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“She never lets me write about it”: Children’s perspectives on “choice” in their writing curriculum

Legislation and policies such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by the majority of states directly impact the educational experiences of children in classrooms. Current shifts in the U.S. education system include a greater focus on preparing all students to be college and career ready with increased expectations for teachers and children. With shifts in the curriculum and standards comes increased attention on writing performance, with a particular focus on measuring and tracking individual children’s progress in order to then evaluate teachers and classrooms (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/01/19/speeding-race-top>). Researchers and policymakers scramble to find ways to assess the increased amount of data that are collected; yet, children’s voices and their perceptions of their educational experiences are missing. In an attempt to include the voices of children in research in order to better understand their experiences in school (with a focus on writing), this study asks the questions:

1. What attitudes and efficacy beliefs did elementary school students hold regarding writing?
2. What were the major influences on these attitudes or beliefs?
3. What was the relationship between the students’ writing attitudes/self-efficacy and the writing practices they experienced at school?

Research has shown students with more favorable attitudes toward writing are likely to write more often and exert more persistence and perseverance when obstacles arise (Jones, 2008; Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000; Pajares, 2003; Zumbrunn, 2010). However, in spite of research suggesting writing attitudes can predict writing achievement; there is greater

standardization of writing curricula, leaving little room for teachers to make choices about how to support writing development and for children to decide what to write about. The goal of this study was to learn about children's experiences with writing in order to inform teachers and teacher educators about ways to design and develop writing curricula that builds on children's strengths and fosters their desire to write. We also hope, through our research, that children's voices will be heard by researchers and policymakers, which in turn may positively influence teacher training in writing.

Theoretical Framework

We utilized a constructivist framework to frame our theories about learning, the social nature of learning and the role of the teacher in this process (Dewey 1938/1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky describes learning as a social endeavor whereby children are directly influenced by the experiences and context within which they experience learning. Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* describes the process whereby children learn from others who are more experienced and this process is what pushes their development. Dewey describes the importance of learning environments, experiences that are educational and the role of teachers (or facilitators) in this process (Dewey, 1938/1997). We used this framework to help understand the role of the curriculum, experiences, and facilitators (teachers, families) in the children's understanding of writing and the development of their identities as writers.

While we relied on constructivist thinking to help guide our understanding of the children's learning and development as writers, we drew on the work of Early Childhood reconceptualists who encourage educators and researchers "to rethink relationships with those who are younger in ways that recognize agency, voice, and complex identities" (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001, p. 3). We used the reconceptualist framework (Cannella, 1997) to examine

notions of what is “appropriate” for young children to write about as well as to rethink the role of children’s experiences and perspectives in curriculum design. Finally, we also used this framework to push on ideas of research design and advocate for the inclusion of voices that have traditionally been ignored to inform curriculum and better understand writing development across the elementary school years.

Method

This study used qualitative methods to examine elementary students’ attitudes toward writing (including their feelings and motivation for writing), teachers’ influences on students’ writing attitudes, and students’ writing preferences.

Participants

The participants in this study were 81 students in an elementary school in the South. The demographics of the school are the following: 70% White, 21% Black, 5% Latina/o, 4% Asian. We contacted one teacher at each grade level (K-5) and asked them to send a letter home explaining the purpose of the study and requesting permission from the parents for their children to participate in the study. We received responses from 10 kindergarten students, 16 students in grade 1, 14 students in grade 2, 13 students in grade 3, 14 students in grade 4, and 14 students in grade 5. All students that returned consent forms were invited to participate in the study.

Data Sources and Methods of Analysis

We conducted focus groups with the students as our primary data source. Focus groups are useful in order to promote conversation among participants and allow participants to “stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to realize what their views are” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 109). We randomly divided the children into groups of 5-8 by grade level (depending on the total number of participants for each grade) and began by introducing

ourselves and inviting the children to tell us their names. Then we gave each student a 7-item questionnaire designed to measure their attitudes toward writing. The scale was developed by Graham and colleagues in 2007 by adapting a reading attitude scale developed by McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth (1995). It can be used for children in grades K-6. We read aloud each item on the questionnaire allowing students time to indicate their attitude by circling one of four images of Garfield the Cat.

After collecting the questionnaires, we asked the students a series of questions such as: (1) Do you like to write?, (2) What do you like about writing?, (3) What does your teacher do to help you write?, and asked them to respond orally. We then used their answers and comments to ask follow-up questions to better understand their responses and attitudes toward writing. Focus group conversations were audio recorded and later transcribed.

The authors of this paper led the focus group discussions. We led three initial focus groups together in order to ensure that we were consistent in our questioning; afterwards we each led a group simultaneously in different rooms. Our initial data analysis were our conversations after each focus group to discuss themes that emerged and responses from children that seemed to resonate (or not) with the existing literature. Based on these initial conversations, we created a list of themes and ideas with which to code our transcripts. These themes included: role of teacher in students' perception of writing, motivators, sense of self in relation to writing, utility of writing, discourse of writing, and affective statements about writing. First, we each coded our individual transcripts noting issues and topics in the transcriptions related to our themes. Then, we reviewed our shared transcripts and made additional notations for themes that emerged that were not on our initial lists.

Our next layer of analysis was to go through our transcripts together and pull out salient quotes or ideas from the various themes and look at the ways in which these themes recurred or developed within a single grade-level. We then examined the ways in which particular themes evolved over the grade levels as children became more mature and experienced writers. We also used descriptive statistics to examine patterns in the data collected on the writing attitude questionnaire. In addition, we asked each of the teachers to fill out a survey about the school writing curriculum, a description of their own practices in teaching writing, and their philosophy of teaching writing.

