Authenticity and Children's Engagement with Writing

SHELLEY K. JONES
Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, East Africa

Abstract

This paper highlights findings from a mixed methods study that explores the research questions: 1) What kind of writing do children like/dislike, and 2) How, if at all, does *authenticity* factor into kinds of writing that children like and/or dislike? Findings indicate that children enjoyed writing that embodied authentic purpose and text (e.g., that purposefully engaged them with in meaningful communicative interactions with an audience through textual forms that exist in the world beyond the classroom). Children tended to dislike writing that represented non-dialogic "school work", that they perceived to be intended for merely assessment purposes.

When she was in grade four (French immersion), several months after her interview for this project, Rose's grandfather died. Rose took a sudden leave from school to be with her extended family across the country. During this time, Mr. M., Rose's English teacher –who actively corresponded with his students through their daily journals - organized a card for Rose, which was signed by all of her classmates, scanned, and sent to her via email. Rose's response (framed as part of her journal-writing to Mr. M.) is as follows (I have used pseudonyms for those mentioned in Rose's journal):

Hi Mr. M.,
Thank you and everyone for the card it was nice to hear from the class. I have written a story about my grandpa and you can read it to the class if you like.

The Olden Days of Papa

Today Im going to tok abut the days my grandpa was young becaus he left home when he was 12 yeers old and set off for a avenchur. His twin sister wonted to go to but he sed no. I think yur going to find this funny. His name is Henry and her name is Henryetta he hoped frate trains akros Canada becaus he was looking for a job. His frst job was working in northrn Ontario but he had no wotr or lit or anething to kep him worm. he had to hunt his on deer. But the cool thing was he did not ned a frezr. It was so coold he left it in the house and wated to cook it.
PS the story is not over.

During these two or three weeks Rose was away from school, she wrote regularly to Mr. M. and the class about her grandfather, documenting his life, and – at the same time – seemingly processing and imprinting her understanding of him. Mr. M. and her classmates emailed their comments and questions. Knowing her story was being read by her teacher and classmates motivated Rose to write several installments of "The Olden

Days of Papa". This is writing that can be defined as authentic. It is meaningful and purposeful, and bridges internal and external worlds.
****

Writing offers ways to access the "semiotic (meaning-making) paradigm" (Halliday, 1999), where shared context, structures and processes facilitate the exchange of thoughts, experiences, and feelings with others. It seems that writing about her grandfather's life and sharing this writing with her teacher and classmates helped Rose not only process her grandfather's recent death, but compose an understanding of his life and his relationship to others. Eagerness to share her grandfather's story seems to have been the motivating impetus behind her writing, and her writing is free, fluid, and brimming with anecdotes, imagery, and insights. But (as discussed in later sections) when writing was a tightly constrained school-based activity, with time pressures and output expectations, Rose experienced frustration and anxiety around writing and developed an aversion to it.

This study arose from my interest in the findings from informal interviews that students in my Master of Education literacy course[1] conducted with primary school students about their literacy practices: Their findings revealed that most of the children who were interviewed did not like writing. This concurred with other research (e.g., Adams, Treiman, & Pressley, 1998; Graham & Harris, 2005) that found that children disliked writing and/or found it frustrating. Given the central importance of writing in children's lives both within and beyond the classroom there is a need to understand children's attitudes towards writing in order to understand how to support them to become engaged, competent, and enthusiastic writers; yet, there is little literature in this area.

In response to this gap in the literature, my study was undertaken to learn more about the kinds of writing children like. My assumption was that the nature of the writing activity, the processes that are involved, and the ways in which children's writing is engaged with by others (i.e., audience involvement) would factor heavily into children's like/dislike of writing. Of interest to me were studies that have shown that children can be highly motivated by *authentic* (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006; Dyson, 2002) writing activities that encourage children to learn and share their experiences about the world with the world (Britton, 1970; Halliday, 1999; Moffett, 1979; Duke et al., 2006; Dyson, 2002). The research questions posed were:

1. What kinds of writing do children like/dislike?
2. How, if at all, does *authenticity* factor into kinds of writing that children like and/or dislike?

An Authentic Writing Pedagogy
All writers, including children, "write their lives" (Collier, 2010, p. 147). Writing immerses writers in "semiotic (meaning-making) paradigms" (Halliday, 1999)—shared

---

[1] These were students enrolled in a Master of Education program in an urban centre in Ontario, Canada.

contexts and systems that facilitate interpersonal communication—through which they interact with the world. Moffet (1979) posited that writing represents "inner speech" that bridges emergent thought and spoken language. Children's development of coherent, embodied, and proficient inner speech is dependent upon opportunities for immersion in social semiotic paradigms that are dialogic, and where language in all its forms (written, spoken, thought) supports children as they assimilate new information, experiences, and ideas through their expanding and deepening *schemas* (Piaget, 1955), or internal frames of reference that enable them to interact with, and understand their worlds in increasingly complex ways,

For many children, their first writing experiences occur at home and involve interactions with family members and friends. In this way, children experience writing as "a dialogic endeavor involving collaboration within social interactions" (Christianakis, 2011, p. 26), where there is a communicative purpose and a responsive audience. In addition to talk, home-based writing experiences also typically include the freedom to draw upon a variety of other meaning-making modes such as pictures, music and drama, to produce text (Nixon &Topping, 2001). This process, which Dyson (1986) called "symbol-weaving", imbues children's writing with a wide range and depth of semiotic significance and supports their development of voice and freedom of expression.

