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## The Evolution of an Elementary Writing Workshop: Fostering Teacher Efficacy and Authentic Authorship in Young Writers

Jennifer Green

*Texas A & M - San Antonio*, [jgreengersh@gmail.com](mailto:jgreengersh@gmail.com)

Kayla Steber

*Danville Independent School District; Danville, KY*, [kayla.steber@danville.kyschools.us](mailto:kayla.steber@danville.kyschools.us)

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## **The Evolution of an Elementary Writing Workshop: Fostering Teacher Efficacy and Authentic Authorship in Young Writers**

Jennifer Green, *Texas A & M - San Antonio*

Kayla Steber, *Danville Independent School District, KY*

Writing is arguably the most complex cognitive activity undertaken by human beings. Writers juggle a wide array of overlapping skills, knowledge, and processes as they strive to express themselves in print. Despite the inherent complexity and demands of writing, stakeholders in the United States have neglected to devote the time and effort needed to develop a deep understanding of effective writing pedagogies (Friedrich, 2019; Graham & Harris, 2019; Griffin, et al., 2020). Concern for underachievement in writing persists, yet teacher preparation programs devote little to no coursework to the art of teaching writing (Scales et al., 2019). Beginning teachers seldom enter the classroom as prepared, skilled teachers of writing; district and school emphasis on the teaching of reading and math exacerbates the situation (Shanahan, 2019). The Common Core State Standards, adopted by the majority of states in 2010, set the goal of transforming how writing is taught in classrooms across the nation (King, 2011). Heeding this call requires analyzing past practice and research as well as applying what we know about the critical components of context and motivation to the development of young writers.

According to Graham and Harris (2019), “Writing and learning to write is shaped and constrained by the community in which they take place” (p. 9). Teachers must consider how to establish a robust context for writers, intentionally including the following elements in their instructional design:

- Participation of the teacher as author and collaborator
- Acceptance and celebration of student selected topics
- Encouragement of peer collaboration

- Provision of opportunities for feedback throughout the writing process
- Publication of student work within and beyond the classroom (Graham et al., 2018, p. 35-38)

When children believe that their voices are valued in a writing community, they will strive to make their stories heard. The notion of community conveys shared interests, norms, and goals as well as a sense of fellowship. Writing presents complex challenges for youngsters; a positive and supportive climate is crucial.

Motivation is another essential component in writing development for young students. There are many ways to define the complex construct of motivation and its impact on student learning. While our understanding of motivation and its interplay with achievement is not complete, it is commonly accepted that students' attitudes and motivation influence performance in demanding academic disciplines such as writing. According to Boscolo and Gelati (2019), three factors influence student motivation toward writing: a) the value the student places on the learning activity, b) a student's perception of his or her writing competence, and c) its value to the curriculum and the student's future study and career (p. 52). The coordination and application of interwoven cognitive processes and skills involved in writing have the potential to overwhelm young students at times, making these motivational factors all the more important.

Elementary students are particularly motivated by choice and the opportunity to share their work with community members (Graham, 2006; Hayes, 2000; Pajares & Valiante, 2006). When provided the freedom to write about topics of interest, talk with peers about their work, and present their writing to an authentic audience, young children's attitude, sense of agency, and self-efficacy increase (Young, 2019). Self-efficacy, the belief that one's capacity influences performance (Bandura, 1977), contributes to increased confidence and willingness to persist at difficult tasks. Efficacious students believe in their ability to conform to the rules of writing and express their thoughts well (Zumbrunn, et al., 2020).

Teachers of writing also need a strong sense of self-efficacy (Curtis, 2017). Teachers' belief in the strategies they employ, the modeling that they do, and the feedback that they give make a difference in their professional practice and outcomes for students (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Teachers' perception of their own methodological writing competence is often intertwined with their complicated sense of self as a writer. For many adults, writing is an emotionally fraught process, influenced by lack of self-confidence and negative personal experiences with writing (Cremin & Oliver, 2017). This factor influences not only aptitude for teaching writing but also the level of importance and time teachers dedicate to writing on a daily basis (Troia & Graham, 2016).

The writing workshop model (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Ray, 1999) recognizes community and motivation as hallmarks of writing time at school. In a writing workshop, students and teachers actively participate in the art of writing,

making choices and communicating with others to grow as authors. The writing process is a central feature of the writing workshop; students as young as five and six years old learn the importance of drafting, conferring, revising, editing, and sharing with the community (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Ray & Cleaveland, 2018). The teacher serves as a model, embracing the creative messiness of writing, and as a guide, providing mini-lessons aligned to students' needs. Though the writing workshop model has its share of detractors (Cremin & Oliver, 2017), its commitment to time, choice, and the writing process have made it one of the most internationally well-known models for writing pedagogy.

