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**STUDENTS AS DECISION MAKERS:
THE EFFECT OF STUDENT CHOICE IN WRITING WORKSHOP**

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Abstract

This qualitative research study reports the observed and reported experiences of a second grade regular education teacher and her twenty-four students when they were provided choices in writing workshop. Students were encouraged to be decision makers; they could choose a writing topic from a list or come up with their own writing ideas. Writing instruction took place in the form of both mini lessons and conferences. This study examines students' interest towards writing as well as the quality of student writing. The study suggests that students chose to write about topics that were meaningful. As a result, students were more motivated writers and thinkers during writing workshop. The author shows examples of students' work and explains how some students arrived to a published piece by examining each step of the writing process. Finally, the study documents how student choice can motivate and encourage even the most reluctant writers.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
LIST OF TABLES	x
RESEARCHER STANCE	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Introduction	5
Writing Workshop	5
Student Choice	12
METHODOLOGY	19
Introduction	19
Setting	19
Participants	20
Procedures	21
Data Sources	22
TRUSTWORTHINESS STATEMENT	24
THEIR STORIES	27
Let's Get Started	27
I am a Real Author	32
It Sounds Fun, Right?	36
I Was Impressed	39
I Can't Be Bothered by Their Whispers	41
They Are Decision Makers	48
Dear Hu Jintao	54
Toy Island	59
The Purple Journal	61
It's Just so Hard to Decide	67
Writing Resources	71

They are so Proud-----	74
DATA ANALYSIS-----	77
BINS-----	79
THEME STATEMENTS-----	80
FINDINGS -----	81
Creativity-----	81
Positive Attitudes Toward Writing -----	82
Improved Writing-----	85
Decision Makers -----	88
Summary of Findings-----	93
WHAT’S NEXT?-----	95
REFERENCES-----	97
APPENDIXES -----	100
A Letter Choices-----	101
B List of Familiar Topics-----	102
C List of Unfamiliar Topics-----	103
D Second Grade Coaching Rubric -----	104
E Letter Writing Rubric-----	105
F Letter Format and Example-----	106
G Student Survey -----	107
H Student Observation Sheet-----	110
I Student Interview-----	111

J	Human Subjects Internal Review Board Approval-----	112
K	Principal Consent Form-----	113
L	Parent Consent Form-----	114

List of Figures

1	Tucker’s Firefighter Letter -----	28
2	Devon’s Firefighter Letter-----	29
3	Aaron: Dear James Madison. -----	38
4	Sadie: Dear Miss Klaric-----	39
5	Sadie: Dear Mrs. Delfry -----	40
6	Devon: Dear Maris -----	41
7	Devon: P.S.-----	43
8	Nellie: Dear President Obama -----	45
9	Marie: Dear Lizzie Rockwell -----	50
10	Lucas: Dear Lucas -----	51
11	Brody: Dear Shane Victorino -----	54
12	Nellie: hi hao Hu Jintao-----	55
13	Devon: Toy Island -----	60
14	Brody: Hi Dawson-----	61
15	Aaron: Dear Richu-----	62
16	Marie: Dear Jacqueline Rogers -----	63
17	Tucker: Dear Soldier -----	64
18	Nellie: Dear Nellie Alexandra Fisher -----	68
19	Tucker: Dear Solider -----	71
20	Devon: Dear Quint -----	73

List of Tables

1	Attitudes Toward Writing -----	84
2	Writing Outside of School-----	84
3	Ability as a Writer -----	87
4	Decision Makers -----	92

Researcher Stance

I am four years old. I am sitting on the beach in my black bathing suit with a big white bow on one shoulder. I am making a sandcastle. I have many tools to work with including shovels and buckets. My sister is playing nearby, and my parents are right behind me while I construct a moat around my sand masterpiece. Finally, I am satisfied with my creation. I walk a couple yards forward towards the Atlantic Ocean. My family arrived to the beautiful beaches of Hilton Head Island days before. The water washes over my sandy feet, and I sit down. I let the water run over me. Minutes pass by before I turn around. When I do, I cannot find my family on the beach. In a panic, I look up and down the expansive sand without success. I do what my young mind tells me to do; I begin to walk and look for my missing parents. I start to cry as I meander across the sandy South Carolina beach for what seems like hours. Finally, a young couple stops me, and asks me if I need help. Between sobs, I tell them that I cannot find my family. They ask where I am staying, but I only know that I am on the island of Hilton Head, and nothing more specific. They bring me to a lifeguard who already knows about a missing girl in a black bathing suit with a big white bow. The highlight of my day is when the lifeguard puts me into his large, red pickup truck, and drives along the beach, with the windows wide open. As soon as I saw my mom, we both burst into tears. I had been lost for an agonizing fifteen minutes.

For years afterward, I stayed near by, and my parents kept a closer eye on their wandering daughter.

I recall the tale of my beach adventure in numerous elementary school essays and in high school personal narratives. Many assignments described the beautiful beach, the crying lost girl, and the red truck. I knew it was a great story; I got a lot of mileage out of it. It is actually the only piece of literature that I remember writing throughout my years as a student.

It is important to point out that I never considered myself to be a good writer. Writing was a cumbersome task and assignments were often completed the night before the due date. Math was my best subject. I liked how it had a concrete and definite answer to be figured out. The subjectivity of writing was a difficult concept for me to grasp.

I struggled frequently in my Writing 100 course in my first semester at college. In fact, my professor criticized my work and told me that everything I wrote was insignificant and unimportant. Hence, I was completely turned off by writing. My self-confidence suffered as a result. In order to calm my nerves, my sister proofread just about every writing assignment for the remainder of my college career.

After graduation, I applied for many elementary teaching positions. In the competitive teaching arena, the end of the summer was approaching and I still did not have a job for the start of the school year. Finally, I received a call from a

local middle school. The director of an educational enrichment program, where I worked during the summer, recommended me for a position. I was surprised when I discovered that I was interviewing for a middle school English Language Arts position. I was even more astonished when I was hired for the position on the spot during the interview. I was ecstatic to have the job, but nervous and anxious to teach writing to middle school students, especially considering my lack of confidence as a writer. As soon as possible, I hit the books. I prepared by learning as many grammar rules and writing techniques as possible before the students recognized me as a fraud.

While teaching middle school English, something amazing happened. I became a better writer. I started to catch my own mistakes just as much as I recognized errors in students' writing. I was more attentive with word choice and the organization of my writing. I realized that writing was an amazing tool to communicate with others. I finally got it!

When brainstorming a thesis topic, I knew I wanted to focus on writing. Today, as a second grade teacher, I want my students to realize the power of written words. Before this study, I would give a writing assignment and often get back a pile of papers that all looked the same. Students have a tendency to replicate my example; papers lack individual voice. I want my students to make a deep connection with the words they write, as I did when writing my beach adventure story. By giving students choices in writing workshop, will they make a

profound connection toward writing? Thus my research question: What are the observed and reported experiences when students are given choices in writing workshop?