When children transition to school, however, they are often faced with what I will refer to as *school writing*, which is something different, and often less meaningful and creative, than the more fluid, organic and interactive writing experienced at home (Nixon & Topping, 2001). School writing can be understood as writing that is primarily focused on mechanics (e.g., orthography, punctuation, neatness), monomodal (pen(cil) to paper) text production, accuracy, conformity, and adherence to prescribed topics, and expected to be done alone. This kind of writing is devoid of interactive engagement with others and is intended rather for non-dialogic purposes such as grading and fulfilling curriculum expectations (Collier, 2010; Duke et al, 2006; Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011; Moffett, 1979; Nixon &Topping, 2001; Parsons & Ward, 2011). Britton (1970) argued that the attempt to teach writing skills without embedding those skills in the social, communicative, processes that are at the heart of writing is a hollow pedagogy:

> …what children use language for in school must be 'operations' and not 'dummy runs'. They must continue to use it to make sense of the world: they must *practise* language in the sense in which a doctor 'practises' medicine and a lawyer 'practises' law, and *not* in the sense in which a juggler 'practises' a new trick before he performs it. (p. 130)

As mentioned, authentic writing pedagogy is different from school writing because it strives to support learners develop voice and connect with others through text that is meaningful and empowering, or authentic, to them (Dyson, 2002). With respect to the classroom context, Duke et al. (2006) proposed the following operational definition of authentic literacy activities:

> [authentic literacy activities] replicate or reflect reading and writing activities that occur in the lives of people outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and

purpose. Each authentic literacy activity has a writer and a reader—a writer who is writing to a real reader and a reader who is reading what the writer wrote. (p.346)

Two elements are essential for an authentic literacy activity: *purpose/function* and *text* (Duke et al, 2006, p. 346). The purpose embedded in authentic literacy activities is that of communication—providing opportunities for meaningful expression of individual voice that resonate purposefully and effectively within semiotic paradigms that facilitate interpersonal interaction as well as intrapersonal reflection. The kinds of text that render a literacy activity authentic are those that are found in the real world beyond the classroom (e.g., news articles, brochures, blogs, poems, and stories), in contrast to inauthentic texts (e.g., grammar and punctuation worksheets, and comprehension questions concerned more with recall and finding the *correct* answer) that are not. Thus, meaningful communication through text is key to authentic literacy.

The Study

This study explored how authenticity factors into kinds of writing that children like and/or dislike in order to provide insights that can support teachers to inspire, motivate and encourage their students to become strong, passionate writers. A mixed methods approach was used to collect data (from questionnaires and semi-structrured interviews) from a snowball sampling of participants.

Research Design

The intent behind my research questions was to learn about the kinds of writing children had experienced at home and at school and that they found to be enjoyable, meaningful, and engaging. I was interested in individual children's thoughts and feelings about writing, as well as any overall trends and patterns in the children's responses that might indicate some common themes that cut across age, school contexts, gender, and even language programs. With this in mind, I employed a survey design (Creswell, 2008) for my research using questionnaires and one-on-interviews as methods of data collection. The children completed child-friendly questionnaires either individually, or in pairs (ie., siblings, or friends that were at the same location at the same time). The questionnaires asked them to provide basic information about themselves, as well as respond to a number of questions pertaining to their feelings about writing by using one of the symbols found in Figure 1. (Please see Appendix 2 for a copy of the questionnaire).

Figure 1. Symbols used as response options in questionnaire.

Once the child had completed her/his questionnaire, s/he and I discussed the questionaire informally. Following this, I explained the interview process, and then conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the participants (questions included in

Appendix), following up on any points of particular interest from the questionnaire and/or informal discussion of the questionnaire. I made digital audio recordings of these interviews which were later transcribed.

The Participants

The participants in this study were 14 elementary school-age children, 12 girls and two boys, ranging in age from five to 10 years (see Appendix 1), living in an urban centre in Ontario, Canada. As I did not seek to pose and/or investigate an intervention, and my intention was to collect data from children of varying ages and diverse school contexts, I chose a snowball sampling approach to participant recruitment. The children were recruited through an informal request for participants for this study on children and writing; this request was addressed to parents of elementary school-aged children, and made through a local school and a local higher education institution. Initially, the children were approached by their parents to ascertain their interest in becoming participants, and the children in this study are those who were keen to do so. As my intention was to investigate diverse pedagogical experiences, the participants range in age, come from diverse programs, schools, and geographic locations within the same city.

At the outset of the meeting with each child, I read a prepared script that explained the purpose of the study; we then discussed this further and I answered any questions the children had. I ensured that each child knew that s/he always had the option to not answer any particular question(s) and/or withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by grouping quantitative findings on specific predetermined codes based on close-ended questions from the questionnaire, as well as codes that emerged from key words, phrases and ideas found from sifting through the data from open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the interview transcriptions. Predetermined codes included, for example, particular writing genres (letters, reports, journals, stories), as well as the context in which the participants wrote (i.e., at home, at school). Data was also coded into the kinds of writing the participants "liked" and "disliked", but the qualitative data generated more nuanced themes (e.g, "frustration", "anxiety") and qualifiying distinctions (e.g., writing done at school that was considered to be enjoyable and meaningful versus writing done at school that was considered to be unenjoyable and meaningless for the participant).

