semester, the 10th grade English teaching team was brainstorming a new unit for the spring semester. Every year, students take on a project that hones their writing for a specific audience. In pre-pandemic years, when the sophomores took an environmentally themed trip to Costa

Rica, they wrote about scientific topics for a lay audience. After the pandemic hit, they wrote stories designed to teach children about COVID-19.

This year, English teacher Gretchen Kellough suggested an idea she had tried at her previous school: older students revising and modernizing classic children's literature for younger students. English teacher Pearl Bauer expanded on the idea: What if students looked closely at the historical and social context in which these stories were written and analyzed the way racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression are expressed in the storytelling? In addition to writing an analytical paper, the 10th graders would “decolonize” a

classic children's book for students in the lower school by revising the story in a way that challenges dominant narratives and reimagines the people, experiences, and values centered in the story.

English teacher Alexa Hart took the idea one step further: Instead of simply revising a story for lower school students, the 10th graders would collaborate with them directly to create a revision.

"When Alexa first proposed the idea in January, it was at a time when all the lower school teachers were in the middle of evaluations and parent-teacher conferences, and some teachers were wondering if they could add one more thing to their plate," said recently retired kindergarten teacher Diana Friedman. "But I thought, 'We will create time because it's worth it,' and it ended up being such a joyful and exciting experience watching students build those bridges and connections."

BONDING OVER BOOKS

Seven lower school classes signed up for the collaboration and the 10th grade English teaching team, which also includes Amber Carpenter, began formulating plans for the students to meet in person.

The students in each division began by recording Flipgrid videos, in which they shared a few fun facts about themselves. Then the collaborators met for their first group discussion. Despite their age differences, they quickly found something in common: a love for books.

"I once got absorbed into *Harry Potter* and when it was lunchtime I didn't even realize it," said second grader Nicole O. to her 10th grade partners Ellie K. and Zoe B., when they asked her about her favorite books.

"You were at Hogwarts—sometimes you just can't leave," Ellie said.

When second grader Alistair H. met with his partners Sam Z. and Julian K., they shared a unanimous feeling.

"The end of *Charlotte's Web* should be changed so Charlotte doesn't die," Alistair said.

"Cultivating a love of literature is such a goal at Nueva," said Diana, who reads aloud to her kindergarteners every day. "Diversity, inclusivity, and identity are other big themes you see throughout our school and a big priority in kindergarten."

Leading up to the in-person meeting with 10th graders, the kindergarteners spent time analyzing different books: What's the gender balance? What skin tones are represented? (In a separate but complementary poster project, the

The kindergarteners weren't the only lower school class that had been deeply exploring relevant themes before the start of this story project.

"When I visited the lower school, I saw all these posters about identity and the history of colonization," said sophomore Owen Y.-L. "I was impressed to see that they were already talking about these themes at such a young age and leading with caring minds."

The story collaboration took place between March and May, with each 10th



Tenth graders Kate K. and Logan R. and kindergartners Marielle B. and Taotao L. review children's books in need of potential revisions.

kindergarteners decided to name their own skin tones, inventing new labels like "warm cocoa" and "juicy peach"). They also talked about the concept of pronouns and shared their pronouns with the 10th graders in advance of their visit.

"We talked about the fact that you can't make assumptions about someone's identity when you meet them," Diana said. "We also talked about the fact that you can't make assumptions about someone based on their gender. We can't assume only girls wear pink or only boys play sports."

grade class adapting their revisions to their unique lower school audience.

"With the youngest grades, we saw more surface-level revisions, where the changes to the story were more obvious," Pearl said. "But the fourth graders were ready to understand more subtle and nuanced changes."

Because the fourth graders already had laptops, they had more opportunities to collaborate with their upper school partners over email and Google Docs during the semester. But Pearl was quick to point out that the collaborations with

the younger students weren't necessarily less thoughtful—just different.

Pearl observed that the 10th graders who worked with the kindergarten students were quick to embody a teacher role.

"As teachers, we know that we learn something best when we we teach it," she said.

"It's not easy for a 15-year-old to collaborate with a lower school student," Alexa said. "It's an undertaking, but we are one school."

