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Writing Identity and the Writers’ Workshop
Looking Back at My Second Grade Classroom

By

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

The writing workshop, a philosophy and method of writing instruction that grew out of the writing process movement, is a powerful method of teaching writing because it encourages students to develop a writing identity. My second grade experience with the writing workshop gave me a lasting connection with writing. Looking back at that classroom and the writing workshop in general, I argue that tone, the basics of time, process and choice, a literature-rich environment, and a community focus all contribute to students’ identities as young writers. Identification with writing is important because it motivates students to pursue writing beyond the classroom.
Writing Identity and the Writer’s Workshop
Looking Back at my Second Grade Classroom

I love to write. I don’t love it because of some extraordinary creativity of soul, some artist’s instinct that draws me to the written word. Rather, I learned to love writing through a teacher and a method, the writers’ workshop. My love for writing traces back to second grade, to a public school classroom with a group of over twenty students. Most of my classmates came from low-income families, and many grew up in broken homes, lived with relatives or in foster care. Yet it was a unique class. A majority of us had moved up together with Cathy Torres, our teacher, from first to second grade, and we had forged deep, lasting relationships. Even more unusual, we had defined ourselves as a class of writers. Our class wrote every day. We wrote from our own lives and about the topics we chose. Writing did not mean filling in worksheets or scribbling down meaningless essays, enlarging handwriting to fill the page. Writing meant deep involvement with our own stories, working and re-working our words over days, even weeks, until they were just right. Writing meant creating, and it meant sharing or publishing. The goal was never a grade. The goal was to make meaning of our own experiences and to share that meaning with others. I don’t remember much about that second grade year except writing. I relished our classroom culture and told anyone who would listen that I would be a teacher and a writer when I grew up, a teacher because I loved Miss Torres, a writer because that’s who I was. This passion for writing became the pursuit of my school career. But it wasn’t until recently that I came to appreciate the roots of this passion: the writing workshop.

Few who write about the writing workshop experienced it as students. The pioneers of this model—Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Nancy Atwell, and many others—
mostly learned writing under the traditional method of assignment-based instruction. Looking back at my own experiences, I believe that what I gained most from the writing workshop was a connection with writing, a sense of myself as someone who writes that has become a cornerstone of my identity.

In this paper, I will discuss this sense of self as a writer, what Wood Ray (2001) calls writing identity, by examining both the nature of the writing workshop and my own experiences within it. I will draw on published works about the writers’ workshop, and I will critically analyze primary data sources, including a video I narrated while in second grade that was used to teach local educators about the writing workshop. In addition, Miss Torres shared a teaching journal with me that she kept for the 1995-1996 academic year, as well as a collection of essays written by the students of my class on how they felt about writing. Miss Torres also gave me access to video footage of one of my class’s share sessions and of interviews she conducted about writing with some of the students in my class. Finally, I interviewed Miss Torres as part of my research for this paper, and I use my notes from that conversation to give a teacher’s perspective to the discussion.

The video that I narrated for the Pinellas County school district, called “Writer’s Workshop: One Child’s View,” is an especially important data source. In it, I explain the elements of the writing workshop as they were carried out in our classroom. After some introductory remarks, I move around the room describing what the students are doing and asking them questions. I discuss everything from our writing folders and notebooks, to the picture books that we used, the editing table, and the revision charts hung up in a corner for reference. My comments reveal the powerful connection that I felt with writing at the time. The tape also shows that my class members and I had made the
writing workshop our own. This is clear in the fact that I, not a teacher, am the one explaining how the writing workshop operates and what it meant to our class. I believe the process of producing “Once Child’s View” was part of what cemented my identity as a writer.

My aim in discussing my experiences with the writing workshop model is to bring new perspective to the discussion about writing instruction. Writing identity should be a crucial goal for any type of writing pedagogy because it helps students to see writing as something they can do outside of the classroom. When students see themselves as writers, they will write of their own accord, for their own purposes. I hope that my critical reflections on the workshop illustrate the power of this model for fostering writing identity and for inspiring lifelong literacy learning.

What is the Writing Workshop?

The writing workshop developed out of the writing process movement of the 70s and 80s, during which “the emphasis of research shifted from products to the process of writing” (Strech, 1994, p. 9). During this period, researchers like Donald Murray began to describe the writing process as they saw it practiced by professional authors. The writing workshop became one of the methods of implementing this research in the classroom. It took root and began to grow with the emergence of publications by Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Nancy Atwell. Donald Graves’ (1983) classic, Writers: Teachers and Children at Work, based on research done at Atkinson Academy in Atkinson, New Hampshire, served as a “theoretical and methodological basis” for the workshop (Strech, 1994, p. 11). Lucy Calkins, who worked with Graves at Atkinson Academy, wrote Lessons from a Child (1983), which chronicles the development of one
student through third and fourth grade in a writing workshop. Her second book, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1986), develops the writing workshop as a theory of writing instruction. Nancy Atwell contributed to the discussion with *In the Middle* (1987), which focuses on using the writing workshop method with adolescents.