Findings

This section considers major thematic categories that emerged from the data with respect to the kinds of writing the participants enjoyed and did not enjoy, their frustrations and challenges with writing, their feelings about sharing their writing, and ways in which children produce and interact with text**.**

Kinds of Writing that Participants Enjoyed

The children in this study most enjoyed the following kinds of writing: letter/note writing; writing to process thoughts and ideas; creative writing; writing to support engagement in learning (e.g., research projects); writing to support engagement in

personal activities (e.g. computer games); collaborative writing; and witing to support daily tasks/activities (e.g., writing lists). All participants enjoyed sharing their writing with an audience, attesting to the importance of dialogic relationships to the meaningfulness of the writing process.

*Letter/note writing***.** Several children expressed their interest in writing in order to engage interactively with others. In response to the questionnaire statement, "I like to write letters*"*, 10 children indicated "yes", three indicated "a bit", and one indicated "no". In her interview, Georgia said that she enjoyed writing to penpals in France (a class activity initiated by her teacher), because "It's fun to know what's happening." Georgia also liked to write letters to her friends who had moved to different parts of Canada. Crystal enjoyed writing letters to her mother as a way of communicating with her, and when she was away on a vacation, she enjoyed writing postcards to friends.

Malory composed persuasive letters in order to "[try] to convince a person to do stuff." Madison wrote letters at home to communicate with her family: she liked to write out her thoughts and feelings and then share them "…by printing it or putting it on somebody's bed and then they'll go there and read it." Madison especially enjoyed writing to adults to persuade them to agree to some request she put forward. For example, "Sometimes when I have a friend over, we would [write a letter to] persuade my mom to let us have a sleep-over or something."

Madison also enthusiastically recalled times when she wrote persuasive letters in the school context. She discussed a letter she wrote to her teacher: "Well, I persuaded my teacher last year on Earth Day that we have a creamsicle day and that actually worked." And, she recounted the contents of another letter she had written to her school principal:

Madison:	Dear Mr. S ..cuz that's my principal…It's me…[Madison] in grade 3 and I was wondering if maybe you could buy…I really like [persuasive writing] because you have to use persuasive words like "I REALLY want to do this because" or …you have to use persuasive words like "think, need, and should."
Author:	So why do you like using those kinds of words?
Madison:	Because it gets people really paying attention and…I'm persuading my principal to get a play structure because we don't have one at school.

Tracy made some interesting observations about the importance of writing as an alternative to speech, as well as for communicating with those at a distance:

Tracy:	.…when you're speaking, you have to be able to say stuff to people they can understand and to live and talk and so you need to be able to say a sentence…like if people are deaf, they won't hear you, so you can write a sentence to them.

Writing to process thoughts/ideas. Some children in this study used writing as a means by which they expressed their ideas, feelings, requests and suggestions—to others,

or just to themselves. Gemma discussed how she conveyed her feelings to others through writing: "You can use words to show what your action is inside…Say I'm mad but I don't want to draw a picture to show it. I want to write words." George, Malory, Charmaine, Gemma, and Georgia discussed how they processed thoughts and feelings through writing in journals/diaries; Gemma stated, "…it's fun to write about what fun things you did and the days." Charmaine said, "I like writing about my life." Tracy discussed writing at home when "I mostly just have some quiet time. Just a day when there's nothing to do." And, Madison explained that she liked to "… write things on my white board."

Creative writing. Several participants expressed their enjoyment of creative writing. Rose reflected on writing poetry as a way of processing her experiences in the world: "[with] poetry you can write about anything you see and use your imagination and choose any words you like to make a picture or thought." Malory explained that her favourite kind of writing was creating stories because of the interpersonal and reflective enjoyment and possibilities it affords "You get to try to remember that moment and normally the happy moments that you experience, and it's fun to write about things that you did and you liked…"

Charmaine recounted her enjoyment of writing a story that embodied an important message:

> When I was at school I wrote this nine page story – it was a fractured fairy tale, and it was really fun to get our ideas out, plan them…It's really fun to read a story with a lesson in it, and I tried to put a lesson in mine and my lesson was not to lie because if you lie too much when it really happens no one will believe you.

At the outset of his interview, Notch unequivocally declared that he did not enjoy writing of any kind. However, during the interview Notch reflected enthusiastically upon working on collaborative writing endeavours at home with a good friend:

Notch:	Well, me and a friend were writing a story called, "Fred the Bunny" and it's kind of funny…another story we were going to call "Twisted Universe"...it's like you control the book… it gives you three places where you can go or three things you can do…We were just doing our ideas and our first draft…We had like this folder that was full of the characters and their companions.
Author:	So you worked together on it and that was fun?
Notch:	Yeah, like P. had a page, I had a page…
Author:	Do you think you might ever get back to working on that?
Notch:	Maybe. Probably.
Author:	So that was an experience with writing that you found fun?
Notch:	Yeah.

Several children enjoyed reading their stories aloud, or having them read by others, as can be seen in the following excerpt from her interview: "Well, at school I was really happy when I wrote a five-page story and my teacher read it to the whole class."

Malory also liked to share her writing: "I normally like to share it with my friends in my class....cuz when I share it, instead of just me telling the person what it's about, it helps them understand it… then that might give them an idea that pops into their head." Sarah, too, enjoyed sharing her writing with her friends, classmates, teachers and family:

"I like to read it to them and sometimes they read it."

