Write On!
Promoting Engagement and Motivation in Writing
For Elementary Students

by

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Abstract

The overarching goal of the project was to provide a theoretical foundation, research-based data, and experiential material to support the development of writing programs for intermediate elementary school students that support student engagement, motivation, and interest by affording students with choice, and opportunities to interact and collaborate in a writer's workshop setting. The review of the literature focused on the topics of the sociocultural theory of learning, sociocultural theory in writing, and instructional practices including teaching writing as a process, using Writer's Workshop, and affording opportunities for student collaboration and choice. Reflection on the literature review and the in-class implementation of a writer's workshop writing program revealed how providing students with freedom of choice in developing topics and modes of presentation, and promoting student interaction and collaboration are directly related to increased student motivation, engagement, enjoyment of writing, improved writing abilities, writing output and overall satisfaction levels.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Learning to Write or Writing to Learn?

Writing is permanence. It is the ability to take thoughts and express them in a lasting way that proclaims, "I was here." Whether it is the drawings of early Man left on cave walls, a book that has inspired billions to worship a particular deity, a play that has transcended centuries while maintaining its relevance, or song lyrics that have inspired a generation to demand social change, writing is the means of communication that allows humankind to hear the voices of those who came before us and it will allow our voices to be heard long after we have gone.

Once the privilege of a select few, writing has become a skill that is both desired and necessary for success in an ever-changing world. As Graham and Hebert (2010) point out, "globalization and technological advances have changed the nature of the workplace [and] reading and writing are now essential skills in most white and blue collar jobs" (p. 3). Furthermore, Graham and Hebert (2010) assert that writing is not just a means of transmitting information from one person to another, or generation to generation, but writing is "the process of learning, and hence, of education" (p. 1). Sociocultural theorists like Vygotsky (1978) and Halliday (1974) argue that language, be it written or oral, is one of the means in which "the patterns of living are transmitted" and an individual "learns to act as a member of a society" (Halliday, 1974, p. 4).

To me, writing is more than a checklist skill on a resume or a tool of enculturation, it is means of claiming self-identity. As such, my interest in this topic stems from a personal desire to be a writer in order to lay claim to my identity. I am also interested in providing my

students with a writing experience that allows them the opportunity to claim their identities as writers and by extension discover their self-identity in a world in which we can be relegated to being a number in the system.

I was also motivated to pursue this topic because of the cacophony of groans I have heard over the years when my students read the word 'Writing' on the day plan. As an avid reader and writer, it made no sense to me; how could one possibly not enjoy writing? But there it was; by Grade 6 students had had their fill of writing topics that ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous. As Vygotsky (1978) stated, "writing should be meaningful and the natural methods of teaching reading and writing involve appropriate operations on the child's environment" (pp. 117-118). Therefore, consideration needs to be given to the social context students are working within and which instructional practices best suit their emotional, social, and educational needs.

Finding Balance – Relinquishing Control in Favour of Student Engagement

Yet the thought of relinquishing control to students is challenging for many teachers. The notion of teacher as the 'expert' and student as the 'blank slate' waiting receptively to be filled with knowledge has been firmly entrenched in pedagogical practice. In 2004, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) formally developed a set of principles designed to guide teaching practices for writing. Their findings, published as the *NCTE Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing* (NCTE, 2004), indicated that choice, relevant topics for authentic audiences, purposeful assignments, collaboration, and ample time to write were among the vitally important facets that contributed to creating motivated and engaged students; they also stated that "instruction should be geared toward making sense in a life outside school, so that writing has ample room to grow in individual's lives" (NCTE, 2004, p.

1). By enabling students to see themselves as writers on their own terms, teachers encourage students to "develop and refine writing skills throughout their writing life" (NCTE, 2004, p. 2), rather than simply regarding writing as a means to achieve a letter grade at the end of a semester.

In this way, students begin to develop a meta-awareness of their own abilities as writers and the desire to write more is generated from writing itself. Therefore, writing is not only a tool in the communication process, but also a tool that permits students to discover what they honestly have to say on a topic. Smagorinsky (2007), quoting Vygotsky in regard to the sociocultural theory of learning, asserts that speech is the "primary tool in the construction of culture" (p. 64). He goes on to suggest that students are in fact "writing to learn" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 65) as much as they are learning to write. In other words, when students use writing as an extension of speech in order to represent the world around them, they are able to problem solve, identify issues, construct questions, reconsider ideas, and try out new ones. Consequently, when students confer and collaborate, talk and write, they are more likely to generate ideas and internalize new learning because of the "playful and experimental dimension" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 65) facilitated by these process. Rather than fearing censure for what the final form might look like, students are willing to write for the experience of learning in the process.

Writing researchers also agree that successful writers interact and collaborate orally before, during, and after the writing process: they talk with other writers, with mentors, with their potential audience, and often with themselves (Atwell, 1998; Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006; Eun, 2010; Laman, 2011). The NCTE (2004) explains this propensity by stating that "writers often talk to rehearse the language and content that will go into what they

write, and conversations often provide an impetus or occasion for writing" (p. 5). This exploratory speech (Barnes, 2008) is, according to Smagorinsky (2013), central to the approach that grants students the opportunity to "think through writing" and use "the potential of speech to generate and explore ideas" (p. 194). When educators dismiss the notions that speech and writing can exist only in certain orthodox forms, that cognition can occur only inside the skull, and that writing is the final expression of learning, they are closer to Vygotsky's vision of "cognition as a full-body experience, particularly in relation to emotions" (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 197). Encouraging students to choose their own topics and collaborate through talk at all points during the writing process enables them to explore and broaden the ideas that are important to them. This sociocultural perspective recognizes that new ideas for writing come from talk, and that expanded ideas for talk come from writing (Bobbitt Nolan, 2007; Murray, 1972; Vetter, 2011).

The practice of providing opportunities for students to interact and collaborate to improve writing is also supported by research conducted specifically in the area of Writer's Workshop (Atwell, 1987, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Graves 1983). Laman (2011) found that "one's understandings of literacy shape and are shaped by the social contexts in which they participate" (p. 134). Therefore, through sharing the experience of literacy in the classroom, children both teach and learn from each other. Certainly one of the underpinnings of sociocultural theory in education is that children learn what literacy is, how it is used, and why it is important, through participating in everyday literacy activities with the individuals who are significant in their lives. While Gee (1989) postulated that children's immediate family environment is the foundation for their home-based identity kit or Primary Discourse, he also recognized that their Secondary Discourses are shaped by interactions with significant

others. Therefore, interaction and collaboration with others (students and teachers) can afford individuals with access to new ways of thinking, doing, and being; effectively, enculturation into the way an immediate peer group thinks and behaves in regard to literacy can impact students' understanding of language and ultimately their motivation and desire to write.

Writing in the 21st Century

Like the NCTE in 2004, Gregorian (2010), in his foreword to Graham and Hebert's (2010) report *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading*, states that "American students today are not meeting even basic literary standards and their teachers are at a loss for how to help them" (p. 2). Given that we live in an age of global information and technology, the "ability to read, write, and comprehend – in other words to organize information into knowledge – can be viewed as tantamount to survival" (Graham & Hebert, 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, Vetter (2011) suggests that becoming a successful "writer is an important skill for the young because it predicts academic success, supports and extends learning, provides opportunities to participate in civic and community life, and fulfills the expectations of the workforce to create clear and concise documents" (p. 18). The challenge for teachers is how to get students engaged in literacy activities, particularly writing. Along with student interaction and collaboration, choice is a key component in the development of motivation and engagement in writing (Murray, 1972, p. 13). It has been suggested by Hillocks (2002) that high stakes testing results in low standards of writing because these evaluations rely on formulaic writing prompts that eliminate the need for independent thought (as cited in Vetter, 2011, p. 187). Indeed, The National Writing Project (2010) and Smagorinsky (2007) discuss how young people do write for their own purposes (e.g., blogs, tweets, emails, websites, Facebook, fan fiction sites etc.), and that scaffolding the writing

process and using writer's workshop can improve writing proficiency and engagement. Furthermore, Vetter's (2011) work with high school students demonstrated that despite any previous negative writing experiences, when given the opportunity to engage in writing that was meaningful and purposeful to their immediate situations, students positioned themselves as writers (p. 190). As mentioned previously, when students are permitted to access their Primary Discourse in order to utilize their "own cultural and linguistic capital to become writers in the classroom" (Gee, 1989, p. 190), rather than writing for an artificial audience (the teacher) or merely for letter grades, they will begin to identify themselves as writers who are self-motivated and who use written language to assert that identity.

While this lack of control can be disconcerting for many teachers, particularly if their students choose to write about topics that may be deemed inappropriate in the school setting, it can provide students with the opportunity to address common concerns, socio-political issues, and personal and societal dilemmas; students empowered with writing choice are able to instinctively consider topics that are relevant and meaningful in their world, rather than those that would be judged important by teachers (Vetter, 2011, p. 194). Freire and Macedo (1987) stated that, "literacy should be a way for students not only to read words on a page, but to read words in relation to the world around them" (as cited in Vetter, 2011, p. 191). Therefore, choice in writing can give students a purpose that is self-motivating, promotes discussion, ensures students are writing for an authentic audience, and most importantly enables students to capitalize on their own sociocultural and academic experiences in order to situate themselves as writers (Vetter, 2011, p. 193).

Literacy Curriculum in British Columbia

Considering that research indicates there is an inextricable link between oral language, student interaction, and success in writing, it is not surprising that the British Columbia Ministry of Education English Language Arts Kindergarten to Grade 7 Curriculum (2006) organized the goals of the Language Arts curriculum for all grades into three components: oral language; reading and viewing; and writing and representing (pp. 343, 346 & 349). The overarching components of 'Oral Language' and 'Reading and Viewing' are to improve and extend thinking, which occurs as students explore, express, present, demonstrate, and respond to ideas. Naturally developing out of these processes, content in the 'Writing and Representing' strand describes how students need to be further encouraged to extend their thinking through expressing and refining, communicating ideas and knowledge, and informing and persuading (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, pp. 353-382).

In the British Columbia English Language Arts Kindergarten to Grade 7 Curriculum (2006), the Ministry of Education refers to the pedagogical underpinnings of the Zones of Proximal Development and the Gradual Release of Responsibility model to describe how teachers model, coach, and support student writing before releasing responsibility to students who are capable of undertaking the process independently. In the curriculum document the process of writing has been organized into five discreet stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing and presenting. Although the stages appear to be independent of each other, in reality the "strategies may be used continuously throughout the writing process" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 349) until the student is able to apply the skills and strategies of the writing process successfully in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes. Furthermore, some suggested achievement indicators in the Grade 6 English

Language Arts curriculum (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) refer to a process approach for writing instruction through the use of writing strategies. For example, C10 in the Writing and Representing section states students should be able to: assess and reflect on their writing by being able to describe the strategies used during writing, e.g., prewriting, building criteria, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, and presenting (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 380). However, the main focus in the Writing and Representing component is on textual features and finished/published products. Aspects of writing such as sentence structure and fluency, word choice and order, text structure, genre, form, grammar and usage, punctuation and capitalization, vocabulary and spelling, and presentation are emphasized as preferred goals that can be measured using the British Columbia Performance Standards for Writing (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, pp. 21-28). Despite the fact that the Grade 6 English Language Arts curriculum does refer to writers making a connection to personal feelings and expressing individual perspectives (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 375), little attention is given to experiential learning, collaborative learning, and the development of new and expanded ideas through the process of writing. Viewing writing in this way subjugates it to an educational domain in which it is meaningful only for its technical accuracy and final draft outcome.