Findings

Overall, we learned about writing experiences that have positively and negatively influenced students' desire to write. We found students reported positive experiences with writing such as choosing their own topic, publishing their work, and receiving feedback and acknowledgment from others. One student commented: "It's a lot more fun when you're free with your topic. You can go as broad as you want!" Another student said: "I have entered a lot of my work in our school writing competition and it feels good if I win, because it kinda boosts my writing confidence a lot".

Students also reported negative experiences such as not having enough time to write, writing in a noisy classroom, and being embarrassed to share their writing with their teacher and peers. One student shared his frustration with writing time: "we just write for Writer's Workshop and she always gives us ten minutes and I'm like getting started and I've got one dot on my paper and then we have to clean up". Another student said: "It's too noisy to write in my classroom, and it's so annoying..and you probably will just mess up at some point". Teacher and peer influences were illustrated in the following quote: "Well, my writing she shared with the

class last year and I got really sad because you don't know if she is gonna say you need to fix this in front of the class or if they'll laugh or something."

We saw shifts in writing attitudes over time, as children had more experience with writing. We found that these shifts looked differently depending on gender and writing experiences in school and at home. We found themes increasing in maturity through the grade levels. For the purposes of this paper, we wish to focus on a particular finding which was young children's desires to write about topics that were "not allowed" by their teacher.

Writing About Familiar Topics

In our interviews with K-5th grade children, one child stated "I really like it when we write about ourselves and things that we know", and another child added "because you can tell people stories that you did over the weekend and stuff because they weren't there". Another child explained why writing about self-chosen topics is important saying "I like being able to choose what I write about because I got it already in my mind and I just know what I want to write about and it's just easier and it's faster and I just like it more." It is clear from these children's statements that writing about what they know is motivating for them, not simply because it is easier, but because it is more meaningful. Although many children shared an overwhelming preference for writing about self-selected and familiar topics, few children reported being given opportunities on a regular basis to write without teacher-directed prompts.

Writing Restrictions at School

In addition to directing children's writing topics, teachers restricted children's writing through their judgments of the children's topic choices. One child said he liked to write about zombies, but was not allowed to by his classroom teacher. His classmates chimed in that the teacher didn't think writing about zombies was appropriate, so they couldn't write about

zombies. Another child said, “We just don’t know how to write about fairies, because we don’t have the word fairies on our popcorn words, cause in classrooms there’s normally not fairies.”

So, while it was unclear if the teacher thought the topic of fairies was inappropriate, it was apparent that the teacher only supported writing topics included on the teacher-selected “popcorn words” of the class word wall. We heard multiple instances where children were not allowed to write about their topics of choice in the classroom. Children explained that they had to pursue writing about these self-selected topics during afterschool programs or at home, often with little support or scaffolding of their writing development from adults or peers.

Flexibility in the Older Grades

In our interviews with the older children, grades 3-5, we asked if they had any topics that were not allowed, and they seemed to have greater flexibility of topic, although were limited by genres. For example, some of the boys wanted to write comic books but these were not part of their writing curricula. Others mentioned being allowed to choose their own topic as long as they were able to fit it into the genre they were currently studying as a class.

We presented the older children the examples of younger students not being allowed to write about particular topics in order to get their perspective. They seemed to think that the teacher was making this choice to protect the younger children from inappropriate topics or subjects that “might scare them.” While they didn’t necessarily agree with the teacher’s choices to restrict topics (“since they see it on TV anyways”) they drew upon the often used discourse of “not appropriate” for young children to explain the teachers’ choices. This raises the question of what are considered “appropriate” topics for young children’s writing and who gets to decide. Furthermore, from a pedagogical perspective, what valuable opportunities are lost for scaffolding

and encouraging young writers when they are not free to write about their interests? And, what happens when children feel like their interests are not supported in the curriculum?

Conclusions

The impact of this research study is two-fold in that it can help teachers rethink topics that are considered “taboo” in schools and consider how these topics might be pathways to encouraging children to write. For example, if we allow students to explore fantasy topics that they are interested in such as zombies and fairies, might they be more likely to elaborate, use exciting word choice, and incorporate conventions such as exclamation points and quotation marks? When children write about self-selected topics or topics of interest, a light bulb goes on in their head, they begin scribbling down their ideas frantically as they prewrite, so as to not let one idea slip away. The opposite is observed when children receive the same message, day after day at school, that writing is something I do for my teacher. Writing then becomes a task instead of a means of communication and expression.

Furthermore, this study can help teachers think about ways to narrow the gap between in-school and out-of-school writing activities so that writing is not just viewed as an “academic” endeavor by children, but rather seen as a multi-faceted activity that is meaningful to their lives. From a research perspective, given that schools and curricula are undergoing significant changes due to the adoption of CCSS, it seems imperative that we take into account children’s experiences and perspectives in order to better understand their views of themselves as writers and to use this knowledge to inform practice and the development and design of writing curricula. For example, as children living in this new digital age, it is important to have conversations about the many forms of writing in our lives. It is also important to broaden children’s conceptualizations of writing by acknowledging the important functions of writing in

children's and their families' daily lives. Finally, the design of this research study, suggest possibilities for teachers to engage with their students in this form of inquiry to inform their classroom practices and include children's perspectives in the curriculum. As teachers take time to reflect on their students' attitudes toward writing and their own role in helping children develop motivation to write, they will begin to realize the power that "choice" can bring to their writing curriculum.

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