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## Teaching Writing From the Inside Out: Teachers Share Their Own Children's Books as Models in Elementary School Classrooms

Ryan Colwell, *Fairfield University*

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### Abstract

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This article describes the Bare Book Project, a writing and research project that challenged preservice and in-service teachers to create their own original pieces of children's literature and use aspects of their personal writing as models for students in elementary school classrooms. Building on research regarding teacher modeling in writing classrooms, the author investigated teachers' purposes for and methods of using their own writing as models, as well as the benefits and challenges that teachers experienced when they incorporated their own writing during classroom writing instruction.

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**Keywords:** teacher-writers, elementary writing instruction, modeling

### A Classroom Celebration

*My students buzzed with excitement as they pulled out their published children's books. I could see the pride that the writers felt by the care with which they handled their final copies and the gentle ways in which they placed them on tables throughout the classroom to begin our Children's Literature Extravaganza. Students shared their children's book with peers, celebrating their accomplishments as authors and receiving feedback from their fellow writers.*

The Children's Literature Extravaganza is a publishing celebration that takes place in a college literacy methods course that I teach each year for preservice and in-service elementary educators at a small liberal arts university in the northeastern United States. As a former elementary school teacher and current teacher educator, I have always been interested in teachers who write and share their own writing with students. I have wondered for what purposes teachers use their own writing as models when working with elementary-grade writers, and I have been interested in how teachers integrate personal models to teach writing. In addition, I have been curious about the benefits and challenges that teachers experience when they incorporate their own writing as a model during classroom writing instruction. In this article, I describe a writing and research project in which I sought answers to these questions. The Bare Book Project is a course assignment I've developed that challenges teachers to create their own original pieces of children's literature on blank canvases, called Bare Books, and then use aspects of their personal writing processes and products as instructional models for students in elementary school classrooms.

## Teacher Modeling in the Elementary Writing Classroom

Writing has been identified as an essential skill that students need to develop to succeed academically and professionally in the 21st century (National Commission on Writing, 2003; National Research Council, 2012). Beginning at the elementary school level, K–6 writers need to learn how to write for diverse purposes and multiple audiences. They must develop a wide range of writing skills, and find and employ the personal writing processes that work for them. Students require opportunities to explore language structure, purposefully use conventions, and experiment with various genres as they create their own original texts.

Social learning theorists (Beaufort, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978) have posited that learning is, in part, a process by which children develop new knowledge and begin to master new skills and behaviors through their exposure to and interaction with models. Cognitive modeling involves the demonstration of a particular skill or behavior, with explanations of the model's thought process and reasoning as the model performs that skill or behavior (Meichenbaum, 1977). In elementary classrooms, writing teachers often engage in this form of cognitive modeling through direct instruction and demonstration. A second-grade teacher might model how writers use sensory description by drafting a relatively boring sentence in front of her students and then talking and acting out how she would revise that sentence by using her senses.

Cognitive modeling has consistently been identified as a practice used by effective and exemplary elementary writing teachers (Allington, Johnston, & Day, 2002; Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2000). In addition, writing researchers have discovered a variety of potential benefits of cognitive modeling. Modeling can be used to introduce students to phases of the writing process (Stein & Dixon, 2001) and to help students learn specific writing techniques and strategies (Whyte et al., 2007). Cognitive modeling has also been linked to high levels of self-efficacy (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) and self-regulation (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002) among writers. These studies lend credence to the use of cognitive modeling as an instructional approach; however, they tend to conceptualize modeling as a simulated academic incident, where the teacher produces a decontextualized piece of text solely for a specific academic purpose. Students may never see ongoing modeling of writing strategies in real-world contexts, particularly in the context of teachers' personal writing.

Other literacy researchers and educators have suggested that modeling must move beyond decontextualized demonstration of writing techniques. Graves (1990) challenged teachers to become models by embracing their own literacy and living literate lives alongside their students. Elementary teachers who live and model literate lives take the time to write for their own purposes and to pursue their own writing passions; they sit down with their students and draft a few lines of a poem they are working on or revise an editorial that they plan to submit to the local newspaper. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) noted that young writers rarely, if ever, see real live adults actually engaging in writing, unless teachers take the time to write with them in the classroom. Whenever opportunities arise, these teachers also share and discuss their writing processes and products publicly with their students to model the lives of writers at work. Graves (1994) urged teachers to incorporate their own writing in their classroom minilessons, writing conferences, and sharing times to teach writing from the inside out.