The newly created British Columbia Ministry of Education (2013) *Transforming Curriculum and Assessment* draft document is organized according to 'Big Ideas' and 'Core Competencies' rather than 'Prescribed Learning Outcomes' or "Suggested Achievement Indicators." By doing so, it removes the temptation to view literacy as something with a finite goal or finish line that can be measured in the same way for every student. Specifically, the new Core Competencies speak to the pedagogical goals of communicating effectively,

thinking critically, developing positive personal and cultural identities, and using literature for both enjoyment and to find meaning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3). Rather than referring to written language as completely separate from oral language, the revised curriculum document recognizes the link between these two aspects of literacy. In the proposed curriculum document it is stated that students will "use the writing process" and "apply the conventions of language" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013, pp. 3-4) to enhance communication. By using the phrase "will be able to develop," it is recognized that students are able to achieve success along a continuum of learning that appreciates students' varying abilities and sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, the multifaceted social nature of writing is recognized through the statement that students will be able to develop "using language with increasing artistry and precision is a powerful tool in the process of communicating for a variety of purposes and audiences" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3).

Project Overview

In Chapter 1 I have discussed the importance of writing as a component of literacy and some of the challenges surrounding teaching writing in the 21st century. I also discussed the issues of collaboration, choice, and curriculum development as they pertain to engagement and motivation in student writing. Finally, I discussed the idea of developing writer identity by teaching *writing to learn* rather than *learning to write*.

In Chapter 2 of this project I discuss the sociocultural theory of learning and how it influences writing instruction. I also explore in detail how writing instruction, specifically process based instruction and writer's workshop, collaboration, and choice, can promote engagement and motivation while encouraging students to view writing as a means of

extending and improving their thinking. In the literature review I look at seminal work and newer research in order to explore pedagogical theories and approaches intended to promote the internalization of knowledge about the writing process as well as increased student interest, engagement, and motivation.

In Chapter 3 I reflect on the introduction of Writer's Workshop in a Grade 5/6 classroom during a six month period during the 2014-2015 school year. Specifically, I focus on aspects of promoting student engagement and motivation through encouraging and supporting student interaction, collaboration, and choice.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Research exploring the role of motivation and engagement in the development of literacy is ubiquitous. It requires only a cursory search to discover that researchers over the last 45 years have determined what literacy teachers have known all along: children must be personally motivated and engaged in order for learning to take place (Atwell, 1987; Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Frey & Fisher, 2010; Murray, 1972; Nolen, 2007; Thompson, 2013). Without students' personal motivation and engagement, literacy tasks assigned by teachers are no more than perfunctory jobs, a laundry list of 'to-do' chores that simply need to be completed. The development of literacy skills requires considerably more than rote learning of grammar and spelling; it is a social, emotional, and cognitive experience in which students must be actively engaged and individually motivated in order for them to achieve success at a personal level and at a level which will allow them to participate in the 21st century global community. As stated in the report *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Graham & Hebert, 2010), the authors concluded:

> [i]f students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write. (p. 2)

In this chapter I review the academic literature and research surrounding the role of engagement and motivation in the development of writing skills in elementary students. Specifically, I discuss the sociocultural theory of learning and its application to writing instruction, and the role of instructional practice including process based instruction, writer's

workshop, collaboration, and student choice in promoting engagement and motivation leading to improved writing ability in elementary students.

Sociocultural Theory of Learning

It seems like an over-simplification of the sociocultural theory of learning to merely say that all learning is social. However, as Smagorinsky (2007) notes, Vygotsky's theorizing implies all thinking (and by extension learning) has social origins (p. 62). The thinking and learning that individuals do is perpetually influenced by social dialogue. Whether that dialogue occurs in real time and physical space or it is an inner dialogue mediated by personal experiences, the social nature of learning is undeniable.

Prior (2006) points out that sociocultural theory argues all "activity is situated in concrete interactions that are simultaneously improvised locally and mediated by prefabricated, historically provided tools and practices" (p. 55). It is within social activity that individuals are socialized into alignment with others, but as they "appropriate cultural resources" they are "individuated as their particular appropriations historically accumulate to form a particular individual" (Prior, 2006, p. 55). Prior's (2006) theorizing supports Vygotsky's assertion that human consciousness is "sociohistorically produced" and that "learning/development [is] a confluence of histories (polygenesis, cultural genesis, and ontogenesis)" (p. 55).

Vygotsky's (1978) research led him to postulate that language and perception were inextricably linked and, like Potebnya (n.d.) argued there is an interdependence between language and thought (p. 33). Furthermore, he maintained that children use language, first and foremost, as a means of social contact with others, and then the communicative and cognitive functions of language become the basis for new and superior forms of activity and understanding (Vygostky, 1978, p. 29). Language is thusly transformed from a tool for

labeling and identifying into a means of synthesizing and eventually internalizing complex forms of cognitive perception. In terms of sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1978) asserted that children acquire information through their personal, sociocultural experiences and "are capable of reconstructing their perception" (p. 36) to "synthesize past [and] present visual fields" (p. 37) to suit their purposes. Essentially, children develop knowledge and cognition as a result of their interactions with others situated within specific social and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that the development of higher psychological functioning originates in social interactions between people and is ultimately the result of an extensive series of transformations and developmental events that occur over a protracted period of time creating a shift from interpersonal processes to intrapersonal processes (p. 57). According to Vygotsky (1978), this "internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology [and] the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology" (p. 57). In terms of pedagogical implications, Vygotsky's (1978) ideas of development "presuppose a specifically social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88). Central to sociocultural theories of learning, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zones of proximal development (ZPD) refers to the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). By definition therefore, the ZPD describes functions that have not yet developed or matured, but are currently in the "embryonic state" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) and will develop prospectively.

Barton and Hamilton (2000), Bomer (2007), and Laman (2011) likewise suggest people's "understandings of literacy shape and are shaped by the social contexts in which they participate" (Laman, 2011, p. 134). Smagorinsky (2013) elaborates on Moll's idea of cultural "funds of knowledge" (p. 197) and points out that children develop "culturally learned ways of knowing – those that people learn through their interactions with those who surround them" (p. 197) which inherently situates them as significantly different from other groups in society. While Gee's (1989) work on Primary Discourse would suggest that this initial home-based sense of identity is the foundation for all other learning, Smagorinsky (2013) suggests that it can also be a source of dysphoria in the school context which can create tension between what one knows culturally and what one is expected to know socially (p. 195).

Pantaleo (2010) points out that studies by Heath (1983) and McCabe (1997) revealed how children who were not familiar with traditional European North American linear and sequential ordering of narrative stories were impacted in both their academic achievement and social interactions at school. Indeed, Pantaleo's own research as well as the research she cites by Cairney (1992), Dressel (1990), and Lancia (1997) document "the influence of literature read or heard by students on their written texts" (Pantaleo, 2010, p. 265). Specifically, Rosenblatt's transactional theory suggests that students bring personal experiences to their reading and writing that are impacted by the "cultural, social, and personal history" (Pantaleo, 2010, p. 267) they are exposed to. In sociocultural terms, Pantaleo (2010) acknowledges writing as a "social practice [that] recognizes the connection between the reading and writing of students [and] their membership in a particular classroom community" (p. 276). By extension, the students' individual membership within a greater social and cultural

community and the social context they are working within impacts their linguistic behaviours and literacy achievement.

Writing and sociocultural theory.

Although Vygotsky privileged speech as the "tool of tools" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 64) in the construction of culture and the dissemination of knowledge, he also asserted that transforming inchoate private thoughts into public or expressive speech in the form of writing enabled writers to change, adapt, and extend their thinking (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 194). This process affords the formation of new ideas by both the writer and the reader. To transfer this notion into the classroom means accepting that speech and writing serve equally as tools in the generation and development of new ideas. Therefore, just as speech can serve as a medium for rehearsing thoughts and exploring ideas, writing, either formative or formalized, can be a way to work through a problem, expand ideas, and ultimately promote learning. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) noted the importance of written language stating that it was a "system of signs and symbols whose mastery heralds a critical turning point in the entire cultural development of the child" (p. 106).

Troia, Lin, Cohen, and Monroe (2011) noted a significant paradigm shift in writing instruction 25 years ago that transferred the focus from the conventions and attributes of writing and finished product to the processes used to generate texts (p. 155). This shift seems to have occurred in response to the realization that the mastery of written language "cannot be accomplished in a purely mechanical and external manner, rather it is the culmination of a long process of development of complex behavioural functions in the child" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 107). Language is, as Halliday (1969) points out, "in the broadest sense social" (p. 37); its

development occurs within sequences that are "articulated each within itself and the situation in which it occurs" (p. 37).

Donald Graves (1980, 1983, 1984) was one of the first educators and researchers to promote the idea that writing ability was something that evolved over time as a result of collaborative effort between student and teacher and student and peers. Graves and Murray (1980), stated that "children as young as 8 years of age are capable of writing to *find out* what they mean" (p. 39). In other words, as Vygotsky (1978) asserted, children are capable of transforming and internalizing socially mediated information to develop their cognition (p. 57). Yet Graves and Murray (1980) described teachers, writing programs, and curriculum of the time as "experts at stealing children's voices" (p. 39) and recognized the need for pedagogical change. According to Graves (1984), the traditional rules about right methods for teaching reading and writing actually were "substitutes for thinking" that "cloud[ed] the issues with jargon in place of simple, direct prose about actual children" (p. 185).

Influenced by the work of Graves (1980, 1983, 1984), Atwell (1998), who like many other teachers assigned her students topics because she believed that her "ideas were more credible and important than any [her] students might possibly entertain" (p. 7), came to realize the choices she made when writing (deciding how, when, what, and for whom she would write) were not options available to her students within the confines of her organized and prescribed writing curriculum (p. 10). Atwell (1998) became an "evolutionist" (p. 3) by taking Graves's (1975) advice to "free ourselves for effective observation and participation in all phases" of writing (p. 15). As such, Atwell (1998) became a "mentor of writing, a mediator of writing strategies and a model of a writer at work" (p. 21). Handing over responsibility to the writer, Atwell (1998) provided her students with the opportunity to write about what they

knew, what they cared about, and what had real life meaning to them (p. 14). By doing so, she enacted Vygotsky's (1978) idea that "writing should be meaningful for children, that an intrinsic need should be aroused in them and that writing should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life" (p. 118). Situated in a sociocultural approach to writing instruction, Atwell's (1998) writer's workshop pedagogies can be viewed as operating within the zones of proximal development: student writers writing in collaboration with teachers and more capable peers in order to extend their own thinking with the goal of finding their own voice and means of expression.

Eun (2010) refers to pedagogical perspectives like Atwell's that incorporate teaching, learning, and development as being close to Vygotsky's (1978) notion of *obuchenie*, an holistic idea that indicates the interconnectedness of those factors (p. 402). Although it could be argued that writer's workshop does not provide effective writing instruction because students have the ability to go ahead of instruction and write in styles that have not been explicitly taught, Eun (2010) points out that Vygotsky insisted "the social origins of individual psychological functions implies that with appropriate support from adults (e.g. teachers), children have the infinite potential to learn almost anything" (p. 403).

Similar to Vygostsky's (1978) theories and Atwell's (1998) methods, Eun (2010) suggests several practical implications of applying sociocultural theories to writing instruction. First, Eun (2010) notes the importance of recognizing the home/school connection which affords students the opportunity to enhance their formal writing through the exploration of the "funds of knowledge" (p. 404) as described by Moll and Greenburg (1990 as cited in Eun, 2010). Moreover, the interactive, collaborative, and dynamic nature of sociocultural pedagogies reflects the notion that knowledge is co-created in both cognitive and affective

domains serving to solve real life problems; as such, knowledge is a human creation integrated across psychological functions rather than merely fact transmission from one person to another (Eun, 2010, p. 405).

Similarly, Laman (2011) explored how children's understanding of literacy is informed by their "participation in everyday literacy events alongside significant others, [w]ithin the daily rhythms of homes and communities" (p. 134) and how experiences within different social contexts affords students the opportunity to discover what literacy (particularly writing) is about and for. Laman's study, carried out in the southeastern United States, followed a Grade 4 classroom of 17 students with diverse cultural backgrounds over the course of a school year; the commonalities for the students was their designation as being in the lowest academic track and having previous literacy experiences limited to rote learning, copying from the board, and simple response or journal writing.

