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AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION ON HOW AUTHENTIC WRITING
AFFECTS STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS WRITING

by
Kerri Colletto

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
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at
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Thesis Chair: Marjorie Madden, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

Kerri Colletto

AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION ON HOW AUTHENTIC WRITING AFFECTS STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS WRITING

2009/2010

Marjorie Madden, Ph.D.

Master of Science in Teaching in Collaborative Education

The purpose of this research study was to determine how students' attitudes towards writing are affected when authentic writing activities are implemented into the traditional writing curriculum. The students kept Lifebooks for a period of three weeks and there was an emphasis placed on writing that was personal and meaningful. Qualitative inquiry strategies such as my teacher research journal, student surveys, individual interviews, discussion groups and student work were used to collect data. Sorting and categorizing data within and between data sources revealed that the freedom to choose a topic effects what is written, that having a personal connection effects what is written, that there is a connection between time and the writing that students produce, and how writing can serve as a motivating factor in students' lives. Implications, including how authentic writing activities can be used to enhance a curriculum, will be discussed in the final chapter.

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To Molly, my co-teach partner in every way, thank you for starting this journey with me five years ago, and for finishing it with me today. You have taught me so much about teaching and life, and I can only hope that I have done the same for you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
CHAPTER	PAGE
CHAPTER ONE: Scope of the Study	1
Purpose Statement	2
Statement of the Research Problem and Question	6
Story of the Question	6
Limitations	9
Looking Ahead	9
CHAPTER TWO: Review of the Literature	11
What is Authentic Writing?	12
Why do Students Write and Why Should They be Writing?	14
Classroom Activities that use Authentic Writing/Studies	18
Conclusion	22
Looking Ahead	23
CHAPTER THREE: Context and Methodology	24
Context of the Study	24
General Methodology	28
The Study	29
Data Sources	31
Data Analysis	33

Looking Ahead	34
CHAPTER FOUR: Data Analysis	36
Introduction	36
Revisiting the Study	36
Introducing and Defining Authentic Writing	36
Giving the Students Their Lifebooks	37
Our First Lifebook Convention	39
Sharing our Writing outside of our Classroom	41
Our Final Lifebook Convention	42
Data Analysis	42
The Freedom to Choose	43
Michelle’s Story	44
Having a Personal Connection to Writing	46
Joseph’s Story	47
Other Personal Connections	48
How Time Affects the Writing that Students Produce	50
Grace’s Story	51
Writing as a Motivating Factor	53
Michael’s Story	55
Summary of Data Analysis	57
Looking Ahead	58
CHAPTER FIVE: Summary, Conclusions and Implications	59
Conclusions	60

Implications for the Field	62
Suggestions for Further Research	63
References	66

CHAPTER ONE

Scope of the Study

“I hate writing!” Michael exclaimed. Michael was in the sixth grade at Bricktown School. Throughout the teachers’ room, Michael was known as a noncompliant troublemaker and the thorn in the side of each and every one of his teachers. His hatred for this particular assignment did not come as a shock. I had heard him say those same words before to describe several different subject areas. It was always, “I hate (insert current hated subject here)!”

But when it came to writing, I knew that Michael was not just complaining to get out of completing his assignment. He truly hated to write. Michael would much rather take an F on the assignment and avoid writing.

“Why do you hate writing?” I asked Michael.

“It’s hard and I can never do it right.” Michael replied, clearly frustrated.

“Why is writing hard for you?” I questioned.

“Because.” He put his head down on the desk.

“Because...” I repeated, trying to extract the exact reason from him.

“Because I never know what to write.” Michael said softly. “So I just don’t do it, and then I fail.”

Unfortunately, Michael is not the anomaly. Each and every day, students avoid writing and accept the punishment of failing. Thinking back to my own school days, I remember a few students who would much rather be punished than write.

When I walk into a classroom during a writing assignment, I am always cognizant

of the students' body language. Some of the students are writing attentively; their pencils are moving across the paper at a rapid pace. Other students are moving slightly slower. These are the students that pause to think in between sentences. Their faces wear thoughtful looks, and though they are not truly engaged in the assignment, they will complete it. The third set of students are the type that every teacher worries about. They are the students who sit and stare into space when a writing assignment is given. When I assess these students' body language, there is typically not even a pencil in their hands! These students are the ones with their heads down on the desk during writing time. They are the students who sit with their arms crossed. They are the students who wear the look of defeat on their faces. These students are the ones who hate writing.

Part of our job as teachers is to teach our students to write. Unfortunately this includes the Michael's of the world, those students who sit and simply refuse to write. Somehow, we must reach these students. The question is how? How do we help students overcome their preconceived notions about writing? How do we show them that writing does not have to be a painful activity?

Purpose Statement

As a teacher researcher, I have found that many students do not like to write. Often these students are the ones who struggle to respond to topics or ideas posed by the teacher. When the students have nothing to say about these topics, writing becomes a difficult, arduous task (Kahn, 2009). This causes students to feel that they are incapable of writing, and elicits a negative attitude towards writing.

The purpose of my teacher research study is to investigate how authentic writing assignments impact students' attitudes towards writing. For the purposes of my study, I

have chosen to define authentic writing as writing that is meaningful, purposeful and personal (Hallman, 2009). Authentic writing assignments help students discover their personal voice, stimulate motivation to write, and provide a meaningful writing experience for students at all grade levels. An assignment should hold purpose and meaning, and the subject should be something that is real to students (Hallman, 2009). Hallman (2009) studied how students at an alternative school wrote about a subject that hit close to home. She observed Bob Schaefer's English class for several days (Hallman, 2009). One day, his students came into the class upset about a letter in the newspaper. This letter had bashed their school and the students that attended it. Schaefer's students were outraged, and he seized the teachable moment. Schaefer put his current unit on hold and assisted the students in drafting a letter to the editor (Hallman, 2009). The students joined together to write for a purpose. This letter to the editor was not an "assignment"; however, Schaefer used this event to teach his students how to write about something that was meaningful to them (Hallman, 2009).

Authentic writing teaches students to discover their personal voice while writing for a variety of audiences (Cone, 1989). When a student writes with his or her own voice, people become interested in listening. Fletcher (1993) argues that when personal voice is used, the words become meaningful. He suggests that authentic assignments give a student the chance to use his or her real voice by directing their writing towards a specific audience.

A writing assignment should hold purpose and meaning, and the subject should be something that is real to students (Hallman, 2009). Many writing assignments are given with the sole purpose of meeting the curriculum standards. Often there is no actual point

to the writing assignment (Kahn, 2009). The students string together bits and pieces of information and call it “writing”. These are the types of assignments that instill a student’s negative feelings towards writing (Kahn, 2009).

The goal of authentic writing is for students to produce something of value (Slagle, 1997). This cannot be done if students are facing restrictions. These restrictions come in the form of rubrics and requirements (Dawson, 2009). Students need to be free to write and express themselves. Students who write free from restriction become confident in their writing ability and students who write confidently will better express their written voice (Romano, 2004).

Authentic writing assignments should evoke emotion and passion from the writer (Kahn, 2009). When students are completing a writing piece, they should be writing to make an impact (Wiggins, 2009). Typical writing assignments do not cause any emotions, which is why students find writing so laborious and disconnected from their own lives (Calkins, 1994). Authentic writing assignments encourage students to use their emotion and passion to write and make a difference (Wiggins, 2009).

Research that supports the use of authentic writing activities is readily available. Several researchers such as Hallman (2009), Romano (2004), and Wiggins (2009) suggest that there is a correlation between how much students write and the type of writing activities they are completing. Duke, Gates, Hall, & Tower (2006) found that students wrote longer responses with more details when authentic writing was incorporated in sciences classes. It is generally accepted that students will write more if they are writing about a topic they are interested in. Hall (2008) discovered that authentic writing activities help grow students’ writing into expressive, meaningful pieces.

Professional journals and organizations such as the National Writing Project (NWP) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) advocate using authentic writing with students. Lombardi (2007) and Kahn (2009) have done research to study how authentic writing assignments impact students' attitudes towards writing. Research has shown that students prefer authentic writing assignments over traditional assignments, and their writing improves while completing an authentic assignment (Lombardi, 2007). New research is needed to assess if authentic writing assignments impact or improve students' overall attitude towards writing.

This research is important and necessary because writing is a vital part of a student's life. Writing is a task that a person will perform both as a student and as an adult. Writing is a way of communicating; therefore, it is necessary for a student to be able to write well and cohesively (Fletcher, 1993). A student must be able to write for different audiences, in different capacities (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). As teachers, we must study the most appropriate way to teach students to write so that they will be well prepared to write in their lives beyond school (Cox, Hooper, & Tirabassi, 2009).

My research is important because I am seeking to find answers about students' attitudes towards writing. My research also seeks to discover whether or not the types of assignments given might impact how students feel about writing. Do students enjoy writing more when they are writing about certain topics or in a particular format? Why do students feel the way they do? Why do many students hate writing? Why does the mere mention of a writing assignment cause anxiety and dread? Research has shown that students who avoid writing do so because they have not had adequate opportunities to

write (Graves, 1991). Research has also proven that students enjoy writing about their personal experiences (Maxim, 1998). I am hoping that my research will contribute to a better understanding of writing and motivation.

Statement of the Research Problem and Question

Writing is a vital part of our students' lives. Students write in every class they step foot in. Yet, while all students write, the ways students feel towards writing is mixed. Some students hate writing while other students love it. The goal of my research is to investigate how the use of authentic writing assignments in the classroom affects how students feel about writing. For the purposes of my research, I will define authentic writing as writing that is meaningful, purposeful, and personal (Hallman, 2009). Therefore, the research question becomes, "In what ways do authentic writing assignments impact students' attitudes towards writing?"

Story of the Question

As a child, I hated writing in school. I was not one of those students who could simply put the pen to the paper and write on any given topic. My worst writing assignments were those that I could not relate or connect to. I remember sitting in my second and third grade classes and having to write a story every day. Some days I could sit and write forever. The words would flow and the product would be an engaging story. Other days I would sit and stare at a blank sheet of paper before hurrying to scribble a sentence so that I had something to hand in.

As I advanced through school my feelings towards writing stayed the same. There were always the familiar feelings of dread and anxiety as I heard the word "story" or "paper". But why? Why was writing such a dreaded activity for me? Why is writing such

a dreaded activity for so many students?

I have noticed that many students have the same issues I did. They can sit and stare at a blank piece of paper for hours, just hoping that one good thought will come to mind so they can write it down. There were plenty of times in my own life where this was the norm. To this day I can recall the anxiety that I felt my junior year of high school when my teacher announced that we would be writing a responsive essay to Kafka's Metamorphosis. We were supposed to start the essay in class, but I was unable to gather my thoughts. Instead, I sat with my head on the desk, doodling on my paper. I was frustrated because I really did not understand the book and that made it difficult to form a response. I sat in my chair and counted down the minutes until the end of class, just praying that I could somehow get through it and write the essay. I hated every moment. Eventually the essay did get written, but it was not easy, and it certainly was not my best work.

I want to know why students feel the same way that I felt. I'm beginning this study with the hopes of discerning why students hate writing. Why do they groan at the thought of completing any type of writing assignment? How do we turn these feelings around and make writing a positive experience?

I remember one particularly memorable day in a fifth grade English class at Bricktown School. The students had just finished reading a story about a chef who had a cooking disaster in the kitchen. Their subsequent assignment was to write a descriptive essay about a time that they had a disastrous experience in their own kitchen. Some of the students started writing immediately, while others sat staring around the room, looking for inspiration. One particular boy, I'll call him Dave, caught my eye. He was sitting at

his desk looking very frustrated as he wrote words down and crossed them out on his paper.

I walked over to Dave and sat beside him. Before I could say a word, he spoke. “I can’t do this,” he complained.

“Why can’t you do this?” I asked curiously.

Dave looked at me as though I was crazy for asking. “Well, it’s stupid and it’s boring, and I just can’t!” He exclaimed, obviously frustrated.

My response was less than ideal. “You only have to write about a time that you cooked something that did not turn out the way you wanted it to. Why is that hard?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Because I’ve never cooked anything before.”

Dave’s response hit me right in the gut. Of course he would find this assignment difficult. The assignment was to write about a disastrous experience in the kitchen, and he had never cooked anything before! How was he supposed to write about something that he had never experienced?

The more I think about it, the more I am certain that Dave was not the only student in the class that had difficulty writing that day. How many fifth graders have cooked before? It would be difficult to write a descriptive essay about an experience that had never taken place. These students, like Dave, probably found the assignment to be “stupid” because they could not relate to it.

My experience with Dave caused me to wonder how specific writing assignments impact students’ attitudes towards writing. Are certain assignments “better” than others? Are students more engaged in writing when they can relate to a topic? Do students enjoy writing more when they are writing about something that is of interest to them? Do

students' attitudes towards writing change when the assignment connects to their lives?

Limitations

As I prepare to conduct my study on authentic writing and its' effects on students' attitudes, I am aware that there are potential limitations that may occur throughout my study. As I conduct this study, I will need time: time to instruct the students, time for the students' to write, time to collect data about the students' attitudes towards writing, and time to analyze all of this data. Typical writing studies are normally conducted over the course of several months, or even a year. The time that I am in the classroom will be significantly less; therefore, time may impact the results of this study.

Another realistic limitation that parallels the time issue is that there are so many authentic writing activities it is not possible to expose my students to each of them. Authentic writing activities include journals, songs, poems, letters, reflections, workplace writing, magazines, brochures, and more. In the limited amount of time that I have to conduct this study, there will not be time to expose my students to each of these activities. I have to limit my use of authentic writing activities to a select few that I feel will enhance my study. Finally, it is important to recognize that the findings of this study will reflect only the writing and attitudes of one group of students.

Looking Ahead

Chapter Two is a review of the related literature. Throughout this chapter I discuss what constitutes authentic writing and how authentic writing is currently being implemented in schools across the country. I also discuss the reasons why students are writing and the reasons why they *should* be writing. Chapter Three will show the context of the study and the research design. I will lay the groundwork for the study and discuss

how it will be implemented. In Chapter Four I will report my research findings as well as give an interpretation of the data I collected throughout the study. In Chapter Five I will provide a summary of my findings and draw conclusions as to the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

In this chapter, I provide a definition of authentic writing as well as discuss what constitutes authentic writing and how it is currently being implemented in schools across the country. The first part of this chapter focuses on what authentic writing is. There are many different definitions of authentic writing but for the purpose of my research, authentic writing is defined as writing that is meaningful, purposeful, and personal (Hallman, 2009).

After discussing what authentic writing is, I examine the reasons why students are writing in schools and the reasons why they *should* be writing. This part of the chapter also discusses why students do not like to write, and how the use of authentic assignments can help students learn to like writing. Throughout this section, I present research that shows how typical writing assignments restrict students (Dawson, 2009). I also discuss how writing can be made meaningful for students.

In this chapter, I present classroom activities that incorporate the use of authentic writing. I also discuss five specific studies around authentic writing that are particularly relevant to my research. In order to understand the role that authentic writing can play in a classroom, I must discuss the role that writing plays in the world. Imagine a world without written language. Imagine a world without stories, without letters, without important documents. You probably cannot imagine such a world because one has not existed since the prehistoric era. For centuries, humans have been communicating with one another through writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Writing is the physical act of

writing down specific words in an order that creates meaning (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Writing is used by humans for many purposes, “to communicate, express, question, persuade, synthesize, and teach” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Writing is a task that we perform virtually every day. We make lists, we take notes, we write letters. Written text is all around us. There are books, posters, newspapers, magazines, and other texts. Perhaps this is why many teachers focus a good amount of time on teaching students to write effectively. Writing is a skill that each and every student will need to learn; however, children often find writing to be a difficult, tedious task (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Teachers get so caught up in the writing process that they forget to teach their students that writing is a way of making meaning (Calkins, 1994).

What is Authentic Writing?

Authentic writing is writing that is meaningful, purposeful, and personal (Hallman, 2009). The goal of authentic writing assignments is to make writing meaningful for all students (Rotkow, 2003). A writing assignment should be purposeful, and the subject should be something that is real to students (Wiggins, 2009). Authentic writing assignments should evoke emotion and passion from the writer (Kahn, 2009). When students are completing a writing piece, they should be writing to make an impact (Wiggins, 2009). Authentic writing assignments encourage students to share their writing with their peers as well as adults (Cone, 1989). Authentic writing should connect the lives of students to the lives of the outside world around them (Wiggins, 2009).

Authentic writing assignments give students the opportunity to express themselves without the normal restrictions that accompany a writing assignment (Dawson, 2009). These assignments are graded on the quality of writing, rather than the

mechanics throughout the writing (Sisserson, Manning, Knepler, & Jolliffe, 2002). Typically students are focused on spelling and grammar while they are completing a writing assignment (Toussant, 2007). Many students get so caught up in the mechanics of writing, they forget what they are writing about! (Toussant, 2007). While spelling and grammar are important, they are not everything. A lot of times teachers will tell the students to use words that they know how to spell; however, this censors what students mean to say (Dawson, 2009). In some cases, a teacher may choose not to count spelling or grammar mistakes when grading an authentic written assignment (Sisserson, Manning, Knepler, & Jolliffe, 2002). Some teachers choose to count spelling and grammar to a degree, and only deduct points when the mistakes interfere with a sentence's meaning (Sisserson, Manning, Knepler, & Jolliffe, 2002).

Authentic writing assignments seek to lift the restrictions placed on students during written activities (Dawson, 2009). Often students write according to a checklist or rubric (Dawson, 2009). These rubrics can have any number of requirements. While the requirements are meant to improve students' writing, they often restrict it (Dawson, 2009). Students focus on checking off the lines on the rubric, rather than writing an expressive, meaningful piece (Wiggins, 2009). One major restriction that students often face is the length requirement. In authentic writing, the length of the piece should not be counted in the overall grade (Trest, 1999). Every student writes differently, so what one student may say in a paragraph, another student may say in a page (Trest, 1999). As Trest (1999) writes, "Two things I strongly believed: no one should tell a writer how long a piece had to be, and everybody's piece certainly didn't have to be the same length" (p.2).

The goal of authentic writing is for students to produce something of value (Slagle, 1997). Students need to be free to write and express themselves. Students who write free from restriction become confident in their writing ability and students who write confidently will better express their written voice (Romano, 2004).

Authentic writing assignments teach students the value of writing, and the different reasons why people write (Hallman, 2009). Many students believe that the only time they write is when they are completing an assignment for a grade (Wiggins, 2009). Students rarely write for enjoyment or personal purposes. Authentic writing assignments provide students with the opportunity to write about something that is personal, purposeful, and meaningful while completing varied types of writing activities (Hallman, 2009).

Why do Students Write and Why Should they be Writing?

Writing is more than choosing a topic, writing a draft, and making revisions. Writing is a means of interaction and experience (Smith, 1986). Students should write to express themselves and their feelings, thoughts, or knowledge on a particular topic or subject (Smith, 1986). They should be free to write in a way that they can comfortably express themselves. Those students who find writing to be difficult typically get lost in formats such as the five paragraph essay (Cox, Hooper & Tirabassi, 2009). These formats, while helpful, make writing into a formula, a structured task. Teachers use format and structure to make writing a fill-in-the-blank equation, one that takes out any individuality. It is because of this structure that students find writing boring and purposeless (Cox, Ortmeier-Hooper, & Tirabassi, 2009). Writing becomes a chore, much like the chores that students perform at home.

Yet, writing does not have to be a chore. Authentic writing assignments seek to make writing meaningful for students (Rotkow, 2003). For example, one of the ways that writing becomes meaningful is when the students write for a specific audience (Cone, 1989). Too often students' writing is only read by the person who is giving it a grade, the teacher. Addressing this, Cone (1989) writes that "because of that perception of the teacher-as-audience, my students played it safe: they wrote as little as possible and as neatly as they could; they concerned themselves with correct headings, length of paper, and titles; and they wrote what they thought I wanted them to say"(p.3). As Cone (1989) states, her students were typically writing what they thought she wanted to hear. When her students began writing to a new audience, their penpals in England, their writing changed. Their letters began to have personal voice, and this carried over into other aspects of their writing (Cone, 1989). Their narratives and expository pieces doubled in length, and the students wrote with excitement and personality (Cone, 1989).

As Cone (1989) discovered, the reality is that students will not always have a teacher as their audience. One facet of authentic writing is that students are given the opportunity to write for different audiences (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). Having an audience is crucial to producing a good written product (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). Generally students write for one audience: their teacher (Cone, 1989). When students only write for one audience, they get used to writing in a specific voice: "the voice" that their teacher wants to hear. This "voice" grows accustomed to spitting out the facts on a subject that the students do not care about. Students get so used to writing in "the voice" that they forget, or sometimes never even discover their own true voice.

Authentic writing assignments encourage students to use their personal voice when writing (Cone, 1989). Writing becomes unique when it is personal, and people become interested in listening (Fletcher, 1993). When personal voice is used, the words become more than words, they become meaningful expressions of students' thinking. Cone's (1989) students discovered that their personalities were present in their writing to their penpals. They enjoyed this different type of writing, and their writing improved because of it (Cone, 1989).

Authentic writing assignments connect to students' real lives (Rotkow, 2003). An assignment should hold purpose and meaning, and the subject should be something that is real to students (Hallman, 2009). Writing should not always be used as a means of assessment and too often, it is. Teachers assess if students have learned the appropriate content by having them regurgitate the material in the form of an essay (Sisserson, Manning, Knepler, & Jolliffe, 2002). This type of assessment causes students to develop negative feelings towards writing (Sisserson, Manning, Knepler, & Jolliffe, 2002).

Students need to be writing something about which they are passionate. Good writing should always be emotional and personal (Calkins, 1994). Typical writing assignments do not cause any emotions, which is why students find writing so laborious and disconnected from their own lives (Calkins, 1994). Authentic writing assignments encourage students to write to make a difference (Wiggins, 2009). All good writing evokes emotion, both from the reader and from the writer himself (Fletcher, 1993). When students are completing an authentic writing piece, they should be writing to make an impact. The goal of their writing should be to affect something or someone (Sisserson, Manning, Knepler, & Jolliffe, 2002). Oftentimes we see this goal met in the writing of a

persuasive essay (Kahn, 2009). In this type of essay, a student is trying to influence and affect another person by persuading them to agree or disagree with a particular opinion (Kahn, 2009). However, how can a student write such an essay if the topic is one that they do not care about? Many teachers assign persuasive essays to fulfill the curriculum requirement, but rarely do they make the topic one that their students are passionate about (Kahn, 2009). When writing a persuasive essay, students must consider their audience, word choice, and tone (Wiggins, 2009). Writing to someone they care about, about something they care about, makes students' writing personal and emotional (Calkins, 1994).

Another important facet of authentic writing is that it encourages students to share their writing (Dawson, 2009). As Frank Smith (1986) wrote, "Writing is for stories to be read, books to be published, poems to be recited, plays to be acted, cartoons to be labeled, instructions to be followed, designs to be made, recipes to be cooked, diaries to be collected..." (p. 566). Students should be sharing their writing: with each other, with their parents, and with various members of the community (Dawson, 2009). While this can be done in a variety of ways, it is up to the teacher to find the way that will be most meaningful to his or her students. Authentic writing does take some creativity. If the students' assignment is to write a letter to the editor, the letter should be about something meaningful to them, and the letters should actually be sent (Sisseron, Manning, Knepler & Jolliffe, 2002). Imagine the joy that the students would feel seeing their letters published in the paper!

Classroom Activities that use Authentic Writing/Studies

Authentic writing assignments prepare students to write in the real world, whether it be writing letters, lists, or brochures. The assignments students are given should prepare students for the types of writing that they may encounter in their adult lives or their future careers.

Cox, Hooper, & Tirabassi (2009) studied how authentic writing assignments could be used to teach future job skills to students. The goal of the project was to teach students how to write in the workplace. There were three objectives to this project. The teachers wanted the students to have the experience of writing collaboratively. The students were also able to work with an actual client and apply what they had learned in class about workplace writing. (Cox, Hooper, & Tirabassi, 2009). And third, the students learned to work in teams to write a business proposal for a specific company. The proposal was then “pitched” to the client, who offered feedback to the students. This type of activity exposes students to the type of writing they will use in the real world, thus making it meaningful and authentic (Cox, Ortmeier-Hooper, & Tirabassi, 2009).

Another authentic writing activity that many teachers find valuable is journal writing. While some teachers choose to assign specific prompts, others allow their students to write about their personal thoughts and feelings (Trest, 1999); these are the students who experience authentic writing because they are free to write about something that is meaningful to them. One first grade teacher, Tricia Hall, chose to have her students write in journals that she called “Lifebooks” (Hall, 2008). The students’ Lifebooks were a place where they could write anything: memories, quotes, questions. The Lifebooks were not meant to hold full stories; instead, they were places to write down thoughts that were

meaningful to the student (Hall, 2008). Hall decided not to grade her students' books because she viewed Lifebooks as places where the students could write about a topic they cared about, without having to focus on the technical components of writing. Hall, following Calkins' recommendation, had her students participate in a "notebook museum" once a week (Hall, 2008). During the notebook museums, students would open their Lifebooks to a particular entry. The class walked around the room, reading their classmates' entries, and writing questions and comments on post-it notes. The notebook museum served a multitude of purposes. First, it gave the students an audience. Students worked particularly hard on an entry that they wished to share with the class, knowing that their classmates would be reading it. Next, it gave the students the opportunity to read different types of writing. Each student writes differently, so if there were twenty students in the class, the students were being exposed to twenty different writing styles! Finally, notebook museums caused students to be inspired. The students would often share ideas with one another, inspiring their classmates to write about similar topics. (Hall, 2008).

Lifebooks and journals give students the opportunity to write about their personal thoughts and feelings (Hall, 2008). Letter writing can offer this opportunity as well. In today's age of technology, students rarely sit down to write a letter (Hallman, 2009); most communication now takes place through email and a computer. Yet many people do not even take the time to write long emails, thanks to text messaging. Although technology is driving changes in the ways people communicate, it is important that students learn how to write letters to different audiences. Students need to know how to write to their peers, to adults, or to professionals. Hallman (2009) studied how students at

an alternative school wrote about a subject that hit close to home. She observed Bob Schaefer's English class for several days (Hallman, 2009). One day, his students came into the class upset about a letter in the newspaper. This letter had bashed their school and the students that attended it. Schaefer's students were outraged, and he seized the teachable moment. Schaefer put his current unit on hold and assisted the students in drafting a letter to the editor (Hallman, 2009). The students joined together to write for a purpose. It was important to seize this teachable moment for a few reasons. Schaefer's students were feeling a lot of emotions and they needed an outlet. Writing this letter to the editor gave the students a sense of purpose and they wrote about a topic that was personal and meaningful to them. Schaefer's students completed an unplanned authentic writing assignment that evoked more emotion in them than anyone could have expected (Hallman, 2009).

Authentic writing assignments can take place in any classroom, in any grade. Four researchers completed a two year study on using authentic literacy activities during science class in second and third grade classrooms. Duke, Gates, Hall, & Tower (2006) defined authentic literacy activities in the classroom as "those that replicate or reflect reading and writing activities outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose" (p. 346). The study took place during a two year time period and involved 26 second and third grade teachers and their students. The researchers wanted to increase students' learning in science by incorporating authentic literacy activities into science lessons (Duke, Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). Throughout the research period, students wrote letters to a local nature center, made brochures about local museum exhibits, and wrote summaries about hands-on demonstrations. The researchers found that the students

who participated in more authentic literacy activities improved their ability to read and comprehend as well as increased their ability to write about different topics (Duke, Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). The researchers also found that these authentic activities provided students with a connection to their lives outside of school, thus increasing student interest in their studies. The students “came alive when they realized they were writing to real people for real reasons or reading real-life texts for their own purposes” (Duke, Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006, p.354).

Authentic writing assignments can be any type of writing that is meaningful to students (Hallman, 2009). These assignments give students the opportunity to create the type of writing that is used in the real world. Rotkow (2003) used poems and songs to make writing authentic in her first grade class. Since her students were young, Rotkow (2003) began by modeling how to write songs and poems for her students. Her songs and poems were based off of her students and what was happening in their lives. She sang and wrote about haircuts and new bikes, about book bags and birthdays (Rotkow, 2003). Eventually the students took over the writing. They, too, began to experiment with writing poetry and finding their voice. “My first graders wrote for themselves, about themselves, and along the way, wanted to share themselves with others...we discovered that authentic reason made our writing real, unlike the forced and awkward exercise that is most school writing” (Rotkow, 2003, p. 1).

Rotkow (2003) had her students write poems and songs as a way of reflecting on their lives. And, reflections are another way to get students to write authentically. Trest (1999), an upper elementary school teacher, replaced journal writing with reflection. She started by having her students reflect about objects: what they thought about them, what

they were used for (Trest, 1999). The students began by writing reflectively about a stapler, but their reflections soon advanced to writing about paintings and poetry (Trest, 1999). Reflection is an effective way to get students writing about something that is meaningful to them (Trest, 1999). Reflecting involves thinking about one's thoughts and feelings. Reflection books are like Lifebooks, a place where students can write about their lives (Trest, 1999). While Lifebooks give students the chance to write about what is happening in their lives, reflection offers students the opportunity to take their thinking further and examine their feelings. Typically, reflection is an authentic activity that would be used with students in upper elementary and middle school grades; however, differentiated versions of reflections can be used in any grade level (Trest, 1999).

Conclusion

Research, journal articles and books that support the use of authentic writing activities are readily available. Written activities such as journal writing, letters, poetry, songs, business proposals, travel brochures, and other activities make writing personal, purposeful and meaningful. Hallman (2009), Romano (2004), and Wiggins (2009) suggest that there is a correlation between how much students write and the type of writing activities they are completing. It is generally accepted that students will write more if they are writing about a topic they are interested in. Duke, Gates, Hall, & Tower (2006) found that students wrote longer responses with more details when authentic writing was incorporated in sciences classes. Hall (2008) discovered that authentic writing activities help grow students' writing into expressive, meaningful pieces.

While professional journals and organizations such as the National Writing Project (NWP) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) advocate using

authentic writing with students, some research has been done to study how authentic writing assignments impact students' attitudes towards writing. Research has shown that students prefer authentic writing assignments over traditional assignments, and their writing improves while completing an authentic assignment (Lombardi, 2007). It is generally accepted that students will write more if they are interested in the topic about which they are writing. New research is needed to assess if authentic writing assignments impact or improve students' overall attitude towards writing. Research is also needed to determine whether or not authentic writing activities have a place in a typical language arts classroom.

Nevertheless, research has shown that authentic activities and assignments are valuable in a writing curriculum. When students write an authentic piece they are writing about something that is personal and meaningful to them, thus engaging themselves in their topic and their writing (Slagle, 1997). Authentic assignments provide purposeful, real life opportunities for students to write (Sisserson, Manning, Knepler & Jolliffe, 2002). Students write to express themselves and their feelings, thoughts, or knowledge on a particular topic or subject that is interesting to them (Wiggins, 2009). Authentic writing assignments help students discover their personal voice, stimulate motivation to write, and provide a meaningful writing experience for students at all grade levels.

Looking Ahead

Chapter Two examined the existing literature on authentic writing and students' attitudes towards writing. Chapter Three will present the design of the current research study and discuss the context in which the study takes place.

CHAPTER THREE

Context and Methodology

Chapter Two examined the existing literature on authentic writing and students' attitudes towards writing. The literature in Chapter Two provided an understanding of what authentic writing is and how authentic writing assignments can be used in the classroom. The literature review also discussed the reasons why students are writing in the classroom and how the significant restrictions placed upon students can cause negative feelings towards writing. Chapter Three takes a closer look at the context of the study and the research design. The first section describes the community, school, and classroom where my research was conducted. The second section gives a brief description of teacher research and discusses the different sources of data that are used in my study.

Context of the Study

Community. Gloucester Township is a residential and business community located in Camden County, New Jersey. Gloucester Township schools serve the communities of Blackwood, Erial, Somerdale, Laurel Springs, and Glendora. This district increases in size and population yearly. As of the United States 2000 Census, there were 64,350 people, 23,150 households, and 16,876 families. As of the 2000 Census the demographic breakdown was 83% Caucasian, 11.5% African American, .16% Native American, 2.6% Asian, 1.1% other races, and 1.4% mixed race. The median household income for the township was \$54,280, and 6.2% of the population fell below the poverty line.

Gloucester Township School District serves approximately 8000 students in grades Pre- K-8 in eight elementary schools and three middle schools. After the students leave middle school, they attend one of three high schools that are part of the Black Horse Pike Regional School District. This school district not only serves students from Gloucester Township, but also students from Runnemede and Bellmawr. Many students choose to continue their education at Camden County College which is located in Gloucester Township.

School. Martin Luther King Elementary School is a public Pre-K-5 elementary school in Gloucester Township. Approximately 800 students attend this school, making it one of the largest schools in the district. The average class contains approximately 24 students. The student-centered school values diverse learning styles and backgrounds. The school attempts to teach each individual student by addressing both similarities and differences in the classroom.

Martin Luther King School provides instruction in the core subjects. Currently, the school uses the Guided Reading Program, Everyday Math, and Writer's Workshop curriculums. The school also instructs students in several special subject areas including Spanish, life skills, physical education, art, music and computers. The different grade levels are located in different wings. The school contains a large cafeteria, gymnasium, and library.

The school provides several different types of instruction for students with special needs. Such educational settings include in-class support, resource, and self-contained. The students' placements are determined by the child study team which is housed at

Martin Luther King School. The child study team is comprised of a psychologist, social worker, speech teacher and guidance counselor.

Martin Luther King School has recently been renovated. The classrooms are now carpeted and it is the only school in the district to have air conditioning. Each teacher is provided with a laptop as well as a document camera, which is a sophisticated version of an overhead projector.

Ms. Monica Greenwood, Martin Luther King School's principal, has headed the leadership of the building for the past four years. Prior to Ms. Greenwood's arrival, Martin Luther King students received poor scores on state tests and there was a very low morale amongst teachers. Currently test scores are up, and the school houses a very tightly knit staff, with teachers working together to help one another. Ms. Greenwood encourages a high morale by hosting staff bonding experiences. She is truly a teacher's principal, and fights to make sure that her teachers are well taken care of. Her door is always open and she is very visible throughout the day.

Ms. Greenwood has recently introduced a new anti-bullying initiative. Rather than focus on how the students should not behave, the new program focuses on displaying good character. Each marking period students are nominated by their teachers to join the Character Kingdom, and only two of the nominees are chosen. This encourages the students to display their best character at all times because they are motivated to join the kingdom. In addition to this program, the faculty at Martin Luther King School reads inspirational quotes to the students every morning.

Classroom. Mrs. Anna Harmon's fourth grade classroom is made up of twenty-four students that exhibit a variety of personalities. The classroom is very diverse with

sixteen of the students being Caucasian, five students African American, one Middle Eastern, one Asian, and one Hispanic. There are twelve girls and twelve boys in the class.

For the majority of the day this classroom contains nineteen students and one teacher. During writing, science and special subject areas, five special education students join the class, along with an in-class support teacher. Each of these students is classified with an Individual Education Plan. There are several other students in the class who are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; however, these students are not classified with an Individual Education Plan. In addition to the special education students, Mrs. Harmon's classroom also houses the gifted and talented students, of which there are six. This makes the classroom an interesting place to be as there are at least four different academic levels.

In general, the students in this class are well behaved and get along with one another. The class does tend to be very chatty throughout the day. This chattiness sometimes becomes disruptive and the students lose recess often because of it. There are three boys who exhibit behavioral problems often. At least one of these boys has ADHD, and he likes to receive negative attention. He will act out, often making noises or crying, because he desires to have the attention of his peers and teachers.

Mrs. Harmon's classroom is a fine example of a learning community. The students are encouraged to be active participants in the community and work hard to "own" their classroom. Their work is displayed throughout the room, as well as in the hallway. Mrs. Harmon works hard to encourage the children to do their very best. She uses a reward system that allows the students to earn more recess time when they are

behaving. The children admire Mrs. Harmon and work hard to please her and succeed in her class.

I chose to complete my study with only the general education students. Initially I thought I would include all of the students. I felt it was important, if not necessary, to include the special education students in my study because they are the students that struggle with writing the most. However, due to scheduling conflicts, I was not able to include the special education students in my study, as they are not in my classroom for the majority of the day. Though I was unable to include the special education students in my study, I still have a wide variety of data due to the various academic levels incorporated in my classroom.

General Methodology

My study will utilize teacher research, rather than a more traditional approach to research. Teacher research, “is a powerful way for teachers to understand how they and their students construct and reconstruct the curriculum” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p.458). Teachers then use this research to change or refine their own practices of teaching, thus benefiting their students in new ways.

For the purpose of this study, I have chosen a qualitative approach to teacher research rather than a quantitative approach. Quantitative research looks at data that can be measured on a numerical scale (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Qualitative research aims to gather a greater understanding of what is being studied. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is often an exploratory investigation that is difficult to graph in mathematical terms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In qualitative research, the investigator does not often take a neutral role and is very involved in the research process

(Lytle, 2009). Qualitative research does not necessarily study the facts; instead, it studies the how and why (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). For example, a quantitative study would research how many students like math class, while a qualitative study would research *why* these students like math class.

In qualitative research, as it relates to teaching, “there is a broad definition of data that includes students’ work of all kinds, observations of students, the researcher’s journal, school and classroom artifacts, and collaboration with other researchers” (Lytle, 2009, p.56). Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data can generate more questions for the researcher and those studying the researcher’s work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

In Living the Questions, Hubbard and Power (1999) describe teacher research: “In teacher research, stories are a critical tool for illuminating the deeper theories or rules governing the way a classroom community works” (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p.2). A substantial amount of my data came from observations and descriptions, both my own, my cooperating teacher’s, and those of my students.

The Study

This study was conducted over a three week period of time. As I mentioned in Chapter One, one of the limitations of this study was the limited time period in I had to conduct my research. Another limitation is that I did not have a sufficient amount of time to expose my students to all of the different types of authentic writing activities. These limitations helped shape the framing of my research. From the start I had to make choices. The biggest decision I encountered was which authentic writing activities I should use in my study.

I chose to start my study by providing students with Lifebooks. I chose to model this after the research of Tricia Hall whom I referenced in Chapter Two. I read the students *Amelia's Notebook* by Marissa Moss(1995). In the story, Amelia keeps a Lifebook in which she records her thoughts and feelings. Upon completion of the book, the students created their own Lifebooks. The Lifebooks were nothing more than a piece of construction paper with lined paper stapled inside; however, the students were able to decorate the outside of their books however they wished to do so. After the Lifebooks were sufficiently decorated, the students discussed what a Lifebook is. A Lifebook is not a diary or a journal; it is a place where students can write down things that are meaningful to them. These “things” can be quotes, stories, memories, etc.

After discussing the purpose of a Lifebook, my students began to write in their own Lifebooks, each and every day. While they were writing, I was also writing, as it is important to see writing modeled by the teacher. The Lifebooks provided a supplemental form of writing; they did not take the place of writing class, rather, they were an addition.

An important facet of authentic writing is sharing that writing with others. Each Friday afternoon, our classroom was transformed into a Lifebook Convention. During the conventions, the students had the opportunity to share one entry from their Lifebooks with their classmates. After a student shared his or her entry, the class had an opportunity to respond by asking questions or making comments. This provided an interactive component to the written activity and assured the writer that his or her writing is being heard. I also participated in Lifebook Conventions so that my students could hear my writing and feel a connection with their teacher.

To supplement Amelia's Notebook, I read aloud specific sections of *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You* by Ralph Fletcher (1996). Fletcher's book is written on a child's level and provides ideas for writing. Many of these ideas were used as a springboard for writing in Lifebooks.

Throughout my research study I had my students fill out surveys and participate in interviews. This enabled me to gauge my students' attitudes towards writing. More information will be provided on this in the following section.

Data Sources

I utilized several data collection procedures including student interviews, teacher interviews with my cooperating teacher, entries in my teacher-research journal, student surveys and student writing samples.

Throughout my study I observed my students and took notes in my teacher-research journal. I employed the two strategies of note taking: in the midst and after the fact (Hubbard & Power, 1999). My notes became an important source of data as I observed how students respond to their writing assignments. I documented both direct and indirect responses to writing. For the purposes of my study I considered direct responses to be comments made about writing, both verbal and written. I considered indirect responses to be body language and facial expressions. Do the students look frustrated? Are their heads down on the desk? Conversely, do the students look excited? Are their eyes lighting up?

This research study also used a phenomenological approach, as another important source of data was obtained through interviews and surveys. Phenomenological research collects participants' descriptions and uses them as data (Waters, 2009). I conducted two

sets of surveys throughout the study. I used my first set of surveys to get a feel for my students' attitudes towards writing. I used the second set of written surveys to investigate whether or not these attitudes have changed across my study.

I conducted verbal interviews with two groups that contained four students in each. These interviews were less formal than the surveys and I developed my questions based on my observations of individual children and their responses to my written survey questions. Upon receiving parental permission, I tape recorded these interviews. This allowed me to be engaged in the conversation, rather than the documentation of the conversation. I also interviewed several students one on one so that I could use their story as a case study in my research. These interviews were extremely informal and occurred when I needed the child's point of view.

Over the course of the study, I conducted multiple interviews with my cooperating teacher. Before I began the study, I conducted an interview with my cooperating teacher to determine the types of writing the students complete during Writer's Workshops, as well as get a feel for how the students feel about writing. Throughout my study I continued to meet with my cooperating teacher to discuss my observations. I asked my cooperating teacher if she noticed any difference among the students and their response to writing assignments.

Finally, I collected student writing samples, including their Lifebooks, as a source of data. While I examined this data I was not looking for academic improvement. Instead, I was looking for differences in length, tone and interest. While looking at the Lifebooks, I became particularly interested in what the students chose to write about.

Throughout my study I kept a folder on each individual child. These folders held all of the documents that I collected in relation to my study including the surveys, interview transcriptions, writing samples, etc. Consequently, since there were multiple sources of data being collected in this research study, it was very important to keep these samples organized.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through the study, including student interviews, teacher interviews with my cooperating teacher, entries in my teacher-research journal, student surveys and student writing samples were used to draw conclusions about how authentic writing activities might impact students' feelings toward writing. This qualitative data was analyzed to determine whether or not the students preferred writing assignments that contained less restrictions over those typically completed during Writer's Workshop. After the data was collected, it was carefully coded and examined for patterns. Each pattern was labeled with a code and the prevalence of these codes across the multiple data sets was documented. This data was then analyzed. The analysis of the data is recursive in that the data is looked at several times. Each time the data is examined it is further broken down and summarized, and new conclusions are drawn. Recursive analysis allows smaller details that may have been overlooked to be examined and reviewed.

The data provided must prove that the study is both reliable and valid. In traditional research, a study is considered valid when the conclusion is credible and cannot be denied. While credibility is a necessity in qualitative research, teacher researchers also seek to establish validity using other criteria such as "democratic validity (honoring the perspectives and interests of all stakeholders), outcome validity (resolving

the problems addressed), process validity (using appropriate and adequate research methods and inquiry processes), catalytic validity (deepening the understandings of all the participants), and dialogic validity (monitoring analyses through critical and reflective discussions with peers)” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.44). It is my belief that my study does maintain validity in each of the five categories.

In addition to being valid, data must also be reliable; meaning it must measure what it says it will measure. In this study, the data is considered to be reliable because it is triangulated; meaning it uses “multiple and different sources, methods, investigators or theories (at least three) to confirm findings” (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p.120). In this study, the sources that are triangulated include student interviews, teacher interviews with my cooperating teacher, entries in my teacher-research journal, student surveys and student writing samples.

Often in a qualitative research study there is disconfirming evidence that refutes or disagrees with the general findings. When I began my study, it was my hope that the evidence would show that authentic writing assignments made students motivated to write and caused an increase in positive feelings towards writing. The results of my research provided a mix of responses. Disconfirming evidence appears in this particular study and is examined in Chapter Four. This disconfirming evidence is significant to my study because it not only challenged my theory; it raised more questions. These questions, and possible answers will be discussed in chapters four and five.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter Four, I present the findings of my research. Although my research study will be conducted with the entire class, several individual case studies are

presented. The case studies include background information about the student, the surveys and interviews completed by the student, and samples of the student's work. The chapter also explores all of data collected and a summary of the results is provided.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

Chapter Four discusses and analyzes the findings of my study undertaken to answer the key research question, “In what ways do authentic writing assignments impact students’ attitudes towards writing?” In order to answer this question, it is necessary to revisit the study and understand the interactions that occurred amongst students and their writing throughout the study. The chapter is broken down into two main parts: revisiting the study and the data analysis.

Revisiting the Study

Introducing and Defining Authentic Writing

I began my study by reading aloud *Amelia’s Notebook* by Marissa Moss (1995). Amelia, like my students, is a student in the fourth grade. She has just moved across the country and is starting a new school. She does not have any friends yet and feels lonely, so her mom gives her a notebook to write in because it will “make her feel better.” At this point, an unplanned teaching moment occurred as one of my students, Rebecca, raised her hand and proclaimed, “I always write when I’m feeling bad.” When I asked if writing made her feel better she shrugged and replied, “Sometimes I feel better but sometimes writing it down just helps me to forget about it.” Rebecca’s comments sparked a discussion among my now curious students. Could writing about a tough situation really make you feel better, or even help you forget about it?

As I continued to read Amelia's entries to my students, we discussed how we could relate to each of Amelia's entries. We found that many of my students had moved and started new schools, and many had gone to school and not had any friends. After discussing Amelia's life, Michael raised his hand to speak. "I think," he spoke timidly, "that Amelia wrote in her notebook because she needed a friend. I think that it was the one place that she could express her feelings."

"I think you are right." I replied, proudly smiling at Michael. "Do you think that Amelia liked to write?" I addressed my students, and watched as their heads bobbed up and down. "Why did Amelia like to write?"

"Amelia liked to write because she could write about her personal feelings."

Joseph replied.

"I think she liked writing in her book because she wasn't writing a boring essay, she was writing something that was meaningful to her." Rebecca commented.

My students paused for a moment, seemingly taking in the fact that writing could hold some meaning. Perhaps there really was a type of writing that could make a difference.

"Miss Colletto?" Ben called out. "Amelia wrote in that book because she needed to solve her problems, and in the end, she did solve them. I think that she liked to write because her writing made a difference in her life."

Giving the Students their Lifebooks

After the students completed their pre-study surveys, it was time to introduce Lifebook writing to them. "I need your help." I told my students. "I need to make a list of reasons why people write." Together, my students and I compiled a long list of reasons.

We found that people write lists, they write in journals, they write down their homework, they write stories, they write letters and they write emails. It was then that Rebecca raised her hand wildly. “Remember Amelia? She wrote to express her feelings. She wrote to tell different people different things.”

I nodded as I looked over at Ben. “Ben, do you remember what you said yesterday?” I asked and he nodded back. “Yesterday, Ben told us that Amelia wrote to make a difference in her life. Over the next couple weeks, we are going to see if writing can make a difference in each of your lives.”

After explaining the requirements of Lifebooks, my students and I talked about the format for Lifebook writing. I explained that there was no set format. Authentic writing assignments seek to lift the restrictions placed on students during written activities (Dawson, 2009). Lifebook entries were not required to be of a certain length; they could be a sentence, a paragraph or a page. Every student writes differently, so what one student may say in a paragraph, another student may say in a page (Trest,1999).The students could draw or make lists in their Lifebooks, they did not have to write stories. They could also start their entries with Dear Diary or Dear Journal, but this was not a requirement. My students were told that the way they chose to set up their Lifebook should be the way that was most appealing to them.

At this point, I gave an example of Lifebook writing by showing my students some of my own Lifebook entries using the overhead projector. The first entry was a list entitled, “Things I Want to Accomplish This Year.” Underneath the title was seven bullet points with my goals for the year. My next two entries were thoughts that were swirling around in my head. My students and I talked about why my writing was meaningful to

me. Neither of the entries was incredibly long, they just contained my thoughts and feelings. We determined that the writing was personal and meaningful to me.

At this point, my students' excitement had built to the point that I thought they were going to combust if they did not receive their own Lifebooks. The Lifebooks were made of construction paper, with white lined paper stapled inside. The Lifebooks were made of simple materials, but my students faces were lit up as though I had given them a most important gift. They set to work, coloring and decorating their Lifebooks with different titles and drawings. Many of them wrote different sayings on their Lifebooks such as "Private!" or "Keep out!"

After decorating their Lifebooks, it was time for my students to complete their first entry. This was one of the few times that the students would all be working on their Lifebooks at the same time. The students wrote diligently, stopping to make sure that their peers could not see the contents of their Lifebooks. The students wrote in their Lifebooks silently and purposefully, two qualities that these particular students did not normally exhibit. This class was a very unique group, and it was hard to motivate them to complete any activity that involved reading and writing. However, day one of my Lifebook study revealed that perhaps these students could learn to enjoy writing if they were writing about topics that were meaningful to them.

Our First Lifebook Convention

After one week of Lifebook writing, we held our first Lifebook Convention. One important facet of authentic writing is that it encourages students to share their writing (Dawson, 2009). As Frank Smith (1986) wrote, "Writing is for stories to be read, books to be published, poems to be recited, plays to be acted, cartoons to be labeled,

instructions to be followed, designs to be made, recipes to be cooked, diaries to be collected..."(p. 566). Students should be sharing their writing: with each other, with their parents, and with various members of the community (Dawson, 2009). Before beginning our convention, I set down some ground rules. Number one, no one was required to share. Sharing was encouraged, but not mandatory. The second rule was that whatever was said during Lifebook Conventions was not to leave the room under any circumstances. I was aware that some of my students might share some very personal thoughts, and I did not want these entries to be shared with other students in the school. My students and I discussed respect, and how important it was to respect the privacy of our fellow classmates. We also talked about how we had to be respectful when our classmates were sharing. If something was funny and the writer was laughing, it was okay for us to laugh. However, it was not okay to laugh at someone's thoughts or feelings. My students and I would continue to discuss these rules throughout Lifebook Conventions because it was important to me and to them that respect was maintained at all times.

Michael was the first student to volunteer to share. "I'm grounded until I get better reports and report cards. I am going to try harder in school so that I can get off punishment." His classmates nodded empathetically, each of them knowing how difficult it was to be grounded. One of Michael's classmates, Leslie, told him that she hoped he would get off of punishment soon. She told him that he was smart; he just had to work a little harder.

Another student, Eric, stood up and shared an entry that he had written. Eric had chosen for his entries to be in the form of a story. This particular story was entitled, "The

Mouse and The Cheese.” The story was comical, and Eric enjoyed hearing his peers laugh at the words he had written. After he presented, Eric’s classmates praised his story, which helped boost the self esteem of a child who was lacking.

Sharing our Writing outside of our Classroom

During the second week of my study, I had the opportunity to have an unplanned teaching moment. At Martin Luther King school, my fourth grade students were paired up with first grade buddies and the two classes completed activities together once a month. This month’s St. Patrick’s Day activity happened to fall on a day where my cooperating teacher and the first grade teacher had unplanned absences, and the materials for the planned activity were nowhere to be found. Rather than cancel the time with our first grade buddies, I invited the younger students into our classroom. My students were instructed to take out their Lifebooks and share them with their first grade buddies. My fourth graders’ eyes lit up as they had the opportunity to share their writing with eager listeners. They read their entries to their buddies with such expression. In return, the first graders listened intently, asking questions where appropriate and making connections when possible. This activity not only served as bonding time for the students, it also helped reinforce how special these Lifebooks were for my students. Michael even created a Lifebook for his little first grade buddy so that they could share again the next time they saw each other. When the first grade teacher returned the next day, she came to me very excited. “My students want to write in Lifebooks now! How did you get them to want to write?” I explained that the Lifebooks gave my students the opportunity to put their thoughts and feelings down on paper and that they enjoyed sharing with their first grade buddies. The first graders began keeping their own Lifebooks that very day.

Our Final Lifebook Convention

The third week of our Lifebook study was spent preparing for our final Lifebook Convention. The students knew that this week they would each be sharing an entry that was meaningful to them. This encouraged them to take the time to write a really meaningful entry, if they had not already done so. I, too, would be sharing an entry, and the students were really excited to hear what it would be.

At the end of the week, we held our final Lifebook Convention. My students had elected to dress up and make this a very special occasion and we set aside an hour on Friday afternoon to share our entries. Each student shared an entry; we heard poems, stories, lists. We had it all! After each student shared, the other students connected to what was said. This helped my students to bond as a class. We shared some laughs, including when Sam read his entry about getting locked in the school bathroom. We also shared some tears, like when Natalie wrote about how her grandmother's death had made her feel very lonely. I watched not only her friends, but her entire class come together to hug her.

Although I would have loved to continue my Lifebook study and incorporate different types of authentic writing into my class, my time at Martin Luther King school came to an end the final week of March. The responses of my students represented what I hoped to accomplish when I began using Lifebooks as a way of incorporating authentic writing in the classroom.

Data Analysis

A review of the multiple data sources seems to suggest four main themes that occurred throughout the research study. These themes include how the freedom to choose

a topic effects what is written, how a personal connection affects writing, how time affects the writing that students produce, and how writing can serve as a motivating factor in students' lives. The second part of the chapter will analyze each of these themes and take a look at several case studies.

The Freedom to Choose

When I started my study, it became clear almost immediately that the freedom of choosing a topic impacted how my students felt about their writing. Throughout the surveys given on the first day of the study, the overwhelming majority of students wrote that coming up with an idea for a story was the most challenging aspect of writing. The surveys also revealed what topics students enjoyed writing about. My students responded that they enjoyed writing about their feelings, their favorite things, and writing for fun.

The freedom to write about something meaningful is an important aspect of authentic writing. A writing assignment should be purposeful, and the subject should be something that is real to students (Wiggins, 2009). This aspect was portrayed and embodied through the Lifebook study. When I sat down with the discussion groups, I found that one of their favorite things about Lifebook writing was the ability to write about whatever they want. To them, this made Lifebook writing special, rather than a regular classroom assignment. The ability to write about any topic without restriction made it easy for the students to find something to write about. Many of the students chose to write about what was happening in their lives. This provided them with a meaningful diary that was full of entries that were important to them.

For many of my students, finding a topic to write about in their Lifebook was not an issue. One particular student, Michelle, had a difficult time with the lack of restrictions

provided. Each day, she had a tough time choosing a topic to write about, and many days she did not write at all. While Michelle is an anomaly, I feel that it is important to present her story as it does give us insight as to why too much freedom to choose a topic may not be a good thing.

Michelle's Story. Michelle is a nine year old, Caucasian female. She comes from a difficult family background like many of the other students in my class. Michelle has four siblings from different fathers. Her own father passed away from a drug overdose. Michelle lives with her mom, her stepfather, and her sisters. Like many families in the district, Michelle's family struggles to make ends meet and lives from paycheck to paycheck. While Michelle is not classified as learning disabled, she does struggle a great deal with school. It is hard for her to pass any subject, with the most difficult being writing.

Upon reading Michelle's survey from the beginning of the study, I was surprised to see that she rated writing as "medium easy". She wrote that the most challenging aspect of writing was that she could never think of anything to write. By the end of the study Michelle rated writing as medium hard. She wrote that Lifebook writing was more difficult for her because she still could not think of any topics to write about. Michelle was the only student to write that she did not like writing in her Lifebook.

While reading Michelle's Lifebook, I found her self assessment to be accurate. The students were supposed to have written fifteen entries in their Lifebooks. When I asked Michelle why she only had seven entries, she told me that it was because she could never think of anything to write. Upon examining her entries, I found Michelle's writing to be short and choppy; however, her entries were not without meaning. One entry

included a paragraph about how her grandparents mean a lot to her since she did not know her dad for a long time. I know that this was a difficult topic for Michelle to write about because she rarely speaks of her father's death; it is too painful for her. Throughout my time at Martin Luther King school, Michelle only spoke of her father once: to tell me that her father would not be attending conferences because he had died.

Michelle had one particular Lifebook entry that spoke volumes to me. She wrote, "Well I pretty much do not know what to write about today." Upon reading this entry, I went to Michelle to have a talk. I asked her why she had problems coming up with a topic to write about. After all, we were in our second week of Lifebook writing and we had just brainstormed a list of topics to write about. Even if that list of topics did not interest her, she had listened to several classmates share during the Lifebook Convention the week before. Surely something one of her classmates wrote could have sparked some inspiration. "Miss Colletto," she replied annoyed with me, "It's not that I don't know what to write about, it's that I can write about anything in the world. It's just too much to choose from!"

After that particular conversation I understood where Michelle, and students like her, would have a difficult time writing without restrictions. Certain students need structure more than others. They need every step of the writing process to be dictated to them, and any freedom that they are given just makes writing harder. In Michelle's case, Lifebook writing was difficult because there were too many topics from which to choose. Even the list of topics that we brainstormed was too many for Michelle to choose one to write about. While authentic writing assignments give students the opportunity to express themselves without the normal restrictions that accompany a writing assignment

(Dawson, 2009), it needs to be noted that some students will need those restrictions, particularly those students with special needs.

Aside from Michelle, the broad nature of topic choice did not seem to be an issue for my students. In fact, my students thought that being able to write about a different topic each day was great! Upon reviewing their surveys, I found that many of my students liked writing in their Lifebooks because they did not have to write about a certain subject and could write about anything they wanted.

The freedom to choose a topic upon which to write is one of the many critical facets of authentic writing. This freedom is part of what makes writing meaningful for students. While I did discuss Michelle's difficulty with topic choice, it is important to note that the majority of my students did appreciate the freedom to choose.

Having a Personal Connection to Writing

As discussed in chapter two, authentic writing assignments should evoke emotion and passion from the writer (Kahn, 2009). When developing this study it was clear to me that whatever authentic writing activity I chose to use, it would have to be something that my students could personally relate to. Journal and diary writing are perhaps the most personal writing of all, which is why I chose to have my students keep Lifebooks.

Immediately it became clear to me that if my goal was for my students' writing to be personal and meaningful, then I had made the right choice. Our discussion of Amelia's Notebook made it clear that my students valued writing about their feelings. They felt that Amelia thought of her notebook as a friend, as "someone" she could tell anything to. Amelia used her notebook to solve her problems and as Ben so eloquently put it, "she wrote because her writing made a difference in her life." My students, too, were looking

for someone they could tell everything to, and they found that someone in their Lifebooks.

Joseph's Story. Joseph's story is a perfect example of how my students valued the opportunity to write about things that were personal to them. Joseph is a nine year old, Middle Eastern male. His family had relocated to New Jersey from California in October, just five months before this study was completed. Joseph is a very smart young man, achieving near perfect grades in every subject. He exhibits a quiet confidence, participates in class and has a few close friends. While Joseph is what some parents would consider "the perfect child", at the time of the study he was having some problems adjusting to his new home and new school.

In the survey that Joseph completed at the beginning of the study, he wrote that he liked to write because it helps him express his feelings. Joseph was very excited about the Lifebook study. He could not wait to write about all the things that were happening to him. Upon reading his Lifebook, I understood why. Unbeknownst to anyone, Joseph had been being bullied since he had come to Martin Luther King school. Several of Joseph's entries were about how he was called a loser and a dumb kid. He was also tormented because of his religion and ethnicity. Joseph's entries intrigued me because I was curious as to why he was writing about this bully instead of telling one of his teachers. When asked about it Joseph replied, "Writing was my way out. I felt better after I wrote about all the things that he did to me." For Joseph, writing was his way of solving his problems, even if no solutions were immediately present.

At the end of the study when completing the final survey, the students had an opportunity to say anything they wanted to me about Lifebook writing. Joseph wrote, "I

enjoy writing in my Lifebook because I can put what I want to put in it without fear of being judged. I can pour my feelings into my Lifebook and if I'm mad, I am no longer mad."

Other Personal Connections

Joseph expressed what so many other students were feeling. For them, writing about their feelings was a release. Their Lifebook writing provided them with an opportunity to write about their negative feelings and then they were able to let these feelings go. Lifebook writing also gave my students a place to go when they were feeling afraid or alone, or when they wanted someone to talk to.

Natalie, for instance, wrote the following entry in her Lifebook. "I have a secret. My secret is that I want to be a writer. Really bad. More than anyone knows." I knew that Natalie enjoyed writing, but I never knew that she wanted to be a writer. When I asked her about her desire to write she told me that her mom said she could not be a writer because writers do not make much money. She told me that she could tell her Lifebook about her goal to be a writer because "my Lifebook won't tell me that I can't do it. It just lets me write what I want to say without talking back."

Another student, John, made a list of the five things he is afraid of. They were: "1. Break a bone. 2. Die. 3. Be in the hospital. 4. Fail in school. 5. Get into a car accident." John was a quiet student who really did not speak up much. I was surprised to see that he had written this list. Upon asking him about it, John told me that his grandmother was in the hospital and he was afraid that she was going to die. This had prompted him to make his own list of the things he was afraid of.

John and Natalie both used their Lifebooks to write about personal topics that they felt they could not tell anyone. Another student, Beth, wrote about a death in the family. “My mom’s friend died of cancer. She had the fourth stage. She was only 44. When she was 40, the doctor gave her one week to live, and she lived for four more years!! Then she died. Sometimes I’m scared my mom will get cancer and die too.”

Throughout my study, I found that my students personified their Lifebooks. They wrote to their Lifebook as if it were a friend that could provide them with advice and information. They wrote about topics that they could not discuss with me, their friends, or their parents. They wrote because they simply needed to express themselves.

A section of the literature review focused on the ability to write with personal voice. Authentic writing assignments encourage students to use their personal voice when writing (Cone, 1989). When personal voice is used, the words become more than words; they become meaningful expressions of students’ thinking. My research study helped my students to discover their personal voice, and it helped me to “hear” their voice. When I read their entries, I felt as though I was listening to them speak the words they had written. I knew my students as students, meaning, I knew who they were inside the classroom. Reading their Lifebooks gave me the chance to learn what my students were like outside of the classroom: their values, their problems, their dreams. Lifebooks gave my students the opportunity to write from their hearts; they were able to speak to me without being afraid of my response. I, in turn, was able to hear them and gain a deeper understanding of who they are.

My study showed that my students valued writing about something that was personal to them. Many seized the opportunity to write about their feelings or the events

taking place in their lives. This personal connection to their topics helped me to understand what my students experienced outside of school and helped me to connect with them on a deeper level.

How Time Affects the Writing that Students Produce

It might seem strange that I discuss the aspect of time; however, the time allotted for writing was an integral part of my study. While time is an important aspect of any study, my data showed that time can be directly linked to the amount and type of writing that students produce. Since Martin Luther King school has very strict curriculum guidelines, the children were only able to write in their Lifebooks after morning work, during free time, during recess, and at home. I found that the issue of time was both a negative and a positive. While some students preferred being able to write when they were inspired; other students really needed a set time for writing. For me, the time issue was something that I struggled with throughout my study. This can be seen in the following entry in my teacher researcher journal.

“If I had to redo this thesis, I would have one set time for students to write every day. Because of timing issues I have my students write after morning work, during free time, after lunch, or at home. This makes it impossible to monitor them because they all write at different times.

However this freedom has given my students the opportunity to write when they are inspired – which I guess is a really good thing. My students are writing when they want to, not because they are told that this is their designated writing time.”

One of the major surprises that came from this study was finding out that some of my students do not feel they have an adequate amount of time to write each day. This was

surprising to me because I had assumed that most students hate writing. Almost immediately my students proved me wrong with their answers to the questions on the first survey. My students wrote that they felt they needed to write more often. Writer's Workshop was not an adequate amount of time to practice their writing. Vanessa simply stated this at the end of her survey writing, "My opinion for writing is that we need to write more often." Eric and Nick answered their surveys similarly stating, "I think we should have more time for writing." Likewise James responded, "I think we should have a little bit more time for writing so our penmanship and story writing gets better." Without knowing it, Amanda probably captured her classmates' feelings the best as she wrote, "I would just like to write for fun sometimes." In essence, the Lifebooks gave my students the opportunity to "just write for fun."

Upon completion of the final survey, I found that my students felt that they should have more time to write in their Lifebooks. The lack of a set time for writing did affect the writing that was produced. For example, many of my students could only write for about five minutes throughout the day. This writing typically occurred in the minutes between morning work and the start of the math lesson. If the students were inside for recess their writing grew by leaps and bounds because they now had a full half hour to sit down and write about whatever they were thinking. After examining the Lifebooks carefully, I also found that the students who took their Lifebooks home generally had more in-depth entries than those who solely wrote throughout the school day.

Grace's Story. Grace's story is a perfect example of how time was an issue in my research study. Grace is a nine year old, Caucasian female. Grace lives with her mom, and has never met her father. She has a much older sister from a previous marriage, but

does not spend a lot of time with her. Grace's mother does a wonderful job of playing both the mother and father, and allows Grace to participate in every extracurricular activity possible. Grace is extremely intelligent, and does very well in school; however, organization and time management are key issues in her life.

At the end of the second week of the study, I decided to walk around the room and see what kind of writing my students were producing in their Lifebooks. I was upset to discover that Grace had only written two entries when she should have had ten. That day, I let out my feelings about Grace's writing in my teacher researcher journal.

"Grace is not writing and I don't understand why. She's smart, talented and capable, and I can't get anything out of her. She tells me that she does not have time to write. No one else is having this problem. It's frustrating to me."

The following Monday, I interviewed Grace one on one to try to figure out why she was not writing in her Lifebook.

Me: "Why aren't you writing?"

Grace: "One because I can't focus. Two because I never have any time to write, I'm always too busy catching up on my other assignments."

Me: "Well, what can I do to help you get more Lifebook writing done?"

Grace: "Probably nothing, unless we don't have to write essays anymore."

Me: "I guess you must not like writing in your Lifebook."

Grace: "Miss Colletto, I love my Lifebook! I just don't have time to write in it."

This informal interview helped me to realize that Grace's issue was not the actual writing, it was finding the time to write.

Grace was not the only student who had problems finding the time to write. Andrew had problems as well, and he chose to document this in his Lifebook. One particular entry read, “I do not like this Lifebook because I have to find time for it.”

As I stated above, I feel that the issue of time was both a blessing and a curse throughout my study. Not having a set time for writing did give my students the opportunity to write when they were inspired. Some of my students preferred to complete their writing at home because it enabled them to “get in the zone”. For these particular students, it was easier to write at home silently, and without interruption. These students wanted to be able to think deeply and write for an extended amount of time, not just during the fifteen or so minutes provided throughout the day. Joseph was one of those students. His entries were usually at least a page long because he took the time to sit at home and write. Other students preferred to complete their entries throughout the day as they experienced different things. Beth would often write about something that took place at lunch or recess.

Still I had some students who would have really benefited from a scheduled writing time. These were students who did enjoy writing but could not seem to find the time to write in their Lifebooks. In the case of my study, timing proved a significant factor that influenced the amount that my students wrote as well as the depth of their writing.

Writing as a Motivating Factor

After reviewing my students’ Lifebook entries, I found that many of them were motivated by their Lifebooks. Inside their books they set goals to achieve, and most were compelled to achieve them. For example, Gianna wrote a list of goals that she wanted to

accomplish this year. One of her goals was to make new friends, while another was to get straight A's in school. Throughout my study, Gianna found herself working harder during class than ever before. She wanted to achieve her goal of getting straight A's, and it showed. Her grades improved, particularly in math which was her most difficult subject. I also watched Gianna reach out to her classmates and attempt to make friends. She began to laugh more and school became a happier place for her. This is reflected in her Lifebook as she wrote, "School is fun now that I have more friends."

I discovered the motivational factor of Lifebooks early on in my study. I documented this discovery in my teacher researcher journal.

"I had an AHA moment today. I have three students that absolutely hate writing. It is a huge task to get these children to write. Actually it is hard to get them to do any sort of work.

But surprisingly enough, they love their Lifebooks. Each day these students fill pages of their Lifebooks. They don't just write an entry, they write several entries. Suddenly my unmotivated students are motivated. If nothing else comes from this study, I have gained the knowledge that Lifebooks motivated my students to write."

This entry in my journal referred to several students. These students did not hand in homework, did not complete class work, and were barely passing their classes. I tried several strategies to motivate these students to do their work, but nothing seemed to work. All of this changed when my students began writing in Lifebooks. Since there were minimal requirements for Lifebook writing, these students did not feel like they were completing an "assignment", rather, they were writing for the sole aspect of pleasing

themselves. This next story is the story of Michael, an unmotivated young man whose attitude turned around during my study.

Michael's Story. Michael was the epitome of an unmotivated student. He refused to do class work, never handed in homework, and failed almost every test he took. Michael is a ten year old, African-American male. His parents are divorced and he is an only child. Michael lives with his dad, a man who works two jobs to put food on the table. Michael claims that school is boring and that he does not care if he fails. His attitude has cost him all of his friendships, and he often does not associate with any of his classmates.

If there is any student who was affected by my study, it was Michael. In his Lifebook, Michael wrote about being grounded because of his grades and about his determination to bring up his grades. Michael took this one step further by sharing his entry at our first Lifebook Convention. Though Michael did not have friends in the class, his classmates did support and encourage him. A fellow classmate, Leslie, told him that he was a smart boy, he just needed to work harder.

Michael used his Lifebook as a tool to improve his grades. He practiced his penmanship and spelling words. He practiced his multiplication and division. He wrote of his feelings about his parents' divorce and he wrote about his feeling of loneliness. As he continued to write in his Lifebook, his attitude, and his grades, improved. Two particular entries in Michael's Lifebook show his new attitude.

"I am glade (glad) you gave us this Lifebook. It gives me something to do when I have nothing else to do or when I'm at home and I'm done my homework I have something to do. Thanks."

The following entry truly shows how Michael grew throughout the process of his Lifebook writing.

“Dear Miss Colletto, I am doing reall (real) good in my Lifebook. It helps me artisaty (artistically) and writing skills. So here’s to you. Thanks for everything you’ve been doing for me and the class. You’ve really been helping us out. Sinsirly (Sincerely), Michael.”

Prior to my study, Michael would never participate in class work. Throughout the course of the three week study, Michael wrote thirty six entries in his Lifebook. He worked harder than any other student. He put in more effort than we had ever seen him put forth. Michael used his Lifebook to motivate himself into becoming a better student and person.

At the end of my study, Michael had the opportunity to write anything he wanted to me about his opinions towards writing or Lifebooks. He wrote the following: “I like letting out my feelings in a secret book know (no) one can read. My Lifebook says everything that I have ever accomplished and more. My feelings towards writing have changed because Miss Colletto has been here to help me and now I’m getting better. Ever since I started the Lifebook I am getting better at all my subjects. I like writing better because of the Lifebooks.”

Like Michael, other students in my class did find writing in their Lifebooks to be a motivating activity. Although this was not my original intention, I am pleased to see that my study impacted my students in such a positive way. As my study progressed, I learned to use the Lifebooks as a tool to help my students accomplish other tasks. For instance, if I noticed that my students were frustrated during a lesson, I would announce

that after we completed our task I would give them a few minutes to write in their Lifebooks. Since my students liked writing in their Lifebooks, they were eager to finish whatever task we were working on. As a teacher, it was an incredible experience to see my students so motivated to write.

Summary of Data Analysis

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the various data sources, I have come to realize that authentic writing assignments can play an important role in the writing curriculum. Although authentic writing is not the only type of writing that should be implemented in school, it is a type of writing that should be introduced to children at a young age. In my particular study, where I had my students keep Lifebooks as a form of authentic writing, I found that many of my students began to develop a positive attitude towards writing that was personal, meaningful, and purposeful to them. This type of writing helped my students connect to the words that they were putting on a page. They learned to express their thoughts and emotions, and began to use writing as a way of releasing those emotions. Both positive and negative experiences were captured on paper, and my students used those experiences to bond with their classmates. My students also began to use their writing as a motivational tool in their lives. Within their Lifebooks my students set goals to achieve. Their Lifebooks helped them to achieve these goals. Writing in their Lifebooks was a positive experience for the children, as it was the one time that their writing was not graded. They enjoyed being free to simply express the thoughts that were in their minds. The majority of my students were grateful for the opportunity to write about the topic of their choice. Too often we place topic restrictions upon students, making writing a laborious task. Lifebooks gave my students the chance to

write without topic restrictions. Throughout my study, Lifebooks quickly became a supplemental part of our writing curriculum. My research showed that while authentic writing should not include restrictions, basic rules and expectations are needed to successfully integrate it into a writing curriculum. My research also showed that the opportunity to write an authentic piece, that is, something that is personal, meaningful and purposeful, creates a positive writing experience for students and fosters a desire to write more often.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter Four, I presented the findings of my research. The chapter explored the data collected and provided a summary of the results. In Chapter Five, I provide a summary of my findings and draw conclusions as to the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

As discussed in Chapter Four, I have found that authentic writing assignments can play an important role in the writing curriculum. After a review of my teacher research journal, student surveys, individual interviews, and student work, I found that authentic writing activities impacted the way my students felt about writing. I discovered that many of my students began to develop a positive attitude towards writing that was personal, meaningful, and purposeful to them. This type of writing helped my students connect to the words that they were putting on a page. I found that my students began to use writing as a type of therapy, a type of release. My students used their Lifebooks as a place where they could discuss their feelings. The more my students wrote about what was happening in their own lives, the more they began to like writing. This leads me to conclude that the more connected a student feels to their writing, the better their attitude towards writing. My research also found that the freedom of choosing a topic impacted how my students felt about their writing. My students enjoyed writing about topics that were important to them. When I sat down with the discussion groups, I found that one of their favorite qualities of Lifebook writing was the ability to write about whatever they want. To them, this made Lifebook writing special, rather than a regular classroom assignment. I also found that there was a connection between time and the writing that students produce. One of the major surprises that came from this study was finding out that some of my students do not feel they have enough time to write each day. Throughout my study, I found that students who wrote for longer periods of time had longer entries and better

feelings towards writing. I also found that the students who took their Lifebooks home generally had more in-depth entries than those who solely wrote throughout the school day. Finally, my study found that my students used writing as a motivational tool in their lives. Inside their books they set goals to achieve, and most were compelled to achieve them. Keeping Lifebooks gave my students a reason to write, and they were motivated to do so. Overall, I found that the use of authentic activities in the classroom, in this case Lifebooks, provided a positive writing experience for my fourth grade students.

Conclusions

Based on my findings and on the research I conducted prior to writing this thesis, I learned a great deal about the connection between authentic writing activities and the ways that students feel about writing. Authentic writing assignments should be used to enhance and supplement a writing curriculum as they typically increase a student's passion for writing.

The evidence that I collected from my fourth graders regarding how the use of authentic writing activities impacts students' feelings towards writing affirms what many previous researchers have declared. Maxim (1998) described research that proved that students enjoy writing about their personal experiences. My research affirmed this statement. I found that my students not only loved writing about what was happening in their lives; they loved using this writing to solve the problems they were experiencing. My students' writing became their outlet and their Lifebooks became a place where they could unload their negative feelings and then watch them disappear.

Cone (1989) stated that authentic writing teaches students to discover their personal voice while writing for a variety of audiences. My findings were similar. As

described in Chapter Four, my research study helped my students to discover their personal voice, and it helped me to “hear” their voice. When my students were writing about their thoughts and feelings, they were no longer my students; they were human beings, each with their own, unique personality. One important facet of authentic writing is being able to share your writing with different audiences. Throughout my study, my students were able to share their writing with myself, my cooperating teacher, their classmates, and their first grade buddies. This made my students’ writing special. They never knew who would get to read their writing next, and they proudly shared their writing whenever they were given the opportunity.

Research has also shown that students prefer authentic writing assignments over traditional assignments, and their writing improves while completing an authentic assignment (Lombardi, 2007). Again my research was aligned with this statement. I found that many of my students began to develop a positive attitude towards writing that was personal, meaningful, and purposeful to them. As the students became accustomed to writing in their Lifebooks, they began to try to write in them as much as possible. As shown in my students’ surveys, the majority of them preferred to write in their Lifebooks rather than complete the traditional assignments assigned during Writer’s Workshop. My research showed that the lack of restrictions placed upon students during authentic writing activities made them enjoy writing more. Instead of being concerned about length, grammar, and spelling, my students were concerned about the content of their writing. They wrote about topics that were meaningful to them. My research showed that the greater the connection between my students’ and their writing, the greater desire they had to write.

Implications for the Field

While other subject areas have grown and evolved over the past ten years, writing is one subject that has almost remained stagnant (Hallman, 2009). In some districts, students are still taught to write the way that I was taught ten years ago. The students are still being instructed to write in a five paragraph essay structure and the emphasis is still placed on grammar and mechanics (Toussant, 2007). Of course, using proper grammar and mechanics are important in a writing piece, but they are not everything, and placing emphasis upon them makes writing a tedious task. As teachers, it is not our job to bore our children by assigning them essay topics that have no meaning in their lives. Instead, I believe it is our job to use authentic writing activities to increase students' motivation to write and provide them with a real life reason for writing. With the use of these authentic writing activities, it is my hope that we can move beyond teacher-directed writing curriculums to curriculums where students write with purpose and enthusiasm.

Using my research and other authentic writing activities, it is my hope that teachers can cultivate a love of writing in their students. I hope that teachers will be more willing to assign authentic writing assignments rather than the traditional essays that are typically assigned in classrooms. I also hope that teachers will use my research to find a way to make writing more personal, meaningful and purposeful for their students. My research will hopefully show other professionals that the period used for writing does not have to be silent and boring. Instead, children can write about those topics that provoke a passion inside of them. They can write from their hearts and they can write to make a difference.

I also hope that my research will show teachers that incorporating authentic writing assignments in the classroom is not a difficult task and is well worth the effort. For instance, in my study, it took very limited time and resources for the students to start using Lifebooks. Once my students began writing in their Lifebooks, they transformed into an enthusiastic group of individuals who *wanted* to write. In other studies, it has also not been difficult to implement activities such as pen-pal writing or a classroom newsletter. The effort that it does take is easily forgotten when the students' excitement for the activity begins to shine through. Authentic writing activities increase students' enthusiasm towards writing. Of course, it may be necessary to teach using a traditional writing curriculum; however, authentic activities should be used to effectively enhance and supplement a writing curriculum. Authentic writing activities are a powerful way of teaching students how to write while fostering a passion for writing.

Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the limitations of this study, including the limited time allowed to complete it, further research must be conducted to see how students' attitudes towards writing are impacted when authentic writing activities are completed in the classroom. While I learned much about the use of authentic writing activities in the classroom and the effect that they have on children, I am just one teacher, and this is just one group of students. There are still questions to be answered, and the only way to answer these questions is conducting further investigations.

I question what this study would look like if I had used different types of authentic writing activities. As discussed throughout the study, I had a variety of writing activities to choose from, but due to the limited time for the study, I felt that Lifebooks

would provide me with the most accurate results. However, I wonder if my results would have been different if I had chosen to implement a pen-pal program or create a classroom newspaper. Would my students have preferred these types of writing activities because it would have allowed them to receive feedback outside of our classroom? Perhaps in the future it would be beneficial to conduct a yearlong study that introduces multiple types of authentic writing activities to the students.

I also wonder what my study would look like in a different setting, and question if the use of authentic writing activities would be different. I mainly wonder how this study would differ if I had included students with special needs. In my own study, I was unable to include the special needs students because of the time that they spent out of the classroom. Now I wonder if these students would have been able to write in Lifebooks every day, and if they would have enjoyed writing in their Lifebooks. I wonder if the demand to write independently every day would have been too much for them. I am also curious to know whether or not the lack of structure and restrictions placed upon special needs students during authentic writing would have adversely impacted them as it did Michelle. Or perhaps the students would love writing for a purpose, instead of just writing to complete the traditional five paragraph essay. Further research is needed to see how authentic writing activities, and which activities in particular, can be used with special needs students. Likewise, I wonder what this study would have looked like with students of a different grade level. Would younger students who are just learning to write have been able to participate in this study? Would they have been able to accurately form an opinion about writing? Would they be able to write for an extended period of time? Part of the reason my study worked well was because my students were using a

traditional writing curriculum. I wonder how this study would have impacted beginning writers. Maybe they would have developed a love for writing if they were exposed to authentic writing activities from the start!

I strongly feel that further research needs to be done concerning the use of authentic writing activities in the classroom. Researchers need to study how authentic activities could be used to enhance, supplement, or perhaps even replace the traditional writing curriculum. In a society where writing and the ability to write grows increasingly important, teachers need to find a way to make writing enjoyable. The way to do this is to create authentic writing activities that are personal, meaningful, and purposeful. Though this particular study has ended, my research on the use of authentic writing activities in the classroom is just beginning. In my future classroom, I plan on incorporating authentic writing activities in the hopes of fostering a love for writing in my students.

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