Writing to support engagement in learning. Most of the children in this study were enthusiastic about writing that is directly connected with learning about the world. Many children, for example, identified report writing as their favourite kind of writing. In response to the questionnaire statement, "I like to write reports about things," eight children answered "yes", three answered "a bit", one answered "no", and two did not respond because they had not yet engaged in report-writing. Gemma stated that her favourite kind of writing was writing about animals because, "It's interesting what animals do." Georgia enjoyed writing about animals because, "It's interesting what they eat and stuff." Sarah stated, "I like projects a lot, like animal projects and all sorts of projects…research." Madison expressed her preference for writing non-fiction because, "Non-fiction is true, and fiction is not true…I really like writing non-fiction more." Tracy stated that writing "[is] a fun thing to do cuz it helps you learn things and understand more things", and particularly enjoyed "…writing about people who do stuff."

Writing to support engagement in personal activities. A number of participants understood writing to be an integrated aspect of daily activities, and enjoyed creating texts associated with these activities. In response to the questionnaire statement, "I like to write lists," seven responded "yes", four responded "a bit", and two responded "no". Tracy stated: "Me and my sister did something and we decided to write our routines on the computer and so that was really fun. I liked that." Dog Prince made shopping lists, and Rose created weekly menus for her school lunches. During her interview, Charmaine said: "It [writing] …gives me lots of ideas of what to do next, how my day's gonna go, it just kind of plans my day." Madison enjoyed "how-to" writing that guided her in various endeavours: "I…like procedural writing…Because procedural writing is instructions…I like doing recipes." Notch discussed how he used drawing and writing as a way of organizing his thoughts when he played the video game, Mindcraft: "I make the drawings and then I show, and then I put arrows and then say what it is and what kind of block it is…and then since I have these good ideas in my head, eventually I'll make them in the computer."

Writing Participants did not Enjoy

Although a wide range of writing activities appealed to the children in this study, they also identified several kinds of writing that they did not enjoy. Based on the negative ("no/not really") responses to the "I like" questions on the questionnaire, and discussions in the semi-structured interviews, the data revealed that many of the children in this study

did not enjoy the following kinds of writing: school-based daily journal writing; drills (e.g., spelling/dictee tests); explaining their thinking processes (such as solutions to math problems); and; writing for writing's sake.

School-based journal writing. In response to the questionnaire statement, "I like to write in a journal,*"* four indicated "no", four indicated "a bit", and six indicated "yes". One participant wrote on her questionnaire that she didn't like journal-writing because she didn't like writing about "things that allredy happened," and George stated in his interview: "I don't really like writing about myself, like what I'm doing…Usually it's not really my choice…" Similarly, in response to the interview question, "Was there a time when you were not happy about something you wrote?*"* Sarah stated, "Sometimes in my journal I wrote about something that I didn't really want to write about."

Drills, explaining thinking processes. Several of the participants in French Immersion programs expressed their dislike of doing writing drills, such as dictee (French spelling quizzes). And several children communicated their dislike of "writing math" (such as explaining their thought process for solving math problems). Gemma said in her interview: "…I do the math problems, and then [my teacher] says, 'Apres tu as fini les problemes du mathematique, tu dois expliquer la mode.' And it's a bit annoying cuz I don't want to write in words. I just want to write…like…math."

Writing for assessment. Several children in this study expressed their dislike of writing that seemed more concerned with getting something down on paper than providing a meaningful, communicate writing experience. George and Notch enjoyed writing stories on their own at home, but they did not like writing stories at school because they "had to" write them. Madison expressed her dislike of writing paragraphs: "Because it's...like you have to remember a lot like the indent…my teacher thinks we need a hook, a topic sentence, a beginning, middle and end…and a closing sentence in a body…I just don't like it for some reason...like you HAVE to put them in a certain order." Madison, however, was an otherwise avid and prolific writer, as has been evidenced throughout this analysis.

Frustrations and Challenges with Writing

This study also found that many children experienced frustrations and challenges related to the demands, restrictions, and expectations around writing at school. All but two children in this study expressed their desire for more class time for writing, and some felt pressured because of time constraints on their writing activities. Tracy discussed her feelings of "worry" when she felt that she would not have enough time to complete her writing, especially when it was a substantial piece. When asked in her interview, "Is there any kind of writing you don't like doing?", she reflected, "Well, I don't really like doing big hard words like I'm going to write a story that has ten pages in it and the pages are stuffed with writing. I don't like doing that cuz it's too much for me and then I'm worried that I won't get it finished and I waste my time and I get all worried." On the other hand, however, Tracy wrote prolifically, and without anxiety, when there was no time pressure: "I like writing really big stories in my [home] journal just because I have a

lot of time and because it's fun." Similarly, Notch stated that he only liked writing "If it's at home, and I'm not pressured at all."

George stated in his interview, "Usually I want more time cuz I like writing a lot." And, Dog Prince relayed her frustration with insufficient time allotted to writing: "I would like to be able to write more stories in my class…usually when we're right in the middle of our stories our teacher says time for recess which really kinda makes me angry cause I want enough time to finish my story then go outside…" Some children, such as Malory and Rose, considered themselves to be "slow writers" because they felt that they were not accomplishing what was expected of them in the time they were allotted for writing: "I think I'm a good writer, just slow at like writing it down" (Malory).