Working in conjunction with the classroom teacher, Laman (2011) introduced students to Writer's Workshop based on Calkin's (1994 as cited in Laman, 2011) work; students took part in mini-lessons, independent work time, reflection, sharing, and ultimately a celebration of writing at year end. Over the course of the year, Laman collected data through field notes, interviews, and audio-taped mini-lessons and conferences from before the intervention, during, and post completion. Her findings indicated that within the writer's workshop structure, students were able to use their individual cultural tools to explore writing in ways that had not been previously available in traditional writing instruction. Laman (2011) stated that key to this process was shared talk between students and student to teacher that "contribute[d] to the children's social activity and learning" (p. 134); specifically, she found talk in three areas informed the process of learning: shared space, meta development, and

writer identity (p. 137). In the shared space of conferences, writer and teacher were able to come to new understandings and realizations. The self-reflection process allowed students to think about their own writing and develop a meta-awareness that promoted growth. Finally, the authentic audience connection and the immediacy of sharing permitted students to become authors and ultimately enact their identity as writers (Laman, 2011, pp. 136-139).

By intentionally drawing on their cultural funds of knowledge while working in the writer's workshop, student writers refined their current skills, added new skills learned through social interactions with other students and teachers, and created abstractions of knowledge they were able to apply to new writing situations (Laman, 2011, p. 141). Similarly, Pantaleo (2010) researching how "students' experiences with a collection of postmodern picturebooks developed their narrative competence" (p. 264), found that students were able to create complex stories that transcended traditional narrative formats despite their previous experiences with literature. In the study, picturebooks of increasing complexity in their use of literary and illustrative devices were read by 40 Grades 3 and 4 students of varied ethnic backgrounds; after reading, students participated in small, peer-led discussions that were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. They also wrote personal responses to the picturebooks, and took part in whole class activities that focused on explicit instruction about the metafictive devices in the picturebooks. The study culminated with students creating their own print texts using a minimum of 10 metafictive devices. Students were interviewed about their finished books and were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their experiences with the instructional unit as well as their view of themselves as writers. Completed books were read twice and analysis of data included charting information about students' the use of metafictive devices undertaken.

The findings suggested that students were able to develop stories that made verbal and visual transgressions of the boundaries of the story world: non-conventional character relationships, intrusive characters and/or narrators, time/space disruptions, abandonment of linear/chronological story structure, intertextual connections, typographic experimentation, and interdeterminancy (Pantaleo, 2010, pp. 275-276). Pantaleo (2010) noted how these findings "emphasize how the students' writing was embedded in a specific context of social interactions and activities that were generated due to their engagements with particular kinds of texts" (p. 277); furthermore, the data revealed that students were able to draw on their "reservoirs of literacy and life experiences and [adopt] and [adapt] signs from other texts they had read, viewed and/or discussed both inside and outside the classroom context" (p. 276).

In each study, the adaptation of individual knowledge, communal knowledge, cultural experience, and social setting demonstrated how writing occurs in numerous contexts and in different modes. The studies also suggest that all forms of writing are impacted by sociocultural factors. As Prior (2006) points out, "writing is a dialogic process of invention" that is in actuality a "mode of social action, not just a way of communicating" (p. 58). As such, writing is a socially mediated process that is by its very nature collaborative and therefore requires instructional practices that recognize and value those aspects.

Instructional Practices

Foundations.

Writing instruction has changed dramatically over the past 100 years. Hawkins and Razali (2012) organize the evolution of writing instruction into three distinct periods: writing as penmanship, writing as product, and writing as process (p. 305). At the turn of the 20th century, writing was considered a mechanical procedure that consisted of handwriting,

grammar, and spelling. Although classical curricula were falling out of favour, students were still positioned, as John Locke had perceived them, as "empty vessels wherein a teacher could pour knowledge" (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 307). Although teachers were beginning to recognize the separation between penmanship and writing as early as the 1930s, Hawkins and Razali (2012) point out that drill and practice instruction of rote learning was still commonplace practice until the end of World War II due to the fact that legible handwriting was viewed as the single most crucial component of communication (p. 308). Post WWII saw the development of writing as a the mastery of behavioural objectives as formulated by Watson, Pavlov, Thorndike, and Skinner; however this practice still focused on "teaching writing skills at the word and sentence level, not teaching ideas" (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 311); the written product commonly produced in this phase was inauthentic, rarely written for a real audience, and had little connection to students' lives outside the classroom (p. 311). The development of whole language theories in the 1970s and 1980s led to the innovative practice of focusing on writing as a process; Atwell (1987 & 1998), Calkins (1986), Graves (1983) and Murray (1972) emerged at this time as leaders in process based writing instruction.

Murray's (1972) seminal work lay the foundations for the 'writing as process' movement and proposed that teachers focus on "the process of discovery through language" (p. 12). Opposite to the pedagogical practice in the previous decades, Murray (1972) called for teachers to "be quiet, to listen, to respond" and instead of being the "initiator or the motivator, [be] the reader, the recipient" (p. 13). According to Murray (1972), when students choose their own topic and genre, use their own language, and are given the time and opportunity to write, "it is an exciting, eventful, evolving process" (p. 12) that includes prewriting, writing, and rewriting. The motivation and engagement to write therefore becomes intrinsic when

students are respected for finding their own voice and experimenting with language rather than perfecting language.

Lam and Law (2007) posit that writing is an activity that is as much emotional as it is cognitive; as such, students need instructional practices that provide motivational resources for themselves and support in the learning environment. Citing Lam, Pak and Ma (2002), Lam and Law (2007) list six components of instructional practice that are relevant to motivation:

1. Challenge – Students are more motivated when they can expect to successfully complete a task that is challenging yet achievable.

2. Real Life Significance – Students become more motivated when writing is relevant and valuable to their life.

3. Curiosity – Students are intrinsically motivated to remove ambiguity and confusion related to cognitive conflict, and they are curious to see how things work.

4. Autonomy – Intrinsic motivation increases among individuals who are given the opportunity to make choices and have control of their own outcomes.

5. Recognition – Children who are praised for their effort (as opposed to the final product) are more motivated to invest greater effort in future tasks. Also, when the goal is seen as gaining new skills and knowledge, students are more motivated to increase effort.

6. Evaluation – Feedback that attributes success to effort and the use of strategies, as well as provides specific knowledge of how to improve creates increased motivation. (pp. 146-150)

Findings from the research conducted by Lam and Law (2007) suggested that students who receive instruction based on the aforementioned components are more motivated which

in turn leads to improved writing performance (p. 158). Lam and Law (2007) also theorize that there is an increase in motivation when the relatedness of the writing task is internalized and thereby creates a high degree of self-efficacy and self-regulation (p. 159).

Graham, McKoewn, Kiuhara, and Harris (2012) completed a comprehensive meta-analysis of writing instruction for students in the elementary grades in order to determine effective instructional practices. Their report supported the findings of Graham (2006b) who argued that, "writing strategies, knowledge, skills and motivation play an important role in students' growth as writers" (as cited in Graham et al., 2012, p. 880). To investigate the effects of various writing instruction programs, Graham et al. (2012) began by looking at 115 articles summarizing instructional programs and categorizing them into 14 different writing treatments. The articles were then re-evaluated and researchers looked for programs that had at least four measurable positive effects indicating the effectiveness of the program. Although the authors acknowledge the limitations of their review because control conditions among the research articles varied greatly, their findings supported pre-existing research which identified the effectiveness of six instructional practices: strategy instruction, collaboration, product goals, prewriting activities, word processing, and the process approach (Graham et al., 2012, pp. 890-891). The review by Graham et al. (2012) also concluded that writing growth could be stimulated by employing other strategies such as teaching self-regulation and increasing how much students write (p. 891). However, if engagement and motivation must be present in writing instruction for students to improve the quality of their work, then it is crucial to ensure that the instructional practices employed are those that encourage and produce those aspects.

Process based instruction.

Although Graham et al. (2012) agreed that a variety of instructional approaches have resulted in positive measurable effects in writing growth, they were unable to determine which practice was 'best' and if specific practices would create the same positive results in different classroom situations. Graham et al. (2012) suggested that specific strategy and knowledge instruction was required to improve the overall quality of writing in elementary students; however, despite the fact that they refer to motivation as playing an important role in writer growth, their findings do not suggest which practices promote optimum motivation and engagement (p. 880). That said, Graham et al. (2012) endorsed the development of comprehensive writing programs with a process approach to instruction (p. 889).

Thompson (2013) situates process based writing instruction in sociocultural theory by emphasizing that writing is a socially situated activity. He supports this assertion by quoting Prior (1998) who theorized that writing "happens in moments that are richly equipped with tools (materials and semiotic) and populated with others" (Thompson, 2013, p. 251). Furthermore, Thompson (2013) suggests that the creation of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) that "constitutes a reciprocal shared space between learner, teacher, and peers constructed through social interaction" (p. 256) is necessary because "it is active intervention that mediates learning within the activity of writing" (p. 272).

This study was taken from a larger research project in which Thompson (2013) worked in a UK comprehensive school with Year 8 students (ages 12-13), many of whom were identified as having experienced difficulties using a process approach to writing (e.g., planning, revising, and redrafting) to improve their writing (p. 253). Using a process based instruction format, the author's overarching goal was to inspire changes in pedagogical

practices of English teachers. Thompson (2013) attempted to determine if those students who experienced "severe problems in mastering written composition" despite having "oral ideas often well in advance of their written efforts" (p. 253) were able to complete writing tasks more effectively when working digitally with collaborative assistance from a teacher to apply the writing process to their work. Thompson (2013) gathered video data that focused on his interactions with John, a student with social, behavioural, and learning challenges for whom working in peer based groups was not an option (p. 253). The video data chosen for analysis were instances of critical incidents in which Thompson (2013) worked collaboratively with John within his ZPD in order to apply the stages of the writing process to John's work and in which it was possible to see the "thought processes involved in [John's] learning" (p. 254).

Thompson (2013) discovered that when working with John as co-constructor on a dual narrative and serving as the "significant other" (p. 260), he was able to act as a mediator to the planning process offering guidance and prompting as required; John worked within the ZPD with Thompson to use a writing process to complete the assignment. Thompson (2013) also noted that John began working with a "sense of redrafting that had been absent previously" (p. 261) and that part of John's process was "creating and using signs to trigger inner speech into outer speech" (p. 261) as he turned his inner dialogue into a narrative plan for writing.

Edwards-Groves's (2010) research discovered that the writing process has been significantly impacted by the introduction of "technoliteracies," a "functional blend of technology and literacy" (p. 50) in which students are able to create meaningful texts that are equally reliant on design, production, and presentation as they are on writing. Edwards-Groves (2010) also points out that technology has made possible "new creativities" (p. 51) in which students communicate their ideas using technology via oral, written, virtual, digital,

and textual modes rather than merely using the computer as a word processing tool. Furthermore, multimodal composing activities fit Vygotsky's vision of the ZPD in the classroom as they often rely on students working collaboratively with more experienced peers or the teacher in order to complete tasks that they are not able to complete independently. By building classroom interactions around text construction that "bridges traditional and newer text forms" (Edwards-Groves, 2010, p. 61), students are engaging in authentic learning tasks that promote intrinsic motivation and the development of higher order thinking processes.

Writer's workshop.