What is the writing workshop? Well, it's just that, a workshop, and it is designed to look and feel like the spaces that real writers use. It is designed to give students the experience of authorship, inviting them, as Wood Ray says, “to do all the things a writer really does: research, explore, collect, interview, talk, read, stare off into space, co-author, and yes, prewrite, draft, revise, edit, and publish” (2001, p. 5). The classic workshop is divided into three segments, a 5-15 minute mini-lesson, open workshop time (roughly 25-35 minutes), and sharing. Other than the mini-lesson, teachers do the bulk of their instructing through individual conferences, during which they ask questions, offer praise, and use the student’s writing as a basis for a writing lesson. The approach gives students ownership of their writing while allowing the teacher to focus on specific needs. Of course, the writing workshop has changed with time. Its pioneers have written new books and tend to be more assertive now, less focused on making the case for the writing workshop as much as describing and prescribing the elements of the workshop structure.

Also, a host of new teachers and researchers have written about the workshop, most notably Katie Wood Ray, whose books include *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They’re All Hard Parts)* (2001), and *Wondrous Words* (1999). But despite these developments, the basic structure of the workshop has remained the same.

My second grade occurred during the 1995-1996 school year at Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Elementary. The school was one of the district’s writing schools. It had
opened in 1992 and was named after Florida’s Pulitzer Prize winning author of *The Yearling* to honor its writing focus. Miss Torres had been teaching the writing workshop for nearly a decade before she taught our class. She was inspired most by Calkins but had also read Atwell and Graves. In addition, she had taught for several years at a burgeoning new writing project in the county, the Poynter Institute for Media Study’s Writers Camp. The camp is a three to four week summer program for 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students that was founded in 1983 as a collaborative effort between the Poynter Institute and the Pinellas County school system. It was designed to inspire young writers and to “retrain teachers” how to teach writing in their classrooms (Clark, 1987, p. 256).

Miss Torres used a classic writing workshop structure in our classroom. During the mini-lesson, Miss Torres explained some new writing strategy using picture books, newspaper clippings, and examples of her own writing. For instance, in “One Child’s View” Miss Torres shares a picture book with us by Maya Angelou called *Life Doesn’t Frighten Me at All*. After reading the book, she discusses Angelou’s writing, especially her use of rhyme and a repeating line. In Miss Torres’ class, mini lessons like these mostly stood alone, although writing workshops today usually incorporate mini-lessons into larger themes or units that the class learns over the course of weeks or months (Calkins, 2006). After the mini-lesson, our class had silent writing time, during which we were supposed to be “seated, silent, and self reliant.” In these 15 minutes or so, Miss Torres would often ask us to try whatever strategy we had learned about in the mini-lesson. For the lesson on Maya Angelou, she asked us to write our own poem using the same repeating line.
During the actual workshop time, we were free to work on pieces of our choosing at whatever stage of the writing process we were in at the time. One of us might be editing a piece in preparation for publication. Another might be drafting a new idea. Another might be brainstorming, and so on. Miss Torres circulated around the room or pulled students aside for conferences. After 15 or 20 minutes of this, the class gathered together for sharing. Writing workshops today employ a variety of sharing methods including having students share with partners or with students at their tables, or having them share only parts of their pieces (Calkins, 2006), but in our class, two to three volunteers read their entire pieces, and often even read pieces they had shared before but had revised. Miss Torres would direct a conversation about the pieces, praising us for writing strategies that we used and teaching listeners to ask thoughtful questions and give helpful comments. The daily ritual of presenting writing to our peers helped us focus on the goal of writing, audience, and motivated us to make our writing the best it could be. It also helped the classroom develop into a literacy community in which we interacted with one another as fellow authors. But all of these components of the writing workshop – mini-lessons, writing time with conferences, and share time – contributed to the development of our writing identities.

Writing Identity and Voice

Writing identity is not a technical term. I don't mean it, for example, to refer to the nature of the self and how it develops during childhood years (Lensmire, 1998). That type of identity, which incorporates all of the elements that make up a person – culture, socioeconomic factors, and experiences – is the umbrella under which writing identity rests. Writing identity refers to a sense of self as a writer, a growing foundation of
writing knowledge and skill, and ownership over one’s own writing process (Rosaen, 1993). This should not be confused with voice, which is an interrelated but distinct concept. Voice relates to how identity expresses itself, both in writing and in other mediums of communication (Lensmire, 1998). The identity expressed in voice is that broader identity that results from an intermingling of social, cultural, and historical contexts (McCarthey, 2001). It is the coming together of sociological factors, such as gender, class, and race, with what Anzaldua (1999) called the “clusters of stories we tell ourselves and others tell about us” (as cited in McCarthey, 2001, p. 125). Understanding voice through writing means looking at the content of a student’s work. What meaning do they make and how does that express who they are? Writing identity refers to the skills and processes students adopt and internalize, and to how they describe themselves in terms of writing. Do students see themselves as writers? Do they exhibit their own sense of writing process and can they articulate that process? Are they motivated to pursue writing outside of the classroom?

The Development of Writing Identity

Writing identity should not be considered something that students either acquire or don’t acquire. All students develop a way of seeing themselves in terms of writing. Even within the writing workshop, students respond to writing differently. In her study of literacy identities, McCarthey (2002) describes three categories of student responses to writing in classroom settings: appropriation, resistance, and transformation. According to McCarthey, students who appropriate classroom norms and roles usually develop their writing identities by adopting and internalizing the rules and emphasis of the classroom’s particular writing culture. For example, Miguel, a sixth grade student, built his writing
identity around his classroom’s emphasis on writing personal narratives with descriptive language. Students like Miguel often perform successfully, but their pursuit of writing is somewhat limited to the classroom. Other students, McCarthey writes, resist the curriculum, certain assignments, or the teacher’s expectations about writing. Anita, a sixth grade student with an abusive home situation, saw writing as “a personal and private journey to communicate with her inner self” (p. 41). Anita resisted using writing as a means of communicating with an audience, instead using her notebooks as therapy. While this limited her success at school, Anita still connected writing to her own life.