Another significant frustration many participants experienced was the challenges associated with generating and organizing ideas: "It's hard to decide what you want…to write what the theme of the story is going to be for each page…it's hard to make up the story…because there are a lot of decisions" (Georgia); "It's hard to find a plot" (Malory); "Sometimes…I can't even get an idea" (Rose). Charmaine explained how her teacher supported the generation of ideas by encouraging the children to talk to each other: "when you talk about the ideas, your friend could tell you if it's a great idea, or if needs a bit of work, so it's helpful." However, Charmaine was the only child who reported that her teacher actively encouraged talk to support writing. Other participants discussed how they believed that being able to talk before writing would help them develop their ideas. George, for example, also agreed that talking with classmates would be helpful: "Because they can give you ideas, and it feels good when you're starting something to share it with someone else." Dog Prince also expressed frustration with developing ideas for her stories, and when I asked her if she thought talking to her classmates about her ideas might be helpful, she said, "Yeah," but explained:

> We're not really allowed to share the ideas….cause my teacher says that it's not that good, and that we can't really talk together, because when we share our ideas we usually end up chatting together and it kind of disturbs the other people who are trying to work hard, so we're not really allowed to share our ideas at school.

Most of the children in this study stated that they thought drawing pictures would help them generate ideas for writing, as represented by this excerpt from Georgia's interview:

Georgia:	…it's hard to decide what you want…to write what the theme of the story is going to be for each page…because there are a lot of decisions…and you have to think about what to draw.
Author:	Are you drawing the pictures first or after you think about the writing?
Georgia:	After.
…	
Author:	Do you think it might help if you did a picture first and then wrote about it? Would that help give you some ideas?
Georgia:	A picture would be kind of easy…

Author: Do you think it's easier to do the writing first and then a picture? Or is it easier to do a picture and then get ideas and write a sentence?

Georgia: Maybe after you did the picture because it gives you a bit of an idea…like it's the sentence made to a picture…A picture first.

Notch discussed how drawing as a pre-writing activity could prompt him to remember his ideas which would help him with his writing: "Cuz if you're drawing before, you might forget your story, and then you look at your drawing and remember. So it acts like a trigger." Tracy expressed a highly integrative, symbiotic relationship between writing and drawing where pictures and words were almost interchangeable: "I write about people a lot and I draw people all the time…Sometimes I don't write stories. I mostly just tell them in my head and draw people and the things that are happening." Despite the deep connection between images and writing for children, however, pictures were typically only included (if at all) in the writing actitivies as 'add-ons', to be produced after the text had been written.

Discussion and Pedagogical Recommendations

Findings from this study indicate that there is a strong correlation between writing that the participants enjoyed and the authenticity of the writing activity. The stronger the connection between the writing activity and the particpants' worlds (internal as well as external), the more plentiful the opportunities for participants to engage in dialogic interactions as part of their writing, and the more powerfully they experienced their writing being acknowledged and responded to as text in the real world beyond the classroom, the greater the children's enthusiasm for writing.

Like other studies (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007; Gambrell et al., 2011; Merisuo-Storm, 2006), this study found that letter-writing is a highly social, authentic genre of writing that children enjoy. Participants established and maintained friendships, presented formal requests, and communicated thoughts and/or posed questions to parents through their letters. Some of the letter-writing activities discussed by the participants were done in the classroom (i.e., Georgia's letter to a penpal in France, and Madison's persuasive letters to her teacher and principal), and others done at home (i.e., Madison and Crystal's letters to their mothers). Common to both contexts, however, were a real audience and communicative purpose, both central to rendering the activity authentic and meaningful for the participants. As Duke et al (2006) note, an *authentic* audience, defined as "a reader who will read the written text for its communicative purpose and not solely for evaluation" (p. 352) is a fundamental component of an authentic literacy activity.

Many participants also enjoyed creative writing. Charmaine, Rose, and Malory explored and processed concepts and experiences of the world through their stories and poems, which they liked to share with others. Rose's reflection that "[with] poetry you can write about anything you see and use your imagination and choose any words you like to make a picture or thought" resonates closely with Moffett's (1979) conception of writing:

…writing [is] first of all…a full-fledged authoring…[an] authentic expression of an individual's own ideas, original in the sense that he has synthesized them for himself. True authoring occurs naturally to the extent that the writer is composing with raw material…. (p. 278)

Through her poetry writing, Rose claimed thoughts and words for herself and communicated in a way that was deeply personal, original, and authentic.

Creative writing intersected both home and school spheres and was potentially meaningful to the children in both contexts, although this was not always the case. Notch was an avid writer, but he made it clear that the writing he enjoyed was done well beyond the classroom walls where he was free to engage in a collaborative, dialogic relationship with his friend to develop and expand his ideas: He liked writing "…if it's at home and I'm not pressured at all." What he did not like, he insisted, was "school work!" The implication is that creative writing done in the school context did not offer Notch the same kinds of opportunities to explore, play with, and develop his writing capabilities.

Speech and writing are "dialectically related linguistic processes" (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 165). Because verbal expression of thoughts is an easier and more accessible mode of communication for children than is writing, it is not surprising that children enjoy talking to other children about their writing thoughts to develop their ideas. And, as Britton (1970) argues, "writing will grow from that talk" (p. 130). There is ample evidence that shows that talk is germane and catalytic to children's writing (Britton, 1970; Dyson, 1999; Fisher, Jones, Larkin & Myhill, 2010; Graves, 2004; Laman, 2011; Wells, 1986), and many participants in this study discussed how they believed that being able to talk before writing would help them develop their ideas. George made the poignant comment, "…it feels good when you're starting something to share it with someone else,"which attests to his understand of writing as a social process. However, only one child (Charmaine) was regularly encouraged to talk with classmates before writing, and one child (Dog Prince) reported that her teacher actively discouraged talk during writing activities.

