A case study of writing skills growth of three eighth-grade students in a writing workshop classroom

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A CASE STUDY OF WRITING SKILLS GROWTH OF THREE EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS IN A WRITING WORKSHOP CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

A Case Study of Writing Skills Growth of Three Eighth Grade Students in a Writing Workshop Classroom

by

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Writing samples were collected over an eight month period from three 8th grade students. Using these samples along with student-teacher conference notes and the results of a literacy interview, the writing growth of each student was analyzed. Each student shows development of strong writing skills and an ability to discuss this growth in an articulate manner using written samples to back up their claims. The areas of growth identified by the teacher/researcher did not necessarily match those identified by the students. This mismatch is partially a result of the ways in which each student hid or abdicated her role as the ultimate decision maker concerning her growth and writing. As a result, implications arise in regards to student skill acquisition, student identity formation as a writer, and the role of the teacher in the secondary workshop classroom.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During high school, my worst subject in school was, ironically, English. While my other grades were consistently high B’s and A’s, my English grades hovered around C’s. Nevertheless, I was a voracious reader and a writer. That never translated into success in the academic field.

That all changed during my freshman English class in college. It was taught by a graduate student, and he showed me what an English class could be. We read interesting books and discussed the ideas they contained. Our writing focused on defending our positions and thoughts. We spent lots of time talking about what we were reading, writing, and thinking. Everyone was involved. It was, for me, a revolutionary experience. This is the class that sent me into English education. I wanted other students to have the same experiences that I had in this class. No one deserved to have the type of experience that I had with high school English.

My classes in the university supported my thoughts. I was taught that English should be an active, thought-provoking class where students’ ideas were valued, that what a student thought was at least as important as his or her ability to use a period correctly. This approach resonated with me.
When my internship approached, I was excited to put into practice what I had learned. It was more difficult than the university told me it would be. How was I supposed to cover all of the “required” material and keep teaching the way I felt was best. Did I have the wrong approach? I had only been teaching for a matter of months so I didn’t have any experience to back me up one way or the other. My mentor teacher sympathized with me, but told me, “worksheets are the real world.”

With this new piece of information, I felt somehow relieved. I shifted my class so that it was much more traditional. The pressure was lifted. I had a direction again and I ran with it. A couple of months into this approach, I began to doubt myself again. It seemed that my classes were less exciting. We were covering more material but it didn’t feel like we were learning as much. My students didn’t seem engaged in the same way. I still felt like I had a good relationship with them, but they didn’t seem to be as involved in what was going on.

I began to question myself and my approach again. Was I making a difference? How could I make sure that I was reaching every student? Was my way of teaching effective? Were my students really learning? I still considered myself a reader and writer, yet I did few of the things that I asked my students to do. How could I reconcile that?

My questions were not answered that first year, and I transferred to another school in the district. My new school was a good fit for me in that many of the teachers were struggling with the same issues that I was. This school was involved in a state funded training/professional development program that focused on helping teachers implement a workshop approach in their classrooms. For the next four years, I used a modified
workshop approach. The class activities included a focus on reading and writing. The assignments reflected the types of things that I did as a reader and writer in my private life.

I enjoyed it. I felt more at home with this approach, but my doubts still nagged me. Was I really doing the best that I could for my students? Was there something I should be doing? How was I to address the pressure of test scores within my classroom? The amount of student-guided instruction did not lend itself well to a regulated instructional pattern. What was I to do?

Eventually, these questions led me to seek my Masters degree, first at the University of Utah and then at UNLV. The desire to have these questions answered is the primary reason I decided to write a thesis. I wanted to systematically look at my class and see if I was making a difference in the lives of these students and if they were learning to be better writers and readers.

Research Questions

Based on this interest, I looked at two questions during this study.

First, what progress did I see in my student’s writing? I felt that they were learning and growing, but could I document that in a rigorous examination of their work?

Second, did my students recognize growth in their own writing? And if so, how well could they point out and explain that growth? It seems that one characteristic of being adept at any skill is an ability to discuss one’s strengths and weaknesses. Could my students do that?
Theoretical Framework

Vygotskian influences on classroom design. The writing workshop classroom is designed around a constructivist approach that is based on Vygotsky’s work. According to Vygotsky (1986), learning is a process in which a learner gains new knowledge as it is mediated by someone with more experience and knowledge. In other words, learning does not happen to an individual outside of associations with others. Learning is an event entered into by at least two people. These two people then construct the sought after knowledge. In the process, the knowledge is changed in both as the learner individualizes it and the mediator, “expert other” reconceptualizes it. Additionally, learning is grounded in the collective (Wink & Putney, 2002). The result is a view of learning that emphasizes the social nature of learning and the malleability of knowledge.

Central to this conceptualization of knowledge is communication between members of the class (Faltis, 1996; Wink & Putney, 2002). However, it must be noted that there are factors, which influence this communication (Gee, 1996). Those forces may originate inside or outside of the classroom itself. In this approach, the classroom itself is a unique and powerful community with forces all its own (Goodman & Goodman, 1990). In this study, the focus will be on the forces originating inside of the classroom. From a Vygotskian perspective these forces may include but are not limited to interpersonal relationships between students and the way the teacher position himself or herself in relation to the students in the class.

From a Vygotskian perspective, student growth is incremental building upon what is already known. Therefore, care must be taken to activate that knowledge prior to learning. Also, a student will learn only as they operate within the zone of proximal
development (Vygotsky, 1978). This is the area between what a student can do
independently and what they can do with the mediating help of another person
(Vygotsky, 1986). As a result, the focus will be on the continuous development of the
participants as opposed to the achievement of some pre-determined “correctness.”

Adolescence is an especially vulnerable time when the emphasis placed on the
context of learning in Vygotsky’s work is perhaps most useful. During this period of life,
researchers suggest that not only are students gaining knowledge but also they are
gaining an identity. This identity formation can also be viewed through a Vygotskian
lens (Gee, 1996). In this case, the identity is seen as a piece of knowledge and is
malleable in that it is constantly under construction and in fact may be fragmented to
form more than one identity students can use to face a variety of challenges and situations
(Hynds, 1997; Branch & Boothe, 2002). Just as in knowledge construction, there are
numerous factors in the development of this identity.

The workshop approach to writing is designed to take advantage of the social
nature of learning (Graves, 1983; Romano, 1987). It is supposed to foster relationships
that carry little, if any, political tension in the student’s eyes. That way the students are
able to develop writing skills. Furthermore, the workshop approach allows for students
to take on the identity of a writer (Romano, 1987; Rief, 1992; Graves, 1983). Indeed the
formation of an identity as writer is one of the workshop’s main goals (Zemelman &
Daniels, 1988; Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Rief, 1992 ).
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Writing Process

Beginning in the late 1970’s, approaches to teaching writing began to shift away from approaches emphasizing the product of student writing to approaches emphasizing the processes students use to create those products (Sipe, 2001). This shift in thought was based on a view of writing as a process. The writing process, as it is called, takes many forms (Romano, 1987, 1995; Calkins & Harwayne, 1991). However, there are four basic stages in every model (Graves, 1983; Romano, 1987). In my class, we use the terms collecting, experimenting, polishing, and publishing to describe the steps in the writing process. Roughly these align with the four stages common to most approaches.

Collecting refers to what a writer does before actually writing. In other cases this is referred to as pre-writing or pre-drafting (Romano, 1987). I have chosen the word collecting to remind myself and my students of the need writers have to constantly be ‘collecting’ details and ideas from the world around them (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991; Lane, 1993).

After collecting, we turn our focus to experimenting. In other circles this stage is called the drafting or writing stage. The most important thing at this stage is “to get
words on paper--not necessarily the right words, but the first words” (Romano, 1987, p. 56). At this stage, we are not looking for correctness, but meaning-making (Graves, 1983; Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987). I use experimenting for this phase because I tell my students that we are only trying things on at this stage. We have something to say, but we aren’t sure how it will ‘look’. Audience begins to become more important during this phase.

Next, we take on the polishing of our work. More commonly, polishing is referred to as revising and editing (Romano, 1987). When this stage is addressed, the story (poem, essay, report) is basically complete (Lane, 1993). Now, we are looking to address two important concerns. First, placing our audience center stage, we make final revision decisions. These include individual word choice, transitions, and pacing. Second, we are looking to make our work as conventionally correct as is possible. I tell my students that at this stage we are not building a new wing on our house; we are only polishing everything so that it shines and sparkles. Because audience is so central to this stage of the writing process, this is where the notion of critical literacies emerges.

Finally, we look towards the publishing of our material. Publishing does not necessarily involve the formal publishing world. Instead, when we talk of publishing, we are referring to making the work known to the intended audience (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). There are several ways of doing this. In my class, we have a bulletin board in our class highlighting a student-author. Also, we have a class website where student work is posted and each quarter we put together a class anthology of each student’s best story from that quarter. In other cases, this might mean sending a letter to the newspaper or reading a poem to a friend.
It must be noted, though, that the writing process is not linear. Instead, it is recursive and circular (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991; Graves, 1983; Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Romano, 1987). Indeed, a person can actually be working in several different stages of the process at the same time (Romano, 1987).

**Workshop Approach**

Based on the view that writing is a process, writing teachers began re-thinking the pedagogy of teaching writing, to what is now known as the Writing Process approach (Sipes, 2001). The emphasis shifts from what a student produces to how a student produces. To put it another way, the end does not justify the means; instead, the means justify the end. The process is more important than the product (Bullock, 1998). The thought is that if students can work independently and strategically through the process of writing, then they will be able to produce writing when needed and for any purpose needed (Romano, 1987).

As a result, emphasis is taken from assigning and judging a product and, instead, is placed on teaching students strategies for dealing with common situations in writing (Lane, 1993; Spandel, 1990). According to Reither (1994), the goal is “to replace a prescriptive pedagogy . . . with a descriptive discipline” (p. 162). For example, a lesson in a writing process classroom might focus on how to come up with ideas for stories (not assigning an idea the students are to write about) or the when, why, and how of using dialogue to move a piece along (in place of a worksheet on dialogue). Research has shown that such an approach leads to students who are more able to independently
address problems that arise in their work and are more flexible in construction of knowledge (Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Pressley, 1994).

The Writing Process approach to teaching writing is also known as the workshop approach to teaching (Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). By using the workshop name, however, the focus is shifted from what is to be taught to how it is to be taught. The term workshop is used to connote a view of learning as actually practicing the craft as an artist would in his/her workshop (Graves, 1983). In practical terms, the workshop approach is best defined as an approach to teaching writing in which writing is viewed as a social, collaborative experience one must perform in order to learn.

Workshop classrooms come in all different styles and appearances. Hansen (1987) identified five main components which characterize workshop classrooms. While Hansen is most noted for her work in the elementary setting, similar trends can be seen in the work of many secondary proponents of the workshop approach (see Atwell, 1988; Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987 & 1995; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988), although the explanations are not as explicit because Hansen’s work is considered a standard for workshops on all levels of schooling. As a result, these five structures can be seen in workshop approaches proposed across levels: choice, time, response, structure, and community.

