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Beyond the Author's Chair: Expanding Sharing Opportunities in Writing

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Pause and Ponder

- Why is sharing an important part of the writing process?
- What kinds of opportunities have your students had to share their writing with others?
- Do all of your students enjoy sharing? Are some reluctant to share?

Each Tuesday during Writer's Workshop, Jack (pseudonym), a fourth-grade student, became anxious when the teacher announced there was one more minute until sharing time. According to the sharing schedule Jack knew he would be asked to sit in the author's chair in front of his classmates, read his writing to the class in an audible voice, and respond to questions and comments from his peers about his writing

As part of a focus group study examining children's attitudes toward writing, I interviewed Jack and other elementary school students. I asked the children how they felt about sharing their writing during Writer's Workshop. Although I heard positive statements from students about sharing their writing such as: "When I share with the class, it makes me feel like I've accomplished something," I also heard statements describing negative aspects of sharing based on the personal nature of their writing and the fear of judgment by peers. Jack said: "I don't like other people to see my writing. I only like one person. Like just my teacher." Jose (pseudonym), a fifth-grade student, said "Sometimes I like to share, but sometimes I don't, because if we're doing a piece about a part of our lives, it's kind of personal so I don't really want people to listen." Lucy (pseudonym), another fifth-grade student, shared that her feelings about sharing change based on the piece she is currently writing: "I love sharing when I feel very strong about what I write and how I feel, but sometimes if I don't think it's the best it can be, and then I don't want to share".

Responses from the children served as a pivotal moment in my reflection as a writing teacher and encouraged me to research new ways to support *all* students on the way to becoming confident writers. This article describes tips for establishing a successful sharing environment, while also acknowledging that sharing is often uncomfortable and intimidating for many young authors. Strategies are proposed for whole-group sharing, as well as alternative experiences for children who are reluctant to share.

Benefits of Sharing

Many researchers have discussed the benefits of encouraging young children to share their writing. These include providing authentic purposes for writing (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000), a platform for thinking and learning (Hurst, Scales, Frecks, & Lewis, 2011), and an opportunity to build confidence in their reading, writing, and speaking abilities (Lensmire, 1992; McCallister, 2008). Piazza and Tomlinson (1985) concluded that “[a] classroom environment that fosters oral language as a meaningful context for learning to write allows children to observe how written language functions in natural, everyday settings” (p. 150).

Sharing has also been found to help children develop a sense of community, foster connections between home and school experiences, and assist students in negotiating their social worlds (Cazden, 1985; Dyson, 1993; Lensmire, 1992). For example, when children share stories about their family traditions, they may recognize cultural similarities and differences that they have with their peers. This exchange of personal information among classmates can help nurture appreciation and acceptance, as well as broaden and deepen children’s initial constructions of written language and help build collective meaning among peers (Barone, 2013). Gallas (1992) explained that “[c]hildren need a place where seminal experiences, which often occur outside of school, move from silent contemplation into speech” (p. 173).

Considerations Prior to Sharing

Purposes of Sharing

Although many benefits are associated with children sharing their writing, research has shown these outcomes are greatly influenced by the purpose of sharing established by the teacher (Cazden, 1985). For example, some teachers provide whole-group sharing opportunities to build a sense of community through oral interactions between students, while others include sharing as a prewriting activity or to give children speaking practice in front of groups (Cazden, 1985). Some teachers direct and manage sharing time, while others take a backseat, allowing their students to serve as resources for one another, by helping each other generate ideas and revise their writing (Piazza & Tomlinson, 1985).

Sharing Among Peers

The results of sharing are also affected by the unique characteristics of peer culture within each classroom. Lensmire (1992) stated that "...we must articulate goals for our workshops and classrooms that go beyond supporting individual student intentions, and include a vision of the type of classroom community in which we want our children to write and learn" (p. 8). Because peer culture is an important backdrop to sharing, it is important for teachers to consider the ways in which a peer audience can shape and constrict the writing of young children. Uncomfortable dynamics among peers can make young authors vulnerable to teasing and conflict, while classrooms that have established a respectful community can provide a less threatening environment for sharing (Lensmire, 1992). Therefore, it is crucial that teachers determine their vision for their writing community before establishing guidelines for sharing.

Establishing a Respectful Writing Community

Although each classroom setting is unique, including various teaching styles and peer dynamics, all teachers can follow a similar sequence of activities to establish a respectful writing community (See Table 1). Teachers can decide how to carry out each step based on their own beliefs about sharing and their knowledge of their individual students.

<INSERT TABLE 1>

Identify Your Purposes

To establish a respectful writing community, it is important to first identify the purposes of writing and sharing within your classroom (Cazden, 1985). Is sharing time an occasional community-building exercise or a vital component to your writing curriculum that allows children time to share their compositions and gather feedback from peers? Does sharing fulfill only one purpose in your classroom or does it serve multiple purposes such as oral communication practice and opportunity for affirmation? Do students' purposes for writing connect with their purposes for sharing? For example, when children share their "how-to-stories" with peers, are they testing out the clarity of their step-by-step directions with an audience, or simply showcasing a completed piece of writing? Whether sharing is a special occasion in your classroom or a routine event, it is important to consider the purposes it serves as you invite children to create bonds of trust within your writing community.

Develop Procedures and Guidelines

Next, in order to develop a sharing community that privileges all kinds of talk and values every child's experiences, it is crucial to involve students in developing procedures for sharing time; including expectations for audience members and guidelines for "talk moves" (Ferris, 2014). Ferris (2014) described "talk moves" as ways of framing questions and responses during

classroom discussions to encourage Accountable Talk (a set of research-based techniques that enable students to participate in meaningful academic conversations; Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008). Some examples of “talk moves” that could be used effectively by students are revoicing (i.e., repeating back a comment from an audience member and verifying whether they have interpreted the feedback correctly) and allowing adequate wait time for answers to questions (Ferris, 2014).