Drawing is also a natural and important aspect of the pre-writing stage for many children as it helps them develop and flesh out their ideas (Graves, 2004). Bruner (1966) argued that children move from visual to textual representations as part of the process of becoming capable of abstract thought. Christianakis' (2011) study of the relationship between drawing and writing for a group of fifth graders found that:

….[drawing is a] semiotic resource deeply embedded within the textual terrains children navigate both in and out of school. When given semiotic choices, the children in the present study integrated drawing, pictures, and writing in sophisticated and creative ways that challenged the primacy of alphabetic monomodal ideologies promulgated in their schooling. (p. 23)

Participants in this study presented a relationship between writing and drawing that is very fluid and deeply enmeshed and strongly suggested that writing activities that offer children opportunities to generate ideas through drawing *before* they write can support their writing development. As Georgia said, "Maybe [it would be best to do the

writing] after you did the picture because it [the picture] gives you a bit of an idea…like it's the sentence made to a picture…A picture first." However, the participants indicated that writing and drawing were not typically integrated into the process of writing (i.e., pictures were "tack-ons" added after the writing had been completed).

Effective writing pedagogy also offers choices (e.g., of topic, of genre) whenever possible. Lack of choice can dampen children's enthusiasm for writing, as was expressed by George when discussing his aversion to journal writing at school: "Usually it's not really my choice…" Teachers should take the time and interest to know what inspires and motivates children to write (Routman, 2005). When asked if she thought that this study was important, Madison said, "Yes [because] teachers will learn more about the students and the teachers will know better why the students don't like something or why they do like something".

The children in this study indicated that they found report-writing to be a purposeful and interesting way of "meaning-making" as it involved them in active inquiry, dialogical interactions, multimodal semiotic processes, and sharing their work with a receptive audience—all of which rang authentic to them. Report-writing offers important pedaogical opportunities for children to acquire meaningful knowledge about topics of interest to them through inquiry and research, and then present their knowledge to a real audience orally, visually and textually. Social interactions tend to be a natural component to this kind of student-centered and inquiry-based learning, and the elements of purposefulness, meaningfulness, and communicativeness imbue all forms of social semiotics, including writing, with authenticity.

On the other hand, when children perceived writing to be non-dialogic and/or assessement-driven, without genuine communicative purpose or textual representation in the world beyond the classroom, was of little interest to them. For example, George did not enjoy journal writing at school, Gemma found writing explanations of how she solved math problems tedious, and Notch resisted any kind of writing that he categorized as "school work". Thus writing activities that lacked the central elements of authenticity (*purpose* and *text*) did not appeal to the children.

Because writing is such a complex process, it is critical that children be provided with ample time for their writing. Graves (2004) stated: "The complexity of the writing process and the interrelatedness of its components have been underestimated by researchers, teachers, and other educators, because writing is an organic process that frustrates approaches to explain its operation" (p. 7). It is possibly because of its complexity, and the challenges associated with trying to explain how writing is learned and taken up, that many teachers find writing so challenging to teach and give it minimal time in the school day (Gilbert & Graham, 2010), and why children often become averse to writing and view it as a chore, rather than as a creative adventure (Adams, Treiman, & Pressley, 1998; Graham & Harris, 2005).

But, educators need to remind themselves that "being a writer—navigating textually through our deeply-layered semiotic, material, and sociocultural worlds—is indeed so very complex to do" (Dressman, McCarthey, & Prior, 2011, p. 7). Most children in this study desired more time to write, and some participants, such as Rose and Tracy, conceived of themselves as "slow" writers and expressed their anxiety and frustration around writing. These self-perceptions are potentially harmful to children's

self-esteem and development as confident writers, as motivation is often dependent on their feelings of being able to successfully fulfill expectations of a task (Gambrell, et al., 2011; Kim & Lorsbach, 2005). Effective writing pedagogy, therefore, negotiates a complex balance between support and guidance through direct instruction and ample opportunities for choice of topic, explorations of genre, stylistic experimentation, and nurturing of individual "voice". If teachers take the time to demonstrate their own writing processes, and acknowledge their own challenges with producing text they feel satisfied with, they will provide children with important insights into writing as a generative, iterative, exploratory, multi-stage (and often lengthy) process.

Teachers are, invariably, faced with time restraints in all areas of learning, but perhaps, with respect to writing, these could be mitigated somewhat by i) more cross-curricular thematic integration that supports ongoing work on a single writing piece across subject areas; or ii) a multimodal approach to representations that purposefully combines writing (of various genres) with other semiotic modes (e.g., drawing, music, drama). In addition, writing activities should offer children opportunities to experience how their own text can reverberate in the world as part of a larger discourse, in various genres, and with a real audience.

