

The Story Whisperer

Every Student Has a Story that Needs to Be Told

Jing Fong



Jing Fong is the education outreach manager for *YES! Magazine*. The daughter of immigrant parents, Jing is grateful for their fierce love of learning, nature, and family. She has lived abroad three times with her teacher husband and two children. Her ideal day is curling up on the couch to read, hiking in the Olympics, or rolling lumpia with friends and family. Jing recently returned to Bainbridge Island, Washington from a magical year living in Harlem.



Not all of us who work in education for sustainability find ourselves in formal classrooms. Perhaps there is another place you are using the principles of ecological integrity, compassion for life, social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence and peace... as a parent, community organizer, faith-based healer or seeker, musician?

I feel humbled that I was asked to contribute to this book. I don't consider myself a role model for sustainability — that's the self-effacing part of me speaking. I don't teach students to measure the health of their local watershed through water quality testing. Or encourage little ones to dance like leaves in the woods. Or dig my hands in dirt with a group of middle schoolers who are growing veggies in their school garden.

What I do is share stories.

I am passionate about people being heard. Being heard means being understood. And being understood means being treated justly and humanely.

Being heard also means sharing information and inspiration. And we all could use this at a time when we want solutions for a better world.



That's where *YES! Magazine* — and its stories — is a beacon of inspiration.

If you think adults are overwhelmed by today's news, imagine how young people feel. As education outreach manager for *YES! Magazine*, I see it as my mission to help teachers and students overcome the paralysis of fear and the sense of being overwhelmed — replace it with powerful ideas and inspiration so they can stand up and take action.

It makes it easy when you have *YES! Magazine* as a learning resource

"Blessing in Disguise"

"This adventure with YES! has changed me. Having this experience has unlocked a newfound confidence within me. When I learned the news of my accomplishment it was like a bomb of happiness excitement and pride had just exploded within me.

Because of this encounter I am now a better writer and better person."

— Noah Schultz, University Winner
Winter 2015 YES! Student Writing
Competition

Noah's essay, "Blessing in Disguise," was in response to Akaya Windwood's article, "Letting Go of Worry." Students were asked to think about the things they worry

about and answer the prompt: "What is one worry you'd like to throw away?" What would you replace your worry with, and what would you gain by not having that worry in your life?

Noah wanted to honor his father by not worrying if his dad had enough to eat or if he was warm enough in his drafty mobile home. His dad's poverty qualified Noah for financial aid and to be in college — while Noah was incarcerated. At seventeen, Noah was sentenced to 90 months under the terms of Oregon's Measure 11 — a tough-on-crime policy that established mandatory minimum sentences for several crimes, and charged

juveniles 15 and over as adults.

Noah made a promise to his mother that he would take advantage of all the resources available to him in prison. He studied for his degree through Oregon State University, and he entered slam poetry competitions and the YES! Student Writing Competition.

In a recent email from Noah, he shared that he gave a TEDTalk back in October, is developing a spoken word poetry workshop to be taught in juvenile detention facilities, and recently published his first collection of poetry. And, oh yeah, he was nominated to be Oregon's next poet laureate.

for middle school students and beyond. For nearly 20 years, *YES! Magazine* has uncovered stories about ordinary people doing extraordinary things for a more just and sustainable world. Stories, such as a predominantly African-American community in Greensboro, North Carolina with nowhere to shop for food when its big box store closed — so they started their own food co-op. Or, Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth helping teachers and schools discipline with dignity, trying healing instead of punishment — part of an effort to end the school-to-prison pipeline. And, how the friendship between a poet and a timber baron kept a grove of Califor-

nia redwoods from being clear-cut. Beyond the magazine, our education outreach program offers resources of its own. It publishes stories from and about teachers, hosts a student writing competition every quarter, and offers curriculum that promotes sustainability.

Our teacher stories, called "Your Stories," are first-person narratives about on-the-ground teaching experiences in and outside the classroom. What is going on in the head of a student with Asperger's Syndrome? What does race have to do with teaching? How does permaculture help Hopi youth remember who they are?