Atwell (1998) also teaches writing from the inside out, composing and sharing her personal writing with her students. When she integrates her own writing into her classroom instruction and shares her thinking as an adult writer, Atwell says, she serves as a writing model for her students:

I show [students] how I plan, confront problems, weigh options, change my mind, read and reread my own writing as I'm writing it, use conventions to make my writing sound and look the way I want it to or my reader will need it to, and consider questions of audience, intention, craft, and coherence every step of the way. (p. 332)

Atwell describes the difference between cognitive modeling and teaching writing from the inside out as a distinction between performance and demonstration. Teachers who engage in cognitive modeling may perform and discuss a writing strategy in front of their students, but teachers who teach writing from the inside out demonstrate and think aloud about how they used a writing strategy in a piece of their own authentic writing.

Although teachers' integration of their own writing models has been promoted as an effective pedagogical practice (Graham et al., 2012), there remains a lack of systematic research on elementary school teachers who write and share their writing with their students. A few research studies have indicated potential benefits of teaching writing from the inside out. Kaufman (2008) found that elementary school teachers' public writing and modeling correlated with young writers' choice of writing topics and genres, adoption of specific writing techniques and strategies, and use of formal writing conventions. Cremin (2006) discovered that when teachers shared their own writing with students, they were able to model the struggles that they encountered during their writing processes and talk with students about the strategies that they employed as writers to overcome those struggles.

Along with the lack of systematic research on teachers who use their own writing as models, it appears that teachers may also be moving away from this pedagogical approach. In the current era of Common Core writing standards, prepackaged writing programs, and large-scale writing assessments, it may be more difficult for teachers to find times when they can integrate their own writing processes and products during classroom writing instruction (Kaufman, 2009b). McCarthy (2008) found that elementary teachers feel pressured to strictly follow prescribed writing programs provided by their districts, programs that are often purchased to help students succeed on large-scale writing assessments. As writing teachers pivot away from Graves's notion of living a literate life with their students, they may likely return to using decontextualized and inauthentic writing models, which are readily accessible through prepackaged writing programs and scripted and standardized curricula.

In a time of increasing standardization, one of my goals as a literacy educator is to better understand how elementary school teachers can live literate lives with their students. Building on existing studies of teacher-writers, I developed the Bare Book Project to explore the following research questions:

- How are Bare Books—children's books created from the practice of teachers as writers—used as instructional models in the teaching of elementary-grade writing?
- What benefits and challenges do teachers experience when sharing their writing lives with their elementary school students?

## **The Bare Book Project: Crafting Original Pieces of Children's Literature**

Each spring semester, I teach a language arts methods course titled *Extending Literacy in the Elementary School*. Guided by current research and practice in literacy, pedagogy, human development, and multicultural education, the course focuses on helping preservice and in-service teachers assess and develop children's literacy strategies and skills, and facilitate whole-class, small-group, and individual literacy instruction. Our preservice teachers are elementary education candidates preparing to work in K–6 classrooms in the future, while our in-service teachers are individuals already working in elementary schools. The Bare Book Project is a course assignment that I've developed and have my students complete throughout the semester. A Bare Book is exactly as it sounds: a bound, hardcover book filled with blank pages (obtained from [www.barebooks.com](http://www.barebooks.com)). I hand out a Bare Book to each of my students during our first class meeting and inform them that their task over the course of the semester will be to create their own original piece of children's literature in their Bare Book.

In an effort to help my students live the lives of authors and pursue writing that is personally meaningful, I allow them to make important choices about how they will fill their Bare Books. Students get to select their own writing topics and genres, decide who they want their audience to be, and choose whether to include illustrations—and if so, using what medium. Throughout the semester, students have in-class writing workshop times, when they engage in their own writing processes and seek out writing feedback from their peers. I also encourage my students to spend time writing when they are out in their K–6 fieldwork classrooms in local elementary schools.

The second requirement of the Bare Book Project is that students must use their original pieces of children's literature as teaching tools in their elementary fieldwork classrooms. I ask the students to teach either a whole-class or small-group writing minilesson in which they use some aspect of their writing as a model for their elementary-grade writers. Due to my research interest in how teachers incorporate their personal writing into elementary classroom writing instruction, I allow my students to make all decisions regarding what aspects of their writing they will model for the young writers in their fieldwork classrooms.

At the end of the semester, my students bring their completed Bare Books to our literacy methods class for an authors' celebration, called the *Children's Literature Extravaganza*. They share their published Bare Books, respond to one another's texts, and tell the stories of how they used their writing as models for the students in their fieldwork classrooms. In completing their Bare Book Project assignment, my students turn in their completed pieces of children's literature, any work that captures their writing processes throughout the semester, formal lesson plans that describe how they used their personal writing as a teaching tool, and personal written reflections on what it was like to engage in their own writing and to use it instructionally with their elementary school students.

### **Qualitative Data Collection and Cross-Comparative Analysis**

In order to explore teachers' purposes for and methods of using their personal writing as models, and to investigate whether teachers experience any benefits and challenges when teaching writing from the inside out, I examined qualitative data from the Bare Book Project during the last two iterations of my *Extending Literacy in the Elementary School* course. These data included the completed children's books; additional planning, drafting, and revising documents; formal lesson plans; personal written reflections of 30

preservice and in-service elementary school teachers; and my own researcher field notes, which I took during in-class writing workshop times and during our Children's Literature Extravaganza.