Writing workshop expert Katie Wood Ray (1999, 2001) believes that the main goal of a writing workshop is to help students find authentic reasons to write. Children who are functioning like authors fill the classroom with a purposeful, happy hum. They research and explore, talk and interact, brainstorm and stare off into space – all with the purpose of expressing themselves as writers. A writing workshop teacher espouses that children are capable writers and helps them to take risks with their work. Creative writing should be a necessary, predictable part of the daily routine, an essential and motivating element of every school day (Ray & Cleaveland, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to explore the writing workshop journey taken by a young teacher, the students, and me, the instructional coach, in a third-grade classroom. Qualitative data inform this exploratory case study that focuses on the evolution of our workshop and three specific phenomena: student motivation, teacher efficacy, and culturally responsive writing pedagogy. Field notes, memos, conversations, and one closing interview elucidate our inquiry into the lived experiences of the participants (coach, teacher, and students). The goal is a creative synthesis of the data: a portrait of a literacy coach's rediscovery of her love of writing workshop, a young teacher's conquering of her reluctance to write in front of students, and her third grade students' development as authors.

### **Shifting the Paradigm: All Children Have Stories to Tell**

Haywood Elementary School<sup>1</sup>, located in a small town in the southeast region of the United States, had been labeled as *Needs Improvement* by the state education agency for years. Reading and math scores were well below the state average; writing scores for fourth and fifth grade students were worse. More than 85% of the students at Haywood qualified for free and reduced lunch prices, making it eligible for school-wide Title I funding. Title I is a federal program in the U.S. established in 1965 as a pillar of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The principal purpose of Title I is to help schools with disproportionate numbers of

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<sup>1</sup> Haywood is a pseudonym for the school site in this study.

lower income students bridge the academic achievement gap through the provision of high quality teachers, programs, and services (Smith & Wright, 2017).

Haywood was racially diverse compared to the district and state, as Table 1 demonstrates.

Table 1: Student Demographics

Race	School (Haywood)	District	State
White	45%	61%	77%
African American	17%	17%	11%
Hispanic	25%	10%	6%
Asian	1%	1%	2%
Two or More Races	12%	11%	4%

Though the student body was culturally diverse, the teaching staff was not. All certified teachers at the school were White; two paraprofessionals were African American, and the principal was Filipino American. The participant researcher and teacher participant in this study were White.

## Profiles of the Participant Researchers

### Instructional Coach Ms. Green: A Journey from Writing Teacher to Coach

I was an avid reader and eager writer as a child. My love of creative writing is readily apparent in the portfolio that my mom kept through the years and presented to me on my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. The enormous accordion folder was stuffed with books, memoirs, letters, brochures, and more. It was clear that I took pleasure in the creative process; I wanted all my students to experience this satisfaction and joy when I became a teacher.

My teacher preparation professors promoted a workshop approach to language arts and so, I did not hesitate to launch a writing workshop with my very first class. In retrospect, I was underprepared and overconfident, but I made up for that with a surplus of gusto. I relished the intrinsic delight that students took in producing and sharing their books. I experimented with techniques and procedures, tweaking my mini-lessons, conferences, and expectations on a regular basis. Looking back, I sincerely hope that I did more good than harm those first years. My students certainly did me a great service in allowing me the time and space to hone the craft of teaching writing over the next decade or so.

My love affair with writing workshop experienced a hiatus in the early 2000s. Enter the era of portfolio assessment for writing. My instruction shifted to a focus on form over creativity. Under pressure to prepare third-grade students for the state writing assessment in fourth grade, I emphasized the traits of transactional,

informational, argumentative, and reflective essays. As mandated by the school, district and state, I adhered to a formulaic approach to writing and I regret to say, I fell into the trap of teaching to a test.

I soon felt bogged down by stacks of simultaneously completed papers in need of feedback. I struggled to find time to hold conferences with students while others were in need of attention and meaningful work. How could I attend to all the voices in the room, engaging their creative spirits and developmental needs, when marching in lockstep toward a finished product? Where was the joy and energy that my classroom used to radiate during writing time? I missed the daily sharing time that highlighted a variety of writing types and forms. This “down-the-line kind of emphasis” (Ray, 2001) failed to focus on the writers themselves; it was disheartening for students and teacher alike.