Good writers know how to use conventions, genres, and styles to engage within semiotic paradigms and, therefore, the craft of writing needs to be taught by demonstrating how meaning is made and/or made more powerful through the adoption and use of various techniques, approaches and forms (Britton, 1970; Graves, 1983, 2004; Moffet, 1979). Effective instructional writing activities are meaningful and contextually-embedded and enable learners to understand the purpose of these activities. But, all too often the teaching of the multitudinous and complex elements of writing (e.g., mechanics, structure, style, genres, conventions) is done at the expense of meaningful content. As Moffett (1979) argued, teaching writing well is challenging precisely because writing well integrates and relies upon such a wide range of skills and abilities:

> When people write, they are simultaneously *drawing* letters, *transcribing* their inner voices, *plagiarizing* concepts and frameworks from their culture, *crafting* their thoughts into language forms, and *revising* the inchoate thought of their inner speech. None of this is wrong, but failing to include all is wrong. (p. 278)

Learning writing structures in isolation from meaningful content and purposeful communicative engagement lacks authenticity (Gambrell et al, 2011) and children seem to be perceptive of (and even begrudge) its 'emptiness'. It would seem that Madison, for example, would likely be more interested in learning to write paragraphs if the content, and the effective presentation of that content, was the focus, and not the structure of the writing—if the pedagogical focus had been on the power and "punch" of a well-crafted paragraph, likely Madison would have understood its relevance to her own writing.

Conclusion

An authentic writing pedagogy supports children's evolving identities and offer ways in which to hold, gaze at, reflect upon, embrace and celebrate their lives. Several children in this expressed the deep connection between their inner worlds, their inner

speech, and writing. As Gemma said, "You can use words to show what your action is inside." What makes writing authentic is not solely the genre, activity, or the context in which the writing transpires, but the reason for it, the conditions surrounding it, its potential to bridge internal and external worlds, and its communicative meaningfulness. The superficiality of much *school writing*—non-dialogic writing activities driven primarily by assessment objectives—does not support children's ability to harness the power of writing for self-development and the establishment of voice: rather it constricts their creative expression and understanding of the possibilities of literacies (Moffett, 1979).

However, *school writing* and *writing at school*, are not synonymous. When the participants had sufficient time, choice, and communicative opportunities, they often wrote with enthusiasm and their writing flourished, whether in the classroom or at home. For example, many enjoyed the classroom-based penpal project of writing letters to other children in a different country; some enjoyed storywriting when they felt that they were able to engage with the process and convey a message to an authetic readership; some enjoyed persuasive writing when there was clearly a responsive audience and tangible outcome; and most enjoyed report writing that engaged them in meaningful and interesting learning about topics of interest to them. These writing activities facilitated the children's participation in the world and enabled them to begin to establish themselves as textual "meaning-makers," a foundation from which they will continue to construct their "social and literate identities" (Collier, 2010, p. 147).

As Britton (1970) remarked, "It is not only that the classroom must more and more merge into the world outside it, but that the processes of school learning must merge into the processes of learning that begin at birth and are life-long" (p. 129). An authenticity-based writing pedagogy will include freedom of choice, creative expression, time flexibility, dialogic and multimodal engagement that support the development of strong, competent, passionate writers. Knowing that their writing ripples in the real world and has an impact on those who read it, contributes to children's sense of identity and agency, and offers them an understanding of the power they, as writers, can have.

****

Hey Mr. M,
Just letting you know that today Im going to continu my story maybe even finish it.

Papa: Olden Days Part II
A little later on Papa met a beautiful yung lady my grandma. He thot she was so beautiful he just had to follo her and she roled her windo down about an inch and sed, "ok, but you have to stay in your on car". So he got her a soda and she sed, "to chase her in his car and finally she stopped her car. He got out of his car and went over to her and asked her if he cood by her another soda. She thank you", and he sed, "yur welcome". Then she sed, "It's getting late. I better get home." She sed, "by and thank you for the soda" again. ...I think for him she was to beautiful. He thot her eyes were as bright as glowing stars he cood not take his eyes off her....

To be continud...

References

Adams, M.J., Treiman, R., & Pressley, M. (1998). Reading, writing, and literacy. In W. Damon, I.E. Sigel, & K.A. Renninger (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (5th ed., Volume 4: Child psychology in practice) (pp. 275-355). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Barksdale, M. A., Watson, C., & Park, E. S. (2007). Pen pal letter exchanges: Taking first steps toward developing cultural understandings. *Reading Teacher*, *61*(1), 58–68. doi:10.1598/RT.61.1.6

Barthes, R. (1997). *The Eiffel Tower and other mythologies* (Richard Howard). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Britton, J. (1970). *Language and learning*. London: Allen Lane.

Bruner, J. S. (1966). On cognitive growth. In J.S. Bruner, R.R. Olver, P.M. Greenfield (Eds.), *Studies in cognitive growth: A collaboration at the Center for Cognitive Studies* (pp. 1-29). New York: Wiley.

Christianakis, M. (2011). Children's text development: Drawing, pictures, and writing. *Research in the Teaching of English, (46)*1, 22-54.

Collier, D. (2010). Journey to becoming a writer: Review of research about children's identities as writers. *Language and Literacy, 12*(1), 147-64.

Collins, J., & Blot, R. (2003). *Literacy, and literacies: Texts, power, and identity* (No. 22.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dressman, M., McCarthey, S., & Prior, P. (2011). On the complexities of writing and writing research. *Research in the Teaching of English (46)*1, 5-7.

Duke, N. K., Purcell-Gates, V., Hall, L. A., & Tower, C. (2006). Authentic literacy activities for developing comprehension and writing. *International Reading Association, 60*(4), 344-55. doi:10.1598/RT.60.44

Dyson, A. H. (1999). Coach Bombay's kids learn to write: "Children's appropriation of media material for school literacy". *Research in the Teaching of English, 33*(4), 367-402.