I engaged in an initial inductive analysis of the Bare Book Project data, "checking and tracking the data to see what is coming out of them...to gain a deeper understanding of the values and meanings which lie therein" (Grbich, 2007, p. 25). To explore how my students were using their Bare Books as instructional models to teach writing, I examined the lesson plans, written reflections, and final Bare Book publications that I had collected for each individual teacher, coding each teacher's purpose for and methods of incorporating his or her own personal writing as a model.

In order to identify the specific benefits and challenges that my students experienced when sharing their writing lives with elementary school students, I examined each teacher's written reflection, where they discussed what it was like to engage in their own writing and to use it instructionally with their elementary school students. I coded any benefits and challenges that students identified in their reflective writing. As part of our Children's Literature Extravaganza, I also asked my preservice and in-service teachers to discuss the benefits and challenges that they experienced as they integrated their Bare Books into their classroom instruction. I documented their conversations in my researcher field notes and coded those field notes for benefits and challenges as well.

During the next phase of my data analysis, I looked across the data for all 30 teachers who completed the Bare Book Project, grouping codes together and collapsing them into more general categories and themes (Merriam, 1998). Through this cross-comparative method (Merriam, 2009), I identified teachers' shared purposes for and methods of using their Bare Books as models during classroom writing instruction, and the common benefits and challenges that teachers experienced as they taught from their own writing. In the sections that follow, I present and discuss the themes that emerged from my inductive and cross-comparative analysis, using illustrative cases and representative examples (Yin, 2003) from the teachers who completed the Bare Book Project (all teacher and student names in the following sections are pseudonyms).

### **Using Personal Writing to Model Writing Techniques**

Many of the teachers who completed the Bare Book Project used their writing to model specific writing techniques (Kaufman, 2008; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004) for the students in their elementary school classrooms. Their lessons focused on a range of techniques, from using appropriate capitalization and punctuation, to developing dialogue between characters, to incorporating line breaks in poetry. Some of the techniques that teachers modeled were specific to particular genres, while others were ones that K-6 writers could use across a variety of forms of writing.

#### **Jana's Lesson—Writing Like a Biographer**

For her Bare Book Project, Jana wrote a biography titled *Walt Disney: The Life of a Legend*, in which she told the story of Disney's life and celebrated his accomplishments. On a personal level, Jana chose to write a biography of Walt Disney because he was a person that she found to be inspiring, and she wanted to learn more about him. From a teaching standpoint, Jana was spending the semester in a fourth-grade classroom where students were reading and writing biographies, and she knew that if she wrote a biography of her own, it might prove to be a helpful model for her students. Ultimately, Jana incorporated her completed biography into a writing lesson to show her students some of the specific writing techniques that biographers use.

Jana began her writing lesson by asking her fourth graders what they already knew about biographies. She told her students that there are a number of important topics that biographers often include when they write a biography about someone's life, and she wanted to teach students about those important topics by sharing with them her own biography of Walt Disney. As Jana read her biography to her students, she paused to point out the important elements that are common to many biographies. For example, Jana wrote about Disney's childhood (see Figure 1):

Walt Disney was born on December 5, 1901, in Chicago, Illinois, to his father Elias Disney and his mother Flora Call Disney. He was one of five children, four boys and a girl. After he was born they moved to Missouri.



Figure 1. A page from Jana's children's book: *Walt Disney: The Life of a Legend*

Jana explained to her students that biographers often include a section about the early life of the person they are writing about, including details about when and where the person was born and what the person's family was like. As she read the rest of her biography, Jana pointed out other topics that biographers frequently include in their writing, such as how the person became well known and what the person's accomplishments were. Along with modeling the important elements of a biography, Jana used her biography to model other techniques used by biographers. During her reading, Jana pointed out how she wrote her biography in chronological order, and she discussed how she included major events in Disney's life (e.g., creating the character Mickey Mouse), but did not include minor details (e.g., Disney's favorite food).

In order to help students practice some of the writing techniques that biographers use, Jana asked her fourth graders to interview one another and create minibiographies of their peers. Each student wrote about where and when their partner was born, what their childhood was like, and what their partner had accomplished so far in their lives. When the class came back together to share, several pairs presented their minibiographies. Here is what Jennifer had written about her classmate Marleigh:

Marleigh was born September 13, 2006. She was born in Norwalk Hospital and she lives in Norwalk, CT. She is good at singing, dancing, and drawing.

As students shared their minibiographies, Jana noted the different writing techniques that her young biographers had used, encouraging students to use those same techniques when they wrote biographies in the future.