Fortunately, the portfolio assessment era ended and I returned to my true north for writing: writing workshop. I revisited *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Calkins, 1986) in the summer of my 16<sup>th</sup> year of teaching and felt my energy and anticipation grow as August rolled around. I enhanced my understanding of the writing process by pouring through notes from a summer writing institute for teachers that I attended years before. I explored the work of writing workshop expert, Katie Wood Ray (2001) and considered how to enhance and adapt the framework to meet my students’ needs. That first year back was reinvigorating. Once again, I heard the hum of engaged writers. Anecdotal notes scribbled in my journal reflected a reawakening in me:

- Marcos, a reluctant writer, almost cried with joy today when everyone burst out laughing at his silly story about his runaway hamster.
- Celeste wrote a beautiful “fictional” story this week about her baby sister adopted from China. When I showed the story with her parents, they shared that she has been begging for a sibling who looks like her for years.
- Xavier (who struggled with dysgraphia) exclaimed with shock, “I’ve never been allowed to write about this in school!” when told that he should move full steam ahead with his informational brochure about Big Foot.

I cherish student work samples from this time. Their pieces were diverse and clever, ranging from personal narratives in diary form to informational brochures to literary nonfiction and more. Writing Workshop was not only my favorite time of the day, but the treasured time of many students as well.

Several years later, after more than two decades in the classroom and the completion of a doctorate in educational leadership, I felt it was time to move into the role of instructional coach. I arrived at Haywood with zeal, ready to launch my mission to create efficacious writers. As a new coach, I anticipated challenges, but

was rather naïve about what to expect. I soon discovered that writing was one of the most complex components of the curriculum. In collaboration with the math coach and principal, we identified the need for professional development in writing, research-based instructional materials, and dedicated time for writing in the master schedule. Still, I felt there was something problematic and complicated going on, something I could not quite put my finger on. I placed writing near the top of my professional agenda, but I was apprehensive about where and how to begin.

I observed significant variability in the quantity and quality of writing instruction in the kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms at the school. Writing was a vulnerable slot in the master schedule, taking a back seat to reading and math throughout the district. This was compounded by emphasis on ritualized essay writing and grammar study in the intermediate grades, driven by the structure of the new state writing assessment for 4th and 5th graders. The lack of time and commitment to writing for authentic purposes had taken its toll on Haywood's young writers. My observations during classroom writing instruction yielded notes with comments such as, "lack of scaffolds and supports," "off-task behaviors," and "need for student choice of topic." Over time, I realized that students were not the only stakeholders who lacked efficacy and motivation; teacher confidence and enthusiasm for writing was scarce as well.

During professional learning community meetings and private conversations, several teachers confessed that they did not consider themselves creative, skilled writers. Writing had been a chore for them in undergraduate and graduate school, a task to endure, not enjoy. Others lamented the lack of coursework on writing pedagogy in their teacher preparation programs. Very few had taken classes focused on writing instruction; such pedagogy was typically woven into reading methods courses and ultimately barely addressed. Another common complaint of teachers was the absence of a sound writing curriculum in the district and professional development to support implementation. Due to these factors and others that went unvoiced, most teachers avoided the struggle that writing presented and admitted to letting it slip off the daily schedule all too often.

Student and teacher efficacy were major concerns for me, but were soon eclipsed by another. An alarming red flag was raised when I heard "these kids" comments slip into conversations about writing. *These kids just aren't ready to write; they can barely read. These kids need to spend more time on spelling and grammar before doing anything creative. These kids need more structured lessons on the English language.* When asked if anyone had considered or implemented a workshop model for writing, I heard comments such as: *I've tried that and it doesn't work. Or, That approach is too loose and kids just goof off. Or, most troubling of all: These kids just don't have the life experiences to write using a workshop model.*

The deficit perspective of children from poverty and children of color is common in American schools and has an insidious effect on teacher expectations



and academic outcomes for traditionally underserved students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Nieto, 2017). If teachers believe, for example, that students' home languages, dialects and experiences are not rich enough for exploration and worthy of sharing, this misguided belief may have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect on children of color (Good & Brophy, 2003). Though teachers at the school seemed to genuinely care about their students' welfare and progress, I did not see consistent evidence of what Geneva Gay (2018) calls "culturally responsive caring." Culturally caring teachers "place students at the center of the learning orbit and turn their personal interests and strengths into opportunities for academic success" (Gay, 2018, p. 61). Culturally caring teachers are also "warm demanders" with high expectations for students and an insistence on academic success for all.

In order to spark interest in the writing workshop approach and build efficacy in teachers, I needed a volunteer willing to take a risk and make a paradigm shift to prove that our kids did indeed have stories to tell and life experiences to share. I embarked on a quest to recruit a teacher to implement writing workshop through co-teaching with me. It took two years to find a candidate, but I felt the project was worth the wait. Three goals were forming in my mind: a) enhance student motivation and writing outcomes, b) improve teacher confidence and skill, and c) dispel the myth that Haywood students did not have stories to tell.