Literature Review

Introduction

Students are often told what to write about, when to write it, and when it needs to be completed. As a result of these restrictions, students often develop a negative attitude towards writing. A workshop model is very different from this limiting writing environment. During writing workshop, students create meaningful compositions and begin to see themselves as writers (Tompkins, 2003). Teachers who provide choices in writing workshop, as opposed to limitations, may see better academic results.

Writing Workshop

Structure of writing workshop. The ability to express clearly and effectively in writing is a skill that students will utilize for the rest of their lives. “Written expression is a complex metacognitive process that draws on multiple skills such as use of correct syntax, semantics, the writing process, and content knowledge” (Shippen, Houchins, Puckett, & Ramsey, 2007, p. 59). The frequency of writing workshop is important and necessary to increase academic success. Students will benefit by following the routine of a scheduled, daily writing workshop. If writing workshop sessions are sporadic or students are rushed, writing proficiency will not be enhanced (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

The role of the teacher during writing workshop is different than in a traditional classroom. “The teacher’s role changes from being a provider of

knowledge to serving as a facilitator and guide” (Thompkins, 2003, p. 389).

While students write, the teacher circulates around the classroom to individually discuss students’ writing.

A successful writing workshop consists of teachers and students who follow the writing process. This includes the following steps: prewriting, writing, revising, editing, and publishing. Prewriting or planning is the stage in which students choose a writing topic, set goals, and develop a writing plan. Writing, or drafting, is uninterrupted time. This is not the stage of the writing process where students should be concerned about mechanics or correctness. In the revising stage, students will make changes and additions to their initial writing. It is ideal for teachers to conference with students during this stage. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are corrected during the editing phase of writing workshop. This may be done with a partner and is referred to as peer editing. Finally, publishing is completing the writing assignment, possibly as a book or using a word processor to type a published piece (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006).

Student expectations must be clear from the beginning of the writing workshop process. By following the same assessment format throughout the year, students will be aware of what is expected of them. The 6+1 Traits, developed by The Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, list six qualities of good writers. They are: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. The final trait is presentation. Students will be more advanced

revisers when they fully understand the 6+1 traits of successful writers. “6+1 Traits fit naturally into the writing process as they make teaching writing more focused and purposeful” (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006, p. 312).

Fountas and Pinnell claim, “young writers need the same support structures that professional writers need, including a quiet place to work” (2001, p. 59). However, incorporating social interaction during this time may actually assist students throughout the writing process. One way of promoting collaboration is to have students work together to generate ideas. During this discussion time, students are able to exchange feedback, enhance ideas, and make decisions (Burns, 2001).

The core of writing workshop is a balance between independent writing and guided writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Students must be given time to work individually in a quiet writing environment. This independent time usually takes place after a teacher-directed mini lesson. Guided writing is a flexible time when the teacher instructs a small group of students needing additional support in a particular area. The content and students will vary in guided writing groups as student work is reviewed (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Strategies to improve student writing. One strategy to improve student writing is for students to be their own decision makers (Berry & Herald, 2009). A student-centered writing workshop allows students to make the decisions about their writing and also understand how their writing progressed based upon these

decisions. Intentional talk is a strategy teachers can use, even in primary grades, to promote positive and constructive decision-making. Intentional talk points out decisions that have to be made throughout the writing process. Teachers and students discuss why they think authors made particular decisions while writing (Berry & Herald, 2009). When students finish a piece of literature, they share their published work with the class. While they are presenting, the teacher “constantly points out that authors and illustrators make choices about topics, genre, and all manner of crafting” (Berry & Herald, 2009, p. 4). The students provide reasoning behind the decisions that they made during the writing process and intentional talk discussion. It is important for teachers and students to discuss and evaluate the decisions that authors make when reading literature. By generating an open discussion and pointing out likable aspects of published literature, students will become more reflective evaluators of their own writing (Danielson & Wendelin, 1992).

Student writers constantly make decisions. One decision they need to make is how to proceed upon perceived completion of a written assignment. They may decide to improve an existing piece, or begin a new writing assignment (Mermelstein, 2006).

Fountas and Pinnell suggest using writer talks to improve student writing. It is “a glimpse into a writer’s life that reveals details important to her work” (2001, p. 423). Writer talks are typically presented by the teacher. The purpose of

a writer talk is to generate important dialogue and classroom discussion about how and why authors write. After seeing a teacher model writer talks, intermediate students may initiate writer talks with their classmates. Initially, the leader of the writer talk reads a detailed excerpt from an author's autobiography or memoir that signifies the author's craft. The discussions about authors may provide insight about how authors come up with ideas for stories (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Presenting whole group mini lessons before students write independently is necessary (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). During this time, students will be introduced to new topics and make connections to things they already know. Atwell suggests that mini lessons should be about five to seven minutes in length (1998). If the focus of the mini lesson is craft, then students will learn about how to become a better writer. Mini lessons are also used to teach the mechanics of writing, including the grammar rules, punctuation, spelling, and word usage (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Beers (2003) claims that the most meaningful mini lessons occur when students listen to a teacher think aloud. This is when a teacher demonstrates what he or she is thinking as they model the stages of the writing process.

Students need to reflect on their writing. Students should take the time to think about what they have written, why they wrote the piece, and something they learned throughout the process. Reflection may occur in multiple forms. It could

be discussed orally or recorded on a writing log. It is beneficial to teachers if students document their reflections, as it provides the teacher with precious insight about the attitudes of his or her students (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Sharing completed work is important for the writer and his or her listeners. Students should be taught how to listen critically and ask questions about the work shared by their fellow classmates (Mermelstein, 2006). After students read their finished work to the rest of the class, students applaud and compliment the writer (Tompkins, 2003).

Sharing sessions and informal conversations also improve the oral language of students. Students should be encouraged to talk with their peers during appropriate times. One school described by Mermelstein initiated a “Chit Chat Café” intervention. During the designated time, students drink tea and make small talk with their friends. The purpose of the café is for students, especially English Language Learners, to engage in conversations where they are speaking and listening (2006).

“It is not enough to capitalize on students’ interest and knowledge and just let them write. Choice must be accompanied by modeling and support for quality writing” throughout the entire writing process (Routman, 2000, p. 296). It is imperative that the educator ensures that students are familiar with relevant examples of quality work.

Conferences to monitor progress. Meeting with students regularly is a way to track progress and also assist writers throughout the process. This one-on-one time is necessary in a student-centered writing workshop. During this time, teachers should provide support and insight for each individual student. The writing workshop model needs to allow time for students and teachers to conference (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006). Tompkins suggests meeting with one fifth of the students per day in order to confer with each student once a week (2003).

During teacher conferences, the teacher's role is to ask important and relevant questions. Eventually, students will begin to ask those same questions about their own writing. Calkins states that conferences "are at the heart of teaching writing" (1994, p. 222). Listening is also another important role for the teacher. During a conference, students will discuss their work. While students talk, they will express new ideas for their papers. It is listening "that creates a magnetic force between writer and audience" (Calkins, 1994, p. 232).

When students are asked about the quality of writing, they often refer to the writing mechanics such as handwriting and punctuation. Voice, description, and organization are often forgotten because teachers focus on correction during conferences. When students know that excellent writing is not simply about correct punctuation, they begin to realize what makes a piece of literature

outstanding. When this occurs, students will implement the important qualities into their own writing (Routman, 2000, p. 215).

