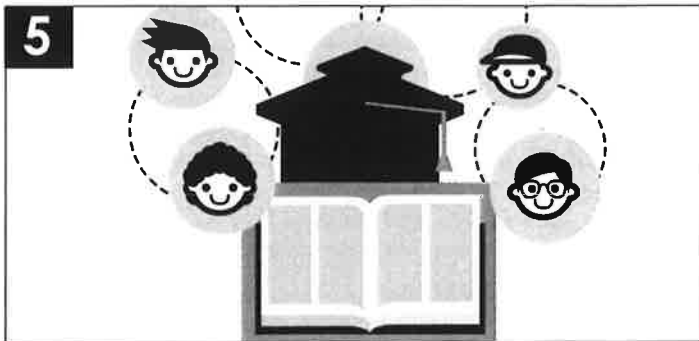


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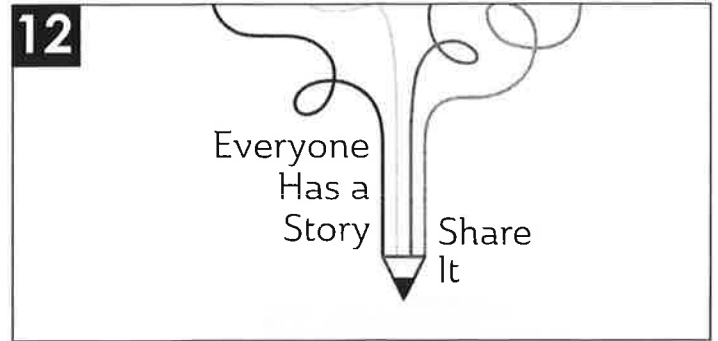
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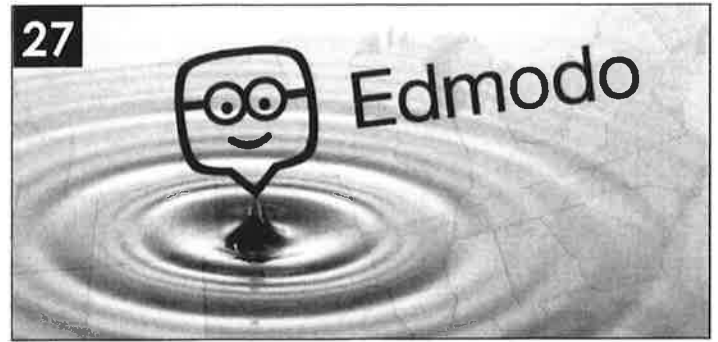
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By Rodrigo Joseph Rodríguez

“I Knew What I Had to Do Next”: Writing (and Reading) Middle Graders’ Lives



Thank you to the Sterling Publishing for permission to reproduce the illustration, by Andrea Miller, from *Zack Delacruz: Me and My Big Mouth* (p. 1).

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CHAPTER 1 ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

It follows then to imagine the challenges faced by a 12-year-old boy whose determination is to remain under the radar—unnoticed—all through middle school. His plan to be a patient, low-key observer through avoidance works for a short span of time, until the tide turns and disrupts the peace. *Zack Delacruz: Me and My Big Mouth* (Anderson, 2015) is the story about a middle-school aged hero whose bravery, wit, and industriousness help his sixth grade class to victory.

As we remember our middle-school years—as teachers, students, or both—images surface and keep us suspended, awakened, or entertained. Teachers of the middle grades can attest to the difficulties and changes faced by young adolescents who are between the ages of 11 and 13. Too often, their stories remain overlooked or missing while they juggle their lives in a middle space: between child’s and young adult’s world. Their challenges and stories range from starting at a new school to growing up in their changing bodies and trying to make sense of all that is happening in their lives in and out of school.