### **Teacher Participant Ms. Steber: A Story of Resilience and Empathy**

Ms. Steber's determination to extend herself, take risks, and persevere are important elements in this story. Her declared area of academic strength as a student and teacher was math. She loved the subject as a child and was working toward a Master's degree in teacher leadership and math intervention. In the classroom, she confidently provided multi-tiered instruction in mathematics and proved herself to be a highly skilled, responsive math interventionist.

Reading and writing were a different story for her, however. As a child, she struggled with phonological awareness and speech and admitted, "As far as writing, I did not like it because I couldn't spell great." She recalled needing that "extra push, that extra confidence" from a dedicated special education teacher who helped her grow as a reader. Even as her reading improved, though, she felt that her writing pieces were never very good or creative. "That stuff just kind of sticks with you," Ms. Steber shared during one of our conversations about writing.

Another consideration in Ms. Steber's literacy development as a youngster concerned state testing. Ms. Steber was a fourth-grade student during the era of portfolio assessment. She remembered, not fondly, the intense focus on the four forms of writing (transactional, informational, persuasive, and reflective). Fourth grade students at that time were also required to take a usage and mechanics test. Accountability pressure was high and many intermediate grade teachers resorted to teaching isolated skills. "They taught in a way that didn't really stick with me," Ms.



Steber reflected. “I just didn’t understand where to put commas in my own writing and why, for example.” She described her teachers’ approach to writing as “straight-forward” and “dry,” sharing that “I just never thought my pieces were any good. I was never very creative.” A bright spot in her memories of elementary school writing was creating her own tall tale. “I did this tall tale in fifth grade about how the Great Lakes were formed,” she said with a smile on her face. “I was kind of proud of that because it was my first little chapter book. I even think I still have it somewhere in my house.”

Fortunately, Ms. Steber was a tenacious youngster with considerable aptitude in other areas, e.g., math and sports. With the support of her parents and teachers, she succeeded in middle and high school. However, her lack of confidence about writing lingered into adulthood. In our final interview, she commented that she knew she was not a “fantastic writer” and that it would take her “forever” to write papers in college and graduate school. The struggle was real for her and she felt she had to “gradually learn on her own how to write.” She acknowledged the important role that her drive to improve played in helping her overcome academic challenges throughout life. “I think my pushing really helped,” she stated. “If I hadn’t had that drive to really improve myself, I feel like I just would not ever be a very good writer.”

Ms. Steber taught writing in various ways during her three years of teaching, but she had never used a workshop model prior to our collaboration. She recalled her first year of teaching at another school in this way:

I honestly don’t even remember teaching writing much. I know that sounds horrible, but we had to focus so much on teaching reading and math. I know we had a writing block and we taught a lot of skills for the mechanics test. I think we did a few writing pieces, but I don’t remember doing conferences,

She moved to third grade for her second year of teaching and described planning as somewhat of an “ordeal.” She and her third-grade colleagues planned as a team and Ms. Steber was responsible for unit planning in math. Though this collaboration saved time, it did not allow her to expand her expertise with lesson design in language arts. She recalled using a ritualized approach to paragraph writing, supported by a specific graphic organizer. As far as student choice and creativity, Ms. Steber commented, “No, nothing like that. They just needed to have a solid five sentence paragraph by the end of third grade.”

When she returned to her hometown and took a job at Haywood, Ms. Steber was thrilled. Though still a relatively novice teacher, she felt confident in her ability to manage a classroom and teach most content areas. From the beginning, Ms. Steber demonstrated a strong growth mindset. Her first year at Haywood presented challenges due to the very low reading ability of most of her students. Through independent study, professional development, and co-teaching, her skills as a

teacher of reading improved significantly that first year. But, in a conversation with me near the end of her first year, she lamented the lack of motivation and creativity in her students during writing. As a reflective, responsive teacher, she felt there was more she could do to promote written expression.

“I know how they feel,” she said, referring to reluctant writers in her classroom. “Just to come up with ideas and go for it – I think they’re really afraid to put something down on paper. I get it.” She was also concerned that her students were unmotivated to write about the topics she assigned. “I feel like that hinders some kids because they might not know a lot of information or they might not be familiar with that topic, or maybe they just don’t care about it,” she said, recognizing that young writers need a sense of purpose and agency to produce good writing. Ms. Steber’s empathy for young writers who lack skill, confidence, and motivation was one of the principal reasons she took a leap of faith and agreed to try writing workshop with me.

Commitment to improving student outcomes was the driving force in our collaboration. However, our different backgrounds and experiences with writing were important factors in our partnership as well.