Student Choice

Calkins (1994) discusses the importance of providing students with meaningful writing opportunities by allowing them to make choices and write about the significant things in their lives. Calkins (1994) states the following:

Time and time again, colleagues have told me that for them writing matters the most when it is personal (when it is self-sponsored and grows out of purpose in their own lives) and when it is interpersonal. Not surprisingly, for us human beings the work that is deeply personal, that is woven into the fabric of our lives, is also interpersonal. We care about writing when we write about or ‘off of’ the issues and experiences that matter to us. Youngsters aren’t any different. They, too, will care about writing when it is personal and interpersonal. (p. 14)

Allowing students to choose topics and genres will motivate them. A student who chooses his or her own topic will select one that is important. “When students choose the topics about which they write and the genres that they use, they will probably produce purposeful, meaningful pieces” (Burns, 2001, p. 459). Fountas and Pinnell believe that students are the best writers when they write about the things that they know (2001). Students’ interests can also be referred to as “territories” (Atwell, 1998, p. 123). Territories are the things you can and/or

want to write about; territories should be recorded on paper and referred to throughout the writing process (Atwell, 1998). Fountas and Pinnell also claim that the teacher must engage students in concrete experiences prior to expecting students to write about their own territories (2001). Authors often write and explore the same territories repeatedly throughout their careers. For example, Patricia Polacco usually writes stories about her culture, friends, and family. Students should be aware that territories may be revisited even after they have been written about (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Atwell wants to “nudge writers to uncover and bring meaning to their own sacred memories of friendship and family” (1998, p. 76).

Intrinsic motivation. Routman claims that “students have to care about their writing to write well—only then will they take revising and editing seriously—and they care about things in which they are interested (2000, p. 213). Students who are intrinsically motivated want to be successful and do their best work. One way to motivate students is to encourage them to grapple with higher level thinking skills. A miniscule three percent of all instructional time is dedicated to more challenging tasks in a typical third grade classroom (Miller & Meece, 1999). When expectations are extended, students with appropriate support will be more motivated to succeed.

To fully motivate a classroom of students, it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide students with writing opportunities that consider their interests and

experiences. “Motivation for writing begins when you mix students’ interests with opportunities for creativity” (Chakraborty & Stone, 2008, p. 158J). For example, food is a concrete way to encourage students to write. Chakraborty and Stone suggest using recipes, such as “Refrigerator Surprise,” to spark creative writing interests. Students are told that a combination of marshmallows, food coloring, and chocolate sprinkles was actually found in the back of a refrigerator. Students then use figurative language to describe the fun concoction. Student interests must be considered while planning writing workshop mini lessons and activities (Chakraborty & Stone, 2008).

Age level must also be considered while gauging student interest and genres in writing topics. According to a research study by Danielson and Wendelin, elementary students prefer expressive writing instead of expository and persuasive writing genres (1992). It is also necessary for student writing to have a purpose such as sending a letter to a pen pal or writing a newspaper article (Danielson & Wendelin, 1992).

During Smeltzer’s (2003) action research study, she implemented writing workshop into her classroom. Her students often wrote about familiar topics such as family, animals, and television characters. All students became decision makers and thought of themselves as authors. As a result, Smeltzer saw students writing longer and more detailed stories.

Another action research study (Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, and Lovelace, 2009) examined the improvement of writing for five African-American students in urban elementary schools. Interventions included in the study were: choosing words carefully and focusing on the number of words written. The results were optimistic. All participants in the study increased the length of their written work and many were using synonyms more frequently.

During an action research study conducted on intrinsic motivation in a middle school math class, Oginsky saw an increase in motivation when students were given choices. Students were able to choose assignments and fill out a survey or inventory. Goal setting was also incorporated into this research study (2003).

Atwell (1998), after reading about a student-centered writing workshop, asked her students if they wanted to develop their own ideas. Her students, some tentatively, all agreed that they wanted to have more authentic writing experiences. Months later, she realized that all students in her class were committed to writing. They had a purpose in writing, and they worked harder than ever before. Some students were mulling over multiple drafts, striving to produce the best possible work. Other students were working on their assignments outside of school in order to make improvement. “We found out that in-school writing could actually be good for something—that it could serve kids as a way to solve

problems and see the world. This was not Camelot. It was genuine, and it was happening in my classroom” (Atwell, 1998, p. 14).

Ownership of writing. Routman (2000) describes the outcome when students are involved and invested in their work.

Interesting things happen when students find their passion. They read and write voraciously about the subject that has captured their attention; they stop asking about length requirement; they stay engaged for long periods of time; their handwriting improves; writing becomes their favorite subject (p. 296).

Enabling students to choose topics and genres will provide students with the feeling of ownership (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006). The work they create is a result of their own creativity and individual decisions. When students are able to write about topics they choose, it increases their attachment to their writing (Johnson, 2001). Students find writing less tedious when given choices and freedom in writing workshop. They are more eager to share their writing with others when it is something they are interested in (Johnson, 2001).

One mistake that teachers make is expecting students to constantly come up with brilliant ideas. Students should recognize that sometimes they will not be given choices about what they are writing; it is the instructor’s job to ensure that students recognize the purpose behind those writing assignments (Routman, 2000). Routman warns that even when we give students choices, they may choose

trivial topics in order to simply get the assignment done. She stresses the need for “personal intention” in collaboration with student choice (2000, p. 213). Routman (2000) believes that if students write with purpose, the quality of work the students are producing will improve.

Preferences towards writing genres are affected by personality types. For example, students who identify themselves as thinkers find strength in writing and recording their own strengths and weaknesses. It is necessary for teachers to assist students as they “diversify their learning style preferences” (Marefat, 2006, p. 118).

Publishing student work will also increase ownership of writing. Students who use electronic resources, such as a computer, are more likely to enjoy the writing process. However, according to a study performed by Schuh and Farrell, the quality of work does not differ when technology is utilized during the writing process (2006).

Student interest, combined with knowledge of the topic, is going to improve the writing of lower performing students (Shippen, Houchins, Puckett, & Ramsey, 2007). When topics are intriguing and stimulating, students are more likely to be successful. When students are knowledgeable about a topic, or are interested in learning more, they will take more initiative during writing workshop.

Student demographic is another aspect to consider while teachers plan writing workshop. Rural and urban students have varying interests. For instance, rural students often express preferences in historical figures, supernatural events, and fairytales, among many other topics. Urban students want to write about: lottery, music, travel, movies, political figures, and entertainment. There were many topics that were popular for both rural and urban students. These topics include the war in Iraq and teen issues (Shippen, Houchins, Puckett, & Ramsey, 2007).

Summary

Providing students with choices is a way to increase motivation during writing workshop. Students will likely pick topics to write about that are interesting to them, thereby creating personal attachments to the pieces they are writing.