One of the greatest strengths of the novel rests in its realistic fiction approach with characters and conflicts that call for creative problem solving through a youth-based network. Batchelor and Bintz (2015) observe, “Creativity today is viewed as individuals involved in a creative process—the process of taking an existing idea or problem, seeing the idea or problem in multiple ways with multiple solutions, and solving or transforming it into something new and worthwhile” (p. 3).

It follows then to imagine the challenges faced by a 12-year-old boy whose determination is to remain under the radar—unnoticed—all through middle school. His plan to be a patient, low-key observer through avoidance works for a short span of time, until the tide turns and disrupts the peace. *Zack Delacruz: Me and My Big Mouth* (Anderson, 2015) is the story about a middle-school aged hero whose bravery, wit, and industriousness help his sixth grade class to victory. Best known for guiding us through workshops and professional books on our teaching of grammar and writing, the author is Jeff Anderson.

Young adolescents are presented through a realistic comedy and youth perspectives that value their ways of speaking and knowing for survival. As the novel opens in medias res, the reader is provided a deeper lens into a school assembly that sets the stage for all the sixth grade strife, humor, and triumph to come. We get a glimpse of Zack as he grows physically and emotionally from one chapter to the next. He explains, “Suddenly, my too-long, grow-into-them-soon khaki pants seemed even longer. My Harry Potter glasses felt bigger and shinier and dumber than ever” (p. 2). Despite the self-effacing humor, Zack becomes someone we can picture and understand as he adapts to some of the moves of middle school, especially when a classmate screams out, “Don’t sit here, Enrique Potter; a kid with a gold earring said. ‘This seat is saved’” (p. 2). A middle-grade female who is nicknamed Pigtales adds, “Did you see his pants? That little boy needs to shop in the toddler’s section next time,” Pigtales said loud enough for me to hear” (p. 2). These insults seem like they are enough to get a middle-grader down, but not Zack Delacruz. He keeps moving and advancing in sixth grade.

As readers, we hear the students’ voices and experience complexities surrounded by drama and conflict at Davy Crockett Middle School in San Antonio, Texas. For instance, Zack explains,

“Besides cruel and unusual punishment, advisory is an avoiding game: avoiding eye contact, avoiding talking, and, so far, avoiding trouble” (p. 1). This avoidance is significant, since it proves to be resourceful for Zack who must endure unwanted, aggressive behavior from his classmate José Soto who is also known as “El Pollo Loco.” Zack learns to outwit the school bully and gains his own sense of self and strength in the company of his loyal classmates who fuel his organizing and deeds for the common good at Crockett Middle School. The decision to speak up for a female peer who is being harassed is best summed up by Zack when he says, “I sure wasn’t going to say anything. If you answer questions, everybody called you a schoolboy. Embarrassment to middle school students was like kryptonite to Superman” (p. 11).

More insights about each character are revealed when we learn that Zack and his classmates yearn to be heard and understood in a tough, young adolescent and adult-made world. Zack admits that he is not as quick to speak up for Janie Bustamente who endures bullying in the presence of her classmates. Unfortunately, Janie’s classmates remain quiet and unassuming as bystanders. Zack explains, “I should have stood up for her. But if I’d said something, it wouldn’t be long before I was the one being embarrassed” (p. 15). How could our hero become embarrassed and ridiculed? Zack adds, “Since my name is Zack Delacruz, José called me Shrimp Delacruz—like a bad pun on the seafood dish Shrimp Veracruz you order at Mexican restaurants. I get it. I’m small, I’m Mexican. Hi-larious” (p. 15). Despite the fact that Zack initially says nothing to defend Janie and she bows her head in humiliation, Zack finally shouts, “Stop it, José!” and becomes more than a bystander.