### **Discoveries and Reflections from our Writing Workshop Collaboration Testing the Waters with a Six-Week Experiment**

At the end of Ms. Steber’s first year at Haywood, we agreed to a brief foray into writing workshop. Quantitative data collected from a curriculum-based benchmark assessment told her what she already knew: her students had made little progress in writing that year. They were well below national norms in terms of spelling, grammar and fluency. More importantly, she recognized that they lacked confidence and interest in writing.

During the warm months of May and April, I visited Ms. Steber’s classroom daily for an hour-long writing block. We carefully selected mentor texts that we felt would resonate with the children and modeled how the themes could serve as springboards for stories. We discussed authors’ craft, demonstrating how to apply the techniques to our own stories. We encouraged peer conferencing and got to know our student authors through teacher conferences. Ms. Steber set up an enticing publishing station and we closed each workshop with sharing from our student authors. Hoping to build confidence, we encouraged students to write about their lives, experiences, and topics of personal expertise. Most importantly, we gave them the freedom to choose *what* to write about and *how* to format it.

Over the six weeks, our hearts warmed as children produced brochures about sports, list books about pets, procedural flap books about Minecraft, and more. It was fast-paced and short-lived, but it made an impression. Looking back on that time, Ms. Steber reflected, “They were so excited! It was like WHAM! We read those stories and all of a sudden, they had their own stories to tell.”

The most moving moment came when Jada, a shy and reserved child, went out on a limb and sat in the author's chair. She rarely shared her schoolwork, much less voluntarily spoke, but she was ready. Inspired by David Shannon's simple picture book, *David Gets in Trouble*, she shared a personal narrative about the time she wandered outside in her pajamas after dark to play with a new puppy. The children were silent and attentive as Jada read in her quiet, raspy voice. Then, as she got to the part about her mom storming out the back door yelling her full name at full blast ("Jada Analise Jones!"), the room exploded with laughter. Jada looked up in shock that her words had caused a reaction. Then, she beamed proudly and finished her story. It was a moment that Ms. Steber and I will never forget.

### **Establishing the Principles of Writing Workshop**

Our trial run the previous spring was important for many reasons. First, it persuaded Ms. Steber that the writing workshop framework was motivating and effective for Haywood students. It also gave us the time and space to strengthen our relationship as colleagues. When Ms. Steber joined the Haywood staff, she was open to support and advice for reading instruction, particularly for students in need of intervention. I was happy to provide it, but initially positioned myself as her mentor and supervisor, albeit unintentionally.

Power sharing, participatory collaboration and equitable positioning are critical for the coaching-teacher relationship (Robertson, et al., 2020). As a former university laboratory school teacher, I had been trained to use a co-teaching model (Heck & Bacharach, 2016) with student teachers. It was my hope that Ms. Steber and I could shift to a "Team Teaching" strategy in the full-year implementation of writing workshop, moving away from "One Teach, One Assist," our default approach during the six-week experiment. This shift would require building trust, open dialogue, and collaborative meaning making; we paved the way by agreeing to meet at least once weekly to plan and reflect.

When August rolled around, Ms. Steber and I followed Calkins's (1986) wise advice about the launch of a writing workshop:

The content of a writing lesson matters far less than the context of it. If day one, two, and three are to go well, we need to structure the workshop carefully, thinking about time, schedules, rules, expectations, and materials. There is no one right way to structure the workshop, but there are principles to guide us (p. 12).

### ***The Principle of Time***

Our first step was to focus on the principle of *time*. We allotted 45 to 60 minutes for daily writing so that students had what Calkins calls "the luxury of time." According to Graham, et al., (2015) effective writing teachers not only devote significant time (approximately one hour) to writing workshop but also

create clear routines for how the writing time should be used. In our planning sessions over the summer, we agreed upon a schedule and collaborated on a management plan.

Mentor texts were read earlier in the day during snack time to save time for dedicated writing during the workshop. Writing workshop began with a brief mini-lesson that often involved teacher modeling or peer interaction. The mini-lesson was followed by writing, the bulk of the time allotted in the workshop. While students drafted new pieces, others conferenced with peers or teachers. Meanwhile, other students edited, illustrated or published. Specific areas in the room were designated for these stages: drafting, conferencing, and publishing. The workshop closed with sharing on the carpet in front of the Author's Chair, a short but important time for celebrating the work of the student writers.