Finally, McCarthey writes that students can transform classroom norms to fit their own purposes for writing, both in and outside the classroom. These students meet teacher expectations while injecting their writing with their own voice and purpose. Ella, a fifth grader who enjoyed writing fiction at home, created personal narratives to please the teacher but included fictional elements to satisfy her own understanding of writing.

Whether appropriating, resisting, or transforming, what’s important to note is that all of the students in McCarthey’s study developed a purpose for writing and an idea of themselves as a writer, although these purposes and ideas differed and produced varying degrees of success in the classroom.

Just as all students do not develop the same writing identity, so also will varied abilities and skill-sets emerge in the classroom, shaping the ways students connect with writing. Rowe, Fitch and Bass (2001) demonstrate that skilled writers will often take on powerful positions in classroom literacy activities. In their study of a first-grade writing workshop, the teacher repeatedly affirmed all students as capable authors with varied strengths, yet the children clearly recognized a hierarchy with the most fluent spellers
considered the best writers. These high-achieving children were more likely to embrace a writing identity, whereas the struggling students tended to challenge or reject classroom literacy definitions and activities as a means to save face. Gradations like these are present in all levels of society and would also be present in traditional classroom settings where students' perceptions of themselves as writers hinge upon grades and other classroom accomplishments. But low-performing children will not necessarily develop a negative view of writing. In fact, the writer's workshop, with its emphasis on all students as authors with a variety of skills and strengths, is set up to discourage such feelings.

Struggling students in the writing workshop often emerge as writers given time and encouragement. In Rowe et. al.'s (2001) study, Patrick began the year considering himself a "poor writer" and often avoided engaging in classroom activities. As the year progressed, he slowly started to make an effort and take more risks, even looking for chances to share from the author's chair. Patrick's writing identity began to take on more positive tones as his willingness to participate increased and his skills developed.

**What's Different about the Writing Workshop?**

Rosaen (1993) records an interview with a fifth grade student, Maria, at the end of a year in the writing workshop. Maria admitted that she had always considered herself "bad" in English and that she had not been looking forward to writing in her fifth grade year. In the interview, Maria acknowledges a positive change in her disposition toward writing, and she attributes this change to the writing workshop. She says:

"Well, in writing workshop, see before I didn’t like writing because I never knew and then we started talking more about authors and things, going through steps. I sorta like got interested in it and I, you know, I thought, well, if we can talk about..."
authors I can put myself into authors', you know, feet, and just act like an
author…you get the feeling like oh, gosh, I'm an author!” (p. 51)

The sense of “I’m an author!” is what motivates students to pursue writing on their own. But this perception of authorship doesn’t happen automatically as students write and revise pieces (Calkins, 1986). Rather, it results from teachers, from those “little, everyday ways in which we show children we regard them as authors,” and also from the structure of the writing workshop itself (Calkins, 1986, p. 225).

Analysis

Through my analysis of primary data sources, I have identified four features of the writers’ workshop that contributed to the development of writing identity in my second grade class. These key elements are a “writerly” tone, or the language used in workshop interactions that encourages students to take ownership of their writing; the basics of time, process, and choice; a literature-rich environment; and a writing community. I will discuss each of these using primary data sources including the video I narrated, “One Child’s View.” My analysis will focus on two research questions: What was it about Cathy Torres’ classroom that inspired writing identity? And, more important, what is it about the writing workshop in general that helps students begin to identify with writing?

Tone – The Language is Different

The first key element in a writing workshop is what Wood Ray (2001) calls the “tone,” or “how the teaching presents itself” (p. 42). For Wood Ray, this can include anything from body language to teaching content, but I mean it specifically in reference to the language used in the interactions between teachers and students, and even between
students and other students, that conveys ownership and connection with writing. Wood Ray writes that tone is built around “teachers seeing their students as writers” (2001, p. 42). Teachers call students writers, they talk to students about “your pieces” and “strategies you might consider,” and they tell them about published authors in ways that encourage students to identify with authorship, as in “you can do what Maya Angelou does in your stories as well.” Tone is expressed to students in a certain feel, a sense of authorship that they get from their interactions in the workshop. Miss Torres described it well in our interview: “That sense of, ‘You’re all writers,’ that was very strategic of me. I wanted everyone to believe that they were writers, even if they could only write one sentence or one paragraph.” Obviously, Miss Torres understood the power of tone to shape literacy identities.

The “writerly” language of interactions in a workshop (to use Calkins’ adjective) emerges clearly during writing conferences. Wood Ray writes about conferences: “We teach just by sitting down and asking about the writing. We teach students that we think of them as writers and that we take their work seriously” (2001, p. 156). Once the conference begins, teachers convey this message with even greater clarity. In her description of a typical conference, Calkins begins by asking the child, “What are you working on as a writer?” (2006, p. 70). After conversing with him about his piece, Calkins compliments his writing process, telling him, “You not only choose your own topics, you also go between drafting and revising all your own. That’s very writerly of you!” (p. 70). Calkins then begins to teach, starting out with “When writers try to put details into our personal narratives…” (p. 70). Calkins ends her conference with, “From now on, always remember that you are the kind of professional writer who not only
writes but also rereads your writing” (p. 77). At every stage of the conference the teacher’s language reinforces writing identity, encouraging the student to see himself as a writer within a community of writers.