Choice simply means that a student is free to make choices. These choices may include exactly what types of literacy activity to be engaged in, the genre a piece of writing may take, or the method of responding to a book. Some proponents of the workshop model even advocate teaching “alternate grammars” in order to develop stronger, more powerful writers (Romano, 1995). None of these choices is mandatory for
one to implement the workshop approach; the specific choices given will vary depending on the teacher and students. However, when meaningful choices are given which allow students to express themselves without fear, student motivation and commitment increases (Guthrie et al., 1995; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In much of the elementary literature, this aspect is seen as paramount in importance. In the literature directed at secondary teachers, on the other hand, choice is seen more often as negotiable. Some experts recommend not allowing students total freedom in topics, genres, or timing; instead, they claim, used sparingly it is acceptable to define deadlines, genres, and topics in some cases (Romano, 1987; Atwell, 1998).

The second component of the workshop approach is time. Graves (1983) suggests that time to read and write is the greatest gift a teacher can give to students. However, limiting this component to mean simply time to read and write hinders both teachers and students. Students should have time to think, to reflect, and to discuss (Guthrie, 1996; Calkins, 1986; Romano, 1987). In fact, some secondary experts cite this as one of the most compelling benefits of the workshop approach (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). By allowing students time to do all of these things teachers allow students to develop a sense of ownership within the classroom, which will, in turn, increase their commitment to the class objectives (Atwell, 1987; Rief, 1992).

Next, the characteristic of response means that students must have the chance to respond to the work of others and to have others respond to their work. If we want our students to become writers, for example, we must give them what writers have-- an audience, not a teacher (Graves, 1983). Therefore, the object of assessment in a workshop classroom is to highlight what a student can do, rather than focus on the
deficiencies in a student’s abilities but to (Rief, 1992). By identifying what a student already can do, the teacher is then in position to build on a student’s knowledge and present information, which will be at an appropriate level to optimize student learning. This view is in harmony with the guidelines for assessment established by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) (1994). While grading is necessary in our school system, we want our teaching to transcend our walls. We want our students to become life-long readers and writers (Calkins, 1986; Romano, 1987). The only way to do that is to allow their work to reach outside of just the school environment. The implications of this position are numerous. To mention just two of them, we must find ways to publish our students’ writing to a broader audience than we can find just within our walls and to invite our students’ families into a classroom both physically and emotionally (Faltis, 1997). These two ways are key to helping our students buy into the type of literacy we are advocating. This connection is essential to school success (Maeroff, 1998).

Next, the workshop approach classroom is filled with scaffolding. Instructional scaffolds are grounded in the work of Jerome Bruner. Bruner envisioned the instruction that takes place in the area a student is not independently proficient as scaffolding. In other words, the purpose of instruction in this area is to give the student as much help as they need to reach a higher level; teachers are to act as scaffolds for the student, to prop up the student to do the job he or she has chosen. The implication is that the teacher and students become collaborators. The use of scaffolding is supported by researchers who advocate the use of the workshop approach with students who are learning English as a second language (Au, 1997; Peyton, Jones, Vincent, & Greenblatt, 1994; Watts-Taffe &
Truscott, 2000) as well as with those who are simply struggling to learn English as their first language (Collins & Collins, 1996; Roller, 1996; Rothenberg & Watts, 2000; Taylor & Neshelm, 2000; Williams, 2001).

Finally, workshop classrooms are to have community. By community, Hansen is referring to a sense of unity and belonging. The workshop classroom should be a place where students feel accepted and in which they feel a vested interest (Graves, 1983). This community seems to emerge largely as a result of the first four components, but its presence is crucial to the ultimate success of a workshop classroom (Graves, 1994). For the adolescent student, this sense of community is the ultimate benefit and attraction of the workshop approach. During this time of life, identity formation is the main focus of many students, and writing in the midst of a supportive community provides adolescents with the ultimate opportunity to work out the conflicts and tensions of this process (Graham, 1999; Rief, 1992; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988).

Despite the promises of the workshop approach, it is conspicuously absent on the secondary level. As a result, there is a hole in the professional literature concerning the workshop approach and the secondary class. The bulk of the literature available in this arena addresses only the classroom itself. Little attention is paid in the literature to the individual learner in this type of classroom. This study, then, is an attempt to begin addressing this problem.

Role of the Teacher

Within a workshop approach to teaching, the role of the teacher has been reconceptualized (Haggemann, 2003). The most common metaphor used in the
workshop classroom is that of teacher as facilitator (Elliot & Pillay, 2001; Romano, 1987; Haggeman, 2003). Other titles include model (Graves, 1984) and mentor (Rief, 1992). In these metaphors the emphasis is on the teacher’s responsibility to support a student’s self-directed learning within the social context of a classroom (Graves, 1984). Proponents of this new view speak in metaphorical terms about learners “budding” or “unfolding” (Sipe, 2001). The emphasis is on helping the student’s abilities unfold at their own pace.

Sipe (2001) has criticized metaphors such as these, referring to them as “traps rather than heuristic guides” (p. 272; see also Graves 1984 for a discussion of this phenomenon). Accordingly, in some classrooms the pendulum has swung away from the teacher dominated classroom to the classroom almost totally devoid of a teacher’s intellectual, emotional, or social presence (Hagemann, 2003; Atwell, 1998). As criticisms of this new extreme became more apparent, however, researchers began to rethink this hands off position (Hagemann, 2003; Drayton & Falk, 2001). Some proponents of the workshop approach began speaking out about the need for the teacher to be in the room in all ways with the students. Graves (1993) said that more direct instruction was needed with children than he had previously claimed. Similarly, Atwell (1998) revised her classic In the Middle to give more emphasis to the need that teachers have to share their expertise with their students.

Still, the teacher’s role is not to determine a rigid agenda of material to cover and have the class march lock-step into academia. Instead, teachers are to bring their interests and passions into the classroom (Atwell, 1998; Romano, 1987, 1995), to set appropriately high standards of conventional correctness (Atwell, 1998; Cazden, 1992; Delpit, 1995),
and to create an environment where students can grow (Graves, 1993; Calkins, 1986; Calkins & Harwayne, 1991). The number one reason for teachers to bring their passions and interests into the classroom is to model for the students the love of writing, thinking, and learning. According to Romano (1987), if we do not share this love and passion with them, we are undercutting the message we are trying to send to our students. After all, if we don’t actually enjoy writing, why should they? This loss would be the greatest loss of all (Romano, 1987). Atwell (1994) describes the lack of teacher presence as simply being a mirror in the classroom unable to do anything but reflect the light the students bring in. This does little to stimulate student growth or learning.

The perceived lack of rigid standards in the areas of spelling and grammar was one of the first areas that critics addressed. Delpit (1995) says that many workshop teachers give the impression that there are no standards for the mechanics of writing. Despite the promise of the workshop, this is a serious disservice to our students, especially those who come from backgrounds where standard English is not the dominant form of discourse (Delpit, 1995; Gee, 1996). Albright (1997) refers to this lack of strictness as “backing out of the room.” Again, this shift does not imply a teacher run dictatorship. Instead, the teacher needs to make clear the expectations of his or her students and while certain basic requirements may be uniform throughout the class, the teacher still works individually with each student to discover what needs to be addressed in the area of mechanics and how best to do it (Rief, 1992; Atwell, 1998).

**Student Learning**

The shift to viewing writing as a process not only affected the specific pedagogy of teaching writing, but it also affected more general views on learning itself. Harste,
Short, and Burke (1988) propose a cyclical model for learning, the “Authoring Cycle”, based on the writing process (See Figure 1). By conceptualizing the process as a cycle, Harste et al. underscore the primary differences between this approach and the traditional, transmission model of teaching. In this approach, everything a student learns is informed and influenced by what they have previously learned as well as other political and cultural tensions in the specific context of learning. Traditional, transmission modes of teaching do not account for this prior knowledge. Also, in traditional approaches instruction leads to a certain point, usually the test, after which that line of thought is abandoned and a new one taken up. This cyclical approach to learning mirrors much

Figure 1. The Authoring Cycle

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more closely the way learning takes place out of school by using the newly acquired knowledge to influence the direction of new avenues of exploration.

In the cyclical approach of Harste et al., writing is not only a vehicle for communicating ideas but also for exploring and learning about them. Similarly, numerous opportunities are made for collaborative learning and consultation. These interactions occur between the student and peers as well as between the student and “experts” and, thus, maintain the notion that there are political, cultural, and social tensions at work in the class. Finally, the cycle ends with the student having an opportunity to celebrate what he/she has done as well as to reflect on what has been learned. Both situations allow for increased notions of self-efficacy. The entire process is designed to lead students to become independent thinkers (Moss, 2000).

Vygotskian ties. The ideas about learning implied in Harste, Short, and Burke’s cyclical model are supported by much of what Vygotsky theorizes. While Vygotsky’s most commonly known contribution to learning theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), other aspects of his theory—namely the social nature of learning and the notion of knowledge co-construction—figure prominently in the approach Harste et al. (1988) are advocating.

Vygotsky’s notion of ZPD says that for each person there is a certain zone or area where instruction is effective (Vygotsky, 1986). If instruction is too advanced, the students will become frustrated; if it is too low and the student will not progress and may, in fact, become bored and/or resistant. The ZPD is defined as the area between what a person can do independently and what she can do with help of a more competent peer. This is the area in which students attempt to make sense of any new information.
presented to them. Thus, teaching must occur at this level if we want our instructional practices to have long lasting effects (Newman, Griffin, & Cole as cited in Bliss & Askew, 1996). In fact, this notion leads directly to the concept of scaffolding mentioned earlier. The instruction that takes place here is the social instruction mediated by ‘experts’ and peers, which lies at the heart of Harste et al.’s (1988) cyclical model of learning.

Unfortunately, during the adolescent years, this zone can be especially difficult to identify due to the wide range of development characteristic of this age (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). If anything this disparity makes it more important to identify a student’s individual ZPD at this stage of his/her education.

The fact that the ZPD’s upper level is measured by what a person can do in collaboration with a peer underscores the idea that learning is ultimately a social act. A learner does not learn without a peer to mediate the practice being learned. This mediator may be anyone-- even the author of a book. The mediator can show the learner how something is done or provide the learner with strategies to aid in their successful completion of the task. Although this is an area of some controversy, there are those who would argue that this is one area that approaches to adolescent literacy development have neglected. Booth (2001), for example, says that we must make reading and writing “socially constructed events if we want to promote literacy development in young people” (p. 8).

As people collaborate and learn from each other, a piece of knowledge will shift from existing outside of the learner ability (and, hence, requiring self-talk to monitor) to having been internalized (and, now, being monitored through inner speech). During this
process, the learner personalizes the information and it becomes 'theirs'. This act subtly changes the original practice (Bliss & Askew, 1996). Additionally, Vygotsky (1986) says that the process of teaching something causes the teacher to re-conceptualize the idea differently. As a result, the original practice has been co-constructed in a new way. Thus, each piece of knowledge and every act are constantly being re-constructed (and deconstructed). It is this continual re(de)construction that not only teaches students but also motivates them (Newman, Griffin, & Cole as cited in Bliss & Askew, 1996). This pattern of knowledge construction and re-construction has echoes of the Harste et al.'s authoring cycle.

While Vygotsky holds significant weight in the educational dialogues of today, not all readings of Vygotsky are alike. Cazden (1996) has identified three main readings of Vygotsky prevalent in current literacy instruction practices. An examination of each of these will help establish the structure inherent in the ultimate model proposed as well as indicate the ways in which students will be expected to react in the classroom setting.