It is noteworthy that Thompson's (2013) example of process instruction was dependent on collaborative engagement in order to be successful. Atwell (1998) and Pollington, Wilcox, and Morrison (2001) describe the writer's workshop format as including teacher sharing, mini-lessons, conferencing (teacher/student and student/student), feedback throughout the process, regular time to write, and student ownership of writing. This format is reflected in Thompson's (2013) description of the "various forms of mediation that affect progress within a ZPD" (p. 272) and each aspect can be seen occurring in the writer's workshop format:

1. Direct instruction from a teacher or more capable peer that is initially didactic but becomes internalized by the learner as part of his or her inner speech. For Atwell (1998), direct instruction took the form of mini-lessons but could also be more informal instruction during the writing process.

2. Modeling of a behaviour or task by an expert that the learner initially imitates and ultimately internalizes and appropriates. As Murray (1972) and Atwell (1998) suggest, the teacher or more capable peers model writing behaviour for apprentice students.

3. Feedback, either oral or written, that offers guidance on performance often occurs with the conferencing process and can come from the teacher or more capable peer.

4. Questioning to assess or assist performance leads writers to reevaluate their own writing within the process of creation.

5. Reassurance and reinforcement of partially understood concepts occurs in mini-lessons, conferences, and collaborative work.

6. Redirection or recursion through the learning process is supported by collaborative work that assists the writer to develop their independence within the ZPD and see what other options or choices are available.

7. Joint exploration of meaning between teacher and pupil is transactional and supports the development of comprehension and cognition within the social context that the writer's workshop is occurring.

8. Peer collaboration involves critical thinking, problem solving, or decision making at an appropriate cognitive level.

9. Scaffolding of a task by the teacher or more capable peer provides a constructive framework for the learner's developing mental processes.

10. Cognitive restructuring occurs within the writer's workshop format as the learner internalizes new ideas and knowledge to become part of the inner self-regulating voice. (Thompson, 2013, p. 272)

The development of the writer's inner voice and identity are fostered within the writer's workshop format as the student takes part in an ongoing social dialogue with both teacher and peers. It is through collaboration that social mediation occurs and affords the student with the ability to "deploy the psychological functions of deliberate semantics [and] the deliberate

structuring of the web of meaning" (Thompson, 2013, p. 249) which ultimately results in the expansion the students' funds of knowledge.

Collaboration.

As an extension of Vygotsky's theory of social learning, collaborative enquiry is another component of writer's workshop that, according to Brown (2009), "draws cognition and culture together [and] informs the close examination of classroom interactions" (p. 29). Heffernan and Lewison (2003) also found that students came together collaboratively in writer's workshop not only to expand their own ideas but also to discover new ways of thinking, and to "use their writing to construct and call attention to problems in their common culture" (p. 437).

By drawing on their background experiences and cultural resources, students collaborate to construct meaning. Just as the children in Laman's (2011) study found themselves identifying as writers because they had authentic audiences and goals, the students in Heffernan and Lewison's (2003) first investigation became writers because their collaborative speech and writing were instruments of change; for them, motivation and engagement were derived because working together, their writing made a difference in the world around them (p. 441). Working with 20 students of diverse learning and sociocultural backgrounds in Heffernan's Grade 3 class in the Midwestern United States, the authors employed picturebooks with powerful social justice themes as a springboard into whole class and peer-led small group discussions about issues such as bullying, racism, peer pressure, friendship, and poverty. The picturebooks were also used as the basis for mini-lessons focused not only on craft and characterization, "but [also] on the ways the published authors constructed narratives to influence readers and call attention to issues and interests" through critical

literacy (Heffernan & Lewison, 2003, p. 437). After discussions and mini-lessons, students wrote personal responses to each of the picturebooks and made connections to the social themes they identified with personally in each book. Moving into the writer's workshop phase, students chose the topic they wished to explore, created storyboards, shared work with peers, and began creating their own critical literacy picturebook. Throughout this process, Heffernan continued mini-lessons that looked at "leads, time shifts, dialogue, and showing versus telling" and explicitly discussed the "power writers have when they call attention to the workings of the world" (Heffernan & Lewison, 2003, p. 437).

The final drafts of student stories were read, coded, and analyzed, and then placed into one of four main writing categories (story structure, themes, use of language, and representations of systems of power) by the researchers. Heffernan and Lewison (2003) found that the representations of power in the stories were particularly noteworthy and therefore developed an expanded coding scheme looking specifically at identifying systems of power and recoded the stories. In doing so, Heffernan and Lewison (2003) discovered that the confluence of personal narratives with social justice themes led to the development of what they called the "social narrative" genre that allowed students to "draw on a variety of shared cultural resources as they recreate[d] fictional worlds" (p. 438). For the student participants, social narratives created collaboratively within writer's workshop became a means of using "fiction writing as a tool for constructing and analyzing shared social worlds" and working collectively to create writing that was a form of social action (Heffernan & Lewison, 2003, p. 438). Documenting the students working collaboratively as a writing collective, Heffernan and Lewison (2003) discovered that writing became more than merely an individual task, rather it held the shared purpose of "making people change" (p. 441). Therefore, the

collaboration between students could be seen not simply a means to accomplish the task with less individual work, rather the shared purpose became the reason for their engagement and their motivation to write.

In 2008 Lewison and Heffernan revisited how collaboration and critical writing (a process based writing approach that highlights the sociological implications of personal issues) led to increased motivation and engagement in writing. Again using Heffernan's classroom, this study looked at 19 Grade 3 students in an elementary school in the Midwestern United States. As a class the students read and discussed "disruptive stories" (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008, p. 443) that contravened traditional storylines surrounding gender, race, class, language, and power relationships; furthermore the stories demonstrated "how ordinary people can begin to take action to help resolve these social issues" (p. 443). During the study, students were encouraged to make personal connections and share their personal perspectives surrounding the themes in the books. Mini-lessons were crafted to "foster social writing that would entail critique, analysis, and interpretation" (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008, p. 444) of the author's writing.

As in their 2003 study, Lewison and Heffernan (2008) afforded students with the opportunity to create stories that reflected their own individual interests and social concerns. Through the process of story boarding, writing, revising, and collaborating with peers, students created story books, many of which explored school related social problems. Data were collected from the child-authored books, notes from classroom observations, entries from students' writer's notebooks, student interviews, and artifacts the class co-created including charts and a learning wall. The data were analyzed both independently and

collaboratively, and then coded into four broad categories: bullying actions, bullying reactions, the roles of adult characters, and protagonist agency.

Heffernan and Lewison (2008) found that 11/12 boys and 6/7 girls in the study wrote about some form of bullying and 41% of those stories contained intertextual connections (p. 457); although students eventually developed their own stories, the similarities within the writing suggest that collaboration was crucial to the students' literacy experience (p. 457). Referring to research by Dyson (2003), Heffernan and Lewison (2008) noted that the textual similarities could be viewed as a demonstration of the students' "integrating and adapting other voices" while "borrowing, appropriating, juxtaposing, blending, remixing, and recontextualizing" what they had experienced in literature previously (p. 457). By collaborating orally and transforming the writing of others, students were able to personalize the meaning of shared sociocultural ideas in order to cultivate new thoughts that inculcated their personal history and life experiences with socially legitimate topics. Like Kamler (2001) and Lensmire (2000), Lewison and Heffernan (2008) found that when students collaborated on critical writing within the writer's workshop they did not focus on the "author's inner intentions, desires, dreams or experiences," but rather their writing had a collaborative nature that was "rooted in particular cultural contexts" (as cited in Lewison and Heffernan, 2008, p. 437) and told stories reflected commonly shared sociocultural issues and perspectives. Furthermore the sociocultural and collaborative aspects of critical writing enabled students to pursue topics they found compelling and meaningful while introducing them "to a sense of intentionality [and] deliberation about what writing can do" (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008, p. 438).

Similarly, Brown (2009) found that through collaborative enquiry, Grade 2 students could "access many perspectives while listening to the voices of their peers and making inter-textual connections (p. 29). When paired with collaboration, writing takes on a new role; aside from being an instrument of communication, it is a means of solidifying the creation of a Secondary Discourse within the context of the classroom or "speech community" (Brown, 2009, p. 30). Brown (2009) investigated how collaboration in writer's workshop can contribute to students' writing motivation, engagement, and success. Situated in a middle class socio-economic residential neighbourhood with a growing English as a Second Language (ESL) community in the United States, the focus was a Grade 2 classroom and specifically an ESL student (Juan) who was struggling to integrate his Primary Discourse into the mainly English speaking classroom context. Following the social interactions of this student with his peers for a year, Brown (2009) sought to identify patterns of shared ways of interacting, learning routines, and communications that led to the development of new forms of salient knowledge for both Juan and his English speaking peers (p. 32). Data were gathered through observation; field notes; audio/video recordings of literacy events; interviews with students, parents, and the teacher; and a narrative analysis of the writing composed.

Brown (2009) found that during writer's workshop, English speaking students who were comfortable with the social nature of the classroom context and who were able to participate in the dominant discourse more easily assumed different identities (for example, writer, illustrator, artist, student, and mentor) that were complimentary to their Primary Discourse (p. 36). Although Juan was accepted as an apprentice to the dominant discourse, unlike other students he was not comfortable incorporating his Primary Discourse into this context as it varied too significantly from that of other students and he remained an outsider.

Notably, because of language incongruities between Juan and his English speaking peers, his experience with collaborative talk was quite different than theirs. Unlike his peers who used collaborative talk as a warm up for writing and a means of gathering and sorting ideas, Juan relied on self-talk and copied examples of successful writing. As a result, Brown (2009) noted Juan's writing was more of an attempt at what Rymes and Pash (2001) call "doing being ordinary" (as cited in Brown, 2009, p. 37). Like Gee's (1989) concept of "mushfaking", Juan had to make "do with something less when the real thing [was] not available" (Brown, 2009, p. 13). Without participating in collaborative talk and writing with his peers, lacking an authentic audience to share his ideas and writing with, and because of his perceived inability to include personal sociocultural connections in his writing, Juan lacked the personal motivation and engagement with the writing assignments to make them anything other than perfunctory tasks (Brown 2009).

Brown (2009) observed that as students actively participated in collaborative enquiry through the use of social language, they were simultaneously building bridges to different perspectives, engaging in discourse, creating artifacts, and using cultural tools to create shared meanings; moreover, through shared talk and writing, students were constructing, co-constructing, and transforming their own knowledge and the knowledge of others (p. 29). Brown (2009) also pointed out that given the symbiotic nature of collaboration, students were able to take from the social interaction in writer's workshop whatever they required to expand their thinking and world view; "some [were] seeking information while others [were] exploring, reflecting and wondering (p. 30).

Collaboration for a common purpose in the Heffernan and Lewison (2003 & 2008) studies was a key component in the development of engagement and motivation, whereas the

lack of collaboration experienced by Juan with his peers (Brown, 2009) demonstrated the importance of connecting to other writers within the social context of the classroom. Vygotsky (1978) referred to the crucial role of collaboration within the learning environment when he stated:

> [a]n essential feature of learning is that it creates the ZPD; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child in interacting with people his environment and in cooperation with his peers. (p. 90)

Choice - cogito sum ergo.

Along with collaboration, a crucial component of writer's workshop is choice. Atwell (1998) explained that freedom of choice in writing does not mean a lack of structure; rather it affords students the opportunity to be accountable for their own learning (p. 15). Sociocultural theory posits that all individual thought is mediated by social contexts and experiences that occur during interaction and collaboration with meaningful others. Vygotsky (1978) theorized that the development of cognition and higher psychological functioning occurs when an individual processes socially mediated information and integrates it into their own way of thinking (p. 52). Bobbitt Nolan (2007) stated that "creative self-expression was the goal most strongly linked to [the] intrinsic commitment to writing motivation" (p. 222); therefore, when children are able to pursue their own interest and have autonomy in their writing choices it affords an opportunity to use prior knowledge which in turn is more likely to increase self-efficacy, success, and positive emotions surrounding writing (p. 222). Quoting Pekrun (2002), Bobbitt Nolan (2007) also noted that "when the writer has choice in the manner or subject of composition, the motivation to produce may come from [...] the positive emotions that accompany creativity and self-determination" (p. 223). By insisting on teacher generated

writing ideas in the classroom context, educators mistakenly communicate to students that adult ideas are preferred and therefore more valuable than children's ideas. Choice and interest are linked to intrinsic motivation; therefore, they are an important component in the development of writer identity and growth (Bobbitt Nolan, 2007, p. 223).

Beaton (2010), citing Graves's (1993), stated that "children need to learn how to choose their own topics when they write" (p. 113) and when they are able to do so, teachers can expect more from their students' writing. By denying students the freedom to choose their own subject matter, teachers are denying them the opportunity to draw from "the rich well of memories and interests" in order to make the writing task meaningful (Beaton, 2010, p. 113). Furthermore, Beaton (2010) suggests that by interfering in student choice teachers negate our students' opportunity to "develop and clarify [their] own way of making sense of the world and [their] place within it" (p. 116).

Beaton's observations come from firsthand experience working with Grade 11 students in Minnesota. In an attempt to engage reluctant students in writing activities, Beaton undertook a writer's workshop experiment in which she handed over choice of topic to her students. Although students in this study were asked to complete specific writing formats (e.g., graphic novels and auto-biographical narratives), she utilized other traditional writer's workshop strategies such as mini-lessons, whole class and small group discussions, teacher/student and student/student conferencing. During the unit, Beaton (2010) found that "allowing students to choose their own topic eliminated one barrier to getting them to write" (p. 112); rather than students perseverating about topics that were uninteresting or lacked personal meaning for them, Beaton was able to shift the focus to discussions about "audience, tone, and purpose" (p. 113) and differentiate instruction for her students' specific needs. Beaton (2010) gathered

data from personal conferencing and class discussions, as well as from completed writing; she observed that when presented with the opportunity to write from their own experiences and interests, students became "more invested in their work and care[d] more about their writing" (p. 113). Qualitative analysis of the data revealed that the writing completed by Beaton's students reflected serious social, cultural, and personal issues that Murray (1972) referred to as going beyond the issue of appropriateness in the classroom:

> [t]his is not a question of correct or incorrect, of etiquette or custom, this is a matter of far higher importance. The writer, as he writes, is making ethical decisions. He doesn't test his words by a rule book, but by life. He uses language to reveal truth to himself so that he can tell it to others. (p. 12)

Beaton (2010) referred to Elbow's (1997) research into low and high stakes writing as a way to move from teacher directed writing into student driven writing that offers opportunities "for using language to learn, explore, take risks, or commune with ourselves and not have our language be evaluated" (p. 116). Low stakes writing such as free-writes, journals, and initial drafts of writer's workshop projects that are private (or semi-private) and ungraded can be launching points into high stakes writing that will be taken to final draft form. By following the writer's workshop formula and handing over choice to her students, Beaton afforded them the opportunity to be, as Lensmire (2000) suggested, "released from the tight control of the teacher, so that they and their writing might flourish" (as cited in Beaton, 2010, p. 120).

In addition to promoting intrinsic student motivation and engagement with writing activities, providing student choice is fundamental in the development of writer identities. Heffernan and Lewison (2003, 2008) and Brown (2009) theorize that when students are given

the opportunity to collaboratively explore and co-construct meaningful writing topics of their choice (specifically topics that are relevant to them within the social context they are working), they are able to extract meaning and reconstruct it in order to extend their own personal understanding and resulting in the internalization of new knowledge (Brown, 2009, p. 29). Brown (2009) further suggests that along with collaborative talk, student choice affords developing writers a means to "participate in dialogue at their level of competence" and thereby "transform each other's knowledge" (p. 30). Choice within the writer's workshop format affords students with the opportunity to draw on their funds of knowledge in order to experience success rather than relying on a teacher driven topic that may have no authentic relevance to the student due to a lack of experience and pre-existing knowledge.

In observing Grade 10 English students as they collaborated to answer questions during a school-wide writing project, Frey and Fisher (2010) found that choice played an important role in the development and perpetuation of writing motivation. Noting a study by Wigfield and Eccles (1994) that determined motivation was the lynchpin to learning, Frey and Fisher (2010) concluded that autonomy was one of the crucial facets in the development of individual motivation and that there is a need to "create meaningful tasks that are tailored to the developmental, academic, and social needs of the students" (p. 30). The student participants observed by Frey and Fisher (2010) were given thematic questions like "Can money buy happiness?", "What is race and is it important?" and, "What sustains us?"; working collaboratively in small groups, the students were given the autonomy to investigate the questions as they desired and present their findings in any format. Frey and Fisher (2010) observed and recorded exchanges between students and joined groups to share discussions; their qualitative findings showed that the task was both challenging and interesting (it

permitted students to explore big ideas that were within their academic reach and were important to them) while it also gave them the opportunity to have a voice in the decisions and choices surrounding the task (p. 30). Students were encouraged to use their existing knowledge and resources in collaboration with others to develop new information and ideas surrounding pertinent questions.

However, the issue of relinquishing choice to students can be disconcerting for some teachers as it can present its own challenges. Beaton (2010) worried about inappropriate topics and the potential for sabotage or "a disruption or interference that temporarily derails the flow of learning and creates a caustic experience" (p. 113). Beaton (2010) found that while some students were happy writing about fairly pedestrian topics, others pushed the envelope of school appropriateness and chose to write about "taboo topics" such as the death penalty, sex, drugs, alcohol, and violence (p. 113). However, Beaton (2010) concluded that the risks associated with affording students choice of writing topic were outweighed by the metacognitive experience it provided to them; when topics were authentic, her students gained a deeper understanding, not only of the topic, but also of the process used to explore them (p. 116). She also recognized that by censoring some topics in the name of appropriateness or those that may be outside her comfort zone, she was "silently passing judgment on certain students and excluding their voices from everyone's learning" (Beaton, 2010, p. 116). While the issue of inappropriate topics or classroom sabotage may be somewhat less significant in elementary classrooms, it is still of concern given children's propensity to discuss private family matters.

Another concern surrounding writing choice involves the selection of pedagogical strategies if students are free to write in any style or genre. When working with teens in their

study, Frey and Fisher (2010) found that student writers needed various forms of language support; they documented that without support "some students will disengage as the tasks become too linguistically complex for their comfort" (p. 34). They also recognized that students did not become proficient in writing by simply listening to language, rather students needed to produce language in order to become increasingly sophisticated with its use. Frey and Fisher (2010) advocated using direct instruction in established literary forms or templates, vocabulary, and grammatical structure, as well as explicit direction in collaborative skills such as argumentation versus arguing. Furthermore, they suggested that when students possess these skills they will use them to develop more sophisticated and nuanced thought patterns and ideas of their own (Frey & Fisher, 2010, p. 33). Along with direct instruction, Frey and Fisher (2010) are also proponents of a modified teacher role when working with small groups; rather than modeling or questioning, they suggest that teachers join groups to "facilitate students' cognitive or metacognitive work" (pp. 34-35) through guiding, cueing, and prompting students to find their own deeper understanding. As Beaton (2010) and Frey and Fisher (2010) discovered, changing technologies and social contexts have transformed the ways in which students learn and demonstrate what they know, and emphasized the need for pedagogical strategies and instructional practices that inspire student interest, motivation, and engagement.

Summary

The importance of writing ability and competence in the 21st century is undisputable. Writing is an activity that occurs for many personal or utilitarian reasons: pleasure, information gathering, knowledge consolidation, communication, social interaction, and the establishment of social status (Bobbitt Nolan, 2007, p. 221). Writing is ubiquitous and it takes

place at home, at school, in the workplace, in the community, and in social situations through a variety of modes. Writing is not only a "predict[or] of academic and/or job success," but also it is necessary as it "creates opportunities for civic participation, maintains relationships, and enhances critical thinking" (NCTE, 2008, p. 2). Therefore, the instruction of writing in elementary school must be viewed as more than simply a mechanical process of putting together nouns and verbs in an "act of inscription" (Prior, 2006, p. 57); rather, Vygotsky (1986) asserts, it must be viewed as a "complex form of social and cultural activity which involves a *high level of abstraction* as pupils attempt to communicate meaning" (p. 181).

In this chapter I described how the act of writing falls within the sociocultural theory of learning because it is a socially and culturally mediated activity that is not only a means of communication, but a "mode of social action" (Prior, 2006, p. 58) that affords individuals with the opportunities to both internalize and externalize knowledge through the reorganization of memory and thought. As Englert, Mariage and Dunsmore (2006) state, meaning is "negotiated at the intersection of individual culture and activity" and therefore writing is "not a solitary discipline" but the "roots of writing competence are developed in social interaction with teachers [and peers] who can dramatize their thoughts, words, dilemmas and actions" (pp. 208-209).

Using the sociocultural theory of learning as a foundation for writing instruction, educators following the pedagogical practices of Atwell, (1998), Calkins (1986), Graves (1983), and Murray (1972) have recreated writing instruction, moving it away from traditional teacher driven curriculum into process based instruction, often in a writer's workshop format, that encourages collaboration (with more capable peers and/or teachers), cooperative learning, time devoted to writing, writing support and feedback, and choice while recognizing the

complex relationship between oracy and writing in the development of "the socially organized activity of production, distribution, reception and uses" (Prior, 2006, p. 60) of language to communicate meaning and purpose. While traditional pedagogies were "custodial" in their focus, writer's workshop instruction is considered to be "humanistic, flexible, and democratic" and it recognizes the role and "importance of attitudes, beliefs, and self-perception" (Pollington et al., 2001, p. 249).

Pollington et al. (2001) note that the implementation of sociocultural-based writing strategies is linked to the development of positive self-perception and self-efficacy that in turn translate into improved personal motivation and engagement (p. 249). Pollington et al. (2001) also suggest that the switch from *product* to *process* in writing pedagogy led to a significant change in instructional methods and the placing of increased value on student autonomy and literacy goals that reflect creativity, self-expression, improving logical reasoning, and knowledge development, all of which are intrinsically linked to writing motivation, interest and engagement (pp. 221-222).

While no single writing instruction program can satisfy the writing needs of every student in every classroom, the literature reviewed in this chapter supports the development of process based pedagogical ideas and instructional practices that are situated in sociocultural theory and focus on students as active participants in the development of writing skills and ability. Instruction that provides cognitive and emotional support for learning while creating a literacy community in which "literacy activities become part of the classroom's sense of identity and purpose" (Bobbitt Nolan, 2001, p. 255) promotes and maintains motivation and engagement by providing innovative and relevant connections to literacy in meaningful sociocultural contexts.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the implementation of writer's workshop as an instructional practice in my Grades 5 and 6 classroom. I also discuss the theoretical and research based rationale for adopting this practice, as well as the implications and outcomes for me and my students.

Chapter 3

Reflections and Classroom Practice

In Chapter 3 I discuss how the research examined in the literature review has influenced my pedagogical beliefs, teaching practice, and writing program. As discussed in Chapter 2, pedagogical theory and practice have changed dramatically over the past century. Hawkins and Razali (2012) state that by the 1970s the emphasis placed on penmanship and rote learning of grammar and language skills had fallen by the wayside in favour of whole language approaches and teachers were attempting to provide "many writing experiences where sensible and functional personal and social values are obvious to children" (p. 308). Yet three decades after the introduction of the process approach and writer's workshop by Atwell (1987), Calkins (1986) and Graves (1983), Hawkins and Razali (2012) state that despite becoming the "dominant instructional paradigm of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, process writing (in its entirety as defined by its founders) did not reach many classrooms" (p. 314). Although theoretically sound and supported by foundational research of Murray (1972) and Vygotsky (1978), authentic language arts instruction with relevant connections to life outside of the classroom that functioned to promote the internalization of higher cognitive functions was still absent from pedagogical practice in many classrooms, including my own.