Plus, taking on a new challenge is part of the fun.

"As a community, we value asking our students hard questions and letting them run with it," Alexa added.

REIMAGINING THE CLASSICS

CINDERELLA/BASEBELLA

"We all had parts of *Cinderella* that we didn't like," said fourth grader Theo M. after he and his classmates Sophia L. and Zoe L. met with 10th graders Noah S. and Samara B. "In the original [story], Cinderella does things that are stereotypical girl stuff. We wanted to change that."

During their first in-person meeting at the Hillsborough campus, the group of five sat cross-legged under the trees in the outdoor learning space below the lower school mansion. Their ideas bounced quickly between them: Why should Cinderella go to a ball, when she could play baseball? If she is a baseball player, why not name her Basebella or Batterella or Catcharella? "Why have a glass slipper when you can have a glove? Why win a prince, when you can win a game?"

The fourth graders spouted one idea after the next as the 10th graders furiously took notes. Over the spring

semester the students continued to share ideas over shared Google Docs. When the students met again in May, the fourth graders were pleased to see many of their suggestions and edits reflected in the revised edition.

"In our new story, *Basebella* is a baseball player who is stuck on the bench and her evil stepmom coach never puts her in the game," Theo said. "The fairy godmother gives her a helmet and a glove to disguise her—not to make her more beautiful—and the stepmother puts her in the game. Her stepmom sees her talent and finally gives her a spot on the team. In the original, the good stuff happens to Cinderella randomly. In our version, she earns it."

RAPUNZEL/RIYA

"I had never met a 10th grader before," said second grader Lara K., who was partnered with second-grade classmate Aanya T. and 10th grader Sasha G. "Sasha had pink boots with big platforms. It was very cool."

The group chose to revisit *Rapunzel*, the famous fairytale of a woman with long hair, locked in a tower, most recently interpreted by Disney in the movie *Tangled*.

"In a lot of books and fairytales, the main characters are white with blue eyes," said Lara. "We didn't see ourselves represented in these stories. We want to see more brown and black people as the central characters."

"I asked Sasha to make the character have brownish, tan skin, with dark eyes and black hair, so it's more of an Indian look," said Aanya. "Her name is Riya instead of Rapunzel in this book. She eats samosas, wears saris, and celebrates Diwali."

In addition to expanding cultural and racial representation in the story, Aanya and Lara asked Sasha to rewrite the villain role because they didn't like the idea of someone being irredeemable.

"We didn't want to include evil in the book," said Aanya. "We wanted to include someone that was either under a curse that made her act evil or someone who was struggling with a need that needed to be fulfilled."

Her name is Riya instead of Rapunzel. She eats samosas, wears saris, and celebrates Diwali.

Lara and Aanya were pleased with Sasha's revision with one minor exception. Sasha unknowingly named the not-so-villainous villain character "Sneha," the same name as Lara's mother.

~~WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE/~~ THE MYSTERIOUS MOTHER'S DAY MUSE

The first time Owen and his fellow sophomore Brynn S. met second graders Jude S. and Alexandra C., it was online. Their collaboration began with patient coaching on the art of muting and unmuting one's microphone on Zoom.

Once all the audio logistics were worked out, the group jumped into a discussion of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, the story of a young boy named Max, who arrives on an island with mysterious inhabitants.

"Reading the book now, we saw themes of colonization," Owen said. "A boy, who presents as white, travels to a foreign island and immediately asserts his authority and subjugates the inhabitants."

"Max sees the inhabitants of the island as monsters who 'roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes,'" said Brynn S., who recalls that even when she read the book as a child she sensed the island inhabitants were being 'othered' by Max.

The group talked about the difference between being "mysterious" and "bad."

"In our revision we wanted to restructure the message that someone who looks different than you is inherently bad," Brynn said. "It's natural that Max is nervous because the inhabitants are new to him, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are bad. In our revision, we called the beings on the island 'mysterious creatures' because being



Why win a prince, when you can win a game?

mysterious doesn't have to have a negative connotation."

"We also didn't want to erase diversity from the story," Owen added. "We wanted to show that different communities bring different perspectives. In our story, the inhabitants express love by spending time with each other. Max observes this and decides that the best gift to give his mother on Mother's Day is to spend time with her at the beach."