Miss Torres also used conferences to reinforce our identities as writers. In “One Child’s View,” she pulls several students aside for individual writing conferences.

Here’s how she discusses Mason’s piece with him:

**Miss Torres:** Mason, you’ve been working on this piece, “Somewhere in the world.” What point are you at now in this piece of writing?

**Mason:** I’m somewhere near the end.

**Miss Torres:** Near the end? So you feel like you’re almost finished? And you wanted to have a conference today why?

**Mason:** Because I needed to share with someone who knew a lot.

**Miss Torres:** You wanted to share, oh so you think I know a lot. Well, thank you.

{Mason reads his piece.}

**Miss Torres:** I love that ‘bright blond shavings.’ Those are great writer’s words. Did you use the bright and blond, both those words that begin with a b, on purpose? You did? I like the sound of that... (After conferencing with the other student) Mason, and I think you’re ready to edit that one too.

Notice that the piece is always Mason’s piece, and that Miss Torres asks him questions that force him to take ownership of it, such as when she asks him where he feels the piece is at and why he wanted to conference with her today. After he reads his piece, Miss Torres compliments him on his “great writer’s words.” She completes the conference by
encouraging him to move on to the next stage in the writing process, editing. The entire
conference reinforces Mason’s position as a writer seeking advice for his own piece.

The tone of share sessions also encourages writing identity. In fact, like
conferencing, the act of sharing itself reinforces the students’ identities as writers.
Calkins (1986) writes that there are three essential elements of writing instruction: a
sense of authorship, a deep involvement with writing, and audience (p. 9). These three
are interconnected – sharing, the audience piece, encourages students to take ownership
and become deeply involved with their work, and both in turn lead to a sense of
authorship. Conversely, authorship inspires both involvement and desire for audience.
The share session, then, is an important element if students are going to become authors.
For Miss Torres, sharing time was a “big teaching time.” She said in our interview, “I
always had the biggest voice. I would say things like, “What I liked about what you did
at the beginning was the way you used a sound…It was always teacher-directed.” In
directing the conversation, Miss Torres filled our sessions with the language of
authorship, modeling to students how they should listen and respond to each other’s
pieces as writers.

The difference in tone in the writing workshop doesn’t stop with teachers, though.
As students begin to see themselves and their classmates as writers, they pick up the
language of writing. This, too, was evident during our share sessions. The videotape
given to me by Miss Torres records an interaction during share time in which Miss Torres
guides a student in how to respond to her classmate’s piece:

Ashley: I liked how you started it.

Miss Torres: I liked her beginning too. What did you like about it?
Ashley: She used a quote at the beginning. In defining for Ashley was “started it” means – “her beginning” – and in probing her to be more specific about her comment, Miss Torres encouraged Ashley to develop what Palmer (1994) calls a “schema” of writing strategies and language. Students rely on this collection of writing knowledge both when they write and when they talk about writing. In another recorded interaction, this one a videotaped interview with Natasha about a deadline writing piece, Miss Torres said, “I remember you asked me if you could write about a moment in time, and I said sure, and that’s what you were trying to do, weren’t you?” Natasha responded, “Yes, I was trying to write about a little moment and explode it, like explode the moment.” Exploding the moment, using a quote in the lead—examples like these illustrate that children will absorb the language of a writing classroom.

**The Basics: Time, Process, and Choice**

Although the tone of a workshop is pivotal, the most fundamental differences in a writing workshop are the basics: students are given time to write, freedom to choose their own topics, and ownership over their writing process. Daily writing time is the cornerstone of these three, the foundation on which both choice and process can flourish. Our class had writer’s workshop for at least an hour every day, 30 to 40 minutes of which was writing time. Wood Ray (2001) argues that this type of regular time spent writing corresponds to identity with writing in the same way that regular time golfing might correspond to growing identity as a golfer. The more you do something, the more it becomes part of who you are.
Daily writing time also helps students begin to see writing as something they can do outside of school. Miss Torres consistently made the workshop the first major period of the day, directly before reading time. She did this in order to encourage students to ponder their pieces outside of class. The strategy worked. In one of her journal entries, Miss Torres wrote about a student who came to class in the morning with an idea for a story: “At 8:30, Natasha told me..., ‘I know what I’m going to write about! My new red velvet robe with lace trim and matching slippers.’” In a videotaped interview done later in the year, Natasha admitted that she had come up with that story at home. She said, “Sometimes I have my idea in my head, like that robe story. I had that already...In the night, I had it in my head.” In another videotaped interview, Wesley responds to a question about how he writes, “I write until it ends, where I want it to stop, then the next day I go home and think, and then I write more on to it.” Natasha and Wesley’s outside-of-class involvement with their writing stems directly from the time in-class dedicated to writing. Calkins (1986), referencing Donald Graves, wrote, “Children, like the rest of us, will ‘write’ when they are not writing if writing becomes a regular and frequent part of their lives” (p. 25). Regular writing time in class encourages students to think about their work outside of class, which leads to a greater investment in their pieces and in the act of writing itself.