Retrospective – Beginnings

Cognizant of the fact that I needed authentic instructional activities to motivate and engage my students, during the summer of 2011 I prepared for my first teaching contract in which I was able to develop, present, and maintain an English language arts program for the entire school year. I remembered my early experiences as a student with literature that had left me bored and uninspired to read or write, and I knew I wanted the students in my class to have a vastly different experience. I knew student motivation and engagement were the keys

to literacy success and, through my university courses I learned about the necessity of detailed lesson planning. I spent hours planning elaborate lessons and activities for writing and presented them with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. With a heavy focus on read, respond, recreate, and write, I developed units for poetry, fiction (including picturebooks, short stories, and novels), creative writing, non-fiction writing, and reader's theater for my Grades 4 and 5 students. I also included a weekly spelling and grammar component to augment literacy learning. As a relatively new teacher, I was concerned with systematically following the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2006) language arts curriculum; each lesson was designed with a specific link to writing and representing outcomes. Although I enjoyed interactive and collaborative writing activities and I observed that my students did as well, I was uncertain of my classroom management abilities and therefore I felt most comfortable when lessons were teacher led with the direction of the learning controlled by me. Despite my best intentions, my writing program became safe and uninspired. While some of my students loved the predictability, most of my students tolerated it, while a few of them groaned –literally out loud– when they saw writing on the day plan. I knew there had to be another way to implement a writing program that could motivate, engage, and inspire my students to write.

Sociocultural Theory in the Classroom – New Ideas

Entering the first semester of my Master of Education program at the University of Victoria in July 2013, I came to an epiphany: although I thought that I was creating fun, meaningful, and engaging writing activities, I had actually been designing assignments that were product-based and authentic only to me and a handful of students. Time spent on planning does not necessarily equate to good pedagogy if the students are not writing for a

"real audience" and are "not stimulated to relate writing to ongoing activities in the classroom or in their lives" (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 311). Furthermore, I realized that my focus, primarily on the finished product, was discounting a great deal of the learning my students were accomplishing; it was as if I asked them to recite the alphabet, but omit the letters 'B' through 'Y'. By working through the prewriting, writing, and rewriting stages, I was teaching my students the strategies of the writing process, but I was not teaching them how to use "writing to learn" (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 194).

Vygotsky (1978) referred to the learning process that occurs when students write as a complex form of social and cultural activity involving a "*high level of abstraction*" as students communicate meaning and translate their ideas from interpersonal speech to intrapersonal speech (p. 181). Therefore, by unknowingly employing a traditional and product based teaching practice, my students and I were missing out on the opportunity that Murray (1972) referred to as "the process of discovery through language" (p. 12).

My personal incentive for transforming my practice came from a simple desire to make a positive change in my writing program in order to foster student interest, engagement, and motivation. I wanted my students to enjoy writing. However, my pedagogical incentive for moving to a process based focus within a writer's workshop program emerged from my growing understanding of the sociocultural theory of learning. As described by Englert, Mariage and Dunsmore (2006), sociocultural theory posits that meaning is "negotiated at the intersection of individuals, culture, and activity" (p. 208); it is a process that occurs when an individual's understandings are "constructed, reconstructed, and transformed through social mediation" (p. 208). Furthermore, according to Vygotsky (1878), all higher psychological processes, such as writing, originate in actual relationships between individuals and consist of

a series of changes that occur when ideas are internalized and transformed from an interpersonal process to an intrapersonal process (pp. 56-57). Although traditional pedagogical theory has viewed writing as a solitary discipline, the "roots of writing competence are developed in social interaction with teachers," and I would argue peers as well, "who can dramatize their thoughts, words, dilemmas, and actions in highly visible ways" (Englert et al., 2006, p. 209). Therefore, a solid theoretical and research-based foundation exists for a writing curriculum that includes co-participation in writing activities such as those found in writer's workshop.

In the following sections, I discuss the components of my revised writer's workshop program, the theoretical and research-based foundations that support its structure, and the implications of adopting this program in my classroom.

Writer's Workshop – Testing the Water

My first attempt at writer's workshop was with Grades 5 and 6 students beginning in January of 2013 and running through May 2014. Having been reintroduced to Atwell's (1998) vision of writer's workshop, I was inspired to attempt it in my classroom. However, I was wary about giving away the sense of calm organization that I had worked hard to create, and I was uncertain that mini-lessons were adequate for teaching writing skills; grammar, spelling, regular language arts lessons and assignments went on as planned and writer's workshop became an add-on to the pre-set language arts curriculum. Three 30-45 minute blocks of time were set aside weekly for writer's workshop in which students worked individually on writing projects of their choice, conferenced with me, and worked on revisions and editing. Writing was kept in separate folders for easy access and to make sure drafts were not lost. I asked for a new writing 'project' to be submitted at the end of every two weeks.

Assessing the success of the program at the end of the year, several implications became evident to me:

- Student motivation and engagement during writer's workshop was notably increased, particularly in comparison to writing activities at other times (e.g., teacher generated activities such as writing prompts and response paragraphs).

- Most students enjoyed writer's workshop and expressed their favourable opinions by asking for more writing time. Many verbally and through body language expressed their displeasure with other writing activities.

- Ninety minutes per week was not enough time for students to complete writing activities to the level they desired. Therefore, many students were submitting rushed or incomplete projects in order to have something tangible on the due date.

- Students wanted to be able to work in pairs or small groups and be able to confer with peers during conferences.

- For some students, little time or effort was being expended on writing assignments other than writer's workshop.

- Several students needed far more assistance than others and often monopolized my conference time, while more capable students often did not want to conference at all. It was difficult to ensure that all students had equal access to conference times and received the assistance they required with their writing.

- Having writer's workshop separate from instructional time was not conducive to the development of new writing skills and made writer's workshop seem disconnected from the language arts curriculum.

- Students found spelling and grammar activities to be pointless. One student commented: "You know, I only study the words the night before the test and have forgotten how to spell them by the next week."

- A survey at the end of May showed overwhelmingly that writer's workshop was students' favourite component of language arts instruction.

Thus, my first foray into writer's workshop had been a success in that students were writing and enjoying writing. I had adopted, as described in Chapter 2, some of the components of writer's workshop such as designating time for writing and affording students choice in topics and genre. However, my hesitance to use mini-lessons and relinquish responsibility and ownership to my students limited the success of the program. In future attempts, I had to be willing to take the leap of faith into the deep end of pool and allow my students to be writers.

Writer's Workshop – Learning to Swim

As noted previously, my goal was to undertake a writing program that would interest, motivate, and engage my students in writing. However, as I read more by Vygotsky, Murray, Rosenblatt, and Smagorinsky about sociocultural theory during my second summer in the graduate program, it became apparent to me that even if I could inspire student interest, I could not inspire my students to be motivated or engaged; they needed to find intrinsic reasons to be motivated and engaged. Frey and Fisher (2010) explained that the "energy and motivation that occur when students are engaged in productive group work results in meaningful learning" (p. 30); however it requires more than moving desks together to create a collaborative environment that will generate self-motivation. Certainly, Vygotsky (1978) stressed the importance of intrinsic motivation by stating that, "writing should be meaningful

for children, that an intrinsic need should be aroused in them, and that writing should be incorporated into a task necessary and relevant for life" (p. 118). It is when written language begins to take on an intrinsic value and students are able, as Murray (1972) states, to "discover and communicate" (p. 12) what is important to them, that they begin to demonstrate the higher psychological functions that Vygotsky (1978) associates with learning and the development of knowledge (p. 89). As described in Chapter 2, Vygotsky (1978) also explained how learning does not occur as a solitary activity; "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment" (p. 90).

Due to a number of extenuating circumstances, I did not implement writer's workshop again until January 2015 with another Grades 5 and 6 class of students. Seeing the need to spend more time on writer's workshop and less time on inauthentic instructional practices such as grammar worksheets or teacher generated writing assignments, I set aside four weekly sessions of at least 45 to 60 minutes for writer's workshop. I continued to look at reading, comprehension, and oral literacy strategies outside of writer's workshop time. In my second attempt at implementing writer's workshop, I adopted a practice that used strategies similar to what Atwell (1998), Murray (1972), and Pollington et al. (2001) describe as key components to process writing and writer's workshop: teacher sharing, mini-lessons, choice in writing, conferencing (teacher/student and student/student), feedback throughout the process, regular time to write, and student ownership – each of which I reflect on in the following sections. As Prior (2006) pointed out, "writing involves dialogic processes of invention" (p. 58), therefore my redesigned writer's workshop program began with talking to my students by sharing.

Teacher sharing.

As the precursor to mini-lessons, I begin most writer's workshop sessions by sharing some of the things I know and love about the art of literature with my students. This brief portion of the entire session, often no more than five minutes, can include me reading a favourite poem; showing artwork I find intriguing and briefly reading a review or artist biography; sharing the lyrics of a song and then listening to it being performed; reading a picturebook, excerpt from a story, newspaper article, or blog, or presenting something that can inspire a new dialogue about writing. My reason for sharing is one of equity. My experience is that not all students have the same exposure at home to literacy; therefore I cannot assume all students are starting on equal footing with a particular genre or style. For example, while many North American students may have heard countless stories by Robert Munsch, students new to Canada may not have any experience with his writing, and would be at a disadvantage if we were going to write a story in that style.

As noted in Chapter 2, Gee (1989) described how students come to school with a strong sense of their own Primary Discourse that has developed from exposure to their immediate surroundings (p. 7). However, Smagorinsky (2013) pointed out that unfamiliarity with the Dominant Discourse in a classroom can create a sense of inferiority or "dysphoria" (p. 195). Similarly, Pantaleo (2010) wrote about how the literacy experiences children brought to school affected their writing. She also noted that, as Chomsky (1965) postulated, linguistic competence can be defined as an "underlying, unconscious knowledge of the rule systems for generating linguistic behaviour" (Pantaleo, 2010, p. 265) and students unfamiliar with the linguistic behaviour of the Dominant Discourse in a classroom are at a vast disadvantage

when it comes time to write. By sharing with my students, I can provide them with literacy experiences that may be different from those they participate in at home.

I also encourage student sharing during this time in the lesson. In this way, students are introduced to a variety of literary sources and choices other than mine. For example, when discussing writing children's books, I asked my Grades 5 and 6 students to bring their favourite childhood book from home to share with the class. While I brought *When Vegetables Go Bad* by Don Gillmore (1994), my daughters' perennial favourite, other titles shared by students included: *Clifford, the Big Red Dog* (Bridwell, 1963), *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Scieszka, 1992), *I Have To Go Pee* (Munsch, 1987), *Classic Fairy Tales* (Gustafson, 2003), and many more including non-fiction titles. The variety of books shared demonstrated the children's range of experiences with literature. Interestingly, three students said they did not have a favourite childhood book because their parents had not read to them. In many cases, when students chose later to write a children's book, it mirrored closely the style of book they had identified as being their favourite. From the sharing experience, other students found new titles that inspired them to write; for example, Shayla (all names are pseudonyms) wrote *You Know Your Vegetables Are Bad When...,* a humorous tale of uneaten vegetables that imitated Don Gillmore's story and included pictures in the style of Marie-Louise Gay.

Sharing with my students provides them with a sense of possibility as they realize the options open to them during writer's workshop. As Laman (2011) pointed out, "children learn the role of literacy through participation in everyday literacy events" (p. 134) and sharing is one means of aiding students to collect ideas that can be transformed into their own writing.

Mini-lessons.