Model and Reinforce Audience Behavior

Several whole-group sharing times should be spent reviewing and discussing what it means to listen respectfully to peers, as well as what helpful feedback sounds like. Teachers should model polite questions and comments as well as discuss comments that might hurt others' feelings. During these initial whole-group meetings, a small number of clear and concise sharing rules (3-5) should be constructed by the teachers and students. These should be posted at the children's eye level to help them acclimate to the sharing routine (See Figure 1). In addition, it is important to remind children during each sharing session to respect and support fellow writers (Lensmire, 1992).

Provide Ownership and Choice

Pass the Torch

Once sharing guidelines and rules have been agreed upon as a class and modeled by the teacher, children should be encouraged to manage sharing time by sitting in front of the class to share their piece and calling on peers to comment and ask questions. During this transition, the teacher's role shifts from facilitator to fellow audience member; allowing children to talk and listen to one another without messages of verbal and non-verbal support or denial from the teacher (Gallas, 1992). When children assume the leadership role during sharing time, they feel

a sense of ownership with their writing and recognize that they are a valuable and respected member of their writing community.

Provide Choice of Audience

Consider replacing the traditional sharing schedule (Figure 2) with a daily sign-up sheet for sharing (See Figure 3). This will allow children to choose when they would like to share, as well as communicate what size audience they prefer. In addition to whole-group sharing, opportunities for sharing with the teacher, a partner in the same class, a small group of children, students in other grade levels, or with outside visitors (such as family members and administrators) can be provided. For example, Jack may indicate on the sign-up sheet that he would like to practice reading his story to a friend before sharing with the whole group or that he would like to share a personal piece with only his closest friend. To remain within the time constraints of sharing time, it is helpful to include guidelines for how many children will be able to share each day and how often each child will be allowed to share.

Considerations for Children Reluctant to Share

As teachers, it is easy for us to forget or ignore the fact that some children are reluctant to share their writing. We may find ourselves prodding these children into the author's chair week after week until the "pain" of sharing in front of their peers wears off or they become numb to the process. We may even pat ourselves on the back for "helping" these children become public speakers and achieve standards related to oral speaking. Unfortunately, as we continue to focus on the proud faces of students who are eager to share and the meaningful exchanges between peer audience members, we fail to wonder how we are affecting the writing identities of the less than enthusiastic sharers.

There are a variety of reasons why children may be reluctant to share. For example, some children may be shy and uncomfortable speaking in front of large groups (Lensmire, 1992). Others may feel protective of their writing because of the personal nature of their pieces (Hall & Axelrod., 2014a). Children who struggle with reading and writing may also be apprehensive to practice these skills in front of an audience. In addition, emergent bilinguals may be reluctant to share while they are developing new language skills (Hall & Axelrod, 2014b). Table 2 provides recommendations that would make the sharing process more enjoyable and beneficial for all children who are reluctant to share.

<INSERT TABLE 2>

Final Thoughts

Our teaching practices are constantly evolving. By listening to children, and respecting their feelings about sharing time, we can continue to develop and modify our instruction. In order to make sharing a beneficial experience for all young authors, including Jack, research suggests that teachers should establish and explain their purposes for sharing (Cazden, 1985), build a respectful writing community (by involving children in developing guidelines and rules for sharing; Cazden, 1985; Gallas, 1992; Lensmire, 1992), provide ownership and a variety of choices related to sharing, and continually reinforce that every child's writing has value (McCallister, 2008). It is clear from the photographs in this article that alternative sharing opportunities provide a pleasurable learning experience for all involved. Graves (1983) stated that "[c]hildren envision the appearance of a piece in print, and the teacher, parents, or friends turning the pages" (p. 54). If we are thoughtful about expanding sharing opportunities beyond the author's chair, all children will be able to enjoy having an "outlet for the irrepressible human desire (and need) to share stories and experiences" (McCallister, 2008, p. 463).

Take Action!

1. Survey your students to find out who enjoys sharing their writing and who is reluctant to share. Ask what they like and don't like about their current sharing opportunities.
2. Take a moment to write down your purposes for having students share their writing and your role in the sharing process. Reflect on whether you would like to make changes to your current sharing routines.
3. Discuss with students the benefits of sharing their writing and decide together which sharing opportunities you would like to try in your classroom.

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Table 1

Steps to Establish a Respectful Writing Community

Step	Description
1. Identify your purposes for sharing.	Decide what objectives sharing will help achieve in your curriculum. How will sharing benefit your students?
2. Develop procedures and guidelines.	Involve students in developing guidelines for sharing time. Decide together on audience expectations.
3. Model and reinforce audience behavior.	Role-play how to be a respectful listener and provide helpful feedback. Give students daily reminders about their role as an audience member during sharing time.
4. Pass the torch.	Allow children to manage sharing time. Guide and facilitate from a distance when needed.
5. Provide choice of audience.	In addition to traditional whole-group sharing, allow children to designate who they would like to share with when they would like to share.

Table 2

Strategies for Reluctant Sharers

Strategy	Description
Help children prepare for sharing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give children plenty of time to select their writing piece for sharing time • Allow children to practice in front of a smaller audience before sharing with the whole group
Provide choice and ownership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support children in selecting a piece that they feel comfortable sharing • Allow children to “pass” during sharing time
Provide alternative sharing opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer to share children’s pieces anonymously

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- Allow children to record their stories digitally to share with the class
 - Arrange for opportunities to share with different types of audiences
 - Encourage children who have writing skills in another language to share pieces in their primary language
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