Methodology

Introduction

Tapping pencils, glazed eyes, slouching students, blank paper. This was a familiar atmosphere during previous writing workshop classrooms of mine. Student writing, even in elementary school classrooms, is expected to be exemplary, yet students often do not know what to write or even where to start. Expectations for writing are extremely high, and teachers are provided with a plethora of suggestions to assist students during writing workshop. I have attempted many of these suggestions and strategies, but I still had students who sat quietly for an extended period of time with nothing written on their papers. To get pencils moving, I decided to provide my students with choices to write about in an attempt to inspire them to be creative and invested in the writing process.

Students were decision makers for their own writing pieces throughout the entire writing workshop process. They decided on topics, genre, and audience during the prewriting stage. Students were able to work at their own pace while drafting. Decisions about revising and editing were at the discretion of the student. Student work finally became meaningful and purposeful.

Setting

My study took place in a second grade public elementary school classroom in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The school was located in a small middle-class neighborhood and included students from kindergarten through fifth

grade. The school community was rich in racial and ethnic diversity with a significant Hispanic population. Title I funding was restored this year after not meeting the criteria for the last two years. Many students were on free or reduced lunch plans. The total enrollment at the school was approximately 350 students. Inside my classroom, students wrote while sitting at desks set up in clusters of five or six, although students were able to choose a different seat or area during writing workshop. There were also six computers in the classroom for students to publish their stories.

Participants

The 24 second grade students in my classroom were the participants in my study. However, these students were not ordinary learners. It is important to note that the students in my class were exceptional. There was a considerable amount of parental support and involvement. At the beginning of the school year, only one student was reading below grade level. The students in this class were supportive of one another and motivated to learn inside and outside the classroom.

There were 12 girls and 12 boys involved with the study. Four students were English Language Learners (ELL), although all four students were in the process of exiting the program as a result of their continued success. Two students in the class had a Gifted Individualized Education Plan (GIEP), but three additional students were recommended for the gifted program and were in the

process of being tested. Slightly less than half of the students in my class were labeled as economically disadvantaged.

Procedures

The study is primarily focused on letter writing and free writing. At the start of the unit, students were given nine writing topics (Appendix A). Students were able to choose a topic from the list provided or come up with their own idea.

Before starting writing workshop, students made a list of topics that they were familiar with (Appendix B). This list consisted of their territories. These are the people, subjects, and events that are meaningful to each individual student. Next, students created a list of things they wanted to know more about (Appendix C). This list consisted of things students were curious about or that interested them. Both lists were posted inside of writing journals, and they were utilized if students needed inspiration for writing workshop topics and ideas.

During the beginning stages of the writing process, students reviewed and discussed how they would be assessed. They had access to the Second Grade Coaching Rubric (Appendix D) and the Writing Rubric (Appendix E) ahead of time to see how they were going to be graded.

Students were taught daily mini lessons focusing on structure, mechanics, content, and style. They were taught about letter formatting and the five parts of a letter: heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature (Appendix F). They looked at examples of letters. Students chose a topic for their letter based on the letter

writing assignment sheet. Students were not confined to the topics provided; they also had the opportunity to write to someone of their choice. During the writing letter unit, students published at least two letters. After students published their second letter, they were able to free write on a topic of their choice.

Data Sources

A pre-survey was given to all students (Appendix G). This determined how they felt about writing before the study began. The survey included statements about their writing ability, feelings towards writing, and student choice. There was also an open-ended space for students to write comments about writing.

A field log consisted of all work collected during the study. It was organized and numbered chronologically. It was coded to look for consistent themes throughout the study. Student work was also collected and placed into the log.

Observations were a key element of the study (Appendix H). Student observations were collections of qualitative data. While observing, I recorded student statements, body language, and work ethic. Observations were made on the student observation sheet, post-it notes, or other paper. Observations, reflections of observations, and analysis of observations were also entered into the field log.

Every writing workshop consisted of a period of time for students to write. During this time, I was able to conference with students about their work. This one-on-one time provided specific insight into individual writing concerns. I was also able to concentrate on the areas needing improvement. The conferences inspired many future mini lessons.

Student interviews were also a key aspect of my study (Appendix I). Students were asked a variety of general questions about writing. I utilized the interview log to record questions and answers. These interview logs were put into the field log.

A mid study and post study survey asked the same questions as the pre-survey. Students answered questions about their attitude towards writing, their ability as a writer, and how many decisions they were able to make during writing workshop. They also wrote comments about writing workshop.

Student work, observations, surveys, and interviews were examined thoughtfully. Throughout the study, I reflected on emerging themes identified in the field log. The information was coded and sorted for future analysis.

Trustworthiness Statement

MacLean and Mohr (1999) claim that a valid study is one that is truthful in terms of the researcher's intent, context, and reporting. Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) approved my study (Appendix J), and it was my responsibility to conduct my research honestly and accurately. Consent letters detailing the study were distributed to my principal and the parents of my students (Appendix K, L). The letters explained the risks and possible benefits of the study. Students and their parents knew that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. It explained that all students in the class would participate in classroom activities and surveys, but only participants of the study would have the results analyzed and reflected upon for the purpose of my research. The parent consent letter also provided contact information for my research supervisor, the building administrator, and the school guidance counselor. Once participation was determined, it was my job as a researcher to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of my students. The observations and data collected throughout my study were kept in a secure location. Pseudonyms were recorded instead of students' names.

I understood that the success of my study depended on the feedback from my support group. MacLean and Mohr (1999) stress the importance for mutual support of colleagues throughout the research process. My group assisted me as I gained perspective on the data collection process, and also helped me recognize

behavioral and academic patterns as they emerged throughout the study. My support group provided constructive feedback to improve my research. I recognized that I possibly had some preconceived notions regarding my research findings. It is important that I eliminated partiality before the study began, and my group checked for bias to ensure that my research maintained its credibility and integrity.

The data collection process is triangulated over a period of time. I collected multiple sources and artifacts of data including an accurate field log, student interviews, credible sources of literature, a myriad of student work, and detailed observations. The variety of sources ensured that the data collected would be precise and comprehensive. I carefully and truthfully reported all findings to the best of my ability during the 14 weeks of the study. Hendricks (2006) stated that when observations take place over a longer period of time, the research will provide more insight in terms of its effectiveness.

There was a range of different directions that this study could have possibly taken. It is important that I remained honest throughout the entire study, even if it challenged my biases or took me to an unexpected result.

My field log included anecdotal records, student work, observations, surveys, and completed interviews. After collecting field log entries, I dedicated time to reflect upon the day's observations and findings. These reflections were detailed and honest. At the beginning and end of the study, students contemplated

their own writing abilities and attitudes in the form of a survey. These helped me see growth over time. In addition, students' thoughts and feelings were conveyed through personal and formal interviews.

I upheld the job of a teacher researcher with the highest regard by truthfully collecting, reflecting, and reporting my research.

Their Stories

Do you want pizza or spaghetti for lunch? Would you rather play kickball or tag during recess? These are some of the decisions that students make daily. Why are students limited to only decide trivial things such as food or playtime? What would happen if students were given opportunities to choose more important things—like writing topics? My study tracks 24 unique journeys. Each child had a story to tell. Here are some of them.