Dyson, A.H. (2002). The drinking god factor: A writing development remix for "all" children. *Written Communication, 19*(4), 545-577. doi: 10.1177/074108802238009

Fisher, R., Jones, S., Larkin, S, & Myhill, D. (2010). *Using talk to support writing*. London: Sage.

Gambrell, L. B., Hughes, E. M., Calvert, L., Malloy, J. A., & Igo, B. (2011). Authentic reading, writing, and discussion: An exploratory study of a pen pal project. *The Elementary School Journal, 112*(2), 234-58. doi:10.1086/661523

Gilbert, J., & Graham, S. (2010). Teaching writing to elementary students in grades 4–6: A national survey. *The Elementary School Journal*, *110*(4), 494-518.

Graham, S., & Harris, K.R. (2005). Improving the writing performance of young struggling writers: Theoretical and programmatic research from the Center on Accelerated Student Learning. *The Journal of Special Education, 39*(1), 19-33. doi: 10.1177/00224669050390010301

Graves, D. H. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemman.

Graves, D. H. (2004). An examination of the writing processes of seven year old children. In D. Wray (Ed.), *Literacy: Major themes in education* (Vol. 3) (pp. 7-23). Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge Falmer.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1993). Towards a language-based theory of learning. *Linguistics and Education, 5*, 93-116.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). Language as social semiotic. In J. Maybin (Ed.), *Language and Literacy in Social Practice* (pp. 23-43). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1999). The notion of "context" in language education. In M. Ghadessy (Ed.), *Text and context in functional linguistics* (pp.1-24). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Halliday, M. A. K. (2003). Written language, standard language, global language. *World Englishes, 22*(4), 405-418.

Kim, J., & Lorsbach, A.W. (2005). Writing self-efficacy in young children: Issues for the early grades environment. *Learning Environments Research, 8,* 157-175. doi: 10.1007/s10984-005-7248-5

Laman, T.T. (2011). The functions of talk within a 4th-grade writing workshop: Insights into understanding. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 25*(2), 133-144. doi: 10.1080/02568543.2011.556518

Merisuo-Storm, T. (2006). Girls and boys like to read and write different texts. *Scandanavian Journal of Educational Research, 50*(2), 111-125. doi: 10.1080/00313830600576039

Moffett, J. (1979). Integrity in the teaching of writing. *The Phi Delta Kappan, 16*(4), 276-279.

Nixon, J. G., & Topping, K.J. (2001). Emergent writing: The impact of structured peer interaction. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology, 21*(1), 41-58. doi:10.1080/01443410123268

Parsons, S. E., & Ward, A. E. (2011). The case for authentic tasks in content literacy. *The Reading Teacher, 64*(6), 462-65. doi:10.1598/RT.64.6.12

Piaget, J. (1955). *The child's construction of reality*. London: Routledge.

Routman, R. (2005). *Writing essentials: Raising expectations and results while simplifying teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Splitter, L. J. (2009). Authenticity and constructivism in education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 28*(2), 135-151. doi: 10.1007/s11217-008-9105-3

Wells. G. (1986). *The meaning-makers: Children learning language and using language to learn*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Author Biography

Dr. Shelley K. Jones is Assistant Professor at the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, East Africa. At the time of this study she held the position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, School of Education and Professional Studies, State University of New York, College at Potsdam. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Shelley K. Jones, Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, East Africa, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Email: shelley.jones@aku.edu

Appendix 1

Participants

Name / Pseudonym	Sex	Grade	Age	Type of School	Type of Program FI = French Immersion En = English
Ali	F	2	7	Public	FI
Charmaine	F	3	9	Private	En
Crystal	F	1	6	Public	En
Dog Prince	F	2	7	Pubic	FI
Emily	F	SK	5	Public	FI
George	M	3	8	Public	FI
Georgia	F	2	7	Public	FI
Gemma	F	2	8	Public	FI
Madison	F	3	9	Public	En
Malory	F	4	9	Public	En
Notch	M	3	8	Public	FI
Rose	F	3	9	Public	FI
Sarah	F	3	8	Public	FI
Tracy	F	2	7	Public	FI

Questionnaire for Students Participating in WISE Research Project

	Yes	A bit	No/not really
1. I like to write stories	_____	_____	____
2. I like to write in a journal	_____	_____	____
3. I like to write reports about things	_____	_____	____
4. I like to write letters	_____	_____	____
5. I like to write lists	_____	_____	____
6. I like to write with a pen	_____	_____	____
7. I like to write with a pencil	_____	_____	____
8. I like to write with a computer	_____	_____	____
9. I like to write at school	_____	_____	____
10. I like to write at home	_____	_____	____
11. I like to write with friends	_____	_____	____
12. I like to write by myself	_____	_____	____
13. I like people to read my writing	_____	_____	____
14. I like to read other people's writing	_____	_____	____
15. I like to read my writing out loud to others	_____	_____	____

	😊	😛	🙁
	Yes	A bit	No/not really

This year, in my class,

1. I liked writing about [topic covered – e.g., reptiles]   ____   ____   _____

2. same question, different topic   ____   ____   _____

3. same question different topic   ____   ____   _____

4. same question, different topic   ____   ____   _____

5. same question different topic   ____   ____   _____

6. I think the writing I did this year was good   ____   ____   _____

7. Writing has been easy for me this year   ____   ____   _____

8. I am excited about writing more   ____   ____   _____

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire!