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“I’m not allowed to write about that in school but at home I can”: Examining elementary school students' attitudes towards writing instruction

Purpose

Research on writing indicates that children’s attitudes about writing have an impact on their writing achievement (Knudson, 1995; Graham, Berninger & Fan, 2007). At the same time, we see the narrowing of curricular practices, especially in literacy, giving children less input into their educational experience and fewer choices about how and what they are learning (Genishi & Dyson, 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine children’s attitudes towards writing and the experiences that have shaped these attitudes and their identities as writers. We conducted grade level focus group interviews with children in an elementary school to learn more about their writing practices (in and out of school), their perceptions of themselves as writers, and the experiences that have influenced their views on writing and their writing practices. The goal was to learn about writing experiences that motivate children to write and lead to children's positive and/or negative attitudes towards writing in order to think about ways that teachers’ can help to support writing development in classrooms across the elementary school grades.

Theoretical framework

We utilized a constructivist framework to frame our theories about learning, the social nature of learning and the role of the teacher in this process (DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002; Dewey 1956/1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky describes learning as a social endeavor whereby children are directly influenced by the experiences and context within which they experience learning. Vygotsky’s *zone of proximal development* describes the process whereby children learn from others who are more experienced and this process is what pushes their development. Dewey describes the importance of learning environments, experiences that

are educational and the role of teachers (or facilitators) in this process (Dewey, 1956/1990). We used this framework to help understand the role of the curriculum, experiences, and facilitators (teachers, families) in the children's understanding of writing and the development of their identities as writers.

While we relied on constructivist thinking to help guide our understanding of the children's learning and development as writers, we used a critical framework that "seeks to question the patterns of knowledge and social conditions that maintain unequal social divisions" (Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner, & Malter Yarnall, 2001, p. 1197). This framework helped us to closely examine how children perceived themselves as emergent writers vis-à-vis the curriculum, classroom discourse about writing and writers, and their experiences as writers. We wondered about children who see themselves as successful writers and what experiences have led to this, as well as the experiences of children who are less engaged in writing. Moreover, we wondered how these children perceived the value of writing in their lives through their own experiences as writers as well as the ways in which they see adults in their lives engage in writing.

Methodology

We conducted a series of grade level interview focus groups with 87 children in grades Kindergarten through Fifth grade in a single elementary school in the South of the United States. One researcher approached a single teacher in each grade level and asked them to participate in the study. Permissions slips were sent home to all of the children in each classroom and we received signed consents from over half of each class. We then divided each grade level randomly into groups of 6-8 children and lead focus group discussions with 2-3 groups per grade. In the discussion, we first used a writing attitudes scale (adapted and developed by Graham et al., 2007) to determine their individual responses and attitudes towards writing. We

then asked a series questions (in a semi-structured format) which included questions such as: What types of things do you like to write about? What types of writing do you like to do at home (including computer, Ipads etc)? What makes you feel good about writing? What is a good writer? We also asked some questions about adult writing practices in order to explore their understanding of the purposes of writing and the skills they thought they would need to be an adult writer.

Data Sources

The bulk of our data were from focus group interviews with children. In addition, we asked the classroom teachers to answer a survey regarding the school writing curriculum, the writing curriculum in their classrooms, their philosophy of teaching writing as well as their perceptions of the children's writing skills (using a developmental writing scale).

Results and Interpretations

Overall, we learned about writing experiences that have positively and negatively influenced the students' desire to write. We found students reported positive experiences with writing revolving around topic choice and the publishing of their work and negative experiences including assigned writing tasks and critical feedback from adults. We saw shifts in writing attitudes over time, as children had more experience with writing. We found that these shifts looked differently depending on their gender and writing experiences in school and home, and we found themes increasing in maturity through the grade levels.

For the purposes of this paper, we wish to focus on two particular findings: the ways in which some children adopted and appropriated the classroom discourse of writing instruction and the disconnects between children's notions of what counts as writing and the writing practices of

adults. While seemingly different, both of these tie into larger questions of who is and who can be a writer and what is the purpose of writing?

Across the grades children focused on the mechanics of writing as being key to their ability to be “good writers.” The kindergartners’ talked about the importance of spelling and knowing words to be good writers. As the children got older the focus was on more complex mechanics such as punctuation, cursive writing, details, interesting vocabulary words and volume of writing. The children in fourth and fifth grade talked about the need to write multiple paragraphs and pages to be good writers and to prepare for middle-school and high school. These shifts appear to be reflective of their developing literacy skills, and the writing instruction across the ages. Overall though, the children’s comments about what they wanted to learn about writing or what they thought they needed to learn seemed to be tied to the writing curriculum and classroom discourses about writing. Within each grade the children’s comments about writing were remarkably similar and were tied to experiences that they had in the classroom or what they had been taught by their teachers.

When asked about writing that they saw adults (in particular adult family members) do, initially most children responded that their parents did not write. The few exceptions were children of professors or lawyers who saw their parents write papers, briefs, or contracts. We followed up with questions about if they saw their parents text, email, make lists, and the children immediately responded that they had seen their parents engage in these forms of writing. Interestingly, it was only those children whose parents engaged in more “academic writing” who saw their parents as writers, whereas the other writing activities were not seen as writing. This raises interesting questions about what kinds of writing are valued, what messages

about writing and literacy children are receiving in school and how they may or may not position themselves and their parents as writers.

As schools move towards adopting Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which focus on particular kinds of narrative texts with clear details of the conventions that are expected and a focus on product, we wonder how these curricular shifts might further affect children who are labeled as or who do not identify themselves as being “good writers.” While most of the adults in the children’s lives engaged in a variety of writing activities, these were not seen as “academic” nor did they mirror the writing experiences that children had in schools. Will the divide between what counts as writing in school and how people use writing authentically in their lives continue to widen? If so, how will this impact children’s writing development as they struggle to see the connection between their writing experiences inside and outside of school?

Significance

The impact of this research study is two-fold in that it can help teachers think about how to incorporate children’s interests and experiences into their writing curricula and teaching practices. Furthermore, it can help teachers think about ways to narrow the gap between in-school and out-of-school writing activities so that writing is not just viewed as an “academic” endeavor by children, but rather seen as a multi-faceted activity that is meaningful to their lives. From a research perspective, given that schools and curricula are undergoing significant changes due to the adoption of CCSS, it seems imperative that we take into account children’s experiences and perspectives in order to better understand their views of themselves as writers and the role of writing in their current and future lives.

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