The novel’s setting in a community with students of diverse backgrounds, including Latino origin, further strengthens the dialogue, drama, and local color. Anderson’s meticulous lens and middle-school teaching background capture a wholesome school community with students who rise to become themselves and even empathetic human beings. One of the greatest strengths of the novel rests in its realistic fiction approach with characters and conflicts that call for creative problem solving through a youth-based network. Batchelor and Bintz (2015) observe, “Creativity today is viewed as individuals involved in a creative process—the process of taking an existing idea or problem, seeing the idea or problem in multiple ways with multiple solutions, and solving or transforming it into something new and worthwhile” (p. 3). The “multiple ways with multiple solutions” are confirmed by the novel as the reader meets a cast of characters, such as Janie Bustamente, Marquis Malone, Sophia Segura, and Cliché Jones, who can make middle school strife unfold from one school bell to the next.

Anderson’s versatility with language is evident and entertaining as we meet Ms. Darling, the librarian, and Mr. Akins, the principal. They hold significant roles in shaping middle school as a place where adults care and listen. Actually, Anderson understands the middle grades and how hiccups and life’s realities can stifle our youngest adolescents. Specifically, Anderson packs the novel with English language arts signature programming to advance literacy

such as National Punctuation Day and figurative language that lend original similes and playfulness to the narrative. To illustrate, in a passage, Zack wonders if he is starring in “one of those extreme-survival shows, secretly being filmed” only to speak out, “Cut! I quit!” (p. 38).

The graphic novel design that appears throughout with Andrea Miller’s illustrations complements the text with a realistic rendering that resembles middle school artifacts and mementos. The art is comedic as we picture the opening pages of a yearbook that lists the classmate Jesús Johnson as “NO PHOTO AVAILABLE,” because he is “PROBABLY IN THE BATHROOM.” These uses of language and illustrations advance the narrative about middle graders’ lives and the classrooms we can build for them to speak up as they become themselves.

Although the Crocket Middle School students hear some cautionary tales and learn some anti-bullying tips from the Goodfriend Express program during advisory, these efforts seem to be missing both relevance and reality. In fact, we learn that life in the middle grades occurs in the midst of things with neither warning nor caution. In the book *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* (2014), Brown and Knowles observe, “Middle school provides an opportunity for young adolescents to explore their social world and try to find their place in it. While dependence on the family decreases and the need for peer approval increases, young adolescents attempt to navigate an increasingly complex social milieu in order to find a place where they can be themselves” (p. 42). As an illustration, while organizing and then launching the Nation’s Best Chocolate Bars fundraiser and an unapproved car wash for the sixth grade dance, Zack and his classmates must act quickly to survive middle school, deliver the demands of leading from the sidelines, lead a peer mediation for the common good of preteens, find ways to collect funds for the unsold candy bars, and endure repeated bullying behavior such as teasing, name calling, and taunts. Lastly, Zack is learning about living between young adolescent and young adult worlds as he navigates coming of age through his parents’ divorce.

After the stellar sixth grade dance that raises the Crockett Middle School roof, Zack Delacruz confirms, “Instead of embarrassed or afraid, I felt happy and proud. And relieved that I didn’t have to sell chocolate bars anymore. Relieved that I didn’t have to disappear anymore. Relieved that I didn’t think I really wanted to anymore. For the first time, I felt like everyone else. Not worse, not better. Just Zack” (p. 161). Zack becomes the everymiddleschooler who is wholly present and whose presence we acknowledge and care about as the narrative unfolds. Daniels and Ahmed (2015) summed it up best recently as they described the middle school life as follows: “We enjoy these [students]; they crack us up. We teach a distinctive age group that displays the whole range of human development, from cuddly dependence, to narcissism, to total hilarity, to deep questioning, to world-embracing empathy—sometimes all within the same class period. If you love this job, you probably like roller coasters too” (p. 13). The empathy and rollercoasters are matched in this middle-grade novel that

Anderson has penned to remind us that young adolescents in middle school seek to be heard and understood by their peers and by the adults in our schools. From young adolescents, we can learn how they navigate their lives in and out of school as a community circle of sorts with imperfections toward becoming whole or a “sixth-grade kind of perfect” (p. 162).

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