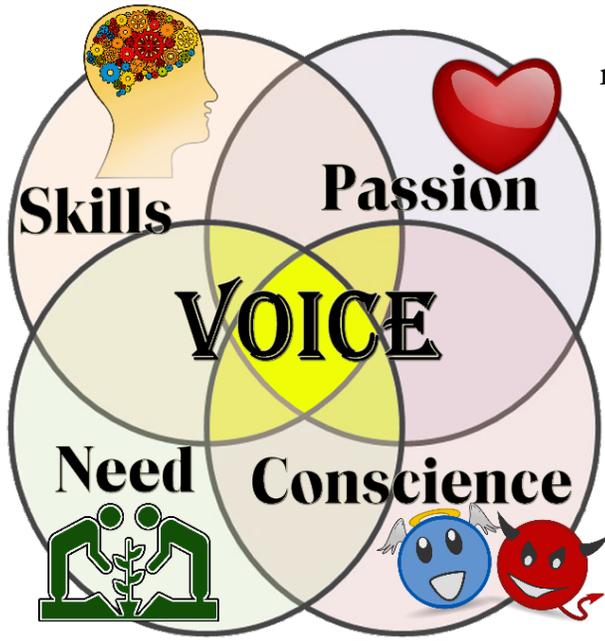


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# Let Your Light Shine

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My superintendent once informed me that I was “not normal.” I shrugged and then smiled. *Normal* wasn’t something I’d ever professed to be. In fact, I’d embraced being different since early childhood.

Growing up in a small, rural town in Northeastern Kentucky—where diversity could be measured by varying shades of white Protestantism—my desire to speak Spanish and eat with chopsticks baffled my parents. During high school, I corresponded with over 100 pen pals from around the world. In college, I decided to study abroad in Beijing, China. To date, I have traveled to over 60 countries and visited every continent on the planet. I love sharing the art, music, food, clothing, and other

cultural delights with the children I teach. My students have enjoyed our Guatemalan parties, Mediterranean and Asian nights, Turkish dance days, and global fashion weeks...just to name a few of the events I’ve organized at Central Elementary.

But when the Kentucky Department of Education released the World Language and Global Competency (WLGC) accountability standards, I panicked. Our school leaders looked around and saw what I had always seen: a homogeneous community with around 1% minority, where international cuisine consisted of several pizza restaurants. Our central office predicted our district would never reach proficiency. The problem was not that our educators devalued global mindset, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, or linguistic abilities. The problem was that **no one** knew how to teach these concepts.

I found myself as one of the best qualified in all four schools to lead our district in WLGC education. Me? The blonde, blue-eyed girl who looked like everyone else, but had always secretly been embarrassed of being monolingual. I was terrified. What if I messed up? Wasn’t good enough? No, I decided I could not take on such a significant role. I remained silent, teaching culture within my school as I had always done. After all, tackling a district problem was not my job. I would never get paid for all the extra hours. An administrator with a bigger salary would likely implement an acceptable solution. Not me.

A year passed and no one addressed the looming issue. Budget cuts caused our district to lose our only foreign language teacher. We were now less equipped than ever to teach from a global perspective. I had to do something. My conscience would not allow me to ignore the situation any longer. Art, culture, and travel: these were my passions!

In order to gain more experience in bilingual education and overcome my fears, I planned a summer trip to Antigua, Guatemala, and volunteered at the School of Hope, which is the first bilingual school in Central America to exclusively serve impoverished children and disadvantaged learners. While

in Antigua, I listened to stories of families who had died in mud slides when their tin shacks washed down the mountains. I helped kindergarteners brush their teeth. And, I watched some of the poorest people on Earth learn a language completely foreign to them in order to improve their chances at a good job one day. Amazed by their determination, I enrolled in Spanish tutoring sessions, developed instructional materials, and built a curriculum that I never imagined I could create. My enthusiasm (and possibly my OCD) took over for the next few months, and before I realized it, I had developed 54 units for K-5 plus library resources for instruction beyond the classroom. Not only did the units include research-based practices aligned to the state and national standards, but the resources were also constructed in a way to include native speakers pronouncing vocabulary at the click of a button. Songs, games, and other hands-on activities made learning fun—just as travel had always been for me.

Educators in my building began supporting my efforts, praising how easy my materials made WLGC education, and displaying their own world flags and Spanish posters. I received awards and grants to aid the project. I became inspired by feedback from other National Board Certified Teachers through Classroom Teachers Enacting Positive Solutions (CTEPS). I introduced the program to other administrators in my district. Now, I am part of a team dedicated to educating our children for their globally interconnected futures, and Lewis County is on the road to proficiency. With 100% of students showing gains in WLGC skills, I am hearing languages other than English spoken in the classrooms and hallways of our buildings for the first time in the history of our school system. I'll never forget the shock on a kindergartener's face when he discovered that adults visiting our school could not say their colors in Spanish, as if that was "not normal."

None of this might have happened if I hadn't let my light shine. I wonder how many educators are afraid to step up in the face of failure and tell their inadequacies—their doubts—to take a back seat. At times, it isn't easy. But the journey is invaluable. Imagine a world where everyone gave their best time, talents, and resources to ensure positive change. That is a place where no need would remain unfulfilled. Let's build that world together. Please let your light shine!



Laura Stone is an artist, writer, educator, and world traveler whose writings have been published in travel blogs, *SCBWI Bulletin*, and *Highlights Magazine*. She is working toward her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership with a specialty in Curriculum and Instruction. She also serves as the Visual Arts Educator, Drama Specialist, and World Language and Global Competency Lead Teacher at Central Elementary where she has been employed for the past 13 years.