The writing workshop also emphasizes choice. Writing researcher Donald Murray (1985) writes that most authors don’t work on an assignment basis, although they might accept ideas from others. Instead, writers collect ideas from their own passions and experiences and from the world around them. In giving students control of their writing topics, teachers allow students to experience the life of real writers. Choice also
encourages ownership. Moffett (1979) argues that students develop ownership of their work only when they experience the “full range of authorship decisions” including over their time, topic, purpose, audience and form (as cited in Rosaen, 1993, p. 7).

Ownership, in turn, makes writing less of a chore (Szczezepanski, 2003). It stimulates the natural desire that humans have to express themselves (Calkins, 1986).

Freedom to choose our own writing topics obviously played a large part in my class’s perception of writing. In the essay responses to how they felt about writing, over and over again the students in my class wrote that they enjoyed writing because they could write about whatever they wanted to. As Ryan put it:

Writing is one of my favorit things to do in school. Let me tell you why I think writing is fun. You can write anything you want to. You can make your reviseing a big mece. You can have a fun time, thats why I’m a writing studint.

Ryan’s response betrays the importance choice has in making writing a desirable or “fun” activity and in creating that sense of “I’m a writing student.”

Finally, the writing workshop helps students understand process, rather than just products, a key ingredient in creating young authors. In assignment-based instruction, students are taught the characteristics of a style of writing, such as a five-paragraph expository essay, and then given an assignment to write one. But students realize intuitively that turning in assignments does not make them writers. Calkins (1986) writes, “Knowing the characteristics of ideal finished products has little to do with developing the skills to produce those products” (p. 14). This is because writing is not something we learn, but something we do (Wood Ray, 2001). I learn the parts of the cell; I write the poem about my grandpa. Writing is craft. Teaching students how to
master their craft, how to use the writing process – idea, write, revise, edit, publish – and the many tools available to them along the way, creates that depth of understanding that engenders writing identity.

But the best teachers don’t just teach the writing process, they help students develop their own process. The questions Miss Torres asks in the videotaped interviews reveal that she encouraged each student to develop a writing process, and the students’ responses show that they had developed this sense of process in their approach to writing.

Here is an interview Miss Torres did with Ashley:

Miss Torres: I’m wondering, Ashley when you write, well, can you tell me a little about what you do when you write? … We know you’re a good writer, so what are the things that you do that makes you a good writer?

Ashley: Um, I try to put some similes in it, and some good writer’s words. And, um, I usually write as I go along. I like, have one {thing} planned and I write that down and then I think of the other part. I have like parts that I think in my head and then I write them down.

Miss Torres’ question reinforces Ashley’s identity as a writer (“We know you’re a good writer”) and encourages her to think about how she goes about the act of writing. Ashley, in turn, shows a relatively sophisticated understanding of her own process. She talks about how she tends to write in “parts” and she adds similes and “good writer’s words” to make her pieces better. Jaime exhibits a similar idea of writing process in her interview:

Miss Torres: Jaime, How do you write? You know how we talked about in class how everyone, well not everyone, but a lot of people have a different writing
process. The way I decide on how I’m going to write might be different than the way you write...So I’m curious, how do you write? What’s your writing process?

**Jaime:** First, I think of something to write about, and then I just, um, put it in my head, and then I just add on to it in my head, and then I just get it all onto paper. And then I just like start revising it and editing it.

Jaime obviously saw her own writing process as beginning with a mental act. She also knew that she must “get it all on paper” before starting to revise and edit. A few minutes later, Jaime describes her revision process, how she goes about adding words to her piece:

**Miss Torres:** How do you change your story to make them better?

**Jaime:** Well, I, um, just do it.

**Miss Torres:** Well, what do you mean, ‘just do it.’ Like, how do you do it?

**Jaime:** I think of something better, and then I like cross the part out that I wanted to put it with and then I put it, I, um, put that somewhere, or if I don’t need it I’ll take it out, and I’ll just put that other piece right in.

Jaime was able to explain the tools that she uses to improve her writing, again beginning with thought and then actually adding to her story by moving or deleting unnecessary parts. In a third interview, Holly describes the process she takes to overcome writer’s block:

**Miss Torres:** Is there anything about writing that you don’t like?

**Holly:** Um, yes, um is when you’re stuck, a writer’s block. I just hate when that happens. When there’s just nothing at home, there’s nothing going on, so I don’t know what to write about.
Miss Torres: What do you do when you have writer’s block?

Holly: I go in my notebook, my old one and my new one, and I just read through the stories, and then that will give me an idea about what else I’ve done before, and then I’ll just write it.

These students’ awareness of the processes they used to write means that they were becoming independent writers. They were capable of taking on the challenges of writing, such as needing to make a piece better or overcoming writer’s block, by using the process tools that they had acquired in the workshop.