After the sharing portion of the session, I lead a mini-lesson designed to last about 10 minutes, although it can last up to 20 minutes as I give students time to practice, share, and confirm their learning with me or a more capable peer. Mini-lessons follow naturally from the sharing phase and set the stage for working with students in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). As described by Englert et al. (2006), "what begins as a teacher-centered discourse in authentic writing activity is succeeded by an interactive and collaborative discourse in which mental activity is distributed and shared between the teacher and student participants" (p. 209). Writer's workshop has been criticized by some who suggest that the focus on process has diminished the role of teaching genre, purpose, craft, spelling, grammar, voice, critical evaluation, and other literary techniques. For example Baines, Baines, Stanley, and Kunkel (1999) stated that "*the process* has become so ubiquitous as to mean anything, or perhaps more precisely, it has come to mean almost nothing" (as cited in Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 314). In my experience, several parents have also voiced concerns about writer's workshop being unfocused, emphasizing the tangible nature of spelling worksheets, book reports, and finished stories rather than recognizing the benefits of the ongoing writing process.

Therefore, in my practice, the mini-lesson portion of writer's workshop is essential as it serves as the basis for student exploration in writing formats and gives them a foundation in conventions that can be further developed during writing, conferencing, and collaboration later in the process. At the intermediate level, many students are still exploring with different forms of writing and are interested in finding out how something works so they can try it themselves.

At the beginning of writer's workshop, I spend time during the mini-lessons focusing on the *6+1 Traits of Writing* (Culham, 2005) and how they can be applied to writing in any genre. Looking at ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation provides students with the confidence to approach a new style of writing, as they feel they have some knowledge about how language works. For example, I have experienced that most Grades 5 and 6 students do not know how to create fluent dialogue between characters in a story, yet almost all of them want to include this feature in their writing at one time or another; so when working on sentence fluency I might spend several days of mini-lessons discussing adding dialogue to a story.

Mini-lessons also emerge naturally out of questions students ask or from my encounters with students during conferencing. This authentic process speaks to the needs of the writers as they develop and change from day to day. Vygotsky (1978) referred to the work of Montessori (n.d.) when discussing the importance of authenticity in writing instruction and said that writing should be taught and evolve naturally, being cultivated rather than imposed (p. 118).

Rather than being tied to a curriculum script that does not allow for detours, the mini-lesson by its short and to the point nature, affords me with the ability to take side trips away from a larger topic and focus, even for a day, on a topic that may be relevant to a specific student without calling attention to that student. The flexibility of the mini-lesson works well in the development of respectful teacher-student relationships as students see that their questions and writing needs are important and valid. In this way, the dysphoria a student may feel is addressed in order to "eliminate feelings of inferiority" so that the student might "participate to the greatest extent possible in conventional cultural activities so as to develop

self-esteem" (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 195). My experience has been that students who have demonstrated writing challenges are often proud that their topic has been chosen for exploration in a mini-lesson and will take credit for the detour. For example, Hayden, who struggled with writing in traditional sentence form but was a creative artist, asked for a mini-lesson on cartooning and was eager to exclaim, "That was my idea." What emerged was a week-long exploration into cartooning, including lessons on learning about onomatopoeia, using speech and thought bubbles to add dialogue in cartoons, and finding inspiration in books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007) and *Bone* (Smith, 2005).

Atwell (1998) offers extensive lists of possible mini-lesson ideas about writing procedures (pp. 154-155), literary craft (pp. 176-1184), and conventions (pp. 186-188); however in my practice I have found it best to be aware of the students' needs and craft mini-lessons as necessary, rather than fallowing any prescribed list. Once students have a sense of the possibilities, they then need to choose a topic and a style and start to write.

Choice in writing.

I will never forget the morning that Sebastian, a student who in his own words 'hated writing,' came dashing into the classroom to check out the day plan. He saw *WW* on the board, did a few fist pumps and his patented happy dance. I asked him why he was so happy and his reply made my day, maybe even my year: "I love writer's workshop! It's the best 'cus we get to write whatever we want!" Before I started writer's workshop, Sebastian's writing had been limited to a few disconnected lines scribbled with little care or attention to meaning, form, or presentation. In writer's workshop Sebastian was creating children's stories, comic strips, jokes, rap songs, and a graphic novel about a mysterious creature living at the local

elementary school. While he still struggled with the mechanics of writing and often rushed through one project in order to move on to the next, it was enough for me that he was writing.

Murray (1972) explained that autonomy is crucial to success in student writing; not merely choice of topic, but the freedom to choose language, form, presentation, how many drafts to complete, when to put aside writing, and what to take to completion (pp. 13-14). Choice frees students to be experimental and find a way to "communicate what we learn about our world" (Murray, 1972, p. 12) with others. If we expect students to write meaningfully, and truthfully, they must be able to choose what to write and how to write it.

The first mini-lesson in my writer's workshop is about choice. I share and discuss with my class, *100 Ways to Show What You Know* (see Appendix) and have them identify the top 20 options that they might like to try. While some are not conducive to or feasible in the classroom setting, it provides options that students often do not think of as language arts activities. Writer's workshop usually starts out slowly, as students are unsure that I really mean they can write about anything. Can I do a horror story? Yes. Can I write poems about unicorns? Yes. Can I write a cookbook? Yes. I started a story about my dog, but I don't like it, can I write about giant mutant slugs instead? Yes. Can I choreograph a dance to my favourite song? Yes, but you also need to include some writing, so how will you do that? Once students realize that I mean anything, in almost any way, they start to write, and write, and write. At times the room is silent and at other times there is a hum of activity as writers brainstorm, collaborate, share, edit, and rewrite.

The introduction of multimodal methods of presentation in writer's workshop creates more options and greater choice for creative expression. Once limited to paper and pen or word processing, many students now have access to a wide variety of presentation options at

school, at home, and in what some researchers refer to as the "third space pedagogy" (Edwards-Groves, 2010, p. 50) in which online sites, iPads, iPods, laptops, phones, and video recording devices facilitate textual composition in ever expanding ways. Although not always available at school because of limited resources or a lack of training for teachers, new technologies are often available at home and technologically savvy students are able to act as the expert, teaching peers and teachers how to navigate the new modes of representation. In my experience, the use of multiple modes in composing permits students who may have had difficulty with pen and paper presentation to feel that they have important skills to bring to writer's workshop. Therefore, writer choice can include not only what to write, but also where, how, and what form of presentation will be used. Furthermore, multimodality accommodates collaborative learning as students work together to complete a task: a group PowerPoint presentation in the computer lab, a digital comic book on the classroom computer, an iMovie, a movie poster in the hallway, a podcast at the big table, or a book of haikus at an individual desk.

That being said, choice in location can be challenging, as there are limitations to where students are permitted to be in the school without me being present. Our school administration prohibits students being in the library or computer lab without an adult supervisor, therefore it can be challenging if one-half of the students wish to work on projects in the classroom while others wish to be in the computer lab. With only two classroom computers for student use, I often have to take a wait list and allow students 15 minutes on the class computer at a time; this technical issue can be creatively limiting and needs to be addressed with administration in the coming school year.

As described in Chapter 2, working with high school students, Beaton (2010) struggled with ethical issues surrounding writing topics that were outside her personal comfort zone and potentially inappropriate in a school setting. Yet she was aware that students who wrote their individual truths were more invested in their writing, took greater care with their work, and produced writing that was more meaningful than if she had assigned safe, "preapproved topics [that] reek[ed] of conformity" (pp. 113-114). In my room, we discuss at the outset what is appropriate for the intended audience; for example, story topics appropriate for a same age peer, would not necessarily be appropriate for a Kindergarten buddy book. I remind students that the books in my room are all appropriate for their age, which does not mean that every book is appropriate for every student. As they write, I ask them to think: "Would Mrs. Hutchings have this story in her classroom library?" or "If this book was made into a movie, would my parents allow me to see it?"

Although Graves (1994) and Murray (1972) might argue that by setting any parameters for appropriate writing I am imposing my own beliefs or biases on my students and potentially hindering their authentic voice, it has been my experience that Grades 5 and 6 students are usually self-monitoring, and as Newkirk (2002) found, show a "willingness to accept limits" in their writing (as cited in Beaton, 2010, pp. 116 & 119). For example, working collaboratively Emily and Sarah created a movie poster and iMovie trailer for *The Bloody Hand*, a thriller that would have surely had pre-teen girls and boys jumping out of their seats had it been a real movie that was edgy enough to be creepy, but not enough to elicit nightmares. Another student, Ethan, wrote a story about Slender Man, a horror character popular with teens, but cognizant of his intended audience (pre-teen boys), he refrained from using vulgar language and kept the goriness suggested, rather than explicit. Both of these

examples happened without my direction and suggested that Grades 5 and 6 writers are able to understand and connect with their intended audience.

I expect that my students will experiment with different styles and genres of writing in writer's workshop. To ensure that students are exploring a variety of writing styles, I ask them to submit a different type of writing on each due date. They are always encouraged to go back to a writing activity that appeals to them and work on it at any time. Some students often follow the same topic throughout a variety of genres; for example Taylor was obsessed with ninjas and so she wrote a ninja picturebook, ninja haikus, ninja comics, and even a ninja cookbook.

I ask students to tell me about new projects when they begin and I record what they are working on. Some students work in a linear fashion and finish one project before moving on to a new one, while others move fluidly back and forth between projects: starting, pausing, starting something new, and revisiting old projects before taking them to completion. In my experience, the thought of abandoning projects that are not working is difficult for many students as they have become accustomed to the finished project being the goal. I often suggest that rather than discarding the writing, they put it in the back of their folder so that if they wish to, they can take it up at a later date. During conferences we often look back at unfinished work to see what was working, what was not, and try to see how that can help us with new writing. As Murray (1972) points out, ultimately what writing students take to completion is their choice and the revisions they make are at their discretion (p. 14).

However, some students need the option of abandoning a project that is not working otherwise they get mired in wondering: why is it not working, should I keep going, what if I cannot find a new topic, what if I waste my time and have nothing to hand in? When we first

started writer's workshop, Dylan was unable to complete any writing or move on to any new projects unless he physically destroyed projects that were not working for him; he would rip the pages into little shreds and sprinkle them like confetti into the recycling bin. After only a few conferencing sessions, it became evident that he had not established a writer's identity; despite having excellent ideas, he found it challenging to take those ideas to completion because of the difficulties he experienced with the technical parts of the process. After suggesting some possible genres that would work for the topics he was interested in and modeling a few starters, I suggested he work with a more capable peer on the writing process. Finding Jeff, a technically strong writer, they worked collaboratively as partners to create a dual narrative poem about the monsters under the bed. Englert et al. (2006) would describe this collaboration as the novice and expert working together on an intermental level to "jointly combine their mental resources to perform a process" (p. 209). As a result of his collaboration with Jeff, Dylan began to recognize that peers valued his writing ideas and he often sought out collaborative writing opportunities during writer's workshop.

Conferencing and feedback.

As students create and co-create, the next step is conferencing and feedback. At the beginning of the writing session, I do a quick group check-in and ask if any writers need to see me before they can continue. Armed with a pencil and small post-it notes in a variety of colours (I never write on students' work, rather I use post-it notes to draw their attention to things we have talked about or worked on), I briefly visit writers who have indicated they need to see me, then I visit writers around the room, checking in, reading, listening, talking, and offering 'expert' advice as needed. I do not see every writer every time, but ensure that I check in at least twice a week. After the class check in and classroom rounds, I open my

'office hours,' by clearing off a large section of my desk so there is room to write and provide two stools for students to sit on so that we are at the same level physically. I find working collaboratively at my teacher's desk is an empowering experience for students as it creates an environment in which we see each other as writers sharing a space, rather than me helicoptering in to help. Panofsky (2003) argues that "mutual respect and trust must be a prerequisite for constructive dialogue within a ZPD" (as cited in Thompson, 2013, p. 254) and I find that creating a physical space in which students are able to approach me and sit down at the 'big desk' as they need, rather than me insinuating myself into their creative workspace, helps them develop their own writer's identity. They are writers coming to another writer to collaborate.

