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## “It Sounds Wrong” vs. “I Would Be Curious”: Challenges in Seeing Students as Writers in a School-University Partnership

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

We are grateful to the students in our classrooms for sharing their work so openly with us and with one another.

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### Introduction

For the past several years, we have taught (separately and together) a capstone methods course in secondary English education. During every semester in which we have taught the course, on the very first day that students return from their placements in middle and high schools, we have asked them if they saw any student writing. Their response, semester after semester, has included phrases like, “they’re so low!” That is to say, their very first impulse upon encountering student writers is to evaluate, and the evaluation they make is almost always negative. They read the student writing as less skillful or of lower quality than they had anticipated, and, more often than not, they articulate this as a comment on the writer rather than on the writing-- not “it’s so low,” but “*they’re* so low.”

This article is a reflective account of our inquiry and the challenges working through this issue with preservice teachers in the context of a partnership with a local sixth grade class. The project was born of a struggle that has concerned us both across our entire careers in English education: how do we effectively evoke in preservice teachers a stance relative to students that allows for an open, responsive, and authentic writing pedagogy? While there are, of course, many obstacles to teaching writing well, one significant component has been the overwhelming power of the “student/school” frame, which renders “writing” more as the fulfillment of assignments than anything else and which renders students not so much people or writers but the fulfillers of assignments (Whitney, 2013). Our challenge is to help beginning teachers to see student writers as writers, and as people, rather than solely as students, and to view student writing through lenses not dominated by the presence or absence of errors, but through a lens of empathy.

In response to that challenge, along with our teacher colleague, we established a partnership in which individual preservice teachers would work

alongside individual middle school students as peers encountering a common writing assignment. In other words, both middle school students and the preservice teachers in our course were tasked to craft a piece of writing. We posited that the partnership would encourage an empathetic stance by providing our preservice teachers with a chance to write with and beside students, an act which we know is effective in breaking down traditional barriers between teacher and student (Whitney, 2013). We hoped that our students would begin to see the student writers not just as writers, but as people, beyond simply being students, and that this, in turn, would influence the way they read the student work itself. While all parties involved did find benefits to the partnership, and all of us would not hesitate to recommend the partnership approach to others, we will here also discuss its failures. Primarily, while we saw the preservice teachers reflecting on aspects of the partnership that would be considered “ah-ha” moments, we also saw a tendency for them to rely on the evaluation of the students’ writing based on functional aspects like mechanics and grammar. Certainly, this is not a surprising phenomenon; in fact, it has long been a struggle for teacher educators to prepare preservice teachers to teach writing and do it well (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). What came out of this particular partnership were insights into how teacher educators might be able to leverage preservice teachers’ assumptions and apprenticeships of observation (Lortie, 1975) to evoke a stance of empathy for student writers not just as students but also as people.

### **Background**

Given our concerns about preservice teachers’ views of student writers, we see it as especially important that teaching writing be meaningfully incorporated into methods courses for teacher candidates, as well as incorporated explicitly into field experiences. Writing has been called the “Neglected R” (National Commission on Writing, 2003), too often left out of language arts curricula (Applebee & Langer, 2013) and English teacher preparation programs (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). However, many preservice teacher education programs neglect writing altogether or address it in a manner that positions it as secondary to the teaching of literature (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). When writing teacher education does occur, efforts to prepare teachers of writing have often relied more on tradition than on contemporary scholarship on writing teacher education (e.g., Ivanič, 1994). Yet, Grossman et al. (2005) have shown that beginning teachers do, in fact, draw heavily on experiences from their teacher education courses when teaching writing, particularly in their second year of teaching and thereafter.