Ashley, Jaime, and Holly’s ability to describe the strategies they use to write reflects metacognition, or “thinking about thinking,” an important step in any writer’s development (Jacobs, 2004, p. 18). According to Baker (1991), metacognition refers to “the awareness and control individuals have over their cognitive processes” (p. 2). It is “knowing about what one knows,” as opposed to simply “knowing” (Palmer, 1994, p. 255). Students who develop metacognitive awareness of their own processes and strategies can more effectively employ those strategies at will. It is one thing to write a simile; it is another to know that you are writing a simile and why you are doing so. Or, to go back to the interviews, when Holly was overcome with writer’s block, she knew of a writing strategy to beat it – reading through her journal. She did not simply do this instinctively; rather, she was aware of this action as a strategy she could use to overcome a specific challenge. Similarly, when Jaime needed to revise her stories, she could intentionally set about thinking up better language and crossing out and moving words to fit her new thoughts into her piece. As these examples illustrate, metacognition allows students to develop an internal toolbox of writing strategies that they can go back to over
and over again to make authorial decisions about their pieces and their time in the
workshop. With practice, students internalize the writing strategies that they use most
often, employing them without as much intentionality or forethought, which allows them
to turn their attention to learning new strategies (Calkins, 1983). This creates an ever-
revolving chain of writing growth.

**Literature-rich Environment**

Miss Torres said in an interview, "I believed in immersing children in rich
literature." And that’s what she did. Miss Torres read a picture book to the class every
day, either at the beginning of the writing workshop or during some other period. She
made a point to make them uplifting books, like Maya Angelou’s *Life Doesn’t Frighten
Me At All* or Cynthia Rylant’s *Owl Moon*. More importantly, she talked about them
through the lens of writing. She used them in mini-lessons and referred back to them in
conferences as examples of writing strategies. These books had a special place in the
classroom, on display underneath the window, and students would go to them for
inspiration. They became part of the classroom’s writing language. Asked in an
interview how she chose to write about a certain topic on deadline, Natasha responded, “I
was just trying to think about something, then I thought about that book Daybreak, and
so, um, I thought I would write about it, I thought that would make a good little poem.”

Natasha did not just know *Daybreak* as a reader, she knew it as a writer, and she knew
that she could use it to help her with her own writing.

Literature helps students formulate their conception of the writer. Surrounding
writing students with the works of real authors is like surrounding piano students with the
works of Beethoven, Chopin, and Mozart. It gives them role-models to learn from and
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inspiration to succeed. But it's not enough for teachers to simply read books to the class or have them available throughout the classroom. Teachers must show students how to read the books as authors. They must teach them to make what Calkins calls "reading-writing connections," seeing the books they read as opportunities to learn from "more skillful colleagues" (1986, p. 221). Wood Ray begins her book, Wondrous Words, with a chapter called "Reading Like Writers," in which she says that students must "learn to write from writers" by "studying the craft of their writing" (1999, p. 11). Teachers model this approach to literature by pointing out the strategies used by the authors of the books read in class and by connecting these strategies to the students' own writing.

Interestingly, Wood Ray argues that writing identity is necessary to begin this process of learning through literature. She writes:

If we know that a particular activity is something we will be doing (writing), if we see ourselves as someone who does this thing (writes), then we have a different way of looking at that thing (text) as we make our way through the world...So what is essential here is to understand that for our students to learn to read like writers, they first have to see themselves as writers (p. 13-14).

In other words, literature inspires writing identity by giving students a conception of authorship and role models to connect with; and at the same time, writing identity enables students to understand literature at a deeper level, as authors studying their craft.

Our class knew about reading texts like writers. It wasn't uncommon for us to point out something about a book's craft, such as the author's use of "good writer's words." For instance, in one of Miss Torres' journal entries she wrote, "Today Jacky shared the book with the class before writers' workshop. She wanted to share it because
of the good words. As soon as she read the title Ashley said, ‘I read that last year – it has great words!’” As student writers, Ashley and I had begun to get excited about the writing strategies we noticed in the books that we read.

Our reading of works like writers didn’t stop with the professionals, though. We also read our fellow classmate’s pieces as writers. In fact, we often responded to our classmate’s writing with the same language that we used to talk about published pieces. In the videotaped share session given to me by Miss Torres, I responded to a piece, “I liked how you did good writers words.” Miss Torres asked, “Can you tell us an example of one of her good writer’s words?” I said, “Bees, bees... Yeah, ‘bees collecting pollen.’ You could have said ‘Bees finding pollen’ or ‘bees something something,’ but you did good writers words.” Obviously, I, like other students in the class, had drawn a connection between the “good words” of a good book and the “good writer’s words” of my classmates. This connection evidences that our classroom had developed strong writing identity – we applied to each other the same language that we applied to real authors.

But we didn’t just connect our classmates with authorship; we also connected ourselves and our own experiences with the authors we encountered in the classroom. In a journal entry, Miss Torres wrote, “I read Lullaby for Emily to begin writer’s workshop. Natasha commented that the author, David Kherdian, worked hard on this book. I asked her how she knew that. She said, ‘I know because it takes a long time to write a good story.’” Natasha readily identified herself with David Kherdian because of her own experiences with writing, particularly with her “Tweedy Bird story,” which she had been writing and revising for several months that year. Calkins (1986) writes of this same
reaction, “If our children see themselves as authors, they will read with admiration, marveling at another author’s efforts and learning vicariously from another author’s successes and struggles” (p. 228). When students read the work of real authors in light of their own experiences with writing, they begin to conceptualize their own place within the category of authorship. They understand that they are doing the things that real writers do and so begin to identify themselves as real writers. In that way, “reading-writing connections” and “reading like writers” are clear markers of writing identity.