Our student writing competition, which we host every school quarter, is a powerful way for students to connect with themselves and their world. Students read and respond to a selected YES! article. Provocative writing prompts push students to deeper questioning of the article's content and their personal experiences and opinions. Students have reflected on the morality of hunting, letting go of worry (see box), simplifying their lives, the value of eating together, joyful (and painful) learning in schools, and how to welcome home war veterans. Other learning resources from YES! engage students in sustainability issues by sharing the "inside story"

on what inspired people to create their thought-provoking, hands-on curriculum — people like marine biologist Riki Ott, who witnessed the Exxon Valdez spill and later wrote the Ultimate Civics Curriculum. Our Visual Learning lessons use an intriguing image — an image without a human being and difficult to guess — to dive deeper into conversation about topics such as how development affects wild animals, the devastation that oil spills have on human and marine life, and who typically is exposed to environmental health risks.

If I can make a teacher's load a bit lighter, I will. It is no secret that teachers have little time to look for curriculum. So, if I can hand over a treasure trove of learning resources, I've done that teacher a huge favor. In addition to offering YES! classroom tools, I sift through a constellation of non-YES! curriculum for the "good stuff" they can use in the classroom with students or for their own personal enrichment. For the most current issue of the magazine, our newsletter highlights ace teaching tools (curriculum, lessons, infographics, projects) to support that theme — all downloadable and free.

Every school year, through the generosity of our donors, over 1,000 teachers and school librarians receive a free year of YES!. If the average class size is 25 students, that's around 25,000 more students

each year hearing stories about real people working for a better world.

Since our writing competition began five years ago, over 800 classes representing 21,000 students have written essays. These are students who have taken the plunge to sharpen their writing chops and to share their dreams, fears, and passionate opinions.

While data is powerful — giving concrete evidence that you moved the needle (or not) — I also find anecdotes equally powerful.

Below are several quotes from students and teachers who have been impacted by participating in our writing competition:

"It's funny because at first I didn't even want to enter my essay due to my anxiety about how others may perceive my thoughts and/or beliefs ... Winning has reminded me of the love I feel when I write, and the passion I feel after I complete a piece ... I'm excited to see what the future holds for me and my writing."

— Karen J., Powerful Voice Winner
therapeutic boarding school, northwestern Montana

"This essay was empowering. Writing about my academic experiences in a classroom was a difficult task, but after a while, I simply felt eager to speak, eager to be listened to. I felt influential and shivers ran up my spine while I spilled my heart out on the paper."

— Jennifer Aguilera, Spring 2015 High School Winner, freshman,
Cristo St. Rey Martin, Waukegan, IL

"I believe this is a true opportunity for students to channel their voice about justice in our society. It is a chance to really see how capable they are and engage in writing that connects to the world outside the class. I am excited for what taking this risk will teach them about justice today and for what it will teach them about themselves."

— Erik Armstrong, English professor
College of the Sequoias, Visalia, CA

RESOURCES

YES! Magazine

www.yesmagazine.org

has over 6,000 online stories about real people working for a better world, plus tools for citizen engagement on issues of peace and justice, planet, new economy, and happiness.

YES! For Teachers

www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers

Offers curriculum, student writing lessons, and stories from educators.

YES! Student Writing Competition

www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays

An opportunity for students to write about something meaningful and to write for a bigger audience.

Global Oneness Project

www.globalonenessproject.org

Offers teachers an award-winning collection of films, photo essays, articles, and lessons that explore cultural, social, and environmental issues with a humanistic lens.



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And here is a quote from an author of Your Stories:

“My parents (particularly my conservative, Japanese dad) don’t really understand the work that I’m doing as it is not anything conventional like lawyer or teacher or doctor. My dad thinks that I wasted my education because I’m “just a farmer” and that I’m a huge disappointment, etc., etc., etc. Now that the article has come out, he has come around and we are on speaking terms again.

Thank you again for the article. It has had more of an effect than I could’ve imagined.”

*— Tasia Yamamura,
school garden and nutrition
educator FoodCorps and Ma’O
Organic Farms, and author of
YES! Magazine story, “My Love
Affair with Breadfruit
(And Other Stories from the
Wai’anae Youth Garden)”*

While I am not a teacher, I like to think of myself as a story whisperer. It gives me great joy to learn that our student writing contest has given a student who is incarcerated the opportunity to share his story with the outside world. I am inspired to hear that a student who is overcoming mental health issues had the courage to write about finding an empathetic community online — and feeling strong again. And the bonus? Helping students boost their writing to a higher level. I am elated when a teacher writes about how the writing competition motivated her students to work harder at their writing because they knew that an audience outside their classroom would read their essays.

I love knowing that I can help students, in some small way, be heard, and find their place in this world.