The students aptly renamed their story *The Mysterious Mother's Day Muse*.

THE GIVING TREE

Tenth graders Bodie C. and Josie M. and their fourth-grade partners, Colton P., Davis Z., and Araya L., revisited a Shel Silverstein classic, *The Giving Tree*, a story about a generous tree and the boy who benefits from it over time.

"The main issue we saw with this book was an unhealthy, one-sided relationship," said Bodie. "The story is about a tree that keeps giving to a boy to its own detriment."

There once
was a tree.
She loved a
boy and a boy
loved her.



"It has misogynistic implications because the male character is exploiting a female character, the tree," said Josie, who was shocked to learn during the research of her analytical paper that Shel Silverstein had also been a writer for *Playboy* magazine. "Each time the tree gives to the boy, the story repeats the line 'And the tree was happy,' but that suggests that to be happy is to fulfill the needs of a man.

"There is also an environmental lens. You can see this story reflect the way man exploits nature."

"The fourth graders were quick to see the problematic relationship," said Bodie, who noted that the fourth graders

created new illustrations for the book. "At the end of our revision, we decided that the boy would plant a second tree, so the first tree wasn't lonely. The boy moves on, but he wants to give back to the tree."

"The original book begins with the line, 'There once was a tree that loved a boy,' and we changed it to, 'There once was a tree. She loved a boy and a boy loved her,'" said Josie. "The tree is still generous. She gives the boy apples. But the boy also waters her and makes her crowns from fallen leaves. It's a mutual, symbiotic relationship."

WHEN ONE CHAPTER CLOSES, ANOTHER BEGINS

After weeks revising stories, 10th graders shuttled over to the lower school mansion once again to join their younger partners for one final storytime session.

"I learned that you don't have to know someone well to make something great with them," said Theo, after hearing his collaborators share their final reinterpretation of *Cinderella*.

For Ellie's group, the reading session left them wondering if their story was really over.

"Our group did *Matilda* and there's interest to keep revising it together even though the formal project is done," she said.

"Next time, we should tackle a longer story, not just a children's book," said fourth grader Maren L.

"I love that this project made our big community feel small and intimate," said Diana (who, after seven years at Nueva, left the classroom at the end of the spring semester to enjoy her new role as a grandmother). "I was so impressed with our upper school students and the way they were focused on our lower school students, making eye contact with them, really listening, asking them questions, going the extra mile."

The enthusiasm was mutual. Bodie enjoyed talking to Colton about his love of Nerf toys and hearing Davis talk about his aspirations for high school. Josie advised Arya on the transition to middle school, the best classes to take, and

which advisors to hope for. Theo loved playing *Two Truths and a Lie* as an ice breaker with his older partners. Lara and Aanya told their classmates about Sasha's pink platform shoes.

"At the end of the project, the kindergarten students sent thank-you cards and the 10th graders were almost in tears," said Pearl. "On their final get-together at the lower school, students gave their partners multiple 'fuzzies—students rub their two palms together as a gesture of care—to fill their buckets."

Many of the students wished the project had begun sooner and that there had been more opportunities to collaborate in person. The 10th grade English team plans to continue the project next year, with plans to start in January.

Owen and Brynn believe their story would have turned out a bit differently if they had spent more time with their younger teammates, Jude and Alexandra. At the final storytime session, Jude and Alexandra offered several imaginative suggestions that hadn't occurred to Brynn and Owen.

"We were so focused on decolonizing the book that we forgot to make it as engaging as possible for a young audience," said Brynn. "With age, we can lose some of that creative freedom to share [our playfulness] with the world. I hope this project inspires the lower school students to represent their ideas and themselves in their future stories."

For Josie and Bodie, the project left them thinking about the future and what choices they will make if they ever become parents.

"This project showed me the importance of revisiting children's literature," said Josie. "These stories sit with you. They teach you what it means to live, how the world works, how relationships should be. If I have a daughter in the future, I definitely want to read stories that empower girls."

"Young people are impressionable," said Bodie. "Children's books are lessons about how to be a person, and we want lessons that we can be proud of." [N]