**Building a Writing Community**

Writing community might seem an odd element to include in a discussion of student writing identities. However, the power of peers to build individual self-conceptions cannot be overstated. Children acquire the definitions that others give them, and so creating a classroom in which students define each other as writers is just as important as making sure individual students define themselves that way. Wood Ray (2001) includes as one of her primary goals for a writing workshop that students are developing “as members of a responsive, literate community” (p. 36). She writes that students in this type of community must learn to “share their own ideas and listen to the ideas of others, ask important questions, support those who are struggling, give many kinds of feedback during all stages of the writing process, learn from other writers, and teach other writers what they know” (p. 36). In all of these things, students build each other up as writers.

Because most of the students in our class had moved up together with Miss Torres from first to second grade, we developed an unusual depth of community. As Miss Torres put it in her interview with me, “There was a real comfort level, kind of like a
family.” However, our development as a writing community stemmed from the emphasis Miss Torres placed on seeing each other as writers. She believed that every one of us could be writers and she set about ensuring that our class believed it too. In our interview, Miss Torres said, “I wanted to make everyone famous for something. Mason was the ‘stellar speller,’ and Wesley was the poet, since he had a hard time writing prose. Everyone kind of had their little niche... I was trying to pull everybody in. I wanted everyone to be in the club.”

Miss Torres’ strategy worked. Our class did become, in large part, a writing “club,” in which we all saw ourselves as writers with differing abilities. In preparation for filming “One Child’s View,” Miss Torres asked me to write some introductory remarks at home. This is what I wrote (grammar corrected for readability):

Hi. I’m Jacky. This is Miss Torres’ second grade class at Rawlings Elementary. I am going to be talking about writers’ workshop in our class today. The members of my class are developing as writers every day. We love it. We write every day for about an hour. My class loves to put their feelings in words. Our class is a writing class.

While I wrote that introduction at home, I shared it to the class before taping the video in case anyone wanted to contribute. The class decided together that it was “perfect.” These words did not just represent my identity; they were accepted as our corporate identity. We were a writing class.

That we saw ourselves as a community of writers was also evident in our actions toward each other, including our habit of borrowing words. When Jonathan came up with the repeating line “quickly, quietly” for his manatee story, everybody’s writing
suddenly erupted with the words. In her interview with me, Miss Torres said about this, “That was big. I would say, ‘Oh wow, isn’t that a complement. Just like we borrow from Jane Yolan, you borrowed from Jonathan.” The logic was clear – we borrow words and ideas from published writers, so why not borrow them from each other? After all, we were writers too. Again, this communal approach to writing encouraged each of us to see ourselves individually as writers. As Miss Torres said in the interview about Jonathan, “That was a big moment for him, when he decided, ‘Oh, I’m a writer too.’”

Sharing time also contributed to our sense of writing community. During the share sessions, we received periodic updates on the progress of each others’ work. We knew what everybody else was working on in their stories, and we understood each others’ strengths and weaknesses as writers. In her journal, Miss Torres records a share session about Wesley, who had been struggling to come up with an ending to his piece. She writes, “Yesterday, Wesley shared his completed tornado story. He began his turn by saying, ‘I have an ending for my tornado story.’ The class responded in unison with a happy sigh.” As this entry suggests, the class not only knew where Wesley was in his piece, but they were rooting for him as a writer, encouraging him to press on through his challenges. This type of affirmation, which only occurs in a writing community, goes a long way in securing individual writing identities.

**Evidence of Strong Writing Identities**

Miss Torres’ writing workshop fostered writing identity through its tone, structure, literature-rich environment, and community focus. There are many other factors, though, in how students connect themselves with writing. Considering myself, I cannot deny that my own identity with writing was influenced by my part in the
production of “One Child’s View.” In May of that year, shortly after making the video, Miss Torres asked the class to write an essay about how they felt about writing. For mine, I essentially re-wrote my introduction to the video, substituting “I” for “we” and ending with, “I am a writing student.” The narrative that I had told about myself in the video had obviously taken hold and begun to define how I saw myself and writing. Yet, the responses of the other students in my class to the same question betray a near universal connection with writing that can only be attributed to the influence of the writing workshop on their lives. Here are just a few of the answers students gave (some punctuation added for readability):

- “Writing to me makes me as happy as a blue jay. It helps us develop as writers. We have writing time because it helps us be great writers...Everyone in our class is a writer, even Miss Torres.”
- “I am a shy writer but I am a writing kind of kid and so is my class.”
- “To me writing is fun but I don’t know why. My style of writing is write about what happening. that’s why I like writing.”
- “We write about things of what we know about. Sometimes we even write things about people. I think all of my class are good writers.”

None of the 16 student responses were negative toward writing, and nearly all of them conveyed a genuine enjoyment for writing.

For students to think writing “fun” is rare in assignment-based instruction. In a chapter entitled “Tap the energy to write,” Calkins (1986) writes, “We, in schools, set up roadblocks to stifle the natural and enduring reasons for writing, and then we complain that our students don’t want to write” (p. 4). Requiring students to fill in worksheets, or
to write five-paragraph essays about their favorite movie, to be handed in, graded, and returned marked with grammar errors, is to deprive students of the “natural” reason for writing – to understand themselves and their world (Calkins, 1986, p. 3). As we have seen, the writing workshop is uniquely designed to pique students’ interest in and involvement with writing. Students don’t just learn to write, they learn to be writers, and that is what makes all the difference.