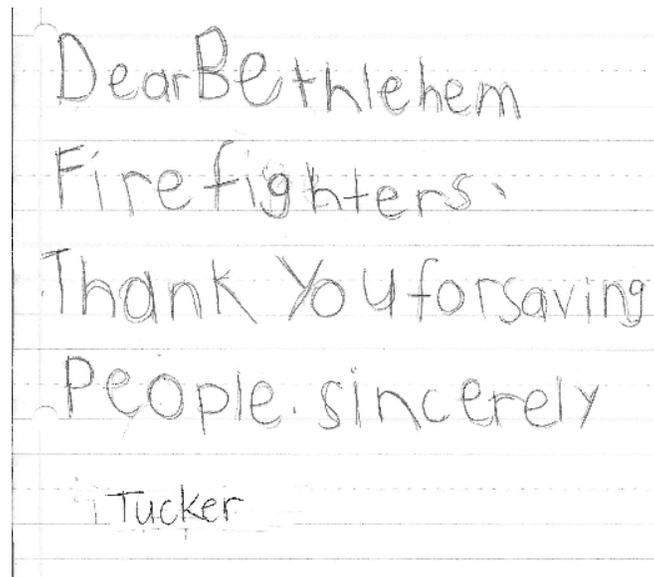
Let's Get Started!

Tucker:

I never know what to write... ever! There are so many thoughts and ideas floating around in my head, but it is really hard to figure out what to write down. I ask myself: Is this the right thing to write? Then I convince myself that it isn't. That is why my journal is pretty much empty.

We read about firefighters this week in school. Miss Klaric asked us to write a letter to a Bethlehem firefighter. I was nervous to write anything on my paper besides: Dear Bethlehem firefighter. I knew that was the right start. After that, I raised my hand and declared to my teacher, "I don't know what to write!" She directed me to the chalkboard where the class had brainstormed ideas to include for their letters. I liked some of those ideas, but they didn't seem right for my letter. Finally Miss Klaric asked me, "What would you want to say to a

firefighter?" Then it hit me! But, I didn't know how to spell it, so my teacher wrote it in my journal and I copied it. This is my letter.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The text is written in a child's cursive script. The letter reads: "Dear Bethlehem Firefighters, Thank You for saving People. sincerely Tucker". The name "Tucker" is written at the bottom of the letter.

Dear Bethlehem
Firefighters,
Thank You for saving
People. sincerely
Tucker

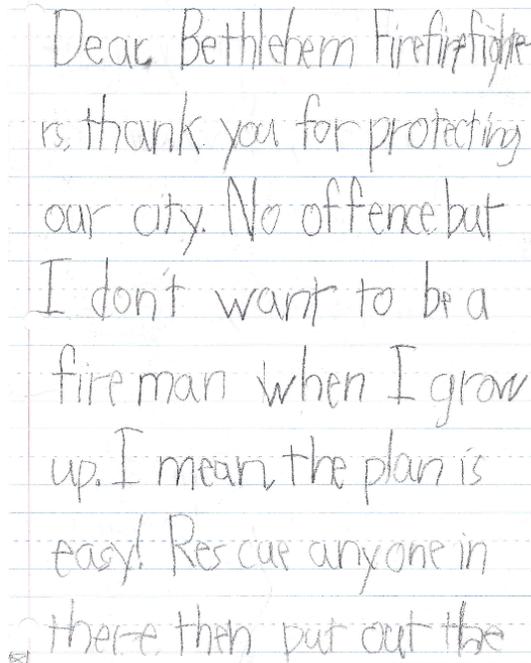
Figure 1. Tucker: Firefighter Letter.

Devon:

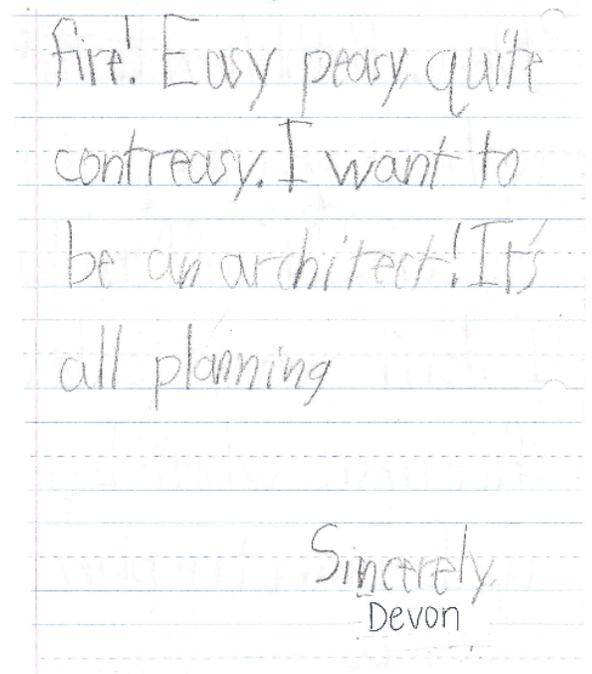
School is kind of boring sometimes. But seriously, how could anything really compare to the stories that I read? Everything is dull in comparison to the floating city of Sanctaphrax. That is the setting of last book I read called The Winter Knights by Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell. It's part of the Edge Chronicles series of books, and I have trouble putting these books down once I start reading. I know that I am a good reader. Since kindergarten, I get different assignments than the rest of the kids in my class. I don't mind doing different or extra work because I would probably be bored if I had to do the same thing as my friends.

The other day, Miss Klaric had us fill out a survey about our attitudes about writing. I do like writing, but not when teachers come up with boring things to write about. For example—the whole summer vacation story? Come on now, can't teachers come up with something better than that?

Miss Klaric today asked us to write a letter to a firefighter. This is a little better than the whole summer vacation story, but I would still rather be reading The Winter Knights. So, I worked for about five minutes on my letter, then copied it onto nice paper, and then I was able to go back to Sanctaphrax, the floating city. This is what I wrote:



Dear Bethlehem Firefighter
is, thank you for protecting
our city. No offence but
I don't want to be a
fire man when I grow
up. I mean, the plan is
easy! Rescure anyone in
there then put out the



fire! Easy peasy quite
contreasy. I want to
be an architect! It's
all planning

Sincerely,
Devon

Figure 2. Devon: Firefighter Letter.

Teacher Reflection:

Today is the first and last day that I will tell my students what to write. Starting tomorrow, I am opening the doors for a student-centered writing workshop. They will become the decision makers and be able to choose writing topics. The letter to a firefighter will serve as a beginning writing sample for students. These letters will serve as baseline assessments of their writing.

After all the students finished their letters, we moved to our meeting spot in the back of the classroom. I identified the author's chair as a place for students to share their letters with the rest of the class. We discussed how to be a good audience by being respectful and supportive. Each student, one by one, sat in the author's chair to share their letters before they were sent away to the local fire department. Devon was one of the first students to read his letter to the class. He sat in the author's chair, reading his letter with expression while putting emphasis in all the correct places. The students were sitting quietly and still; his letter captivated them. Devon's ability to use voice did not fool me—I knew that his letter was rushed, and he was capable of adding more significant details to his work. The class applauded.