The first reading is primarily based on Vygotsky’s notion of play and its role in learning, sometimes called spontaneous learning. This view holds that any direct instruction is inappropriate. Advocates of this reading claim that, “any attempt by well-meaning adults to make the rules explicit [direct instruction] can actually inhibit learning” (Goodman & Goodman, 1990, p. 233). In this reading the teacher is merely an example or model, and the student is responsible for choosing from what is shown, what to learn.

The second reading Cazden identifies is the polar opposite. This reading focuses on Vygotsky’s discussion of school instruction. Here the teacher’s job is direct
instruction. In this reading, though, the teacher is responsible for identifying a student’s ZPD and ensuring that instruction falls in that area. This reading incorporates Bruner’s construct of instructional scaffolds into its reading of Vygotsky.

Finally, the third reading accepts the Vygotskian notion of social learning. However, this reading stresses that all social interaction is not equal. Instead, there are political, social, cultural, and historical forces at work that can impact the effectiveness of any direct instruction. The implication of this reading of Vygotsky is that learning can be resisted as well as internalized. An example of this type of thinking is Krashen’s (1982) notion of the “affective filter”. In Krashen’s conceptualization all education, indeed all experiences, is screened through a filter made up of political, cultural, and social forces. Only certain things will make it through this filter. Those are the only things that will be learned. Thus, we must do all we can to insure that our instruction will pass as easily as possible through this filter. Similarly, this reading of Vygotsky brings in the notion of critical literacy.

Cazden concludes by saying that we need to integrate the three readings to create a new more powerful theory of learning. I would argue, however, that the first two readings fit neatly within the third perspective. If we acknowledge that there are forces at work in our classrooms which will impact the effectiveness of our instruction, this it is only logical to conclude that in certain situations a student would not benefit from any direct instruction and in others a more traditional, transmission approach to teaching would be appropriate.

This collapsing of readings is perhaps easier to understand if we view all learning as following Gee’s (1996) notions of acquisition and learning. Acquisition is similar to
Cazden’s (1996) first reading of Vygotsky in that says that some learners need time to just observe and experience a skill or social practice. According to Gee (1996), this time is usually in the initial stages of learning a new set of social practices. By simply observing and experiencing, a learner can gain some political clout in terms of his/her ability to ask questions and to understand explanations. Before this, a student’s questions may lack clarity, and the student may not have the proper background knowledge or schema, which will allow him or her to understand the answers. Also, if the person being observed is the teacher and is using the desired skills, he or she gains credibility in the student’s eyes (Allen & Gonzales, 1998). Following a period of acquisition, Gee’s concept of learning kicks in. At this point, a student is in a position to gain specific knowledge necessary to function in the set of social practices for her new community. Still, the periods of learning will be interspersed with periods of acquisition.

Relating this back to the last reading Cazden identifies, then, demonstrates that there is room in the classroom for the Vygotskian notions of play and of school learning. In fact, both are necessary if we are to fully integrate our students into the “mainstream literacy” (Gee, 1996) that so many will need for success in the professional world. Additionally, this reading, in order to completely incorporate both acquisition and learning, brings Vygotsky’s mandate that to learn literacy skills, students must be engaged in personally meaningful literacy activities.

*Expectations in student learning.* A teacher operating from a Vygotskian perspective would expect a learner to grow as they see skills modeled in real uses (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Romano, 1987). Furthermore, this skill acquisition would be in response to what the learner needs in order to accomplish self-chosen tasks. The
skills would be learned to meet needs, instead of the skills being the end of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Carroll as cited in Cazden, 1992). As a result, the teacher would not be surprised to see each student in his or her class learning different skills at the same time.

In the process of learning these skills to create and make meaning, the student will seek more skills in order to create new products. This new knowledge will be internalized as it is used individually and shared publicly (Cazden, 1992). Internalization will subtly change the knowledge as it is personalized to meet the needs and prior knowledge level of the student (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) and allow the knowledge to take new forms in those who share their expertise with the student.

*Student identity formation.* The explicit goal of the workshop approach is to help students become writers (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1982). The idea is that by organizing the writing classroom around the principles that real writers use, students will identify themselves as writers. Almost as if the environment will lead directly to the identity. However, research shows that identity is more complex than that (Hynds, 1997; Branch & Boothe, 2002). While it is possible for an individual to choose an identity for another person and have them accept it (usually because the one making the choice is in a position of political or cultural authority), this can be detrimental and, indeed, is not as prevalent as once thought (Branch & Boothe, 2002).

In fact, some researchers say that identity formation can take place on many levels at the same time and multiple identities are formed to meet a multitude of situations (Hynds, 1997). Then, using these identities as a basis, students attempt to choose the vocabulary and syntax that will best serve their purpose in a given situation (Gee, 1996).
At times, these efforts are stymied due to the adolescent’s lack of political power and or cultural knowledge (ibid).

In conclusion, viewing writing as a process led directly to new models of learning that emphasized the cyclical, continuous nature of real world knowledge acquisition. These models, characterized by Harste et al.’s work, contain Vygotskian learning principles such as social learning, scaffolded learning, and co-construction of knowledge. By acknowledging political, historical, and cultural influences, these models become fluid and dynamic. Following these models students gain skills they see modeled in the work of others at a level consistent with their previous learning. In these cases, it is expected that the knowledge base will subtly shift to meet the needs and prior knowledge levels of the learner and that in the process of gaining this knowledge new identities will be formed.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Setting

*Thomas Jefferson Middle School.* The year of the study was the first year of Thomas Jefferson Middle School. Although, it was built to alleviate crowding in three other middle schools, the student population the year of the study was about 150 students more than the school was designed to house.

The school is attractive and spacious. The basic floor plan allows for each grade in the school (sixth, seventh, and eighth) to have its own area. The only exceptions to this are Physical Education classes and electives such as music or art classes. Despite being new, the school suffered from some of the stereotypical problems facing urban schools, namely gang problems and low-test scores.

The school draws not only from the area in which it sits but it also draws from a section of town up to five miles away. Between the school and the farthest area runs a major interstate effectively cutting the cachement area into two parts. The area where the school itself sits is the home turf of a gang associated with the Bloods. The area on the other side of the highway is home to a rival gang. As a result, the year was marred by several fights and almost constant tension stemming from this problem.
Academically, the school faced challenges from the outset. The majority of the students came from Samuel Smith Junior High School. Samuel Smith was the only Junior High in the district that made the “needs improvement” list the previous year. This list is made up of schools that have 40% or more of their students in the bottom quartile on national standardized tests in four areas: math, science, reading, and language arts. Additionally, Samuel Smith was being turned over to a private company to run and so at the last minute all of their special education students were transferred to Jefferson based on a contractual agreement between the district and the company.

In its first year Thomas Jefferson had over 40% of its students in the bottom quartile on three of the four measured areas. Over 39% of the students scored in the bottom quartile on the reading portion of the test, which was just enough to keep Thomas Jefferson off the “needs improvement” list.

Not all of the difficulties faced during Jefferson’s first year were stereotypical or expected. During the course of the study, the nation was dealt a blow by the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Beyond the shock and fear felt by many people across the country, many of the students at Thomas Jefferson had parents who were in the military as a profession. A number of these parents were called to foreign lands during the aftermath. As a result, there was a noticeable stir among some of the students comparing family situations in the time following this disaster. Interestingly, very few students and none in the study ever wrote about the events or what they meant in their lives outside of their journals.
In the face of these challenges, though, the students remained essentially students. They were an upbeat, lively group who had opinions on almost every topic under the sun and were not afraid to share them with anyone.

*My classroom.* The three students who served as participants in this study were in my fourth period class. This was the class immediately following lunch. On the whole, the students in this class were noisy and outgoing and full of energy every day. The result was a class that was often funny and upbeat. Jokes were commonplace and humor was the order of the day.

Academically fourth period took longer to catch fire than the other classes. However, when the fire was lit it was a bonfire. Sensing a lack of engagement in the students, I tried a variety of strategies to engage them—group work, oral activities, etc. After about a month of the same stale writing, I read an Edgar Allen Poe story to the class as it was about Halloween. At the end of the story, a debate broke out on why the character was insane. All of the students took a side and with only a few disturbances, the class spent about twenty minutes talking about the story and its effect on them. In fact, many of them were talking about it as they left. Trying to build on this, I found other stories that did not really end or had an ironic ending that required the students to infer some piece of information or event. Reading these aloud to the class caused more involvement and engagement. In fact, the class gave these types of stories a name—hanging endings, because they leave you hanging. For the next month or so hanging endings became the order of the day in some form. Beginning with these stories, the class came alive. There was a new excitement to be in class.
At first, most of the students tried to follow the pattern of the hanging endings in their own writing. Gradually, however, the students moved on to other types of writing. Still, hanging endings became the most common type of writing in the class and the class remained excited.

This event marked a jump in writing development in the participants of the study. While it is impossible to draw conclusions about the rest of the class, it is likely that similar results would be seen in their developmental time line.

Participants

Selection. The main focus of this study was to investigate the literacy learning of "average" eighth-grade students in a particular classroom. All subjects came from the group of students assigned to my English 8 classes. There were 121 students assigned to my four English 8 classes when the initial assessments were made. The assignment to my classes was considered to be random. Therefore, no other steps were taken to ensure a random selection of subjects.

In order to try and get students who were "average" two measurements, an attitude survey and a writing sample, were chosen. First, all students took the Writer Self-Perception Scale writing attitude survey (Bottomley, Henk, & Melnick, 1998; for complete text see Appendix A). The purpose of this writing survey was to measure students' self perceived competencies about writing. The survey has a 38 item likert scale. Each answer was assigned a point value between one (strongly disagree) and five (strongly agree), and each student’s total score was derived. Two student’s surveys were thrown out because it was assumed that their answers did not reflect valid data as they
answered the same on all forty items and were done within moments of beginning. The range of scores between 100 and 120 were decided to be representative of most students based on an examination of the range of scores. As a result, students scoring below 100 or above 120 were excluded from possible inclusion in the study.

The second measurement was a two page writing sample. The students were instructed to write a two-page story. No more direction was given regarding topic or form. The students were told that this piece would help me know where their skills were at the beginning of the year and were encouraged to do their best. The students had two days in class to complete the assignment, but were allowed to continue working on it at home for longer if they so wished. No student chose to keep it longer than two days.

These pieces were then graded using the four trait writing model adopted by the state of Nevada for use in the eighth-grade writing proficiency tests. This scoring system was chosen because I am a trained grader in this system of scoring and it was assumed that the students would be familiar with it as there is a big focus on it district-wide in junior high English classes. These scores were examined and it was determined that most students scored between ten and fourteen. Therefore, students outside of this range were not considered for inclusion in the study.

At this point, only sixteen students remained who fit both criteria for inclusion in the study. Christina, Fernando, Julie, Maria, and Scott were chosen to be in the study because they were all from the same class period. No other class period had more than four students eligible at this point. Also, consideration was given to choosing three of one gender and two of another. Three girls were chosen because there were nine girls in the group of sixteen as opposed to only seven boys. About halfway through the study,
Scott was expelled and just before the end, Fernando’s parents rescinded their permission for him to participate. As a result, only Christina, Julie, and Maria were left in the study.