Our intentional, structured use of time during writing workshop was a natural extension of Ms. Steber's orderly, consistent classroom management. Clearly established routines, procedures, and expectations empowered students to use the time well. Ms. Steber reflected on the management of writing workshop at the end of the year, noting how involved and occupied her students were during this final hour of the school day:

The way it's set up, it gave me time to conference more with kids because they weren't all done at once, like when I used to do the graphic organizer and then we'd move on to the next step. With writing workshop, we were all at different points and that helped because it was like, "Oh, you're done? Come see me while everyone else is still at different points writing." So, that helped a lot. And I think they were more engaged and on task most of the time.

Though the last hour of school is not typically the most productive time in elementary school, in Ms. Steber's writing workshop, the writers were immersed in their work and often reluctant to stop for the day

### ***The Principle of Choice***

Choice can be a powerful motivator for children to read and write (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016). We believed that the freedom to choose their own topics would motivate them and help them grow as authors. We also wanted the students to extend themselves and experiment with new genres and formats for their writing.

We read memoirs that were serious (*Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs* by Tomie DePaola) and memoirs that were silly (*Memoirs of a Goldfish* by Devin Scillian). We read personal narratives that were simple (*No, David!* by David Shannon) and ones that were complex (*Thunder Cake* by Patricia Polacco). We read literary nonfiction in diary form (*Diary of a Spider* by Doreen Cronin) and expository text with engaging text features (*What the Moon is Like* by Franklyn M. Branley). We encouraged them to look for ideas in their independent reading and

in their daily lives. We added “bricks” (construction paper rectangles) with topics and techniques to our bulletin board, the Wall of Ideas. As the Wall of Ideas expanded, so did the quantity and quality of the students’ writing.

Ms. Steber kindled more excitement by discussing tangible choices that students could make while publishing. The kids’ eyes lit up as Ms. Steber showed them the publishing center. For many students, being offered the time, space, and materials to experiment with bookmaking was a novel experience. They were hooked and eager to get started. Bookmaking was deceptively simple and compelling for the children. In a writing workshop, the art of bookmaking can also be instructive. According to Ray and Cleaveland (2018), making books is developmentally appropriate for young writers and has other benefits, such as:

- builds stamina
- makes the reading-writing connection clear
- helps children understand the writing process
- develops understanding of genre, purpose and audience (p. 2)

The principal of choice made a strong impression on Ms. Steber and her understanding of her own reluctance to write as a child. She noted how sharing ideas for topics through mentor texts and class discussions led to more creativity, “opening it up for them to really explore what they wanted to write about.” I was also encouraged that Ms. Steber truly believed that her students had important ideas to express. She commented, “Every kid has different stories to tell and I say that giving them the freedom to write about those different topics was really, really good” demonstrating that she did not subscribe to a deficit perspective of her students’ lived experiences.

### ***The Principal of Feedback***

According to Young (2019), effective teachers of writing establish the importance of feedback through their own experiences as writers. By actively modeling, sharing, and discussing their writing with students, teachers demonstrate the struggle through which writers must go to improve. For Ms. Steber, this was a challenging, and sometimes frightening prospect. When asked how she felt about sharing her writing with students, she stated:

That really makes me nervous when I have to write in front of them. I’m still hesitant because it takes me a little time to think about it and so... It’s not always very good when I have to do it right in front of them. I think, they probably think I’m a horrible writer because I’m over here making mistakes and not having complete thoughts.

Deep-seated feelings of inadequacies from her childhood kept her from seeing her own struggle as a potential vehicle or tool for instruction.

In order to reinforce a collaborative community for writing, Ms. Steber and I required students to hold at least one peer conference before meeting with a teacher (See Appendix A). We established a clear purpose for peer conferences and set expectations for behavior. Peer conferences were guided by a checklist so students would listen closely and offer compliments and well as suggestions. Peer conferencing had multiple benefits. Students appreciated and valued feedback from a child's perspective. Many students inspired one another with their ideas, skills, and writing techniques. In addition, the form used during peer conferences motivated students to revise and edit before meeting with a teacher, which helped the teachers to manage the constant flow of writers in need of teacher conferences.

Ms. Steber and I provided direct feedback to students using a similar procedure. Our first step was to ask for the peer conferencing form and give it due consideration. Had the child learned anything about the strengths of the piece while talking with a friend? What changes were made as a result of the suggestions? These were important questions to ask to reinforce the importance of peer feedback and to launch our discussion of the piece at hand. Our teacher conferencing forms (See Appendix B) were personalized and student-friendly. The student author carried our specific compliments and suggestions away from the conference to assist with revising and editing. We also kept anecdotal notes regarding each child's work on class rosters as we conferenced. Our jottings inspired important conversations later between Ms. Steber and me and played a critical role in the planning of upcoming lessons.

