“They Just Loved to Be Experts”: Teachers’ Perspectives on Inspiring Writing in the Kindergarten Classroom

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Based on our experience as former elementary teachers and on conversations with teachers and administrators, we realize writing instruction in elementary classrooms continues to be a challenge. Although many schools and districts have made writing instruction a priority, the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts (2012) call for more attention to be given to writing instruction in the elementary grades. According to the standards, elementary students should “write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes and audiences” (Common Core Initiative, 2010, p.18).

In thinking about our own teaching and our work with other teachers across the nation, we find that it seems to be common practice to ask our youngest writers to compose texts for an unspecified audience, usually presumed to be the classroom teacher, for an unspecified purpose. For example, young students are often asked to write in a journal about their weekend or to compose a piece of text in response to a prompt. We have found this problematic because we are asking our young children to engage in writing that is very different from the writing that expert writers do. Expert writers compose a piece of text for a specific audience and chose a genre that best addresses the purpose of the writing.

Although empirical evidence has suggested that giving older students an external audience is related to higher quality writing (e.g., Cohen & Riel, 1989; Crowhurst & Piche, 1979), until recently it has not been clear whether giving young students a real external audience (other than classmates or the classroom teacher) would affect the quality of their writing in the same way (Block, 2013; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001). In a study examining second graders’ writing of informational texts, Block (2013) found that writing quality was significantly higher when student were writing for an external audience as opposed to writing for the classroom teacher.
Through research we are beginning to learn more about effective writing instruction for our youngest writers; however, teachers continue to report feeling overwhelmed and intimidated by teaching writing. Teachers often tell us they yearn for effective professional development that will strengthen their instruction and their confidence. According to Mansvelt, Suddaby, and O’Hara (2008), informal professional development (self-driven or self-initiated) in which teachers engage in collaboration has a greater impact on implementation than traditional professional development experiences. Collaborative practices in planning and curriculum development lead to positive impacts on teacher morale and practice (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). The teachers we work with report little opportunity for any professional development in writing instruction and even fewer opportunities that involve collaborative planning.

**Purpose of the Study**

Although the aforementioned studies suggest that providing young writers with an audience beyond the classroom teacher yields writing of higher quality, it’s less clear whether teachers are incorporating opportunities for writing to an external audience into their writing curriculum. A few studies looking at teacher writing practices (Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Culter & Graham, 2008) found that while teachers perceived they were very good at modeling, in reality their writing instruction actually included a great deal of grammar and spelling as isolated skills. Many teachers “equated writing instruction with assigning activities or topics” (Brindley & Schneider, 2002, p. 334).

We spend a significant amount of time informally observing a variety of classrooms during writing instruction, and we notice that students are rarely asked to write for an external audience and purpose. Instead, much like the teachers in the Brindley and Schneider study, teachers we observed are focused on teaching isolated skills and grammar through workbook type instruction. Teachers understand that effective writing instruction involves more than grammar and sentence structure and is not limited to prompt writing; however, they report feeling underprepared to engage students in meaningful writing opportunities.

**Methods**

In this study we developed a collaborative professional development experience for kindergarten teachers to better understand how teachers’ perceptions about their writing instruction changed when they altered the instruction they provided for their young writers. In addition, we learned about changes they noticed in their kindergartners’ writing.

**District, school, and teachers.** Duchess District* is a small rural district located in the intermountain west. The district serves about 4,900 students across six small rural communities and 13 schools. Duchess District strives to provide as many educational opportunities as possible for the students, many of whom have very little knowledge or experience outside of their own small communities.

Earl School, the school in which the participants teach kindergarten, is the second largest school in Duchess District. Earl is a Title 1 kindergarten through second grade school with a student population of 727. Of these students 83% are White, 8% Hispanic, and 5% American Indian/Alaska Native, with 4% listed as being of two or more races; 34% of the students at Earl School receive free or reduced price lunch. Our two participating teachers, Wilma and Nancy, both taught two half-day kindergarten sessions, with approximately 20 students in each session.

Wilma has more teaching experience than Nancy. Wilma has been teaching kindergarten

* Pseudonyms are used for the district, school, and teachers.
for the past 18 years at Earl School. She holds a bachelor’s degree in early childhood and elementary education, as well as a reading endorsement. Wilma assumes a leadership role in the curriculum decisions of the kindergarten team at Earl, which consists of 10 teachers and multiple Title 1 and special education aides. Having been team leader for multiple years, Wilma mentors new kindergarten teachers during their first years of teaching.

Nancy received her bachelor’s degree in elementary education this spring. For the first half of the school year she was a student teaching intern, meaning she was the only teacher in her classroom but received extensive assistance and support from her university supervisor. The remaining half of the year Nancy was the sole certified teacher in the classroom. Although this was her first year of teaching, Nancy has years of experience working at Earl School as a Title 1 aide and librarian.

**Professional development session.** To provide support for the teachers’ writing instruction and to help them understand the importance of having students write for a real audience and purpose, as well as to offer strategies to implement such instruction, we set up a 2-hour professional development (PD) session. We met at the Earl School conference room after school prior to the start of the project. All of the teachers were provided with a copy of the text *Reading and Writing Genre with Purpose* by Duke, Caughlan, Jezwik, and Martin (2011). Prior to the PD session, teachers had been asked to read the first chapter of the book and come to the session with multiple ideas for writing projects for their class or grade level.

The first hour of PD consisted of the research team sharing information about the positive impact of writing for a real audience and purpose. The teachers took notes and asked questions about the research and ideas shared. The second half of the PD was much more collaborative, as teachers and research team members talked about the ideas shared and the ideas the teachers brought for their own writing projects.

The kindergarten team decided on the project focus, the steps needed to teach any content or background knowledge to the students, the steps for completing the project with the students, and the finished product. Equipped with a team for collaboration, the teachers left the PD with background knowledge on writing for a real external audience and purpose, as well as a specific project and timeline to complete for their grade level.

**Implementation of the altered writing instruction.** At this point in the year, the kindergarten team had just completed Kindergarten Round-Up—a time in which all the incoming kindergarteners come to the school for prescreening to determine their basic skill levels. During this time the teachers had noticed that the children coming for the screening and some of their parents were very apprehensive about starting school generally and going to kindergarten specifically. The team decided that they would elicit the help of their soon-to-be-outgoing kindergarten students to compose a text introducing preschool children to kindergarten, with the intent of helping to ease some of the apprehension and fear of the incoming students.

The teachers talked to their classes about seeing all the new students at Kindergarten Round-Up and noticing how nervous and scared these preschoolers were about starting kindergarten. They asked their students to recall all the things they had learned about school over the school year and reminded them that at the beginning of the year they hadn’t known any of that information. Then they asked the children if having a book that explained all the places in the school they would visit, the rules of the school, and the people they would meet and work with would be helpful for those new students. The experienced students agreed, so the teachers invited the young writers to create a book for the incoming class.
Results

As a result of this experience, Wilma’s and Nancy’s attitudes towards writing instruction changed. Each found that as her perspective was changed by the PD experience, her teaching methods and strategies changed as well.

Wilma. Prior to the PD and her subsequent implementation of the writing project, Wilma described her writing instruction as “self-generated” and topic driven. Like many kindergarten teachers, she typically spent the beginning of the year on letter-formation and then worked with her students on sentence structure. Wilma also indicated that many of her writing topics were derived from the reading curriculum and reported, “So much of what we work on is just sentence structure. We just discuss so much sentence structure.”

Overall, Wilma indicated she has been most frustrated by a lack of a structured writing curriculum. She explained that she generally felt her writing curriculum was “haphazard and scattered.” In her former instruction, typical writing time for Wilma would be providing her students with a writing page and a prompt of some type to help them. Additionally, she admitted that she always found herself desiring more time for writing in her classroom.

With her new approach to writing, Wilma sat down with her current students and shared a concern she had about the nervousness of the soon-to-be kindergarten children and their parents. When Wilma suggested that the class write a book introducing kindergarten to next year’s kindergarten class, her students were all in favor. According to Wilma, this new approach to writing for her students was a great success. She reported that her kindergartners were more attentive to the task than they had been during their previous writing experience, and the children actively contributed ideas about what to expect in kindergarten to the class book.

During the shared writing time, the students eagerly participated in composing the pages of the book. Wilma noted that her students were completely engaged, realizing their knowledge was valuable and validated. They had the experience of being experts. These young children knew kindergarten, and they knew the feelings they had had right before starting school. Armed with that expertise, the kindergartners eagerly worked to write their book for the incoming kindergarten class.

Wilma likened this experience to reading and the way she naturally considers children’s background knowledge as they work to comprehend a text; this project provided an “aha moment” when Wilma realized how important it is to do the same thing in writing. She explained, “They love to talk so much about what they know. In the project, they were referred to as experts. They lived it. They know it.” For Wilma, it became clear that allowing children to become experts and share their expertise with an external audience was highly engaging for her young writers.

Nancy. Like Wilma, prior to the PD and writing project Nancy had reported being frustrated by the lack of a clear writing curriculum. She attributed this feeling to being “on my own” and not knowing “exactly how to get from Point A to Point B.” As a first year teacher, Nancy said it was difficult to even know what was expected of her writing instruction. Like many new teachers, she “read the standards” but found herself “not exactly sure how to get [her kindergarten students] there.” Similar to Wilma, Nancy spent most of her writing time with students practicing writing letters, some words, and a few sentences.

Nancy admitted that her students had not done a lot of the writing she had envisioned they would do during the school year. Nancy’s kindergarteners were “resistant” and “didn’t dare put themselves out there.” Overall, Nancy was frustrated with the time constraints and lacked confidence in providing effective instruction to foster
meaningful writing experiences for her young writers.

To apply the new approach of having her students write for an audience and purpose, Nancy gathered her class on the carpet looking at the easel and reminded them about how they had gone the entire year as kindergarteners and knew a lot about how to be good kindergarteners. Nancy’s students eagerly talked about all the things they needed to know that happened in their own classroom. Each time Nancy asked for ideas, hands shot up and students started eagerly sharing the places in their classroom the new kindergarteners needed to learn about and why. The students were excited to share what they knew, and Nancy reported noticing that the discussion helped expand their ideas, something she had struggled to do in her previous instruction. She said her students started saying things such as “yeah and then we do this and then we do this,” which helped all her students take ownership of the writing and express their ideas. This brainstorming activity quickly sprang into a full-class shared writing experience as the students took the list of brainstormed ideas and turned them into phrases and sentences.

**Changes and new priorities.** Both teachers reported that they plan on devoting more time to writing instruction. Nancy stated she is going to start her students writing at the beginning of the year instead of focusing solely on “words” and “sounds.” She doesn’t want to wait until the students have mastered a set of skills to let them write. After participating in this project, she understands the importance of beginning the year with shared writing experiences and supporting her kindergartners as they develop independent writing skills. Wilma plans to facilitate opportunities for students to compose texts on topics and for purposes that her students find valuable. She now notices opportunities to capitalize on her students’ natural curiosity.

A priority for next year for both teachers is to help their kindergarten students have a clear audience and purpose when they write. Wilma now sees opportunities all around her to support a child’s research and foster an opportunity for that child or a group of children to compose a piece of text in an appropriate genre to share the information they have gathered. In this way Wilma sees her students having ownership of their work and a true purpose for their writing. Nancy said the best thing about this experience was having the students focus on people who will be reading their writing instead of just writing to an unspecified audience. She said, “That was a real excitement too because it wasn’t just we’re writing to write. It has a meaning. It has a purpose.”

**Discussion**

Prior to the PD the teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by writing instruction and were eager for more structure. Participation in the PD and the accompanying writing project helped them improve structure by bringing meaning to the writing experience.

**More meaningful writing instruction.** Although they noted that writing wasn’t necessarily an unpleasant time for most of their students, the teachers all indicated that many students seemed resistant, indifferent, and disengaged during writing instruction. They felt this was due in part to the lack of meaningful instruction during writing time. The teachers admitted that they had never thought to give students an external audience, nor had they considered presenting writing as a way to solve problems.

When reflecting back on the PD and writing project, the teachers noticed a significant change in their instructional practices and their general attitudes toward writing instruction. Their earlier practice of spending a great deal of time focusing on letter formation, spelling, grammar, and sentence structure is very similar to the few studies that have looked at teachers’ writing instruction (Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Culter & Graham, 2008). Little time was spent focusing on the purpose for the students’
writing. When the teachers made the small change of providing an external audience and a specific purpose, they noticed vastly different results from the typical classroom writing experiences as writing began to have more meaning for the students.

**More engaged students.** Wilma’s and Nancy’s experiences were consistent with the research suggesting that providing students with an external audience and a specified purpose yields higher quality writing (Block, 2013; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001). Although our study did not specifically examine changes in students’ writing, both teachers eagerly shared their observations of changes they noticed among their students after the PD and writing projects.

Both reported that their young writers were much more engaged and the kindergartners were far less hesitant to write. In fact, Nancy found that approaching writing with the external audience and specific purpose helped her to better understand her students’ previous resistance to writing. She reported that previously, she had spent a significant amount of her class writing time listening to children who struggled with what to write about and helping children who weren’t confident to begin writing on their own. Through this project she realized the significant part of writing instruction that had been missing was providing a real audience and a specific purpose for her students.

**Further applications.** Teachers affected by the PD reported that when their instruction focused on an audience and a purpose, writing time became much smoother and students were more engaged in the writing tasks than they had been under earlier methods of instruction. All of the teachers indicated that they plan to continue approaching writing instruction with a focus on the audience and the purpose for which their children will write. They were most pleased that they didn’t have to overhaul their current writing instruction to make this change. They were able to simply tweak their approach in order to help their kindergartners focus on the external audience and, consequently, the purpose. That small change produced significant differences.

As we all know, young children are naturally curious and ask several questions a day. One teacher suggested using children’s questions as the basis for writing. In Wilma’s classroom, children have been very curious about animals and have asked questions such as “What are the differences between turtles and tortoises?” Now Wilma sees this desire for knowledge as a wonderful opportunity for children to become experts and compose a piece of text to address this and many other questions.

Other teachers have used a variety of approaches. A team of first grade teachers in the same district invited their young writers to watch a video from a local landscaping company. From the video the children learned about different flowers and seeds, and they conducted additional research. Each child then created a new seed packet in which he or she wrote the necessary information about the seeds and plants with illustrations. The students then shared their finished product with their families, but the teachers noted that the following year they took the work back to the nursery to share with the community. Other teachers in the district engaged second graders in conversations surrounding playground issues. From that discussion, the second graders designed and wrote instructions for safe games for fellow students to play on the playground during recess. These will be published and kept in the school library as a resource for the elementary students.

At the culmination of the PD project, teachers felt more confident in their writing instruction and empowered to make future changes in their writing curriculum. One essential component to this newly gained confidence was the ongoing collaborative approach to professional development. Wilma and Nancy both acknowledged collaboration as critical. Through this project
they provided opportunities for their students to take on the role of experts and to share their expertise with a real external audience. Nancy and Wilma encourage all kindergarten and early elementary teachers to establish a supportive team of teachers, to work collaboratively to identify creative writing projects for external audiences, and to enjoy supporting young writers as they engage in writing experiences similar to those of expert writers.

References


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