### **Karen's Lesson—Developing Sensory Description**

Karen wrote a fictional picture book called *My Story* about the adventures of a miniature boy who accomplished gigantic things, despite the fact that he was only as tall as a pencil. She used her story to model how writers use sensory description. Karen began her writing lesson by reading through her entire picture book so that her third-grade students could enjoy and understand the story. Then she read through the story a second time, focusing students in on her use of description as a writing technique. One of the passages that Karen analyzed with her students was the opening scene from her picture book (see Figure 2):

It was a dark and stormy night. The trees shivered with fear and the animals hid beneath the bushes far out of sight. The wind whistled in a wild rage and the rain came pelt-pelt-pelting down on our rooftop.



Figure 2. A page from Karen's children's book: *My Story*

Karen highlighted specific places in her beginning where she used sensory images, and as the author, she explained how she used description to paint a picture in the reader's mind. She continued reading through the text, asking students to identify further examples of sensory description.

Following her modeling and discussion of her personal use of a writing technique, Karen engaged her third graders in a guided practice activity in which they experimented with that same writing technique. Since it was springtime, Karen asked her students to brainstorm some written examples of how they would use their senses to describe the season. The students came up with a variety of sensory images for spring. Sandra wrote that in the spring, she feels "the warm rays from the sun beaming on my face." Christopher wrote that in the spring, he hears the "peaceful, blue and red birds chirping in the morning daylight." Karen invited several students to share their own descriptive writing, and the

class discussed whether the sensory images helped to create vivid pictures in their minds. To wrap up her lesson, Karen asked students to think about their own independent writing and talk with a writing partner about how they might use sensory description moving forward. Karen made sure to remind her young writers that they could use their senses to describe across a variety of written genres, from narrative writing to informational writing to poetry.

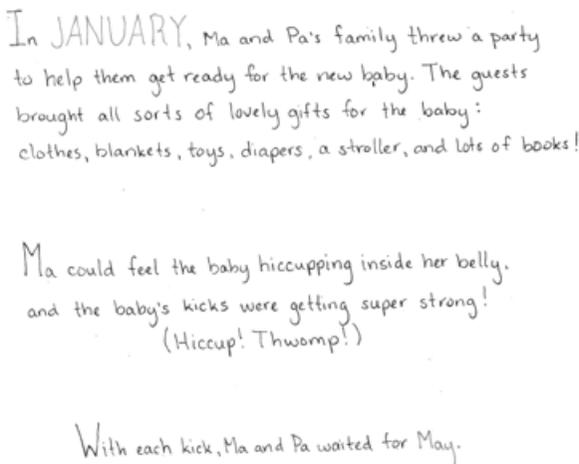
Jana and Karen chose to use their children's books to model writing techniques for their elementary school students. They shared their written products to show students how they personally used writing techniques, then offered their students opportunities to practice those same writing techniques, before ultimately inviting students to apply the techniques in their own writing.

### Using Personal Writing to Model Writing Processes

Other teachers who completed the Bare Book Project used their personal writing to model writing processes (Atwell, 1998; Stein & Dixon, 2001) for elementary school students. During these lessons, teachers demonstrated and discussed how their children's books came to be, in an effort to make public the composing processes that are often hidden from younger writers. Teachers shared with their students the stories of all the hard work that went into creating and publishing an original piece of children's literature, from their initial brainstorming to their final revising and editing.

### Alissa's Lesson—Brainstorming Personal Stories

Having just recently given birth to a baby girl, Alissa drew on personal experiences in creating her picture book, *Waiting for May*. Alissa's book tells the story of Ma and Pa, who find out that they are expecting a baby for the first time. The book describes the important milestones that Ma and Pa experience during each month of the pregnancy as they excitedly wait for their new baby to arrive (see Figure 3). Alissa chose to share her picture book with a group of third-grade students, modeling the brainstorming process that she went through in order to bring a personally meaningful story to life.



In JANUARY, Ma and Pa's family threw a party to help them get ready for the new baby. The guests brought all sorts of lovely gifts for the baby: clothes, blankets, toys, diapers, a stroller, and lots of books!

Ma could feel the baby hiccupping inside her belly, and the baby's kicks were getting super strong!  
(Hiccup! Thwomp!)

With each kick, Ma and Pa waited for May.

Figure 3. A page from Alissa's children's book: *Waiting for May*

Alissa began her writing lesson by talking with her students about the challenges she faced in trying to come up with a topic for her children’s book. She told her third graders that she knew she wanted to write about something personal, a topic from her life that she knew a lot about. But she wasn’t quite sure what that topic should be. She began searching for a topic by brainstorming a list of personal stories that she could tell. She showed her students this list of potential writing topics:

- visiting my uncle in New Jersey
- waiting for my baby to arrive
- planting a garden

Next, Alissa described how she shared her list with one of her friends, because she wanted to find out which of her topics would be most interesting from a reader’s perspective. Alissa’s friend wanted to hear more about waiting for the arrival of a new baby, so Alissa ultimately chose to write her story on that topic, as it interested her as both a writer and a potential reader.