### ***The Principal of Explicit Instruction***

Writing workshop mini-lessons can focus on craft, content, or form. As our workshop evolved, we strived to create lessons tailored to students' needs. Our observations from conferences and the author's chair served as our guide. For example, many students were inspired to write list books after hearing Judith Viorst's sweet book *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*, a memoir of a beloved cat. A few days later, the list books were pouring in during conferences. However, we discovered a common pattern: students were indeed listing, but in a very straightforward, abbreviated fashion. We conferred and decided that a lesson on elaboration and idea development was in order.

We opted to approach the lesson on how to enrich a list book by sharing a teacher exemplar. I brought an informational book that I had written about my horse, Pumpkin, who had died of old age some years ago. Each page of the short book began with one of Pumpkin's qualities, e.g., "The first good thing about Pumpkin was that she was sweet and loving." As I read the book, I drew attention to the ways in which I illustrated each quality with details or a story, such as an anecdote about Pumpkin nickering to us as we played in the backyard. Family photos of Pumpkin contributed to audience interest as well. With my own writing



piece, I communicated the importance of elaboration and demonstrated how to compose a rich paragraph for each item on the list.

Equally important was the chance to connect with the students as fellow writers and compassionate friends. They perceived my sadness at the loss of a beloved pet, as well as my commitment to paying her tribute with my list book. One of the unintentional, yet very rich and valuable benefits of writing workshop is the humanizing aspect for the members of the writing community. Teachers and students make powerful connections through the sharing of stories.

As the year progressed, Ms. Steber reflected on her growing comfort with being the leader of a community of writers. After watching me teach mini-lessons with my own writing pieces, making mistakes on purpose and just as often making errors accidentally, she realized that this was an important part of the learning process for all. She began to use formative data from conferences to create model writing pieces and plan differentiated mini-lessons for her class. “I like the idea of how you just see what they’re having problems with and that’s what the mini-lesson should be on, because they’re not all going to have the same problem and needs,” she observed during one of our many planning sessions.

### ***The Principle of Sharing***

When children are treated like authors, they rise to the occasion. As the earlier story about Jada illustrated, the author’s chair is a magical place in a writing workshop classroom. Ms. Steber and I were thrilled to see reluctant writers respond with pride and joy to their peers’ appreciation of their work. In our closing interview, more than a year after Jada’s sharing of her story about getting in trouble, Ms. Steber poignantly said, “You know, that was the first time I’d ever seen Jada share her writing and actually smile because we were all giggling at her story. That was something.”

Writing workshop experts agree that sharing is powerful for young writers (Calkins, 1986; Graham et al., 2018; Ray & Cleaveland, 2018). Sharing time allows students to assume the role of expert, modeling and inspiring others with topics and tips for author’s craft. In fact, the author’s chair is often not the end of the road for an author’s work. It can be the beginning of a new piece. For example, Ms. Steber and I often saw the benefit of mini-lessons and mentor texts on genre during sharing time. Student feedback, such as “That story sounded like a poem!” or “That would make a great play!” frequently provided the impetus for the author’s next work.

Making the author’s chair a regular part of writing workshop not only creates momentum, it creates community. Sharing stories binds group members together and helps us to know one another deeply. Laughing, crying, and reacting to one another’s stories establishes a sense of family and camaraderie. Within a safe and trusting writing workshop, students’ voices and dreams emerge.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

When I opened our closing interview by asking Ms. Steber to share how she felt writing workshop had gone that year, her thoughts immediately turned to her students. She commented on the freedom of choice and its effects on creativity. She described her students' work proudly as "authentic," recognizing that "You want it to be theirs. It's gotta be theirs." She also reflected on the principle of time. For the students, the increased time felt "natural" and she loved the stamina and enthusiasm for writing that she witnessed in her students. Most importantly, we were both thrilled and honored to hear our students' voices and get to know them better through their stories.

### **Increasing Student Motivation to Write**

Did we achieve any of the goals that I had set as a new coach at Haywood? The first goal, to enhance student motivation and writing outcomes, was evident in classroom observations and student output. Analysis of student work over the year demonstrated significant growth. We did not emphasize assessment within the writing workshop time, but we observed tremendous gains in their products. Students who entered third grade frequently asking, "How long does it have to be?" when assigned a prompt for writing were now able to sustain their engagement without specific prescriptions for length. Authors who suffered from writer's block, such as Jada, known to say, "I have nothing to write about," found their voices in small moment stories. And, grammar and mechanics lessons resulted in meaningful application as students revised their stories in anticipation of publication and sharing with others.