Next it was Tucker's turn to read his letter. His eyes looked at mine and I noticed that he was filled with fear. He started to stutter, "I ... I ... I don't think I want to read my ... ummm.... letter." So I offered a compromise. "Tucker, how about you sit in the author's chair, and I will read your letter." He looked nervous, but he agreed to my concession. He hesitantly moved toward our author's chair.

He did not sit down, but turned his back to his classmates as I read his story. From where I was sitting, I could easily see his profile. I noticed that Tucker was smiling.

I am a Real Author

Nellie:

Today was a really great day! Miss Klaric told me that I am a real author! I can't wait to go home and tell my mom! Can you believe it? ME! She said that I am going to get to choose what I want to write about! After I write a story in my journal, I will conference with a friend or Miss Klaric, and then I will publish it—just like a real author!

My teacher said that authors have to take a lot of time to think about what will make a good story. She even said that sometimes authors get stuck. That makes me feel better to know that real authors aren't perfect.

I was told that we are going to be able to write two different letters. I can either come up with a letter that I want to write or I can pick a letter topic from the list that Miss Klaric passed out to the class. As we were looking at the list of topics, I knew right away who I wanted to write to—the President of the United States of America. I can't wait until I can get started.

Marie:

It's really hard to pay attention in school. My brother was taken away from my family. It makes me really sad when I think about it. I try not to cry about it, but sometimes I can't help it. After Miss Klaric said that we could write a letter to anyone in the whole world, I knew who I wanted to write to—my brother. But,

if I write to him, then I will be sad because then I will be thinking about him. So I need to come up with another idea. So I need to stop thinking about him, and start to think about who I could write a letter to besides my brother.

I look at Miss Klaric's idea paper, but I don't really like any of her letter ideas. I look inside my messy desk because I don't know what else to do. Inside it, I have a book called Presidents' Day by Anne Rockwell and illustrated by Lizzie Rockwell. I remember when Lizzie Rockwell came to our school when I was in kindergarten. That was a really special day. All the kids wore matching t-shirts and we got to keep the book Presidents' Day. Lizzie Rockwell even signed my book. I wonder if I could write a letter to her. I raise my hand, but Miss Klaric is working with another student. There are a lot of kids who are waiting in line to talk to her, so I get into the line. When it is finally my turn, I ask Miss Klaric if I can write a letter to Lizzie Rockwell. She said that it was a great idea, so I go back to my seat and start to think of things to write. It is hard to think about something else besides my brother, but I am going to try.

Brody:

I don't like school. I would rather be outside playing kickball or watching the Phillies. School is easy for me. I know a lot of the things before my teacher even teaches it. But, I don't want to be here. My parents had to have a conference

with my teacher about my behavior. They were not happy to hear that I am sometimes not nice to other kids.

Anyway, Miss Klaric told us today that we are going to write letters. I wasn't sure who to write to at first, but then Miss Klaric said that we could use our lists that we made earlier in the school year. I made a list of all the things that I know a lot about and a list of things that I want to know more about. As the top of my list was, of course, the Philadelphia Phillies. I am going to write a letter to Shane Victorino, the center fielder for the team. I can't wait to get started.

Tucker:

Oh no. I have to write a letter. I don't know where to start. Miss Klaric made a bunch of letter topics, but I don't think I want to write any of those. I raised my hand and Miss Klaric read the topics to me again and told me to put a star next to the ideas that I thought were interesting. One of the topics was writing a letter to a soldier. Maybe that would work, but I don't know. I'll just sit here.

Devon:

Finally! I get to write about what I want to write about. One of the topics that Miss Klaric gave to me was writing a letter from one character in a book to another character in the same book. I am going to write a letter to Maris, one character in the Edge Chronicles series from Quint, another character. I can get

lost in the virtual world of Sanctaphrax and not get in trouble for having my book out. I really like that I can choose my own topic. Watch out—I'm going to need a lot of paper for this one!

Teacher Reflection:

After the first day of a student-centered writing workshop, I can honestly say that my students impressed me. They were creative and thoughtful today. Many students have concrete ideas for their letters and already started drafting their letters, while other students are thinking and brainstorming. A handful of students were utilizing online encyclopedias to search for information necessary for their letters. One student was looking up information about General George Marshall, the United States military leader. He will use the information to write a letter to this World War II army general.

The lesson today ended after the half hour scheduled time, yet it felt like it ended too soon. Many students had to stop their thought process just as they were getting started. In addition, much of my time was spent answering individual students' questions. I want them, by the conclusion of this study, to become decision makers for all aspects of their writing, not just choosing topics. This will result in students becoming more independent and successful. Tomorrow's mini lesson will focus on the structure of a letter.

It Sounds Fun, Right?

Tucker:

I learned today that a letter starts with Dear, so I write that on the top of my paper. Then I stop and raise my hand. Miss Klaric has a line of students waiting to meet with her or ask her questions, so I put my hand down and my pencil down, and I wait.

Lucas:

The best part about school is being around my friends. The things that I learn in school can be hard, especially math, but I love coming everyday. Miss Klaric is having us all write letters. At the last writing workshop I decided that I was going to write a letter to myself. I know it sounds kind of funny. But anyway, the cool part is that I am going to close up the envelope when I'm finished and I cannot open the letter until I graduate from high school. It sounds fun, right? So I wrote my letter to myself and finished it all today. I had a conference with Miss Klaric for a while in the back of the room. I guess there are a lot of things that I need to change. I didn't realize that capital letters and periods were really that important. But anyway, I like my letter. Miss Klaric also said that I should write more details. She said that I could write about what I want to be when I grow up and stuff. That isn't a bad idea, but I liked my letter the way it was before. Oh well.

Aaron:

All day I think about Pokemon. I love Pokemon cards. I love Pokemon TV shows. I just love everything about them. The worst thing about school is that if you have Pokemon cards here, and Miss Klaric sees them, they end up in the June Box. It is for all the things that don't belong in school, and they have to stay in that awful box until June. I know exactly what cards I have in the June Box, and I can't wait to get them back.

I started my first letter already. It is to James Madison. I like learning about history. Miss Klaric helped me print out information on the computer about James Madison. After that, I got to use a highlighter, which was really fun. Then I started to write my letter. Although I like this letter, I am already thinking about my next letter. Do you think Miss Klaric will let me write to a Pokemon character? We'll see. Here is my James Madison letter:

Dear James Madison,
What was it like when
you were the
president of the
United States of
America? I read a lot
about you I read
that Thomas

Jefferson was your
friend and you were
born in March 16,
1751. I also know you
lived in Port Conway.
I read that you were
the fourth President
of the United States
of America. What
decisions did you
make for our
country?

Aaron

Figure 3. Aaron: Dear James Madison.

Teacher Reflection:

I had trouble focusing on the positive today. Although my students were being thoughtful and creative, their thought process was being cut short due to the lack of writing time. By the time that the mini lesson was over, students had only about fifteen minutes to write. Most of the remaining time I was working with Lucas on fixing up and adding to his letter. Forcing instruction time and writing time together into a half hour block is too brief for my study, so I am going to change it. Instead of having writing workshop everyday for a half-hour, I am going to have it twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes. This way, I can thoroughly teach a mini lesson and provide students with time to think and write.

I Was Impressed

Teacher Reflection:

The school day started like any other school day. Students walked into the classroom, signed up for a lunch, and waited for me to check their homework. After all of the hustle of the morning activities, I walked over to my desk to take attendance. What did I find on my desk? It was an envelope with my name on it. I broke the seal to open the envelope, and I smiled as I read it silently. Sadie had written me a very nice letter. It was dated, had all the components of a letter that I had previously taught, and was written in perfect handwriting. The letter said:

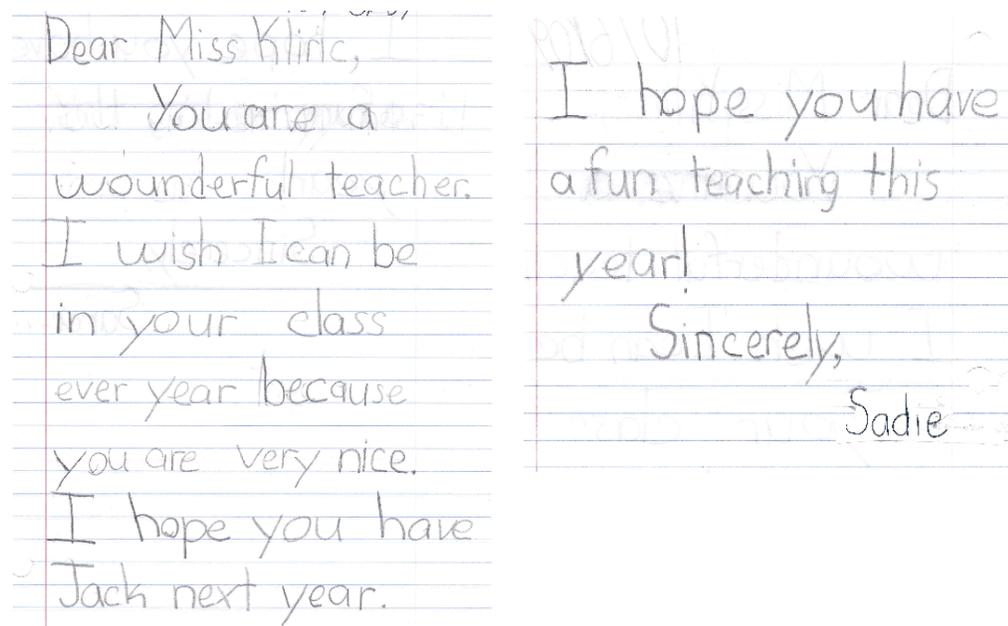
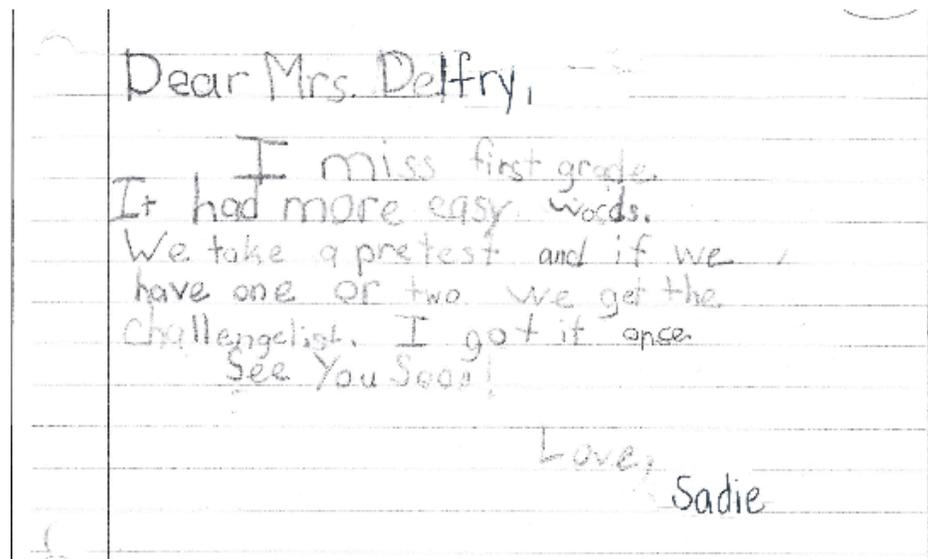


Figure 4. Sadie: Dear Miss Klaric.

I was definitely impressed that I had a student who was motivated to write outside of school, but I thought that was the beginning and end of Sadie's letter

writing phase. At the end of the day, I was copying some things in the teacher's lounge when a first grade teacher approached me. She handed me a letter in an envelope. It was a letter from Sadie to her first grade teacher. I found it so inspiring to have a student who was writing outside of school. Sadie has discovered that writing is a way to communicate with others and get a message across. Her letter said:



Dear Mrs. Delfry,

I miss first grade.
It had more easy words.
We take a pretest and if we
have one or two we get the
challengelist. I got it once.
See You Soon!

Love,
Sadie

Figure 5. Sadie: Dear Mrs. Delfry.

I Can't Be Bothered By Their Whispers

Devon:

There is so much that Quint would want to say in a letter to Maris, so I am going to write my ideas down in my journal because I don't want to forget all of my ideas. Some of the people at my table are talking to each other, but I can't be bothered by their whispers. I can't be stopped. I am just so anxious and excited to get my letter written. I want my letter to show Quint's desperation. He needs Maris' help.

Dear Maris ^①
Vilnix Pompulinus
is actually believing
that Hax Vollitax!
But it's not his
fault. It's just
that he doesn't
have any friends.

He thinks that I'm ^②
a big jerk and that
I think I'm the
best. I wish that I
could stop the
trouble and become
his friend. But alas,
not even one person

in the Knights ^③
Academy is not
trying to stop
me. I know you're
a great brainstorme
r. Maris. Could you
think of a way
to do the task and

then write back on ^④
how to do it? Once
you're done with
the bark scroll, wait
for Welma to come
to your window. Give
her the letter, and
she'll give it to me!
LOVE, devin

Figure 6. Devon: Dear Maris.

I'm finished my letter now, but I don't want to start another letter yet.

How can I stay in my fantasy world? I know! I could continue my letter by adding a P.S. I'm going to need more paper.

⑤
P.S. Could you also think
of a way to stop him
from believing Hax Volitax?
He thinks that a great
storm is coming
because of the anvil
formation in the clouds.
I don't believe him,

⑦
going to kill them
all. How do I know?
Because he already
tested some. He just
sended out Screedius
Tollinix. When he got
on his sky ship and
flew into the air, the

⑥
though. There's something
wrong with the air
density. There is not
enough to make any
stormphrax. Even if he's
right, if he sets all the
knights on a quest
to get stormphrax, he's

⑧
flight rock chilled to
the core and the ship
tipped over! He crash landed
and died. I truly need
your help, Maris.

Figure 7. Devon: P.S.

Finally, I'm finished! I guess I have to leave my floating city and go back to second grade. Do you like that my P.S. is longer than the actual letter?