After modeling her own brainstorming process, Alissa asked students to experiment with a similar process themselves. She invited each student to make a list of personal stories that they could tell from their own lives. One of her students, Declan, came up with the following list of potential writing topics:

- when I visited my cousin in Los Angeles
- my aunt and uncle and I went to the park
- why my brother has too many toys

Then, Alissa asked her students to share their lists with one of their classmates to find out what stories readers would be most interested in. Declan’s writing partner told him that he wanted to hear more about his visit to see his cousin in Los Angeles, and he also wanted to know why Declan’s brother had too many toys. At the end of her lesson, Alissa had her writers share their reactions to engaging in this brainstorming process and explain why it might be important to get feedback from other people regarding their writing ideas.

### **Peter’s Lesson—Seeking Feedback to Guide Revision**

For his Bare Book Project, Peter wrote a narrative poem called *Messy Max*. In the poem, Max is a young boy who hates taking showers, and he decides that he is never going to get clean again (see Figure 4). Max describes all the benefits of being dirty, from keeping bullies away with his stench to always having flies buzzing around his head to keep him company. But Max ultimately scraps his plan to be dirty all the time when he sees a bubble bath that he just can’t resist jumping into. As an in-service fifth-grade teacher, Peter knew that many of his students struggled to revise their written products, so he decided to model his own revision process for *Messy Max*.

Peter started his writing lesson by asking his students if they ever talked to their friends, family members, or classmates about any of their writing. He told his fifth graders that he often turned to other people in his life for writing feedback, especially when he wanted to revise his writing and make it better. To model this process, Peter shared with his students an early draft of *Messy Max*. He explained that there were many aspects of his narrative poem that he really liked, but he felt like he could also make improvements. In order to help him revise his story, Peter turned to his friend Brady for feedback on his writing. Peter showed his students a transcript of the conference that he and Brady had about *Messy Max*:

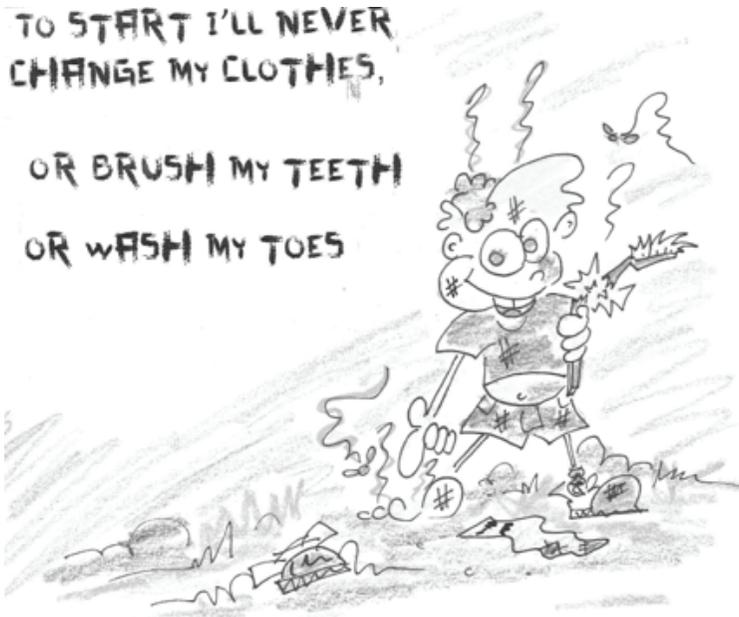


Figure 4. A page from Peter's children's book: *Messy Max*

Peter: Hey, I wanted to show you a poem I've been writing about a kid who hates taking showers. Could you listen to it and give me your first impressions?

Brady: Okay.

Peter: (Reads his narrative poem aloud)

Brady: It's pretty good! I liked a few of the verses toward the end. It really picks up. It's slow to get started, though. I wonder what you could do about the beginning to make it more like the end.

Peter: Yeah, when I was reading it, I felt the same way. I think the beginning is boring because nothing really happens.

Brady: All four of the first stanzas basically say the same thing.

Peter: (Reads aloud the opening stanzas) Maybe if I add a story about how Max got dirty in the first place, that will make it more interesting.

Brady: Mm-hm, try it!

Peter discussed with his students how his writing conference with Brady helped him revise his writing. Brady thought that the beginning of *Messy Max* was too repetitive, so Peter returned to his beginning to try to make it more interesting. Peter read his final copy of *Messy Max* to his class to model the revisions that he ultimately made.