### **Building Efficacy for Teaching Writing**

The second goal, to improve teacher self-efficacy and skill, was apparent in Ms. Steber's actions and in her words. When we began the year-long project, I frequently had to guide and encourage Ms. Steber as we planned the delivery of mini-lessons. By the middle of the year, we had shifted to co-planning and co-teaching. Though Ms. Steber appreciated my presence and help on a daily basis, she confidently carried out the workshop on days that I had to miss. As the end of the year approached, we were able to team teach adaptively and naturally. As her skills improved, I found myself watching and learning from her as often as she learned from me. This was a tremendous gift to both of us.

Many of her comments in the closing interview demonstrated her reflective nature and increased sense of self-efficacy about writing. As we talked in May, I was happy to hear her plans for "next year" when she would be on her own. For example, she noted her tendency to focus too much on editing during conferences and stated:

As far as next year, with conferencing, I know with some of my struggling writers, I need to just accept it at a certain point. I think sometimes I tried to change it, to make it perfect, and add some stuff. But, I just need to leave it with what they have sometimes and not make them fix everything. I want it to be theirs.

Her vulnerability about writing still showed, but she felt “less nervous when I have to write in front of them.” She admitted that she still hesitated and worried that her writing might be “horrible,” but she recognized that awareness of the struggle had helped her to become a better teacher. “I know they feel it,” she said, “I know that they know they need to be able to write and it’s kind of scary, but now I feel like they trust me to help them.” By stepping out and conquering her fears, she was able to model a path forward for her students.

I left Haywood at the end of that school year to become a college professor. Increasing teacher efficacy had been one of my major goals at Haywood; thus, I sincerely hoped that Ms. Steber had gained the confidence to carry on with writing workshop with her future students. We stayed in touch and discussed her students’ writing progress and her growth as a teacher of writing. It was with great joy that I visited her classroom after many months away and heard a familiar hum during writing time. As Ms. Steber conferenced with students, I visited with others who were busy with graphic novels, flap books, personal narratives, and more. Several students proudly showed me their portfolio full of published pieces. The sense of authorship was real and authentic; Ms. Steber radiated confidence and pride. She had done it on her own, without my presence and support.

### **Proving that All Students have Stories to Tell**

My third goal, to dispel the unsubstantiated and unfounded myth that Haywood students did not have “life experiences” to fuel stories, was certainly achieved within the walls of Ms. Steber’s classroom. By creating a safe, trusting community for all voices to be heard, she demonstrated that she was a culturally caring teacher. She had created a clear, consistent structure for students; her expectations were high and students rose to meet them. Ideally, this experience would have inspired and transformed other classrooms in the school as well. However, as described earlier, it took significant time and mutual trust to carry out this project. Ms. Steber became a math interventionist two years later and is having a significant impact on students in that realm. She has professional goals to become an instructional coach or school leader in the near future. It is my hope that she will carry this experience with her and find opportunities to advocate for student-centered approaches to writing such as she experienced.

Teacher preparation programs and school systems should increase attention to child-centered pedagogies for literacy and culturally responsive approaches to writing. Understanding the developmental stages of writing and the importance of emphasizing choice and the writing process in the elementary classroom would

empower teacher candidates to create communities for writers. In addition, well-crafted writing pedagogy classes contribute to enhanced efficacy and confidence for young adults who are preparing to teach. Many college students suffer from low confidence and negative writing histories, similar to the teacher participant in this study. Writing coursework for preservice teachers can and should include rich opportunities for honing the craft of writing.

This experience reawakened my love of the writing workshop framework and reaffirmed my belief that it is indeed a developmentally and culturally relevant approach to writing. Our story is a counter story to writing workshop detractors who claim the model lacks the structure needed to improve students' ability to write. Emphasizing the relational aspect of coaching through co-teaching was a powerful vehicle for growth for all: Ms. Steber, her students, and me. It was an honor to take this journey with them and witness the evolution of a writing workshop through their eyes.

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## Appendix A

### Peer Writing Conference

Conference partner \_\_\_\_\_ Writer \_\_\_\_\_

- Step 1: Listen to the writer share their piece without interruption.



- Step 2: Compliment the writer! Tell them what you liked best about their writing (your favorite part, a word or phrase they used, how they organized the piece, etc.).
- Step 3: Give a little constructive criticism; tell them something they could do to make the writing better.
- Step 4: Sign here when you have done all the above: \_\_\_\_\_

What is one thing that you will change about your writing after meeting with a friend?

**Appendix B**

Writing Workshop Teacher Conference

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Writing Piece: \_\_\_\_\_

<u>Compliment #1:</u>	<u>Compliment #2:</u>
<u>Spelling Changes:</u>	<u>Suggested revisions:</u>

- Ready to publish     Make changes & see teacher again     Hmmmm ...