The participants. Each of the subjects had a unique character that was reflected in her writing and its development. Maria was the quietest student in any class, yet one of the funniest. She sat in the back of the room and always did her work. Despite being quiet, Maria was almost always found in the middle of a large group of girls between classes and before and after school. Maria is one of the few students I was aware of who had no significant problems with another student during the course of the year.

Maria was a bit of a perfectionist, which impacted her learning. Her goal from the first day of school was to have straight A’s for the entire year, a goal she achieved. Still, it was a goal that did not come easily to her. She put in a lot of time and effort to make sure that every grade was an A.

Julie was perhaps the only student more driven than Maria. Unfortunately, Julie’s drive did not reach the classroom. Julie’s goals were all related to her basketball. Still, Julie showed a surprising understanding of how athletics and academics mix. She chose not to play basketball for the school, despite being generally recognized as easily the best girl player in school and probably better than 2/3 of the boys’ team as well. She said that she didn’t play because school was difficult for her (she has a learning difficulty) and so she wanted to focus on school during her eighth-grade year so she would be able to academically perform in high school and play ball there.

Perhaps Julie’s learning difficulty taught her this focus. In the middle of the study, Julie was suddenly pulled out of my class to go to a resource English class. She fought the move but was overridden. In her new class, she refused to talk. She did all of
her work well, but did not open her mouth to participate in class or to communicate with the other students. Everyday she went to the counselor asking for a transfer back. Within two weeks, she was back in my class.

Christina was like Maria in that she was quiet, but her laughter came easier and she was more talkative outside of class. Christina was, in her own words, a “very diverse person”. She did not fit any stereotype. She loved Boy Bands and Professional Wrestling. She thinks it would be fun to be from England so she calls her mom “mum” and uses words that, to her, sound more British. Christina was the most involved of any of the subjects in the stereotypical teen-age girl life. She was the only girl to speak of boyfriends. Christina’s strength may have been her attention to detail. All of her work was neat and well done, and her notebook was always perfectly organized.

The three girls did not appear to have any real connection to each other outside of the classroom. Christina and Maria were friendly towards each other but seemed to limit their conversations to the times they sat near each other.

Data Collection

Writing Pieces. During the course of the study, August 25, 2001 to April 11, 2002, each student was asked to complete a minimum of three “published” writing pieces per nine week grading period. Additionally, extra pieces could be turned in. In the case that additional pieces were turned in, they were used as part of the written evidence. Finally, at the end of each nine week grading period, each student was to compile a portfolio demonstrating her best work from that year. In conjunction with the portfolios students wrote a self-reflection piece which focused on their perceptions of their writing
skills. Also, each student kept a daily journal. During this time, each student completed a minimum of nine "published" pieces of writing and four self-reflection pieces.

The participants were told that at the end of the study they could go through their work and remove any pieces that they did not want to be part of the study and if they wanted to keep a copy of a particular story that I would make a photocopy for my research and they could have the original. Only one girl, Maria, chose to remove any of her work from the study and that was only journal.

Student-teacher conferences. Formal conferences were conducted approximately once every two or three weeks with the participants, although brief informal conferences were held much more often. The purpose of these conferences was to help me know what each student was focusing on in their writing. This information, then, would help form the basis of mini-lessons and class discussions. During an interview, notes were kept detailing the subjects covered in talking with the student, insightful comments made by the participants, and my observations about the student's writing. During the course of the year, each participant had a minimum of 14 student-teacher conferences.

Literacy Interviews. The literacy interviews lasted between fifteen and twenty-five minutes. The set of questions formulated from conference notes was individual to each student and included five to eight questions (See Appendix B). Other questions were asked to seek feedback, clarification, or support based on the answers given. Not all of the questions I drew up initially were asked. The students were advised beforehand that questions would be asked concerning how they thought the year had gone and how they had grown as a writer. I explained that they should come prepared to use their writing to back up any claims they made about skill acquisition or development.
Data Analysis

Case study. To document the findings from my research I chose a case study approach. Yin (1994) defines a case study as, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 13). In other words, a case study is used to look at an experience as it happens and in the context it happens. In fact, a prime consideration in case study research is situating the findings in the context the events happened. According to Merriam (2001) a case study approach is chosen “because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (p. 28-29). This means that an either/or approach is not taken, rather the researcher is trying to understand how something happens in a given context.

In my case, I chose a case study approach because I wanted to discover if my students were progressing and, because I assumed they were, how this progress was happening. Furthermore, I wanted to see how I could view this growth and how the students themselves viewed this growth. The case study approach to research allowed me the most ability to look at my student’s growth in the context of the my classroom.

Researcher analysis. In order to answer the first research question, I examined the body of work of each participant to look for areas of significant growth. Based on what I saw I chose one area to focus on. This was the area that I felt experienced the greatest amount of growth during the study. Generally, this skill is one that showed steady improvement over the course of the year; however, in one case, the skill seemed to emerge from nowhere with proficiency suddenly during the middle of the year. Then, I examined each piece of writing during the year for evidence or lack of evidence of the skill I had identified.
Furthermore, I went back and looked at the conference notes from the year to identify patterns of development and concern. This was done to help me look at each participant’s cognition of their own growth. Based on these two factors, I wrote the literacy interview questions for each student. During the interview I sought to find out if the participant was aware of her growth in that particular area and was able to discuss the ways in which their writing skills increased.

Student analysis. The second research question is in regards to the participants' ability to recognize growth in their own work. In this case, the literacy interview served as the beginning source of information. In preparation for the literacy interview, the last self-reflection piece asked the students to identify the area of greatest improvement in their writing. A question was designed for the literacy interview to address this answer. Prior to the literacy interview, each participant was advised that she would be asked to defend her position using examples of her own writing, a skill that had been discussed and practiced by the entire class. As a result, the participants were able to practice their answers beforehand, if they wished.

During the interview, notations were made as to the pieces and sections that each participant used to defend her position. When a participant simply referred to a whole piece as evidence of skill acquisition, I asked her to clarify by pointing out exactly where in that piece the skill was most evident or what section of the piece was most indicative of what we were discussing. Each participant did this ably and without hesitation, although few of the selections seemed to be pre-determined.

After the interview, I examined each participant’s work again in order to find evidence to back up what they had said in their interviews. Special emphasis was put on
examining those pieces that each participant had used as evidence. In the writing of this section of the analysis, special attention was paid to doing so through the lens of the participants themselves.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

In presenting the findings of this study, I will provide a section for each participant. Each of these sections will then be divided into two parts. The first part, designed to address the first research question, is labeled “Researcher Analysis.” In this section, I have selected one area of significant growth based on an overall study of each student’s writing. Also, discussed in this section are mini-lessons, class discussion, and other class influences that may have impacted the development of this skill. The skill discussed is different for each student (See Table W-1 for an outline of the topics to be covered).

The second part of each student’s section, labeled “Student Analysis”, is an explanation of the student’s viewpoint and words about her writing. This part is designed to address the second research question. The writing skill addressed in this section is the skill that each student identified in her final written self-reflection as her area of greatest growth over the course of the school year. Every effort is made in both sections to maintain the voice of the students. Therefore, corrections have been made to grammar and spelling only in those cases where it was felt that understanding would suffer.
Table W-1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing skills discussed in relation to each student.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reason for this organization is to attempt to provide the reader with as complete a picture as possible of each subject as a writer. Following the three sections dedicated to each subject will be a final section that addresses issues arising in the work of two or more students.

Maria

Researcher analysis. The area of growth in Maria’s writing that struck me as most significant is her use of dialogue. Looking at Table M-1 the explosion in Maria’s use of dialogue is evident. Class discussion of dialogue was abundant. During September, October, November, and December, several class periods were spent looking at models, discussing how dialogue works in stories, and playing games to reinforce the mechanics of dialogue.

In discussing the development of Maria’s use of dialogue, reference will be made to the number of lines of dialogue written. A line of dialogue in this case is defined as the number of text lines in the original document as written by Maria. All of her
documents with the exception of “Lost in the Forest” are handwritten by her. As a result, the spacing is roughly the same. In the case of her typed story, the number of lines would increase significantly, but for purposes of this study that does not matter. The results still stand. Another implication of this method of counting is that in this piece due to the pieces being typed, included samples may not match up with the count mentioned in the study.

Through all of the class work on dialogue, though, Maria’s published pieces showed no evidence of any real dialogue use. Before the Christmas break, little more than one percent of Maria’s “published” lines take the form of dialogue. After this point, over one-fourth of her “published” lines come in the form of dialogue. In fact, if the

Table M-1

Maria’s use of dialogue in her writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lines—story</th>
<th>Lines—dialogue</th>
<th>Lines—paraphrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zacatecas, Mexico</td>
<td>Sep. 3</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rattlesnake</td>
<td>Sep. 20</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fair</td>
<td>Sep. 27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Aunt and Uncle</td>
<td>Oct. 10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary’s best friend</td>
<td>Nov. 11</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Dec. 3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary’s best friend (revised)</td>
<td>Dec. 12</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George is missing</td>
<td>Jan. 11</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost in the Forest</td>
<td>Jan. 16</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cute boy</td>
<td>Feb. 27</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
January 11th piece, which contains no lines of dialogue, is eliminated, then over thirty-five percent of Maria's writing from January 16th on is dialogue (see Table M-1 for an examination of dialogue usage in all ten of Maria's published pieces).

During a conference in early February, I asked Maria about the increase in dialogue in her stories and she explained that it was because she now felt comfortable using dialogue to move her story along. However, there is no evidence that she was ever practicing dialogue. In fact, the written record is almost bare. The one exception is in Maria's piece dated September 20th. This piece has three lines of dialogue.

"Stay calm, Jissel. Don't move," said my mom. "Jissel, I will distract the snake, while you go and ask for help."

"But Mom," I said.

"Run."

These three lines move the story line along, but they neither tell us much about the characters nor are they integral to the story development. In "Lost in the Forest", dated January 16, the dialogue is integral to the story and central to the character development.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"I'm getting out the fishing gear so we can catch our lunch."

"Dad, I think you should go ahead and catch your lunch if you want to.

I'll go get something else to eat."

"Go ahead, Carlos."
“Dad, where’s the food? I can’t find it, Dad.”

“I didn’t bring any, Carlos.”

“What! What are you thinking? You didn’t bring any food?”

Another good example of Maria’s ability to use dialogue effectively is her story “The Cute Boy”, dated February 27th.

She watched her sisters trying to give away clues about asking them out.

Marisela noticed he kept staring at her.

“Hi,” said Marisela.

“Hey,” he said.

“Sally, Mary, mom is calling you.”

“Tell her we’re busy,” said Sally.

“What’s your name?” he said.

“My name is Marisela. What’s yours?” she answered.

“My name is Ernesto.”

“Marisela, tell Mom, Ernesto invited me to dinner,” said Mary.

“I’m sorry, but I think I’m already busy that night,” said Ernesto.

“What do you mean you think?”

“I wanted to know if Marisela would go out.”

So, then what was the catalyst for her increased use of dialogue? After talking to Maria, I would argue that viewing this growth as sudden and explosive is a mistake.
Maria was practicing her dialogue. In the literacy interview, Maria told me that she practiced in her journal. She kept her journal, so I was not able to verify this information. Also, she did complete the activities in class conscientiously. When I asked her why she didn’t try any dialogue before this, she said that she didn’t think she could “do it right.” More specifically, Maria said that she was unsure of the punctuation and didn’t feel that her dialogue sounded “like people talking.” She wanted more time to practice than what she had in class. In fact, even with her last two efforts, Maria was concerned about her punctuation, although she did feel that in both cases her dialogue helped her story.