After sharing how he engaged in a writing conference as part of his revising process, Peter asked his fifth graders to engage in peer conferences of their own. Since the students were in the middle of a poetry-writing unit, Peter asked each student to identify one poem that he or she had finished drafting. He had students pair up and offer feedback to one another, with the goal of helping all writers revise their poetry. To scaffold his fifth graders' conferences, Peter had each pair follow a common process. First, an author began by sharing what she thought she needed help with in her poem. Next, the author read her poem aloud to her classmate. The classmate then discussed what he liked about the author's writing and what questions or suggestions he had. Finally, the author described how she would address the partner's questions or suggestions through her revisions. After the conference was completed, the partners then reversed roles. At the end of Peter's lesson, he asked a few pairs to share their conference experiences. For example, Yazmin had written a nature poem in which she described beautiful flowers blooming, and her partner Megan wanted to know what the flowers smelled like. Yazmin knew that she could go back to her flower poem and revise to add more detail. Peter wrapped up his lesson by inviting students to regularly seek out feedback from their families, friends, and classmates as part of their revision process.

Alissa and Peter made aspects of their writing processes—brainstorming and gaining feedback—public, as models for the writers in their classrooms. After sharing their personal writing processes with students, both Alissa and Peter invited students to experiment with these processes in their own writing.

### **Benefits of Teaching Writing From the Inside Out**

The preservice and in-service teachers identified both instructional and affective/social benefits of engaging in their own personal writing and sharing their writing as models. Teachers noted instructional benefits such as the ability to provide clear and concrete writing models to their students and the ability to publicize for their students their own thinking as writers. Affective/social benefits that teachers mentioned included using their own writing as a form of motivation for their students and integrating their writing to build a sense of writing community in their classrooms.

After teaching with their original children's books in elementary classrooms, many teachers expressed how their writing enabled them to provide clear and concrete models of the kinds of writing they were expecting their students to engage in. After using her Walt Disney biography to introduce students to biography-writing techniques, Jana reflected on the power of incorporating her own writing during classroom instruction:

My writing seemed to be a useful teaching tool for the students because it was a small-scale version of what they would be working with, and I was able to model for the class the work they needed to be doing....By demonstrating the method and routine of writing, students can visualize the writing procedure and make it substantially more personal.

No matter what the teachers were using their children's books to model, their end goal remained the same: to provide students with opportunities to connect what they were learning to their own writing. Many teachers felt that using their own writing helped them facilitate students' personalization and direct application of writing techniques and processes, which builds on the findings from previous research (Kaufman, 2008).

Although the teachers were only asked to incorporate their personal writing into a single lesson during the Bare Book Project, several teachers found that they could use their writing for multiple instructional purposes. Personal writing may offer teachers and students opportunities to deeply examine the writing techniques and processes underlying a single model text. A teacher could use a piece of her own writing to anchor an entire writing unit or even as a piece that she and her students could return to on an ongoing basis throughout the school year.

A number of teachers appreciated how they were able to publicize for their students their own thinking as writers. Katie published a fairy tale in her Bare Book, but she shared several drafts of the story with her students to demonstrate her revising process. She reflected on how important it was for students to hear her vocalize her thinking as a writer:

I was able to use my own work and my own thought process as instructional pieces.... As I modeled revising for them, they were able to see my thought process and I was able to discuss with them how I decided to make certain changes.

Often, the writing models that teachers present to students are completed texts, and rarely do students get to witness the thought processes of published authors. Thus, another instructional benefit of teachers incorporating their own writing into the classroom may be that it provides students with living, breathing writers, directly in front of them. Teacher-writers can actively share their thinking about their own writing, discussing their reasoning and decision making—a teaching approach that Atwell (1998) refers to as “taking the top off of your head.” Students can also ask questions about their teachers’ writing techniques and processes and get answers directly from the writers’ mouths.

Along with the instructional benefits of teaching through their own writing, the teachers also described affective/social benefits as well. A number of teachers felt that using their writing as a model could serve as a form of motivation for the writers in their classrooms. Alexia, an in-service third-grade teacher, described the emotions that she experienced when she completed her children’s book:

After putting in the effort to create a piece of writing, it creates a tremendous sense of accomplishment and pride in the author. It is important to give children the opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments and share their work.

Teachers who share their personal writing successes with their students, celebrating their accomplishments and pride in their work, may inspire their students to set and pursue writing goals of their own (Beaufort, 2000; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

While celebrating success is important, writing is often difficult and challenging work, for both children and adults. Many of the teachers found that it was equally motivating to share with their students some of the struggles that they faced as writers. Tanya described the benefits that she saw in discussing her own writing struggles:

I think it shows the students that even adults sometimes struggle with their writing, and that we have to have a lot of outlines and rough drafts before we can come up with a final product. Students would know, then, that it is okay for them to mess up or struggle with [their] writing.

When teachers open up about their own writing struggles, discussing how the struggles made them feel, and how they worked to overcome them, it could motivate young

writers to acknowledge, and tackle, the challenges they encounter in their own writing (Cremin, 2006).

A final benefit that teachers experienced was the sense of writing community that emerged from sharing their writing in the classroom. The teachers described how sharing their writing enabled them to build connections and develop trust and comfort with their students (Kaufman, 2009a). Amelia, a preservice teacher, noted how engaging in her own writing and sharing it in the classroom placed her on an equal, collegial level with her students:

It softens the level of authority in the classroom. What I mean by that is teachers are the leaders of the classroom and students are always answering to them, but by having the teacher come down a few levels and actually show the students that we do work like they do; it makes the students feel valued I think....As cliché as this may sound it makes me feel like “we’re all in this challenging yet exciting world of writing together” and we can enhance each other’s experiences.

Amelia’s comments suggest that teachers who teach writing from the inside out may challenge a more traditional teacher–student dichotomy. As Amelia engaged in her own personal writing alongside her students, she experienced a transformation in her classroom identity. She was no longer solely a teacher of writing, but also another member of the classroom writing community (Christenbury, 2000; Graves, 1994).

### **Challenges of Teaching Writing From the Inside Out**

Although the preservice and in-service teachers experienced benefits of engaging in their own personal writing and using their writing as teaching tools, they also identified several potential challenges associated with this pedagogical approach. These challenges included fear and discomfort about sharing their own writing, struggles to determine what kinds of personal writing were appropriate to share with elementary school students, and worries about the instructional and curricular time commitment of writing and sharing their own work.

A number of teachers felt nervous or uncomfortable about sharing their own writing, which is consistent with previous findings on teacher-writers (Cremin, 2006; Graves, 1990). Emma described the feelings of anxiety that she experienced as she prepared to use her children’s book with her students:

I am not confident enough to share my own work, let alone with a younger crowd. I was a bit self-conscious about my end product and wondered whether or not they would actually like it.

Other teachers could relate to Emma’s anxiety about sharing her own writing. They expressed a lack of confidence in their own writing abilities and felt that students either wouldn’t enjoy their writing or wouldn’t be able to learn anything from them as writers. While teachers may doubt the value of their own personal writings—thinking that they are not “good enough” for elementary school students—those writings could be more valuable than they think. If teachers share the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of their own writing, they may demonstrate to their students that writing is a difficult task, even for adults, and that all writers have anxieties and fears that they are working to overcome.

Another challenge that teachers discussed was the struggle to determine what kinds of personal writing were appropriate to share with elementary school students. Janette turned her Bare Book into a writer’s notebook, which she filled with poetry, personal

narratives, and informational texts that she planned to use as models with the students in her future classroom. She decided against including certain pieces in her Bare Book, such as an entry about her love of wine and a description of her feelings about God and Heaven, because she felt that they were inappropriate for younger writers.

Many teachers echoed Janette's concern about whether their own personal writing topics were developmentally appropriate to share with elementary school students. Other teachers worried about whether their sentence structure and language use would be too complex for younger writers to understand and learn from. Hannah, for example, questioned whether sharing more advanced writing would actually stifle student writers by creating a false expectation that students had to write pieces that were "as good as the teacher." Alexia was particularly troubled by the potential consequences of teachers modeling writing strategies using developmentally inappropriate texts:

One challenge to using your own writing in the classroom is that the work needs to be relatable to the students. If a teacher's writing is not age appropriate for the students in the class, students will have a hard time using the same strategies in their own writing. If they have a difficulty reading or understanding their teacher's work, they will not benefit from the lesson.

If elementary teachers decide to incorporate their own personal writing into their classroom instruction, it appears that they must carefully consider what pieces they decide to share with their students. In developing their rationale for using particular pieces of writing, teachers may want to think about the developmental appropriateness of their writing, their instructional purposes for using their writing, and any scaffolding that might be necessary in order for young students to successfully learn from their models and apply their learning to their own writing.

As they reflected on teaching writing from the inside out, the final challenges that teachers identified related to time commitment. Teachers like Peter wondered when they would find the time to engage in their own writing, given all of their teaching responsibilities:

Writing is hard work, and producing writing takes valuable time that could be spent planning, grading, and preparing materials. It can also be very difficult to find time to write during class, when there is so much else one should be doing, like conferences.

Peter struggled to think about when he might find time to write himself, but he also worried that even if he did find time to write, his own writing might be taking him away from the other important work that he needed to be doing as a writing teacher. This form of writer's guilt, where teachers question whether their own writing should take precedent over the writing products and instructional needs of their students, appears to be a common concern for teacher-writers (Brooks, 2007; Cremin & Baker, 2010).