Although some students ask for feedback on the mechanical aspects of writing (grammar, spelling, etc.), most of my feedback comes in the form of idea development through writing strategies. Just like Dylan who had great ideas but struggled to get them onto paper, many students know what they want to say but have limited experience transforming ideas from their internal to their external voice. Depending on the student, I make suggestions about genre, format, organization, voice, sentence fluency, or word choice. As the expert in the room, students often feel that my suggestions are the right ones to take, however I like to remind them that Murray (1972) referred to writing as being "experimental" and having "no rules, no absolutes, jut alternatives" (p. 14) and so it has to be their voice to tell their story.

Although the description of my writer's workshop thus far seems like the perfect classroom environment for writing, situations arise that are not conducive to writing. Smagorinsky (2013) stated that unfettered speaking is a "tool to generate new ideas through the process of talking" and that "exploratory speech is central to writing to learn" (p. 194) so

it is crucial that I do not interfere with purposeful, collaborative talk. Therefore, I designate certain areas for quiet work and other areas for collaborative work.

Time and ownership.

Atwell (1998), Englert et al. (2006), Murray (1972), and Smagorinsky (2013) all refer to the importance of time for writing and the development of student ownership for their writing. As teachers know, finding an hour of uninterrupted time can be challenging, so as explained above, in 2015 I set up my timetable so that students could regularly write in the morning for 45-60 minutes. As previously noted, my first attempt at writer's workshop was too time constrained and as a result, student effort and enthusiasm was limited by the strictures of deadlines and the ticking clock; now along with designated writing sessions, I also encourage writing at other times (e.g., when students have completed other tasks and have free time). Traditionally every afternoon in my classroom began with 30 minutes of DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) time, however I had so many requests for extra writing time, I now encourage students to use a portion of that time to read and a portion to continue their own personal writing. By my placing emphasis on time for writing, students begin to see that writing is important and that it is something that grows over time, it does not just happen in one, 30 minute lesson.

I ask students to complete and submit one different final draft every four weeks, but as mentioned earlier, I keep track of all writing projects to ensure that students are not getting fixated on unproductive projects. I do not ask students to record how much they have written daily as this practice returns the focus to product, rather than process. Murray (1972) asserts that assuming ownership of their writing permits student writers to see the choices they made in their writing and what other choices they might make in the future (p. 14).

Final thoughts

Just as I encourage my students to think of writer's workshop as an ongoing experiment with the process of writing, I try to view the development of my writing program as a process of learning; it is not perfect and with each group of students I will need to reevaluate the program in order to meet their specific writing needs. However, I believe writer's workshop is a pedagogically sound method of getting students writing while encouraging self-motivation, engagement, and promoting the development of a writer identity. Although he was referring to teaching the writing process and not specifically writer's workshop, Murray (1972) explains that when we embrace this pedagogical stance and respect and respond to students "not for what they have done, but for what they might do; not for what they have produced, but for what they might produce" (p. 14), we afford them the opportunity to become writers and experience the writing process for themselves.

I have found the implementation of writer's workshop as the writing component of my language arts program to be a positive and beneficial addition for my students and me. By encouraging the transformation of interpersonal processes into intrapersonal processes, writer's workshop supports the formation of concepts and ideas that characterize the development of higher psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 56-57). Through providing opportunities for students to coparticipate in meaningful literacy activities that have direct relevancy to their lives outside school (in terms of topic choice, multimodal representation and so on), writer's workshop is a pedagogical practice that promotes intrinsic interest, motivation, and engagement with writing.

Annotations

Over the past two years as I have worked to complete my Master of Education in 21st Century Language and Literature, I have read countless articles, books, and reports pertaining to pedagogical ideas, theories, issues, strategies and methodologies. While all have been valuable in some facet, I believe that the following articles are vastly important and relevant for teachers of elementary writing:

1. Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cumberland, RI: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from http://www.ebrary.com

Vygotsky's work on the sociocultural theory of learning describes the development of symbols, speech, and written language in children for the purpose of communication, the internalization of higher psychological functions that lead to the construction of knowledge, and the social nature of learning. He also defines the concept of Zone of Proximal Development and describes its application in education. He posits that learning and development are interrelated and that formal education should be meaningful and relevant to a child's life in order for the child to become intrinsically motivated. This work provides theoretical and research-based evidence for the use of naturally cultivated and collaborative learning and is a must read for all teachers, especially those with an interest in language and literacy.

2. Smagorinsky, P. (2013). What does Vygotsky provide for the 21st century language arts teacher? *Language Arts*, *90* (3), 192-204.

As a companion article to Vygotsky's research and theory, Smagorinsky relates sociocultural theory to the 21st century language arts classroom. Smagorinsky demonstrates how Vygotsky's theorizing is still relevant, despite being over 80 years old, and encapsulates

how his ideas can be utilized in schools to promote the development of human potential and the construction of meaning. Smagorinsky (2013) discusses how, using a Vygotskian approach, teachers can assist students to make the connection between emotions and learning, eliminate feelings of inferiority, or dysphoria, from their classroom and promote empathy, encourage the incorporation of students' funds of knowledge into the classroom context, make relevant connections between home and school learning, and use the ZPD to scaffold new information and skills, "resulting in tomorrow's new, individual competencies" (p. 199). This article provides educators with practical and helpful advice for incorporating sociocultural learning into the classroom.

3. Murray, D. (1972). Teaching writing as process not product. *The Leaflet*, *Fall*, 11-16.

Murray's groundbreaking article introduces the concept of teaching writing as a process rather than focusing on the final product as the most important component of the writing experience. Murray suggests a role reversal in the writing classroom, concentrating on the active role of the student in generating ideas, choosing genre and language, setting the pace for writing, and ultimately making choices about revision, editing, and the presentation the final product. Conversely, teachers are advised to be "coaches, encouragers, developers, creators of environments in which students can experience the writing process for themselves" (Murray, 1972, p. 13). Murray provides straightforward and realistic advice for teachers who wish to navigate away from traditional writing instruction and embrace a sociocultural approach that promotes choice, collaboration, and creating meaning through the use of language.

Implications for Future Research

Despite the fact that there is a plethora of information about the sociocultural theory of learning, the writing process, and writer's workshop, several areas require more research to expand understanding and provide pedagogical support for the 21st century classroom. First, there is a dearth of research in this area based on Canadian research and content. Writing research has been done by Pantaleo (2010) and Hare (2012) researched the link between Indigenous knowledge and the literacy experiences of First Nation's students in school. However, I was unable to locate Canadian content regarding the use of writer's workshop in Canadian schools, particularly as it relates to meeting the literacy needs of a growing multicultural population.

Next, the new British Columbia Ministry of Education Transforming Curriculum and Assessment (2013) documents propose significant changes to the language arts learning goals in classrooms at all grade levels. Research into how a sociocultural approach to writing instruction and the implementation of writer's workshop fits with and promotes the new curriculum goals in British Columbia would be advantageous for educators in the province. It would also serve as a review of the new curriculum ideas and make suggestions for areas of improvement and/or change.

Lastly, research exploring the ways writer's workshop can meet the changing needs of the 21st century classroom would be beneficial. Atwell's (1998) guide to writer's workshop was last revised over 15 years ago and her experiences, techniques, and advice reflect the technology and social context of the day. Furthermore, her experiences were somewhat unique because of the circumstances in her classroom: a private school, relatively small numbers of students, large-sized classrooms designed for writer's workshop, and abundant

supplies and tools for students to use in their work. An updated look at writer's workshop in a multi-dimensional environment with relevant instructional ideas and strategies that address integration of students with special needs, multi-ethnic classrooms, computer technology, and limited resources would be valuable for educators who wish to implement the writing program but who struggle to integrate it with their curriculum because of the social context.

Conclusion

As my graduate experience draws to a close and I reflect on the past two years I realize that this educational journey has been like a ride down a great river. In July 2013, I stepped into the calm water near the shore, uncertain and nervous about the fast moving water before me. My safety line, my family and friends, were there on the shore waving me on as I joined my colleagues on a raft heading into the unknown. I had been on this river before, it was exciting, but it moved so swiftly now that I feared I would fall and drown. At times I paddled for my life and seemed to make no progress, and then I would reach an eddy and be carried along on the momentum of the river. I watched as the shoreline receded and then came back into clear view, my family and friends running alongside, encouraging me on my journey. Halfway down the river, I saw a large rock looming in the water. There was no way to avoid it and as I passed its jagged fingers grabbed me and pulled me under the water. I gasped for breath and struggled for my footing, thinking my journey was over, but soon my family was standing in the water beside me and my colleagues had returned with the raft. Once again I was on my journey and the river's end was in sight. And now, in August 2015, I realize the river does not end, it runs into the sea and it can carry me anywhere I want to go.

This educational journey has been one of learning, affirmation, and discovery. As a student, I have learned new pedagogical strategies and theories I can take into my classroom

to improve my practice. Classroom work with inspired teachers and enthusiastic colleagues has provided a plethora of ideas I can transfer into my practice in the years to come. As an educator I have found affirmation that my teaching is based on best practice research and has a firm grounding in theory that has stood the test of time. Reading work written by Murray, Smagorinsky, and Vygotsky has provided me with a solid understanding of the sociocultural theory of learning and how it pertains to the social dynamics of the classroom. As an individual I have discovered the power of perseverance and determination. I feel confident I can take those characteristics into my classroom and draw on them to give my students the best educational experience possible.

Perhaps the greatest part of this experience was to see myself as many of my students see themselves. In my classroom, I am the expert; so being the novice, the person who struggled to make meaning from the words I was hearing, the person who felt I would never 'get it,' the person who could read a passage three times and STILL not understand what the author was trying to say, has been a humbling experience. Smagorinsky (2013) stated that "by deliberately taking the perspective of other people who exhibit points of difference that have real ramifications in their lives, students [can] begin to engage empathetically with others" (p. 196). When we build our classroom environment based on empathy, we create an atmosphere of trust in which our students can reach their full potential as learners.

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Appendix

100+ Ways to Show What You Know

Make a chart	Make up a role-play
Draw a cartoon	Make a photo/slide presentation
Make a time line	Make a poster
Write a song	Write a puppet show
Make an outline	Make a mobile
Act as class expert	Make a video
Write a radio play	Make up a test and key
Make a vocabulary list	Write an advertisement
Make a graph or table	Make a picture map
Create a dance	Hold a panel discussion
Give a pantomime	Invite/interview a guest speaker
Give and justify an opinion	Make some flip charts
Make a flow chart	Design a questionnaire
Write a newspaper article	Write a paragraph/essay
Take notes	Make a news show
Write a story	Create a Novel Study Package
Give directions to someone else	Make a glossary
Illustrate a process	Rewrite something in a different genre
Write a poem	Write questions for someone to answer
Make a puzzle, word search, etc.	(include a key)
Write a diary	Analyze the pros and cons
Conduct an experiment	Write a letter to the editor
Write and produce a play	Pre-Post Comparison
Make a flannel story board	Project completion as evidence
Make a model	Peer evaluation
Draw a picture	Make up an evaluation scale for yourself

Make a mind map

Paraphrase orally or in writing

Switch point of view and rewrite

Make an outline

Write a sequel/prequel

Teach a peer

Teach a teacher

Make a speech

Teach younger students

Make a relief map

Summarize some reading

Act out a legend

Make some flashcards

 Prepare an oral reading

Prepare an oral report

Make a map

Demonstrate an activity

Cook some food

Hold a conversation or a debate

Make a diorama

Make or dress a doll

Draw a flag/coat of arms

Create a pop-up book

Write a letter

Make a collage

Make a simulation game

Tell a story

Make a montage or mural

Make a sketch

Conduct a survey

Give a talk/lecture

Make a travel poster/brochure

Create a biography

Organize a field trip or visit

Make a booklet/pamphlet

Set up a display

Make a wheel chart

Write a book report

Write a critical analysis

Write a précis/summary

Write/act out character sketches

Do a dramatic monologue

Find meanings of difficult words and

concepts

Tutor someone

Simulate the situation

Interview

Write ad expert opinion

Complete your challenge experience

Create an acronym