Based on these comments, it seems that the pressure of a graded assignment combined with her own high expectations (she worked hard to earn straight A’s all year in every subject) overwhelmed Maria and made her choose the safer route of not exploring her developing talents in writing that would be graded. Instead of practicing in her regular writing, where others, myself included, might see that it was not up to her usual high standard, Maria turned to forms of covert rehearsal.

The first form of covert rehearsal was group and partnered assignments. Maria completed all of these assignments, few of which counted heavily on her grade. Also, the expectation that there would be a considerable number of mistakes on these assignments was made clear. Both of these factors would lessen the pressure on Maria to demonstrate mastery and allow her practice to blend in with the work of the other students as she was simply a contributing member of the group and did not have to assume complete responsibility for the finished product. Published assignments were to be the students’ best work. As a result, Maria was not free to try here.
Another form of covert rehearsal Maria took advantage of was the daily journal each student kept. Due to numbers, I rarely read journals carefully unless there was a specific request to the contrary. Journals were also places where it was expected that students would write quickly and they would not be penalized for problems with mechanics or style. Consequently, journals provided a place for Maria to practice out of the limelight.

The last form of covert rehearsal was the drafts Maria was writing as a normal part of class. A draft was not turned in unless the students chose to make it a published piece of writing. As a result, Maria was free to practice in these pieces without worrying about her grade slipping. The only evidence of this is found in the notes of student-teacher conferences I held with Maria. During one such conference, which followed a mini-lesson on dialogue, Maria and I looked at a piece of writing to identify places where dialogue would help her story. She identified several places, and when I checked in at the end of the period, she reported that she had added some dialogue in one of the places. During future conferences, Maria would indicate an interest in dialogue. In fact, in answer to the question, “what are you working on in your writing?” Maria twice answered that she was working on dialogue. At least one of these conferences took place during a time when dialogue was not the focus of classroom discussion. Two times during conferences Maria had a piece of writing in front of her containing dialogue. However, none of these pieces made it to her published writing because, “they just [weren’t] real good.”

During the literacy interview, Maria did not bring up the area of dialogue when asked how her writing had improved during the course of the study. However, when
asked directly about dialogue, she agreed that her use of dialogue in her stories had improved, although she claimed, “it still isn’t as good as I want” most of the time.

Maria made use of her journal, practice assignments, and student-teacher conferences to improve a part of her writing that needed some help. Still, an examination of only her published pieces gives little indication that Maria is concerned about her use of dialogue or that she is working on it. Instead, it is only through a knowledge of her student-teacher conferences that the teacher might know what Maria is working on in order to help her address her needs. Still, Maria recognizes her improvement and can use dialogue effectively to help move her story along in meaningful ways.

*Student analysis.* During the last self-reflection piece, Maria wrote that the area of greatest growth in her writing was the endings of her stories. I did not expect this response. During the course of the class, endings were only discussed during one period of time and, then, the focus was not on writing effective endings, but on writing a specific type of ending effectively. Ironically, at this stage of the class, Maria tried, but did not use the type of ending under study.

In her literacy interview, Maria was able to defend her assertion by pointing to specific examples of endings. An examination based on Maria’s given evidence is found in Table M-2.

The first piece Maria pointed to was “The Fair” (writing sample #1). This choice did not appear to be pre-meditated. Maria simply scanned the dates at the tops of the papers in her portfolio until she found one written near the beginning of the year. Then, she pulled it out, looked it over, and said that this story’s ending was weak, “because I didn’t know what to do and . . . this came out.”
Once I got off the ride I was so happy because my nightmare was finally over. For the next couple of days I had nightmares. I could see myself terrified and not being able to scream.

According to her at this point, almost all of her pieces from the beginning are like this one. When questioned further, Maria clarified this to mean that all of the endings were poor. Maria never indicated that she recognized that she ended many stories with a reference to nightmares.

### Table M-2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Ending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zacatecas, Mexico</td>
<td>Sep. 3</td>
<td>Cuts off-- no real ending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rattlesnake</td>
<td>Sep. 20</td>
<td>Mentions nightmares because of the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fair</td>
<td>Sep. 27</td>
<td>Mentions nightmares because of the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Aunt and Uncle</td>
<td>Oct. 10</td>
<td>No ending--stops mid-sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary's best friend</td>
<td>Nov. 11</td>
<td>Mentions nightmares because of the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Dec. 3</td>
<td>Hanging ending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary's best friend (revised)</td>
<td>Dec. 12</td>
<td>Brings to conclusion which presumably ends haunting and fears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George is missing</td>
<td>Jan. 11</td>
<td>Hanging ending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost in the Forest</td>
<td>Jan. 16</td>
<td>Brought up to date and gave funny twist based on the events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cute boy</td>
<td>Feb. 27</td>
<td>Portrayed character weakness-- very sad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Ø denotes those pieces that Maria used as examples in her defense of her assertion.
After this, Maria pointed to the Mary stories and said that she had a better ending in the second one. In fact, she indicated that her ability to do better endings is what really prompted her to re-write this piece. When questioned how this ending was better, she responded by looking at both of them and said that the re-written version actually ended the story.

When asked for another example, Maria pulled out her story, “Cute Boy.”

“I wanted to know if Marisela would go out.”

Marisela was shocked and she knew her sister was going to explode. Both of them. Every time she gets something they want it happens.

“I’m sorry but I won’t,” said Marisela.

According to her, this piece also had a quality ending. This time, though, she said that the ending was good because it told you something about the girl. When asked what it shows about the character, Maria said that it showed she “was different from her sisters because she didn’t like the boy her sisters did.” Maria claimed that she did this on purpose because she wanted to write a story about a girl like her.

Finally, in response to the question about her best ending of the year, Maria claimed that “George is Missing” is her best ending.

“When James saw the officer he panicked. He didn’t pay attention and tripped. At that moment, he pulled the trigger.”
When asked why, she said that it had to do with the way it left the reader caught up in the action. She said it sounded like a movie when two people fight over a gun and it goes off. For a second, no one knows who got shot, but in this case, “Who gets shot is entirely up to the reader.” It should be noted that the only ending studied in class was this type of ending. And many of the reasons Maria gave for it being her best ending were reasons discussed in class. She did say that this type of ending is “fun” to write.

In conclusion, Maria was able to defend her claim that the area her writing improved in most was her repertoire of endings. She is articulate in her defense of that assertion and the proof she provides is compelling.

Julie

**Researcher analysis.** The area of Julie’s writing that most obviously improved in my eyes is her use of complete sentences. In the beginning, Julie used an abundance of sentence fragments and run-on sentences (See Table J-1). As a result, there were times when her improper grammar got in the way of her meaning. For example,

> “Percy was always making A’s, B’s but one test was a little hard and he come home with a C he was upset but his friends like what are you triping for that’s good but for hem and his family it was like a F so he knew he had it coming” (“Who Inspired”, September 20, 2001).

Not only is this confusing to read in the middle of a paper, but also the lack of punctuation takes away from the fluency of the piece.
In looking at Julie’s growth here, a survey was made of the sentences Julie marked (see Table J-1). These were determined to be either sentence fragments, run-on sentences, or correctly marked sentences. Then, I counted the number of sentences that would have been marked if Julie’s paper was exactly correctly. In order to further analyze her growth, I determined the percentage of the sentences Julie marked that were correct \([\frac{\text{sentence fragments + run-on sentences}}{\text{marked sentences}}]\) and the percentage of what should have been marked that was marked correctly \([\frac{\text{marked sentences} - (\text{sentence fragments + run-on sentences})}{\text{actual sentences}}]\). This allowed me to see the rate at which Julie correctly marked what should be marked and the rate at which what she marked was correct.

Table J-1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Julie’s use of endmarks</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mom’s Boyfriend</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who Inspired</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grandmomma’s Trip to the Store</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tony and Eric</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dark Falls</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Me and Basketball</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coming to an End</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Best Teacher</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malcolm X—unassigned</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malcolm X—assigned</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table J-1, before Julie’s piece of December 5, 2001 only 57% of what Julie marked as sentences are actually sentences. This means that 42% of the actual sentences in her pieces are marked correctly. Beginning with this piece, 84% of what Julie marked as sentences are correct, or 75% of all sentences that should be marked are marked correctly. The difference is even greater, if the first piece is compared with the last piece. In Julie’s first piece, only 29% of her marked sentences were correct. This means only 20% of the sentences in her first piece were actually correctly designated. In comparison, on Julie’s last piece, 90% of her marked sentences are correct, which is also 90% of all actual sentences marked correctly.

Beyond the numbers, Julie’s sentence usage undergoes a more subtle change with this improvement. In the beginning, Julie’s sentences tend to ramble on. An example of the kinds of sentences Julie wrote at the beginning of the year is found in her September 5th piece:

“So now that I’m about to have a little baby brother, I guess I might as well get to like him, in a friend way, but not in a fatherly like way, but long as my mom likes him I will but I do not know about my sister...”

What Julie actually has marked is even longer, but it is a run-on sentence. As it is, this sentence runs fifty words.

Later in the year, Julie’s sentences tended to be much shorter. For example, in her piece on February 21st, she wrote:
“Mr. Tompson always told me to follow my heart and don’t let someone else led me in the wrong direction.”

This sentence is fairly typical of Julie’s writing at this time. It is twenty words long. Additionally, these later sentences, shorter and more often correct, eliminate much of the confusion in Julie’s earlier pieces. Also, the shorter sentences serve to increase the fluency of Julie’s piece.

Julie’s growth in the area of sentences is paving the way for growth in her use of paragraphs and dialogue. The first time Julie uses both paragraphing and dialogue relatively successfully is in her November 11th piece, “Tony and Eric”.

As Sarah walked through the front door Eric’s mouth dropped in shock
She’s beautiful Eric said to Tony. “I know said Tony to Eric.”
“I’m Eric, Tony’s best friend,” he said to Sarah.
“Hi, well as you should know I’m Tony’s girlfriend.” Sarah said with a smile on her face.

Here her paragraphing is good and her dialogue is fairly well done, though there are some other errors. This paper was edited in groups with a specific focus on paragraphing and dialogue. As a result, with the mediation of her peers, Julie does a much better job than would be anticipated. However, on subsequent pieces, when group editing did not focus on those two aspects, Julie’s writing is again lacking. Thus, we see these skills lie in
Julie’s ZPD. Although she doesn’t use paragraphs, Julie’s dialogue skills show improvement again in her January 18th piece, “Coming to an End”.


Here, though, Julie does not do as well as in the “Tony and Eric” story, but this time Julie is doing it on her own.

All in all, Julie’s improvement in writing sentences is evident. Also, the indications are that this improvement is paving the way for the acquisition of paragraph and dialogue skills.

Student analysis. On her final self-reflection questionnaire, Julie indicated that the way her writing improved the most was her ability to think of ideas for stories. Unlike Maria, this is something that Julie and I had spoken of several times in conferences. Plus, there were several times in which strategies for generating ideas were directly mentioned in class discussions and mini-lessons.

In light of this assertion by Julie, I examined her work from the beginning of the year trying to identify the strategy she had used to come up with the idea for each piece. This review of Julie’s stories supports her assertion that she has more options for choosing stories now than she did at the beginning of the study (see Table J-2). In compiling this evidence, conference notes of student-teacher conferences and pointed questions during the literacy interview were used to gauge Julie’s reported strategy use.
An examination of her writing as well as class records and Julie’s comments were used to compile the data for the written evidence section of the chart. In her reporting, Julie did not necessarily mention each piece of writing. Consequently, only X’s are used to point to cases of Julie’s reported use of a particular strategy as opposed to a specific number.

The first two of Julie’s student-teacher conferences focused on idea gathering. In neither case, was Julie even writing. Instead, she was sitting because she “[didn’t] know what to write about.” During the first conference, I talked to Julie until she came up with a topic. The second time, however, I gave her the idea. Other ideas came from teacher prompts directed to the entire class. When asked about her approach to gathering ideas to

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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Real-life (just thinking)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher prompt</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction (just thinking)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to old topic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altered prompt</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging ending -- working backwards</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
write about, Julie said all she did was, “just thinking”, a response that Julie also used in her final literacy interview to describe her approach to coming up with ideas at the beginning of the year. Julie said that “just thinking” did not come from anywhere she could remember (teacher, lesson, etc.); it was just what she figured everyone did.

Following a mini-lesson in January, Julie returned to an old topic to re-write it. In a conference on that piece, she said that she liked this approach because the story was “already there”; she just needed to add more and make it better. In her final literacy interview, Julie claimed to have used this strategy at least one more time, but until she pointed it out, I did not recognize it because the piece she returned to was from a social studies class.

Another time Julie claims to have used this strategy is with a piece she wrote on Malcolm X as part of a group. Her group was to write a biographical report on someone who fought for the civil rights of others. They chose Malcolm X. As she was doing the research for her section of the paper, Julie found out so many things that interested her about Malcolm X that she wrote an individual piece on what else she had learned that did not fit the section of the paper she was responsible for. While this is not returning to old work in the same way as the first examples, Julie thought of it in the same way.

Julie mentioned using three more ways to get story ideas. Based on the written record, I identified an additional two strategies discussed in class that Julie used to gather ideas for her writing. In her literacy interview when asked to list the ways a writer could get ideas, Julie listed the following: going back to an old topic, what if, working backwards, talking about a subject, just thinking, altering a prompt from the teacher, looking/listening for funny things around her, and asking someone else. This list
suggests that Julie’s ability to come up with original ideas to write about is not limited to what is represented in Table J-2. However, Julie did not provide examples of pieces where the idea came from talking to someone else or looking/listening to funny things around her. Consequently, it cannot be conclusively stated that Julie knows how to use either of those strategies effectively.

Julie can defend her position that she has more strategies she can use to find ideas to write about. Finding ideas is always a challenge but by her own declaration, Julie is now more prepared to face this situation in the future.

Christina

*Researcher analysis.* The area of growth that is most significant for Christina is her love of writing. By her own admission, Christina’s love for writing had “fizzled” during the previous school year; however, it is the key to her writing. “If I get [my love of writing] back, I’ll have no trouble writing papers anymore.” (2nd quarter portfolio self-reflection). Before her love of writing declined, Christina claims to have enjoyed writing. In fact, Christina said that before this time, she had regularly written stories and poems for herself, in addition to all her assigned writing. Now, she does not do any self-directed writing with the exception of notes to her friends. She cannot point to any one person or experience that caused the change in her feelings. According to her, they simply “happened”.

In order to examine Christina’s feelings for writing over time, I examined her use of voice in her writing. According to Graves (1983), voice is, “the dynamo of the writing process” (p. 31). Many writing workshop proponents argue that helping a student
discover his or her own voice in writing is the most important part of a writing teacher’s job (Romano, 1987, 1995; Calkins, 1986). This is because finding a student’s voice in a piece of writing shows that the student has taken ownership of the piece (Romano, 1987). These are the pieces they fall in love with and that cause them to fall in love with writing.

In Table C-1, I have included sample sections from various pieces Christina wrote throughout the course of the study. Also, I included the voice score each piece received as it was graded according to the four trait writing approach. Under this approach, there are a total of five points possible in each of the four traits. Roughly speaking, a five means the student has used that trait at a highly proficient level; a three represents developing work, and a one is for work lacking that trait (Spandel, 2000).

Table C-1

Examples of Christina’s voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>Voice Score</th>
<th>WRITING SAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Coin</td>
<td>Sep. 20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Since then, every time he went to sleep, he’d have visions of things, and as life went on, they had happened. Kevin was amazed at it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“He never left his house. His parents urged him to move on with his life. Kevin was still afraid but did as they said. He decided to get rid of the coin he had found.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camy (urban legend)</td>
<td>Oct. 29</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>“Once there was a girl named Cameron. She is usually called Camy. She was on her way to a track meet.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"The cops gave it a look. In the back seat was America's Most Wanted Murderer of teen girls. The driver of the sleek, black corvette explained why he kept flashing his headlights to have her pullover and he flashed the light every time the killer rose up to stab her."

Diverse Person
Feb. 13
3/4
"If it sounds good, I'll listen. I have a Shania Twain CD and a Linkin Park CD. I watch the Disney Channel and MTV. I go to Backstreet Boys concerts and wrestling events."

Weird Dreams
Feb. 27
4
"It was the weirdest dream I've ever had, but it seemed so real. It was scary and realistic. It was so many things... It made sense but was mysterious, funny but serious, realistic but fictional, strange/odd but seemingly normal."

Malcolm's Family
Apr. 1
4/5
"Malcolm's childhood was not an easy one. He spent his youth preparing for death."

"He continued on to be elected Class President. More impressively, he ranked as one of the top three students of his 7th grade class. Dreaming of being a lawyer, he discussed his future with a white teacher. His English teacher simply told him to be 'realistic' and consider being a carpenter."
In Christina’s early writing, characterized by the first two samples in Table C-1, her voice is lacking. The sound is dull and no risks are taken. In contrast, Christina’s later writing has more moments of good voice. There are still points at which Christina’s writing hides behind her big words and unusually formal syntax. Still, there are times, when it sounds as if Christina is writing about topics she knows and cares about.

This is especially true in her piece of February 27th, “Weird Dreams.” Prior to writing this piece, Christina had checked out a book of Edgar Allen Poe’s writing. In this piece, she tries to imitate his style and subject matter. The result is a piece that, like Poe’s writing, jumps around and often demands that the reader pay close attention. The piece seems to be the story of a girl who dreams that she is an alcoholic. As in the sample passage in the chart, there are times when Christina’s voice seems, just like her character’s dream, “realistic but fictional”.

Still, there are times, when the writing is stiff and lacking in voice. For example, “As this dream continues like a television series, I get more in-depth with alcoholism. I understand why people do it—not totally, but an idea”. Even here the phrase “like a television series” is new and has a touch of voice.

Towards the end of the piece the voice seems to drift a little back to the same stilted voice in her other pieces. The voice at the end yanks the reader right back into the voice of the character and causes the reader to wonder what is the ‘truth’ of this piece.

“It’s funny how I’m jumping subjects. I usually don’t do this. I’m only doing this ‘cause I’m sleepy, excited, and my brain is coming up with all these ideas.”
Forgive me, for this it's not my best quality. Not much of a story, huh? At least I'm writing about my dreams. I would get more into the story but I don't know how.

I woke up confused and scared. But I laughed to myself. Funny how your dreams seem so real.

It's just weird.

The trend in this piece to an increase in voice is not alone. In fact, when comparing the voice scores given in grading to Christina's pieces at the beginning of the year to the scores of her later pieces, the difference is there. Christina's average voice score in her first three pieces was a 2.5 (scores of 3, 2, and 2.5), while her average score over the last three pieces was a 3.7 (scores of 3, 3.5, and 4.5).

Due to the small sample size this is not a definitive guide, but there is evidence in these scores that Christina's growth is real even if it is not as drastic as a 50% gain. First, the highest score in the initial sample was a three; in the last three pieces, the lowest score was a three. Also, a score between two numbers indicates that there are moments that the writing achieves both levels. In Christina's last piece, then, we have a sample of writing that has pieces worthy of a perfect 5 score.

Another reason to believe that Christina is taking more ownership over her writing and that she is beginning to regain an interest in writing is the source of her ideas. Christina's initial five pieces included two pieces with story lines taken from TV shows and one taken from an urban legend. After Christmas (beginning with Christina's
favorite piece of writing), all of Christina’s ideas are either original or in response to a teacher assignment (research paper).

The final indication that Christina is regaining this interest in writing is that during her literacy interview, Christina claimed that her interest in and love of writing was increasing, though still not where they were before. When asked if that meant she did outside writing simply for herself beyond the notes to her friends, Christina giggled and said that it did not mean that.

For Christina, the evidence suggests that she does not ever fully recapture the love for writing that “fizzled.” However, there are indications that it is growing. Throughout all of her published work, a steady increase in the voice used in Christina’s writing is evident. It never fully emerges as a dominant part of her writing, but her use of voice is increasing. An examination of the voice used in Christina’s writing gives us an optimistic picture of a young writer who is, in this case, re-engaging with her writing.

**Student analysis.** Christina said that the area of her writing that improved the most was “being descriptive.” In her literacy interview, Christina clarified this point to, more specifically, mean her word choice, and being able to “fill in a few more details” (See Table C-2).

When asked for examples of her skill level at the beginning of the year, Christina pointed to a passage from her September 20th story that reads, “he saw something with a shine. As he observed it he learned it was a very unique and old coin.” When asked to describe this writing, Christina said, “It’s just . . . kind of boring. I mean, the words don’t say anything.” Skimming the rest of the story as she spoke, she said the following passage was the same:
"One morning he woke up in a fright. He had a dream about getting his head chopped off. He never left his house. His parents urged him to move on with his life. Kevin is still afraid but did as they said."

According to Christina, these passages are indicative of her skill level at the beginning of the year.

Table C-2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of descriptive writing in Christina's pieces</th>
<th>Early examples</th>
<th>Later Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
<td>&quot;unique&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;BUSTED&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;urged&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;shrieked&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;snatched&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details</td>
<td>&quot;something with a shine&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;sparks out of control&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;a very unique and old coin&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I'm imprisoned in my room&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Kevin was still afraid&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;The box was so heavy. I couldn't see where I was going.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In response to a request to point out examples of her improved skills, Christina immediately pulled out her piece from January 8th. On at least two separate occasions Christina said that this was her favorite piece. As a result, talk about this piece was abundant. Christina chose two passages from this piece.

First,
"Why was I in such a hurry? Prior to that phone call, I spilled Coke on my mum's computer. The entire thing smoked up. Sparks were out of control. A major dilemma! (⊙). My instant plan was to steal one—I had no time to think of a better one."

Second,

"I snatched a box and ran for my life. The box was soo HEAVY. I couldn't see where I was going.

"Christina Monique Caldwell!" a familiar voice shrieked.

"¡BUSTED!"

Christina said that both of these excerpts were good examples of being more descriptive. You could “see them” easily. When asked to specifically point out the words that were better and the details that she felt helped create this. Christina pointed out words like, “Busted,” “snatched,” and “shrieked”. Images included the following: “Sparks were out of control” and “I'm imprisoned in my room”.

At this point, Christina was asked what had helped her to develop this new skill. She said that class discussion and oral practice had helped her the most. According to Christina, exercises such as practicing orally finding words to describe various objects like a hat helped her understand how words could be used to describe things powerfully.

Another activity, Christina said really helped her was re-writing a part of one of her pieces. This let her see not only that words could be powerful, but also that she could
use them powerfully. I asked her to show me a time when she had done this. She pointed to her piece from October 29th.

In this piece Christina rewrote this paragraph.

Camy nervously drove down the alley pushing the accelerator. Looking in the rear view mirror frequently, her heart pounded out of control. As she approached her house she ran as hard as she could to her front door—praying her father would take notice.

Following is the re-written version:

She drove quickly down a dark alley. She could see the driver's lights flash over and over. She quickly drove up her driveway and pounded on her door hoping her dad would quickly open the door.

According to Christina, the re-written paragraph does a better job of fitting the story better. It sounds, “fast, like the story.”

Christina also pointed to a re-written section of another story. She had lost the original story, but the re-write was, according to her, a good example of what she was talking about.

“I did it again. I thought about him for about three hours. I couldn't stop. I couldn't sleep. I feel helpless. Helpless because I don't know where he is.
I have an incomplete state of mind that I must live with until I see Bryant again”

(December 14th).

Without the original story, however, Christina could not really say for sure that the re-write was better than the original. Still, she felt it was “really good”.

All in all, Christina’s assertion that the area of greatest growth has been in the area of her ability to “be descriptive” (2nd quarter self-reflection) and “fill in a few more details” (final self-reflection) is an assertion that she appears to be comfortable defending. While she took time flipping through her work in search of examples, she always found what she was looking for and stood by.

Findings Across the Participants

The two research questions of this study set it up to underscore a pressing concern of workshop teachers. By examining the same thing, student writing growth, through two distinct lenses, the stage is set to point out differences in what is seen through each lens. Such a discussion is valuable on many levels. One level has to be the issue of control in the classroom.

One of the core beliefs behind a workshop classroom is that the students should set the agenda. Teachers who adhere to a strict interpretation of writing workshop claim that students determine the direction a class takes. Even less stringent readings lay the responsibility to guide the class at the teacher’s feet only on the condition that the class goes in a direction determined by students’ needs.
In this class, as in all of my classes, I tried to let the needs of his students inform curricular and instructional decisions. However, the subjects' behavior and writing suggest that this was not completely achieved, at least in their eyes.

Specific to this study, looking at a brief outline of the writing skills covered in class shows a rough alignment between the growth of the students and the subjects covered in class. (See Table W-2) The alignment of the burst in knowledge and the period in which the skill is covered in class is not exact. In fact, almost all of the skill developments lag a month behind the time it was covered in class. There are a couple of variations. For example, voice was covered almost every month in the class so the connection between the development of Christina's writing voice and class discussion is, in one sense, clear. Also, Julie's development of strategies to gather story ideas takes off about two months after that is last covered in depth in class.

Still, the relation is consistent enough to suggest a connection. The reason for the lag may simply be practice time. Graves (1994) suggests that often as a student learns new skills, their skill level appears to remain the same due to the amount of attention that they are paying to the new skill. At times, there may be an apparent drop in the proficiency of other skills as the new skill is honed. Then, as the amount of attention needed to use the new skill decreases, the proficiency in that skill increases, and the former skills return to the previous level of mastery. Just as Maria practices dialogue in a number of covert "risk-free" ways before using it, perhaps all of these students do that on a smaller scale with these skills. Another reason may simply be the timing of when a story is turned in and when it is begun.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Maria</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Christine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sep.</td>
<td>Writing Process</td>
<td>Ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gathering Ideas and Images</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Voice</td>
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Regardless of the reason, the point remains that the writing development of students in this class is tied to the presentation of material. While this is not necessarily a surprise, it does suggest a certain tension between the desire for a truly student-centered approach and the power that a teacher has to determine the direction of the development of his or her students. Each subject’s development is a product of this situation, but in some ways the students themselves perpetuate this tension in their approach to class and the ways in which they hide, abdicate, or fail to recognize their own decision making power.

In Maria’s case, she chose to hide, in a way, a self-chosen focus of her growth. While endings were never a focus in class, Maria consciously worked at improving her skills of writing endings. Despite a number of student-teacher conferences and two previous written self-reflections, it was not until the final self-reflection that she disclosed this focus of hers. As a result, my interactions with Maria were not centered on the skills she chose to work on.

It could be argued that Maria’s decision to not disclose this self-chosen emphasis is part of her right to set the agenda. However, when asked why she didn’t bring up
endings during conferences or in previous self-reflections, she said that she thought I would be more interested in the things being discussed in class.

One consequence of this course of action is that I was unable to help her develop strategies for writing endings. This does not seem to have hindered Maria's development; her abilities obviously increased. Still, the questions remain. Would the skills have increased faster if I had been in a position to mediate the skills acquisition? Would the skills have been more polished with my help? Or, would teacher intervention actually have stunted Maria's growth?

The more germane point in this discussion focuses not on her writing development, but on her notions of power in the classroom. Despite efforts to make the class student-centered and to make the instruction responsive to student needs, individually and collectively, Maria did not see the class as a place where she was free to set the agenda for her own growth. She did not even feel like the teacher would value her attempts or decisions to work on a different part of her writing. In essence, she buried her decisions under a pile of teacher-generated curriculum.

Julie did not hide, to my knowledge, any area that she was working on. Her development falls in line with topics covered in class. This could be because Julie abdicated her decision making responsibilities. Instead of taking responsibility for knowing what skills she needed to work on, it could be that Julie allowed the teacher to establish the agenda for her learning and was willing to accept a teacher judgment of what she needs without question. This interpretation is problematic because Julie was able to talk about her growth and about areas she wants to improve in. The question lingers in regards to Julie. Did she taken control of her learning?
One reason to suspect that Julie did view the teacher as the figure in control of her learning is her work on the Malcolm X paper. Julie was excited about what she was learning about Malcolm’s life and she demonstrated an ability to critically judge her work on this project. As part of the assignment, each group made a Power Point presentation to the class. Julie’s contribution to the presentation was five slides about the assassination of Malcolm X. All of the slides had pictures with the exception of the slide which dealt with the men convicted of the killing. Knowing that she had pictures of all three based on conferences, I asked her if she would like to learn how to scan in some pictures to include on the slide. Julie’s response was that she had pictures of them she found online, but that she had decided the men did not deserve to have their picture in the presentation. Also, Julie judged the information she had found about Malcolm X and weeded out the unnecessary parts. It turned out there was enough that Julie got rid of to write a second paper, which she did as a private assignment.

As Julie worked on her paper for the group report, she had at least one formal and two or three informal conferences with me about her work. During this time, there was nothing unusual about Julie’s work. It seemed in line with the rest of her work. However, when she finally turned in her report, the writing was stiff and hard to read. It sounded much like an encyclopedia entry, lifeless and dull. Following is an excerpt taken from the middle of the piece:

Elijah Muhammed denies that he or the NOI had anything to do with the slaying of Malcolm X, on February 22, 1965.
Many people were in shock when they heard the tragic news. Martin Luther King sent a telegram to Betty Shabazz, expressing his sadness over the tragic assassination of your husband Malcolm X. Even though they didn't always see eye to eye on methods to solve the race problem.

On February 23, 1965 James Farmer, core Director stated that Malcolm X's death was a political act.

On January 12, 1966 the trial opened for the murder of Malcolm X. March 11, 1965 the police arrested Norman Butler, Talmadge Hayer, Thomas Johnson for the murder of Malcolm X. On March 2, 1966 Hayer testified that he and three accomplices were hired to kill Malcolm X. Hayer, Butler and Johnson were convicted of murder in the first degree on March 11, 1966. April 14, 1966 the three were sentenced to life in prison.

When asked why this piece of writing is so different from what I had seen in conferences and what she had turned in earlier, Julie responded that she was only doing what I had instructed. When pressed for details, Julie pointed to an incident that happened just a few days before the paper was due. During a class discussion, someone asked about the organization of their paper. In response, I said something to the effect that dates are a good way to organize a paper of this type because they help readers keep things straight and place the information in a larger context. Based on this comment, Julie reorganized her paper to be based on the dates of events.

I only vaguely remember the incident as it was not a point meant to be stressed. In fact, it was not even in the lesson plans. Still, the power this one comment had on
Julie's decisions regarding her paper seem to indicate that Julie felt she could make decisions regarding her work and learning only within the parameters that I, as the teacher, established. Julie's actions, while in substance different than, almost antithetical to, Maria's actions, serve to underscore the same dilemma: the teacher sets the agenda for what is to be learned and covered.

Whether Christina buys into this same way of thinking as the others is debatable. The overt evidence is lacking. However, there is a telling bit of information in her work. As was noted earlier, she felt her love for writing had fizzled. In the same reflection, Christina said that she doesn't like sharing her work with others because she is "insecure about stupid things." In her literacy interview, Christina said that she doesn't like it when people tell her what is wrong with her writing.

During this interview, I asked if this had always been the case. Christina said no, it hadn't bothered her as much in the past. She did say that teachers were the worst offenders, but at least other students didn't have to see what they said. When asked further if it had mostly been in the last year or so (roughly the same time as her "fizzled" love of writing), Christina responded non-committally that it might be. In other words, she didn't give enough information to say if there was a link between the two. However, this brings up the question of how a critical response especially from a teacher can affect student learning and attitudes.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

According to the research, writing workshop classrooms exhibit five characteristics: time, response, choice, scaffolding, and community. In my research, the largest conflicts arose in the notion of community. Strict writing workshop proponents say that our students should come to identify themselves as writers (Atwell, 1993, Calkins, 1982; Graves, 1983). In fact, it has been argued that many writing workshop proponents don’t necessarily want their students to write as they do in a stylistic sense, rather they want their students to feel about writing as they do (Graham, 2001). In other words, the goal is to form a “community of writers” (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988).

Often, a key element in this sense of community is the sharing of student work on a large scale (Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1987). In other words, the effort is to provide for the students what a real writer has, an audience. This will help the students to identify themselves as writers (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). In my class, however, the sense of community came as a result of the students being engaged in the same activity (writing), not having a common identity (writers). In other words, we became a community that was writing or a “writing community” (Theisen, 1988, p. 115). We were not a “community of writers” (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). This distinction impacted my
class and students in the sense of ownership, the area of student identity, and the role of the teacher.

**Student Ownership**

Student ownership of their work and learning has a central place in the literature surrounding the writing workshop (Romano, 1987). Workshop proponents say that as students enjoy the benefits of the five parts of a workshop classroom they begin to take ownership of their work. They begin to see themselves as capable of writing, learning, and achieving (Calkins, 1986; Calkins & Harwayne, 1991). This ownership is exhibited in the topics students choose to write about (Graves, 1983; Romano, 1987, 1995, 2000), the audiences they choose to write for (Calkins, 1986; Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987), and the forms they choose to write in (Calkins, 1986; Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987, 1995, 2000).

Hynd (1997), on the other hand, says that the notion that students will automatically take ownership of their work when presented with the right conditions is an "assumption [that] is particularly problematic" (p. 8) due to political and social pressures surrounding the classroom, in general, and the adolescent classroom, in particular. This is due to the fact that student ownership is, in many ways, closely tied to the sense of community in a classroom, and often the emotional and social weight of being part of a community is too much for adolescents who are struggling to carve out their own niche without opening themselves to potential ridicule or harassment (ibid). This was particularly true in a classroom like the one I had where issues of gang allegiance made for a tricky social context at best.
I would suggest that in my classroom ownership was cloaked and uneven. Certainly, the lack of risk-taking in Maria’s work led me to wonder at one point, if she was ever going to take ownership and step out on a limb with her work. Yet, her privatization of her progress is the best example of student ownership in my research. Julie’s last minute change of her research paper demonstrates to me that she has not taken ownership of her work entirely, although her decision to exclude pictures of Malcolm X’s assassins strikes me as a strong position of ownership. Christina’s ownership of her work in this study never seems complete.

The hidden nature and unevenness of this ownership is troublesome if I am to form a “community of writers.” In writing about working class college students, Ashley (2001) suggests that at times, students will at times split their ownership in order to “play the game” demanded by school and their teachers. This can be seen in Maria and Julie’s experiences in my class. Maria says she hid her work because she thought I would be more interested in talking with her about the same topics we covered in class. The same motivation is ultimately what led to Julie’s change in her research piece; she was giving me what she perceived that I wanted. However, in the context of Ashley’s research only Maria truly maintained ownership. She did this by sacrificing her “authority” for her “authorship.” In other words, she allowed me to set the agenda for our conferences by referring to our in-class work, while she continued working on her own agenda away from me.

In my research, then, I found that student ownership was not consistent nor was it always visible. My students played an intricate game of balancing the perceived weight of my position as teacher with their position as student and the other student’s positions
in the social framework of the class. The result of this action was that the participants do not show evidence of seeing themselves as owners of their own work and growth in a consistent fashion.

Student Identity

Closely aligned to the idea of student ownership is the idea of student identity. As stated before, the primary component in the workshop ideal of community is the student’s identity. In their classrooms, teachers are to create a “community of writers” (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). In other words, students are to become writers (Graves, 1983, 1984; Romano, 1987). They do this in response to having the type of environment real writers have (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1982).

However, student identity formation is not so clear-cut. Hynds’ (1997) work points out that adolescent identity formation is not uni-dimensional. Instead, adolescents develop a number of identities, which they use at strategic times to meet the demands of a given situation (Gee, 1996). Therefore, a student’s identity formation might not meet our exact ideal. In fact, Graham (2001) suggests that we do not so much want our students to think of themselves as writers as we want them to “understand and visualize a new set of roles and possibilities for themselves as writers” (p. 363). These roles then become new facets of a person’s identity. In this case, while a person may formulate an identity as writer, he or she may also simply appropriate parts of being a writer to various identities they have chosen for themselves. Despite the change, this is consistent with the basic underlying principles of the workshop approach. The difference is not a difference of practice, but a difference of associations we envision for our students.
In the context of my class, this type of appropriation is seen in each of the participants, but most thoroughly in the case of Julie. In Julie’s choice to skip the basketball season in junior high in order to better prepare herself to be able to play in high school can be seen as evidence that she has altered the traditional identity of student (and, by extension in my class, of writer) to simply be a part of her identity of basketball player. In other words, Julie does not seem to think of herself as a student or a writer; she sees herself as a basketball player in the school context. Academic achievement and writing are simply part of what she must do in order to be a basketball player. She is attaching what might become an identity to another identity to serve her own purposes. Maria and Christina both exemplify this identification in their commitment to their individual growth. They both are worried about what their mistakes say about them as a person, which holds them back from identifying themselves as writers. Instead, they become students who write. Furthermore, the idea that all three may be to some extent “playing the game” calls into question the validity of my perceptions of their identity formation.

The role of the teacher

The final implication of this change in the community aspect of the workshop is the role of the teacher. Workshop proponents argue that teachers should be “facilitators” (Hall, 1998; Sipe, 2001), “models” (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1984), and “collaborators” (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991; Graves, 1994). The implication is that the power should be decentralized and the focus should be on building an equal relationship between student and teacher and on building a solid relationship between the students themselves
(Goodman & Goodman, 1990). In this scenario the mediating role in learning could be fulfilled by anyone in relation to anyone because every student has strengths to share with the class.

In my study, I think this view is limited. I approached the context of this class during the study in this way. I made efforts to present myself in the light of a facilitator or simply a fellow community member, but it did not work. One explanation may be that my class population was predominantly minority. Delpit (1995) says that in most minority cultures positions of power are addressed and made explicit. Therefore, when teachers attempt to make these positions invisible (as is the case with most people when put in a politically powerful situation), the students do not know how to negotiate the freedoms being granted them. They do not, in essence, have the tools or vocabulary to use this meaningfully. As a result, she suggests that instead of trying to make the political forces invisible, everything be done to make them visible. Furthermore, Delpit argues that making the rules and roles of power explicit, a teacher can pave the way for students normally excluded from the power structure to understand the rules and, thus, increase their political power. In other words, teachers should make explicit that they are the final word when it comes to mechanical correctness or appropriate actions. By reserving this veto power, so to speak, the teacher then enables the students to successfully negotiate their way through the area the teacher has designated as acceptable.

Such parameters could potentially have given Julie the power to place my comment about dates into the context in which I meant it. Also, by being more explicit about the ways I would grade and discussing that with the students, I may have created a
situation that would have allowed Maria to experiment with dialogue in a more public way so that I could help her more readily. Also, by assuming that position and making clear my expectations concerning mistakes and my approach to weaknesses in student writing, I may have created a relationship that would have allowed Christina to feel more confident in her writing.

In other words, instead of trying to focus my efforts on building a community among the members of my class, perhaps I would have been better served by focusing on the students' relationships with me and with the writing. I could have taken the central place in my classroom and insulated all of us in writing as opposed to sitting in the middle of the group and laying writing over us like a blanket. Both factors, focusing on my relationship with the students and their relationship with writing as opposed to the students interpersonal relationships, would have allowed the students to more easily negotiate their way through my class, our relationship, and their own ideas regarding the work they were doing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the beginning, I said that I was interested in whether my students were really progressing in my classroom. This desire led, ultimately, to this study, and I have my answer. My students are becoming better writers in my room. They are growing and gaining skills in great fashion. That excites and revitalizes me.

However, I did discover some unsettling information. I had always thought that my class was very learner-centered. Now I question the degree to which my room is that way. I understand that if my students have five or six teachers whose rooms are distinctly teacher-centered that will have ramifications in my students' approaches to my
class. Nevertheless, I am now more sensitive in my efforts to identify the students’ needs and desires as I plan for my class. Based on this experience, I feel more research on community formation in the secondary workshop classroom is needed, especially in urban and more traditionally oriented school settings. Related to this, research on identity formation of students in the workshop class is needed. There is actually a relatively large pool of research on the identity formation of teachers in this setting, but surprisingly little on student identity formation. Finally, as I stated in the literature review, there is a hole in the research regarding learning in the secondary workshop classroom. This is probably a result of the lack of models in practice.

Still, I feel that my study does begin to address some of these questions, although it was not necessarily designed to address each one explicitly. Furthermore, my research does begin to answer some of the questions surrounding the workshop approach on the secondary level. As Allen & Gonzalez (1998) suggest, the best evidence that this approach works is successful students. Maria, Julie, and Christina are successful students both in my eyes and in theirs.
APPENDIX A

WRITER SELF-PERCEPTION SCALE

Listed below are statements about writing. Please read each statement carefully. The circle the letters that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the following scale:

SA=Strongly Agree  A=Agree  U=Undecided  D=Disagree  SD=Strongly Disagree

Example: I think Batman is the greatest super hero.  SA  A  U  D  SD

If you are really positive that Batman is the greatest, circle SA (Strongly Agree).
If you think that Batman is good but maybe not great, circle A (Agree).
If you can't decide whether or not Batman is the greatest, circle U (Undecided).
If you think that Batman is not all that great, circle D (Disagree).
If you are really positive that Batman is not the greatest, circle SD (Strongly Disagree).

(Oc)  1. I write better than other kids in the class.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(PS)  2. I like how writing makes me feel inside.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(GPR) 3. Writing is easier for me than it used to be.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(OC)  4. When I write, the organization is better than the other kids in my class.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(SF)  5. People in my family think I am a good writer.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(GPR) 6. I am getting better at writing  SA  A  U  D  SD

(PS)  7. When I write, I feel calm.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(OC)  8. My writing is more interesting than my classmates' writing.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(SF)  9. My teacher thinks my writing is fine.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(SF) 10. Other kids think I am a good writer.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(OC) 11. My sentences and paragraphs fit together as well as my classmates' sentences and paragraphs.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(GPR) 12. I need less help to write well than I used to.  SA  A  U  D  SD

(SF) 13. People in my family think I write pretty well.  SA  A  U  D  SD

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(GPR) 14. I write better now than I could before.
(GEN) 15. I think I am a good writer.
(OC) 16. I put my sentences in a better order than the other kids.
(GPR) 17. My writing has improved.
(GPR) 18. My writing is better than before.
(GPR) 19. It's easier to write well now than it used to be.
(GPR) 20. The organization of my writing has really improved.
(OC) 21. The sentences I use in my writing stick to the topic more than the ones the other kids use.
(SPR) 22. The words I use in my writing are better than the ones I used before.
(OC) 23. I write more often than other kids
(PS) 24. I am relaxed when I write.
(SPR) 25. My descriptions are more interesting than before.
(OC) 26. The words I use in my writing are better than the ones other kids use.
(PS) 27. I feel comfortable when I write.
(SF) 28. My teacher thinks I am a good writer.
(SPR) 29. My sentences stick to the topic better now.
(OC) 30. My writing seems to be more clear than my classmates' writing.
(SPR) 31. When I write, the sentences and paragraphs fit together better than they used to.
(PS) 32. Writing makes me feel good.
(SF) 33. I can tell that my teacher thinks my writing is fine.
(SPR) 34. The order of my sentences makes better sense now.
(PS) 35. I enjoy writing.
(SPR) 36. My writing is more clear than it used to be.
(SF) 37. My classmates say I would write well.
(SPR) 38. I choose the words I use in my writing more carefully now.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Maria

1. You say that your area of greatest improvement was in your endings. Can you show me?
2. What in class helped you to develop this the most?
3. Why didn’t you mention this during any of your conferences with me?
4. Can you tell me a couple of other ways that your writing improved?
   Examples.
5. I noticed that your dialogue took a big jump about Christmas. What caused that?
6. What part of class helped you the least in developing your writing skills?

Julie

1. What has been the best part of class for you?
2. I noticed that you said the area of greatest improvement for you is in the way you come up with story ideas. Can you explain that?
3. Can you list the ways you can come up with story ideas?
4. What in class helped you to do that the most?
5. I noticed that your grammar got a lot better. Did you notice that?

6. What caused this growth?

7. Did you pay special attention to that this year?

8. What helped you least this year in class?

Christina

1. You said that your descriptive writing was the part of your writing that has improved the most this year. Can you give me any examples?

2. Was there anything we did in class that was especially helpful in developing this?

3. You said that your love of writing fizzled. Can you tell me about that?

4. How is your love of writing now?

5. What part of class helped you the least?
REFERENCES


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