Finding time to write was a challenge that many teachers identified, but it was not the only challenge related to time commitment. Teachers also questioned whether there is time available for the integration of personal writing within crowded classroom writing curricula. Tamika, a preservice teacher, wrote:

Oftentimes the curriculum that is being taught in a school is very strict in regard to what needs to be taught and what the students need to learn. Depending on the current topic, it may be difficult to introduce my own work in such a way as to meet the standards that I have to teach, as well as to have the students learn from what I am showing and discussing with them.

Tamika's comments reinforce the notion that in an era of increasing standardization, it may be more difficult for teachers to find times where they can integrate their own writing processes and products during classroom writing instruction (Kaufman, 2009b). Yet, if teachers are willing to devote even 10 minutes a day to their own personal writing, as Graves (1994) suggested, then they may be able to find valuable spaces where their writing can serve as models to enhance existing writing curricula and directly meet the unique needs of the writers in their classrooms.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Consistent with previous research (Allington et al., 2002; Wray et al., 2000), the findings from the Bare Book Project suggest that teacher modeling is a powerful pedagogical approach to teaching young writers. The preservice and in-service teachers used their children's books to demonstrate writing techniques in action and to model writing processes for their elementary school students. While the teachers acted as writing models for the students in their classrooms, this modeling was not limited to an isolated demonstration of skills and strategies pulled from a teacher's manual or prescribed curriculum, or the use of a decontextualized piece of writing created for a specific academic purpose. Rather, the modeling stemmed from the experiences of insiders; teacher-writers who were facing similar challenges to those their students faced.

This appears to be one of the major differences between traditional notions of cognitive modeling (Meichenbaum, 1977) and the notion of teaching writing from the inside out (Graves, 1990). A teacher who lives the life of a writer may draw more on her own personal experiences as the source of her classroom modeling, while a teacher engaged in cognitive modeling may model a particular writing technique or process but have little experience using that technique or process in authentic writing contexts. This lack of personal writing experience may stem from the fact that elementary teachers feel pressured to use prescribed writing curricula and programs or to prepare students for high-stakes writing assessments, rather than sitting down to engage in meaningful, authentic writing alongside their students (McCarthy, 2008). Yet teachers who write with their students may possess an added layer of expertise and greater appeal as writing mentors, due to the fact that they have personally experimented with many of the writing techniques and processes they are trying to teach. In essence, these teachers are saying to their students: "I've tried this out in my own writing, and I'd like to help you give it a try in yours."

Building on previous research of elementary teacher-writers (Cremin, 2006; Kaufman, 2008), the preservice and in-service teachers who completed the Bare Book Project experienced instructional and affective/social benefits of using their personal writing as a model. They also experienced challenges related to their own writing anxieties, the developmental appropriateness of their writing, and the time commitment required to engage in their own writing. But perhaps the most difficult challenge of all for preservice and in-service elementary teachers is finding a way to begin living a writing life in the classroom, particularly in a time when writing teachers are asked to implement prepackaged writing programs and prescribed curricula (see Figure 5 for recommendations about how teacher-writers can get started). The results of the Bare Book Project lend further support to the practice of teachers engaging in their own writing and incorporating their personal writing as instructional models.

- Sit down and write with your students on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.
- Try completing any writing assignment that you ask your students to complete, and share your experiences with your students.
- Keep your own writer's notebook, and use a piece of your personal writing to model a writing technique.
- Share your own brainstorming, drafts, revisions, edits, or completed pieces of writing.
- Talk with students about your writing process, and help students find their own writing processes.
- Discuss important lessons that you've learned as a writer.
- Celebrate your writing successes, and describe how you've overcome writing challenges.
- Model goal-setting for the writers in your classroom by setting, pursuing, and reflecting on your own personal writing goals.

Figure 5. Possibilities for teachers who want to teach writing from the inside out

As educators continue to teach writing from the inside out, there are several areas for future research. The integration of teachers' writing models may look similar or different as they teach various written genres to their students. Further research is needed to describe how teachers integrate their own written models when teaching students how to write everything from personal narratives and poetry to informational reports and persuasive essays. As elementary students write across these different genres, their products are becoming increasingly digital and multimodal, blending text with artwork, photographs, video, animation, and music (Anstey & Bull, 2010). Additional research should examine how teachers' use their own digital and multimodal writing as models for their students. Finally, researchers must directly examine how this pedagogical approach impacts student learning and the subsequent quality of students' written products. It would be interesting to compare the student writing produced in classrooms where decontextualized modeling occurs to the student writing produced in classrooms where teachers are modeling using their own writing processes and products. While we continue to study the practices of teacher-writers and explore the impact that they have on their students, it is critical to keep in mind the words of Donald Graves (1990): "Writing is too important to be relegated only to children; it is important enough for us all to include as a basic part of our own lives" (p. 36).

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