My Writing Identity beyond Second Grade

After second grade, my experiences with the writing workshop tapered off. Third and fourth grade were consumed by FCAT practice, writing five-paragraph essays with assigned topics and 45-minute deadlines. I hated it. I was convinced that my writing ability was dissipating with mechanical essays and pointless assignments. In the summer after my fourth grade year, encouraged by my teachers and spurred on by my desire to maintain my love for writing, I applied to the Poynter Institute’s Writers Camp. That summer was like being back in second grade. Based on the principles of the writing workshop, the camp emphasizes the writing process, student ownership of topic choice, and audience. Students learn through mini-lessons, writing activities, and conferences and are given plenty of time to write and share their writing. At the end of the camp, students publish one piece in a camp anthology and read another to an audience of campers and their families at a final ceremony. I was hooked. When my fifth grade teacher focused more on math than the writing workshop, I consoled myself by looking forward to camp that summer. I did so again when I got into sixth grade and the writing workshop had disappeared altogether, replaced with grammar and literature instruction punctuated with periodic writing assignments. I call seventh and eighth grade my “Dark
Ages,” when writing itself disappeared, replaced with Reed-Kellogg’s diagrams and vocabulary workbooks. But I kept going to Writers Camp, and I kept calling myself a writer.

In middle school, I formulated a desire to be a journalist and I pursued this diligently for the rest of my school career. In ninth grade, I was accepted as a member of the X-Press Team, a St. Petersburg Times project for upper elementary through high school grades in which students meet periodically with professional editors and write articles for a weekly section of the paper. In tenth, I participated in the Poynter Institute’s yearlong high school program, a two-week summer camp followed by monthly meetings in which we heard from a variety of professional journalists. I also wrote and edited for my high school newspaper. Once in college, however, my goals changed. Although I will graduate with a minor in journalism, I hope to teach English, to pass on the legacy of the educators in my life and to give my students the appreciation for writing that I gained from the writing workshop.

**Concluding Analysis**

At this point, an important question needs to be asked. Was I a special case? Was I part of a subset of the classroom populace that took to writing, while the other students did not? In other words, will some types of students benefit more from the writing workshop than others? Lensmire (2001) argues that popular students and students from higher social classes thrive in the freedom of a writing workshop, whereas outsiders tend to feel uncomfortable sharing their writing or working with certain peers. He relates an interview with a student who hesitated to share her work with the class. When asked why she felt uncomfortable when other students did not, she pointed out that
“they have lots of friends” (p. 111). Lensmire writes, “Students, especially unpopular students, felt there were serious risks involved in writing for peer audiences – risks to their sense of self, to what they valued and cared about, and to their social standing in relation to others” (p. 110). Along a similar vein, McCarthey (2001) notes that evaluations of a student by parents, teachers, and peers impact a student’s self perception in relation to literacy and help construct student’s identities. A student who is generally acknowledged as a good reader or writer, like I was, is apt to accept that identity and pursue those activities on their own. Researchers also suggest that cultural views of literacy influence how an individual relates to reading and writing (McCarthey, 2001).

I do not argue that the writing workshop will always produce strong connection with writing. I do, however, think that the writing workshop provides a supportive environment for all types of students as they form literacy identities, because the focus of the workshop is on writers, not products. Evans’ (1993) study reveals that in assignment-based instruction students see reading and writing as “demonstrations of what they (know) for the purpose of pleasing the teacher and getting high grades” (as cited in McCarthy, 2001, p. 122). Students who do not excel in these goals perceive themselves as failures and begin avoiding writing and reading altogether. In contrast, the goals in a writing workshop revolve around individual writers and their growth. The workshop is not so much focused on what the children produce as it is on the process that got them there and how they have grown and developed in that process. This “child-centered” approach allows each student writer to work at his or her own ability and pace (Szczepanski, 2003, p. 14). Ownership of their time, topics, and process motivates students to become independent learners, writing for “authentic purposes” rather than to
please the teacher or to receive a high grade (McCarthey, 2002, p. 20). I believe that the writing workshop can foster writing identity in any student. Because the writing workshop is modeled after the work of real authors and because it focuses on children as authors, it contains powerful potential to inspire students to pursue writing beyond the classroom and into their adult lives.

**Conclusion**

My second-grade desires to be a teacher and a writer are easy to understand in light of my love for the writing workshop, a place where students teach each other as part of a community of young authors. Those passions have not faded. Wood Ray (2001) writes, “That sense of self, that sense of being ‘one who writes’ that is nurtured in a writing workshop, is a hard thing to lose” (p. 40). I haven’t lost it, despite years of grammar workbooks and research papers. I still see myself as a writer. Why is that important? Why should we aim to instill writing identity in our students? Because it makes them lifelong learners. Rosaen (1993) identifies being “personally involved in and committed to learning” as a key quality of a learning community (p. 10). This quality expresses itself as a desire to go on learning. I believe that students who consider themselves writers will pursue writing and other literacy activities outside of the classroom setting. I pursued it in the Writers Camp and in all manner of other opportunities for me to write and learn about writing. As my testimony illustrates, writing identity gives students wings to fly far beyond where school could ever take them, far beyond what any teacher could ever teach them. This is the power of the writing workshop.
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