In designing this partnership experience for students, we hoped to establish a more horizontal relationship between preservice teacher and sixth grader than they typically have in a traditional practicum experience. Further, we

hoped that even when their role included assessment that they would learn to delay that evaluation until the appropriate moment. As Penny Kittle points out, in order to keep writing, “writers need feedback, not evaluation” (208). Kittle explains:

You just can’t develop a relationship with a writer by trying to fix everything. I think it is too easy to forget that a teacher has two roles as a reader of student work: one, to hear what the writer is communicating, to listen well, to consider and respond to the thinking in the piece; and two, to help the writer communicate it with as much grace as possible, which might mean to correct and suggest and model the conventions of the genre. I’m afraid in our rush to get the stack of papers off our desks, we sometimes jump to the second role without enough time spent on the first. (212)

For this reason, we wanted this initial encounter to be an encounter between two writers, not only between a student and a teacher. We wanted the preservice teachers to empathize with the challenges sixth graders found in the assignment, to draw parallels between their own experiences as writers and those of students, and to inhabit an overall stance of attention to the writer rather than to the writing itself. In this, we kept Calkins’ words in mind:

If we can keep only one thing in mind-- and I fail at this half the time-- it is that we are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by “what might help this writer” rather than by “what might help this writing.” (228)

And, during the course of our methods class, our preservice teaching students are in some ways freer to do this than they may be at any other time. The course takes place a semester or two before their formal field experiences begin. They are in a transitional space, between student and teacher and between college and career. As such, there was an opportunity for them to meet their sixth grade partners in a space to which it will only get harder to gain access as they find themselves called to grade, to plan instruction, and to attend to groups of students rather than just one (Cooper, 2007). For a very limited time, our students were given a platform without the constraints of the mandates of assessment, evaluations of themselves, and the balance of a full time career. This aspect, to us, made the promise of the partnership to inspire empathetic interactions between the middle school students and our students a desirable one.

In addition to pertaining to the need for more inspired writing teacher preparation, this work also unfolds within a larger context of need for more and better field experiences for teacher candidates in general. Although multiple

sources (Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009; NCATE, 2010) have recommended that field experiences begin earlier in the preparation period, increase in number and duration, and integrate more fully with university coursework, these goals have proven extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Some of the barriers are general to teacher education programs regardless of the content or grade level. For example, local schools may be too small, too few in number, or too remote to accommodate university students at multiple points in their preparation programs. Other hurdles are perhaps particular to the subject area of writing. First, given that writing is under-attended to in most school settings (Applebee & Langer, 2006), a field placement made specifically for language arts is by no means a guarantee that the experience will include any opportunities to deal with students' writing. Further, classrooms where writing is actually taught are not necessarily optimal places to learn to teach writing—professional development in writing is remarkably inconsistent across geographical areas and “standard practice” with respect to writing in schools varies considerably. For example, in our local region, some secondary English teachers are using a workshop approach, where others use a purchased curriculum (like Springboard) that may as well be the workshop approach's opposite. Anne's graduate courses for teachers, for example, have included participants who had attended Writing Project institutes right alongside others who had never heard the terms “writing process” or “writing workshop.”

Cross-institutional conversations (Smith and Anagnostopoulos), and more specifically, conversations between preservice teachers and secondary students, offer a promising way to facilitate contextualized practice in the teaching of writing. A growing number of reports have described the affordances of these in other content areas (Camicia & Dobson, 2010; Day, 2009; Eppley, Shannon & Gilbert, 2011; Moore & Seeger, 2009). Their main benefits for writing teacher education are twofold: First and most importantly, they place the preservice teacher and the student into a dyadic relationship, and one in which the preservice teacher is not expected to be thinking about a whole class of students at a time. Further, they can often take shape without the necessity of making a full-on field placement for each student in an individual classroom, and they can work well across distance. These concerns, while more practical in scope, are no less important given the real constraints that accompany developing field placements in many programs.

### **Study context and methods**

Our university's footprint on the local area is a large one. The university is large, the town is small, and the relationships between permanent residents are well enmeshed. There are numerous instances in which someone teaches your child at school, you teach her in a graduate course, and you also coach her child in

a sport, for example. However, for our university students, relationships with the town are much more transitory; just for an example, as part of this project one of my students remarked that his sixth-grade partner was the first person he had ever met that lived on a real farm, even as the University is surrounded by farmland. While this set of community issues was not the main impetus for this partnership, it is one relevant feature of the context.

Our course, titled Secondary Language Arts II, is a methods course taken by preservice teachers the semester or two before their full time student teaching internships. The course covers topics ranging from assessment and the teaching of poetry to working with ELL students and building strong classroom communities. Previous to this course, students have taken a block of three courses, one focused on the teaching of writing, one focused on literature and literacy, and one focused on media literacies. Through these courses, the preservice teachers in our course had exposure theories about the teaching of English Language Arts, and, specifically, the teaching of writing. What most hadn't had yet was the opportunity to put that theory into practice, an issue that we sought to remedy.

Because of our institution's close proximity to a local school district, we were able to collaborate with a sixth-grade teacher, [Name], pairing our 28 students and her 25 students during a fall semester. We made a deliberate decision that rather than it being "our student is the tutor and her student is the tutee" that we would position students side-by-side, working on a common writing assignment. This was important, as the goal was for our students to step outside their frame of teaching as assigning and assessing and instead come to understand students as writers, individuals whose experiences and preferences (as well as skills and abilities) influenced the writerly decisions they would make. We framed the experience for our preservice teachers as a way to get to know a student writer and engage in one-on-one work, but we weren't explicit about why we thought that was important except for a vague assumption about the "practice" being good to have. The topic of empathy, while a goal for us, was not in the forefront of our methods course, topically or content-based, the partnership began. These details will become important as we explore the outcomes of the partnership.

We began by having both groups of students write introductory letters to one another; the [University] students then replied to the sixth-graders. This was a way for the middle school and teacher education students to get to know each other and break the ice; it was also a way for our students to see the middle schoolers' writing for the first time. At that time the [University] students also wrote a reflective document called their "First Reaction" to the student writing, in which we asked them questions about what had surprised them in the writing, what they wondered about, and what they thought was next for the student. Next, Ms. Squier facilitated two writing workshops: during the day she did a session with her own sixth grade class, and in the evening she came and facilitated the



exact same workshop with our college class. This workshop had two parts: the first part was to assign the writing piece that both groups were to work on, a “Where I’m From” poem based on the poem of that title by George Ella Lyon (a fairly common classroom activity). The second half of the workshop was about responding to peers—Ms. [Name] offered to our students the very same set of response practices she had introduced to her own class earlier in the day. It was a purposeful decision not to frame it as “here is how to respond to student writing.” Instead, it was “here’s how to respond to peers.” This, we thought, might better position our students to see their middle school partners as peers and not as students of their own. It also provided both groups of students a shared language to use when working in their partnerships. Two days later, the [University] students visited the middle school to have in-person conferences focused on the poem drafts both sets of students had prepared. Practicing the strategies offered by Ms. [Name], they read one another’s drafts, offered each other feedback, asked questions about what else might appear in the poem, and suggested ways one another could revise. Finally, an additional five school days later, both groups of students met in the library at the middle school to have a read-around. Teams stood up side-by-side and read their poems together.

The data and analyses that follow come directly from that partnership and the collaboration days that transpired because of it. Teacher candidates discussed the initial letters they received from the sixth graders, first using an oral response protocol and then in a written “First response” document. We collected the written responses and made an audio recording of the discussion. Next, as participants completed the “Where I’m From” poem writing assignment in tandem, met in person for a writing conference, and met again for a publication session, we collected all related documents as well as took notes as a participant observer during the face-to-face conferences. These data were then analyzed using inductive, open coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994) including within-case and cross-case displays. Resulting themes were then brought back to the dataset as a whole to ensure that what made sense for coded data also made sense for the wider picture.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Four related themes emerged from this data. First was that teacher candidates characterized student writers in ways that commented on the student’s feelings or attitudes, often comparing student writers to themselves in ways that either seemed to ignore the student (focusing more on oneself) or cast the student in a negative light. Second, the preservice teachers relied upon mechanics as the determiner of skill. Third, when asked what was next for the student writer, teacher candidates’ stated intentions were corrective. Finally, the preservice teachers paid only a limited amount of attention to genre when reading student



work. Taken together, these findings make clear that helping preservice teachers encounter and respond to “the writer and not the writing” (Calkins, 1986) is more complex than we had imagined and can have unintended consequences. It is not enough to set up a non-traditional field partnership and hope that it yields empathetic and humanistic approaches to teaching writing on behalf of preservice teachers. To foster that type of stance with preservice teachers, teacher educators must prepare them to think empathetically and reflectively. This includes exposing apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975), building in reflective analysis, and facilitating conversations prior to such a partnership to lay bare preservice teachers’ prior expectations about the teaching of writing.

### **Characterizations of student writers**

#### ***Based on feelings***

Upon reading their writing partners’ letters, the teacher candidates tended to characterize students as people, often even making comparisons between the student’s writing or experience and their own. We had actually intended this as a goal of the partnership, reasoning that as preservice teachers got to know student writers on a personal basis, perhaps noting connections between their own experiences and those of students, they would better appreciate those student writers as writers with much to contribute. These took the form primarily of praise for students’ ambition and enthusiasm. For example, when asked what surprised her about her partner, one teacher candidate wrote:

I was surprised by quite a few things. The first was that [name] is very involved in school activities. I really enjoyed the fact that she has aspirations, even though she is unsure about all of the details, because many students at her age do not feel the need to think about the future. Also, many students her age have already given up on themselves, so they don’t believe they can accomplish future goals.

Another teacher candidate similarly described her partner in terms of her attitude:

The fact that her personality shines through her words reminds me of the very reason I plan to work with adolescents. Her cheerful sunny outlook on all aspects of her life makes me smile. My first thought, to be honest, is I hope to read plenty of student reading just like this.

These positive characterizations of their sixth grade partners initially struck us as good outcomes. After all, they are praising their partners, and they are doing so based on having considered information about the students that goes beyond their writing itself. It is important that teacher candidates develop respect for their students and find ways to regard them as human beings and these responses lend toward an empathetic stance. However, many times, the comments

candidates made about students were less positive. Comments about student attitudes were frequently combined with judgments about students' motives, priorities, or preferences that seemed more harmful than helpful. This often occurred when the preservice teachers began to make additional comparisons between themselves and their middle school partners. The comparisons yielded negative assessments of students instead, an outcome for which we were unprepared. Consider this passage from a candidate's report upon reading a detailed and expressive letter from her partner:

When I first read this letter...I was taken back by how involved she is with her school. I consider schoolwork to be most important, obviously, and it should come before any extracurricular activities that you may be a part of, so I hope that she is able to juggle all of the music lessons and sports activities and still be able to pull accomplishing grades. When I was in sixth grade, I was also involved in extracurricular activities, I played the Violin, I played basketball, and I was a cheerleader; so I suppose I understand that it isn't too difficult to handle those things all together when you're at that age. Elementary school doesn't expect nearly as much from you as the Junior High, High School, and College does. Which is probably one of the underlying reasons why I dropped all of those activities once I moved on to seventh grade. I just hope that if [she] continues to participate in all of these extracurricular activities, she understands the values of effective time management. I would hate for her to have to give up one of her interests, if she has a love for music, then by all means, continue to play your heart out with those instruments, but remember, when it all comes down to it, school is what should be on the top of that priority list.

While that candidate implied that the student's extracurricular passions would make it difficult to focus on academics, another candidate was more direct:

She is involved in band and cheerleading, but, in her writing, she has incomplete sentences, misplaces punctuations, lack of punctuations, and other grammatical errors. I understand that all grammatical errors do not need to be addressed, however, if they are not addressed, students will not be able to learn the correct way to write. I believe academics should hold importance over extracurricular activities. This does not seem to be the case in the life of Kristen.

On the one hand, the preservice teachers were often surprised that the sixth graders were so involved in activities, or so talented, or so interesting. At

first glance this may seem positive, as though the students impress them. But it also reveals that the expectation was for something less—that these things are notable in the way they surpass the teacher candidates’ expectations. In addition, in almost every comment, the teacher candidates make explicit comparisons to their own former lives. It’s worth noting that most of our students hail from suburban backgrounds and were high achievers in school with many extracurricular activities. The same is true of many local sixth graders. Yet, while drawing parallels between students’ experiences and one’s own is empathetic, it can also severely limit one’s ability to see and respond to differences. Too often, beginning teachers tend to try to teach students in ways that would have worked well for them (Lortie, 1975)—but these experiences do not apply directly to students in the same way. Rather than seeing the students as complete, varied people who are writers and who have rich lives outside the classroom, these college students see themselves. Or, alternately, they see people who are unlike themselves in ways that compare negatively.

### *Challenge of Expectations*

Also notable was the sense of surprise in many preservice teachers’ characterizations of students as strong writers. Having compared the student writing to what they expected to see, they were pleasantly surprised. This was their first encounter with student writing in the course of their teacher education program, but their comments make it clear that they had already developed expectations about what they would find. For example:

I was also pleasantly surprised with the quality of her work. Before I read the letter, I was reminding myself that she was writing at a sixth grade level, but when I read the letter, I found that it was written with a much better quality than I expected it to be.

Many students, in fact, expressed surprise that their sense of what “sixth grade writing” would be was disrupted. Notably, in expressing this surprise, several candidates (whose program will result in certification for grades 7-12) also revealed their notion of sixth graders as “young,” “clever,” and “adorable” in ways it is difficult to imagine them characterizing high school students:

I thought the quality of writing was very good. Had I not known in advance, I doubt I would have known [name] was only in sixth grade. Perhaps I need to change my concept of what a sixth grader is like. To me, they are children, but I forget that while they are young, many of them are very clever and ready to prove themselves.

This candidate's partner was one of Ms. Squier's most avid writers:

I was most surprised at how well written the letter was. My student seems to be a much more proficient writer than I expected her to be. I don't know if I had low expectations for 6th graders as a whole or if this particular student is just a better writer. She claims to be writing a series of books, which is adorable and could also contribute to her good writing skills.

These comments about the high quality of student writing might seem like indicators of a helpful move on the part of the teacher candidates, from seeing student writers as likely to be poor writers to seeing them as more skilled. Yet while that's certainly true, it's also true that the preservice teachers here began with low expectations for the quality of the writing—and, perhaps more to the points we will make below, they jumped immediately to an evaluative stance, comparing the writing to standards of grade-level writing they carried in their heads. An interesting line of inquiry would be to trouble where these expectations come from and how, as teacher educators, we can help preservice teachers become critical about the expectations and assumptions that they bring to the act of working with student writing.

### ***Mechanics***

The next strong theme was the way our students used mechanics as the determiner of skill. That is, they tended to pronounce students to be “skillful” or good writers, and then offer as the reason for this a lack of errors. For example, one noted that “Overall, I thought the quality of [my partner]’s writing was really good. I didn’t really notice any major spelling or grammar errors.” Or this recollection: “The first time I read my student’s letter, I was extremely impressed with the quality of his sixth grade writing. I expected it to be full of errors, and overall be very basic.” Another colleague shared that same sense of surprise: “I was most surprised at how well written the letter was... There are few grammar or spelling mistakes if any. Overall I was very impressed.” Thus, even in evaluating student work positively, the standard for the evaluation was having a low error rate. This positions students as error-makers and teachers (including future teachers) as error detectors—and, as we will see in the next section—error correctors.

Viewing student writing in this way posed particular problems for those teacher candidates who doubted their own proficiency in formal grammar or editing. If “skillful” writing is correct writing, and the teacher’s role is to evaluate, then what becomes of the teacher who can’t detect errors (or more to the point, can’t name the errors using the terminology of formal grammar)? This comment dramatized just that dilemma:

I was never critiqued enough throughout my high school or college career in the writing category to know whether or not my writing is up to par. I find this particularly disturbing considering I am going to be an English teacher, and I could not tell you what is exactly wrong with his writing. I can say it sounds wrong but I do not know the proper terms of use to express how to correct it.

This is a frequently sounded theme in our classes as it is in this dataset: I can't be a good teacher because I am insecure of my grammar vocabulary. When error determines who is a good writer and who isn't, it also determines who is a good teacher and who isn't. It is also worth noting that these teacher candidates do in fact take a grammar course and they do (or did at some point at least) possess a vocabulary of parts of speech, sentence structure, etc. Yet unsurprisingly, this knowledge remains detached from their own practices as writers and thus their own "ear" for detecting errors—a detachment that worries the preservice teachers but whose underlying assumptions they have failed to challenge.

### *Corrective intentions*

A third and very striking theme is that the candidates saw intervention by a teacher as the obvious next step for student writers, and candidates' teaching intentions were almost always corrective. That is, when asked what could come next for the student writer, all but two members of the class described corrective teaching intentions. The model they seem to be drawing upon is not one of growth or of extending existing competencies, and not of a writer developing on his or her own, but of intervention by a teacher in which the teacher's task involves correcting deficits. Not only is the dominant frame a corrective one, but also the content to be corrected is mechanical (unsurprising in light of the discussion above). For example:

What concerns me most is that [name] is not a student who despises writing. On the contrary, she listed writing as one of her hobbies. She says that she enjoys writing stories and reading. A student who is so passionate about a subject, is one who would appreciate the corrections made in her grammatical errors. [She] seems like a student who is eager to learn, and if she is taught, she would attempt to apply the corrections to her future writings.

Beyond the irony of the candidate's own comma error in a sentence about error, we read in a statement like this one a presumption that most students would

despise writing and would not appreciate correction. Yet, correction was what all but two candidates focused on:

With further instruction in the usage of English as a writing tool, [he] will have no problem correcting the minor errors found throughout here.

I think she would do well with instruction on improving her writing on things like her style and flow. I would also say it would be good for her to work on her individual sentences to make sure she continually writes complete sentences that have subject verb agreement.

The need for correction was sometimes expressed quite simply, wherein to correct the writing would complete or polish it:

He just needs to learn how to use apostrophes and he will be set. There are not many other concerns I have in relation to his writing or what he is writing about.

Other times, correctness was more explicitly tied to what it meant to be a good writer:

The next thing to tackle with him in regards to his writing is going to be, as I mentioned early, sentence structure. A good writer varies the length of the sentences, and the construction of them. It is okay to use some short sentences here and there, but you want to make sure that each sentence is not a short, abrupt sentence that ends awkwardly each time. You want to be able to throw in compound sentences, use commas to separate thoughts, use prepositional phrases, etc.

In this way, teacher candidates imagined their own response to student writing as correcting the writing. This was at times linked to candidates' notions of what makes a good writer. Perhaps more notably, they oriented their comments in this way even in the context of a partnership in which they had been explicitly prompted away from correction in their interactions with the student and toward simply getting to know the student writer-to-writer. In essence, they were unable to separate their own experiences as students gaining feedback from their own teachers.

### ***Genre***

Finally, candidates paid very little attention to genre in discussing the students or their writing. While attention to conventions irrespective of genre is unfortunately common in writing instruction, it was striking in the context in

which this class is taken: candidates have had a prior course in the teaching of writing in which genre was central to an approach to the teaching of writing. Further, they have also been doing some writing in unfamiliar genres (Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2009). We know that error is tied to genre: what counts as an error or what counts as good writing surely should change according to the genre within which a student is working. However, these teacher candidates ignored generic features, differences, or rhetorical situations by and large. Only five of them referenced genre even obliquely, mentioning that they were reading a letter. For example, one said about a student's introductory letter, "I'm not aware if she has been taught what a letter should consist of or not, but from that structure alone it looks great."

They referred to the genre of the letter primarily to qualify comments about error. Thus this negative evaluation: "I am unsure if she thought that because it was an informal assignment that we were supposed to write informally, but the mistakes in this letter were far worse than the grammar being informal." This teacher candidate was not the only one to consider "informality" in the friendly letter; another commented, "The one thing that concerned me a little bit about his writing was that it seemed a little conversational in style. I understand this writing was an informal letter, but I just hope that it doesn't carry over into his formal writing also." Notably, here informality is seen as a liability if not an out and out mistake.

Only two teacher candidates considered genre in the way we might initially have expected all of them to do, taking into account the requirements and limitations of the occasion and form as they read the students' letters. For example, this candidate compared his partner's letter to his own:

This was an introductory letter...Because of this, it is written in a very simple and direct style. I would not say this is juvenile or in any way indicative of [her] unique writing style because my letter was the same way. It is hard not to write something along the lines of "Hello, my name is this and I live here and I like this." The letter was set up in the same way as mine was: it began with her name, age, where she lived, and who she lived with. She then told me about her neighbor being a university student to give us a common point to relate to. Without consciously doing so, she took the only fact she knew about me, that I go to the university, and tried to show me we have some sort of common ground on which we could build a potential relationship.

This candidate drew upon what he knew about letter writing to understand what he was seeing in the student writing. In the same vein, for one candidate, genre was offered as a possible explanation for problems in the writing:



I would be curious to read one of my students' lengthy papers to see its sentence progression because even this letter did not have a coherent progression and it was a short paragraph. I was also very much into poetic language and creative writing in sixth grade, so I wonder if this student is a better writer in a different genre of writing.

In this last comment are glimmers of that which we had hoped would happen in the partnership as a whole. Rather than assessing the writing solely in terms of errors, the candidate is thinking about problems in the writing in terms of both genre and in terms of the total picture of the student as a writer. Rather than jumping to an evaluation based on error and forming an intention to correct the student, this candidate instead expressed curiosity and reaches out for more data. It is this kind of thinking, about the student as a writer and whole person and about teaching writing as teaching writers rather than as assessing individual pieces of writing, that we had hoped to encourage in the entire group.

### **Moving Forward**

As we continue to teach methods courses and continue to develop partnerships between teacher candidates and student writers, we take from these analyses two major points. The first point concerns the potential of community field placements and partnerships like this one, along with reflection about some of the challenges to making them truly influential on the way preservice teachers go on to teach. The second point concerns our failures to significantly alter the ways preservice teachers encountered and responded to student writers.

All of our students left the experience humming with excitement about their one-on-one work with the middle schoolers. In the parking lot after each visit, students would say things like "I love it here!" "I so want to be a teacher now!" and "That was magical!" After almost three years of college in which they have not had any in-depth field experience, this excitement on its own was a benefit for our class, which often finds itself so mired in bureaucracy of obtaining clearances and applying for student teaching and managing the logistics of getting to their placement that they lose their initial inspiration for teaching. And, in fact, often when our students go to their traditional field placements for the first time, they experience disappointment rather than delight. So to have them interacting with students around writing in an atmosphere of delight seems to us to be important on its own.

However, the purpose of the project was to influence what would come afterward in ways that went beyond enthusiasm. These particular data don't extend into the later placements, yet anecdotal conversations with the candidates suggest that these effects were much more elusive. The partnership experience

apparently failed to disrupt candidates' student/school frame and error-oriented approach to reading student work, it had at least activated a vision of teaching as exciting and of students as skillful. But once they entered their more traditional placements a few weeks later, their conversations compared their own teaching situations and students negatively to Ms. Squier's class. Explaining their perceptions of students in their field placements-- in districts less affluent and more rural in character than the university town -- they remarked that the students were poor writers because the children were poor, the school didn't have computers, or their mentor teacher wasn't as good as Ms. Squier. For this reason, they couldn't do in their placements the things they had seen Ms. Squier do. In other words, they attributed the strong writing they had seen in the sixth grade partners to their suburban setting or to the brilliance of that particular teacher. From that interpretation, they seemed to take a license not to teach writing at all in their placements, to agree with a mentor teacher that the students were not ready to write until some later point in the semester, or to revert to assigning and assessing alone. Even after looking at these particular sixth-graders and saying "they're better than I thought," they still went to their own students and said "they're so low." In fact, we may have exacerbated that reaction by having them in a school where the students have had some high quality writing instruction as compared to the status quo in the area.

And herein lies an important idea about writing partnerships, ideas we had missed when designing the experience for my class was speaking to a colleague about this, and the question he asked me was, "why did you expect anything else?" That is, he wondered why we expected something would automatically be applicable to whole class teaching from a context that had been organized as a one-to-one relationship. It's a good question: Do insights developed in one-to-one relationships with young people carry over into how candidates face a larger group of students—are they strong enough to disrupt the student/school frame?

A compelling argument for community-based placements in preservice teacher education has been that they make it more possible for the preservice teachers to notice and think about students and student learning. That is, taking the responsibility of whole class instruction off of preservice teachers for a moment helps them to forget themselves and really observe what they can about the learning that is going on in the young people they encounter (Brayko, 2013). However, that potential might only be realized if there are explicit bridges made by preservice teachers and by university faculty between the community placement and student teaching placement. It's not enough to go be successful as a tutor or be successful in a one-on-one mentoring or, in this case, in a modified peer relationship with a child. It has to be that the community experience pushes itself into the classroom experience.

Second, and more specifically to the teaching of writing, this study makes clear how deeply rooted is the tendency to view student writers first and foremost as students, and student writing primarily as a space where skills are displayed or where lack of skill is exposed. That is, even in a partnership consisting of one-to-one contacts, designed to offer shared experiences engaging in shared writing processes and shared content, and in which no teaching was expected, teacher candidates consistently invoked the students/school frame. It is a frame that brings error into sharp focus and in which the primary modes of response are corrective and evaluative.

We had claimed as a key goal that preservice teachers should have experiences getting to know and responding to “the writer and not the writing.” (Calkins, 1986). As we have shown, much of the time this simply did not happen; the preservice teachers persisted in attending primarily to the writing itself and commenting upon it primarily in evaluative and/or corrective modes. Perhaps more surprising, and potentially much more troubling, was the frequency with which the preservice teachers did seem to be engaging the writer and not the writing, but then remained in an evaluative and corrective stance. This ultimately has even more potential to do harm in the classroom than jumping right to evaluation of the writing might have done. That is, they did respond to the writer, and many said the writing was better than they thought it would be, but at other times their move toward the writer was to criticize the writer for being a poor student, too busy with extracurricular activities, or unmotivated. We had encouraged them to try to learn about the person behind the writing-- and then when they tried to do this, their efforts were so laden with judgment that they had the potential to do more harm than good.

However, it is important to note that while our preservice teachers had difficulty employing empathy when it came to reading student writing, they, on a whole, were good people capable of empathy in their everyday lives. This juxtaposition led us to consider what a challenge it was to place themselves in a "peer" relationship with someone so much younger and so differently positioned. In essence, what a tricky thing it is to try to be horizontal to a student writer. For one thing, the teacher candidates have institutional authority. They are in the relationship for the purpose of teaching them. They know a lot of things that the students don't and they're older. We didn't ask them to ignore these differences, nor do we think it is even possible to do so. Good writing teachers have a way of hanging out temporarily in this "peer" space, finding ways to be a writer alongside another writer even though there are really so many differences in experience and expertise. We know this kind of collegiality with students is really important-- to be a writer teaching writing and having shared experiences with student writers (Whitney & Friedrich, 2013; Augsburg, 1998; Cremin & Baker, 2014). That was the exigency for the partnership to begin with. However, at the heart of that

stance is a very tricky set of skills, involving positioning oneself in this flexible way. It's a hard set of skills to learn and one we admittedly didn't deal with explicitly in setting up the partnership. One takeaway from this realization is that it's not enough to teach preservice teachers how to teach writing; we also have a responsibility to scaffold experiences for our beginning teachers so that they mindfully practice how to view and treat their students as people.

We believe that one way to encourage preservice teachers to more reflectively and empathetically see student writers as writers and people is to provide more opportunities like the partnership described in this study, that work to contextualize the fears and assumptions that our students have before they headed out into the field in a major way. We will press on in establishing partnership experiences for our preservice teachers, and we will persist in urging them to encounter student writers as writers and as people. Yet, we do so now with a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in getting from simply having encounters with student writers to really developing stances and foci of attention that make a difference in how preservice teachers learn to teach and be in classrooms. We move forward with a more focused effort to help the preservice teachers in our classrooms prepare for and unpack experiences with student writers in critical but empathetic ways: by providing them time for reflection, by gently challenging the claims they make about the expectations of student writers, and by helping to bridge the world of University and PreK-12 classrooms.

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