Tucker:

I see other students writing. I see other students working. I am just sitting here with nothing on my paper besides Dear Soldier. I raise my hand, but Miss Klaric is always working with other kids. There is always a line of people who want her help. I need her help because I don't know what to write. I know I am writing to a soldier, but I don't know what to say to him. Maybe if I just sit here, someone will notice that I need help.

Nellie:

I know that I want to write a letter to the President of the United States, Barack Obama. I want to tell him all the things that are important to me. I once heard about this rule. It says that you can't be president if you were born in another country. I don't like this rule. I have lived in the United States for my whole life, but I was adopted from China. It's unfair! I think that I would be a great president someday, but I'll never get a chance. This is something that I'll write into my letter.

Dear President Obama,
Could you change
this rule that if you
are not born in the
USA you are aloud
to be President,
because I am born
in China. And if you

can change this rule
that would be
wonderful. I have
alot of questions. Do
you like the white
house? How many
sheaches do you do
pera day? Do you like being

President? Do you
like your secret
secretice?

Sincerly,
Nellie Fisher

Figure 8. Nellie: Dear President Obama.

Maybe I can make a difference by writing this letter. Maybe President Obama will read my letter and change the law. I sure hope that he listens. Maybe one day, I could be president.

Teacher Reflection:

I need to figure out a better way to conduct conferences. I am finding that students are almost afraid of being independent. I am being asked a plethora of questions that students can answer themselves. They ask me questions like: *Is it ok if I write about this?* or *How do you spell this word?* or *Can I publish my story?* These are all questions that I want students to figure out on their own.

I am spending too much time working with individual students. For example, I spent fifteen minutes working with Lucas today, primarily correcting punctuation and spelling errors. I wonder if he even learned anything because I was doing all the work for him. I was in charge of this conference. I need to figure out a way to improve student conferences.

During that entire block of time, I noticed that Tucker was just sitting at his desk daydreaming. My goal is to teach my student writers to make decisions and be more independent. By doing so, I will have time to devote to students who truly need individual support. I am going to start a new type of conference—satellite conferences. I will go from table to table asking students to tell me about their writing. They will be in charge of the direction of the conference. I am not going to walk around with the red pen and correct every mistake. I will use these brief conversations to listen instead of control. If I see that a student is forgetting punctuation marks consistently, I will point out a place where he or she did it correctly and ask that student to find the rest of the mistakes independently. This

way, that student is benefiting and learning from the conference. I am looking forward to starting the satellite conference process so I can assess the progress of every student.

On another note, I am completely impressed by the topics that students have chosen for their letters. Most students have chosen a letter topic from my list of ideas, but there are a few students who thought of their own letter recipient. I am pleased by the level of student creativity.

They Are Decision Makers

Teacher Reflection:

Today, my mini lesson will focus on making sure sentences are complete sentences. I will also introduce students to satellite conferences. I want my students to be conscious of the decisions that they are making while writing. By teaching complete sentences, I am hopeful that students will think about the length of their sentences, and whether or not they are complete. I will remind students that they are decision makers and it is important that they are becoming more independent writers. If students have a question, they should think about the best solution individually. *Should I think about it and figure it out on my own? Should I ask a friend to help me? Is it so important that I ask Miss Klaric?* These are the questions that I want my students to think about during writing workshop. I want them to know that I am available to help, but also that they are decision makers and should be making choices independently.

Tucker:

Maybe today is the day that Miss Klaric will be able to help me with my letter. She said that conferences would not have long lines anymore. I never wanted to wait in line. Maybe that is why I don't have anything on my paper. Now, she is going to come around the room and talk to kids about what they

wrote. I sure hope that she comes to me. I still only have Dear Soldier written in my journal.

I get nervous when Miss Klaric comes over to my table. She asks my neighbor what she is working on and tells her that she needs capital letters at the beginning of her sentences. Then, Miss Klaric comes to me and sees that I only have two words written on my paper. She asks me what I have been doing the past five writing workshops. I told her that I didn't know what to write. So she pulls a chair over and sits next to me. She asked me, "What do soldiers do?" I said that I think they fight in wars. Then my teacher asks me what I want to tell the soldiers who are fighting. I am still not sure. Then she asks me if I have a question for a soldier? This is really hard. Miss Klaric said that she was going to come back to me in about five minutes and that she wants me to think of something to ask a soldier. Then she goes to the other students at my table and starts to ask them questions. Hmmm. I am not sure what I would want to ask a soldier. I am going to keep thinking because I need to have something before Miss Klaric comes back to me. I wonder if soldiers ride on horses. There it is. I have my question. I raise my hand and tell Miss Klaric my question for the soldier. She smiles and tells me that I did a good job and that I should write my question down. So I do. I am happy with my letter today.

Marie:

I am sad today. I keep thinking about my brother and how he doesn't live with my family anymore. I started writing down my letter to my favorite author Lizzie Rockwell, but I really just want to write to David, my brother. So when Miss Klaric is walking around the room, I work on my Lizzie Rockwell letter, but when she is working with a student, I will open to another page in my journal and write about how I am feeling. I don't want Miss Klaric to know about this because I don't want to get into trouble. That is why it needs to be a secret. This is what I have written to Lizzie Rockwell:

Dear Lissy Rockwell^①
I Loved when you
came to our school!
Thank you for the
free book! President's
day is a very very
good book! Did
you like to write and draw?

You came to our^②
school Clearview
last year and it
was the best
day ever! Please
write back! sincerely
Marie

Figure 9. Marie: Dear Lizzie Rockwell

Lucas:

I am an ok writer. Sometimes it is hard. I don't always understand the mini lessons. I like to write fast. If I write fast, then I can draw a picture or read a book or daydream about playing sports. I wrote a letter to myself, but I can't open the letter until I graduate from high school. A couple weeks ago, Miss Klaric spent a lot of time with me to help me fix up my letter. She wanted me to add more things to it. So I added more things that I like to do. This is my final letter:

1. Dear Lucas, I like to play basket ball is my favret sport lucas: if you can not open this letler until I graduate

2. from high school. I like to play football to. And i like to play soccer to and hoke in especially basball I like to play

3. I like to play with my sister to I dont uoshale play with my friends becaus. I am only aloud to play with my friends

4. at school and i want to be on the philadelfea Eagles! sincerely Lucas

Figure 10. Lucas: Dear Lucas.

Teacher Reflection:

Giving students choices in writing workshop is helping them become conscious of the important decision they make while writing. Overall, I am happy with the way that the satellite conferences went today. I was able to work with Tucker who had almost nothing written on his paper. I tried to focus on the positive with him. It is only one sentence, but it is a sentence in the right direction.

Marie wrote a very nice letter to Lizzie Rockwell. I like that she was creative and thought about a topic on her own. But I am also very worried about Marie. I know that she has a lot going on at home. I am not sure how to help her. I will ask her if she is ok, and she will tell me that she is sad, but then she says that she doesn't want to talk about it. The other day, one of the other students said something to her, and she could not stop crying. She was still crying when the other students went to the library, so I took her back to the classroom and played checkers with her. I asked her what made her sad, and she was not really able to tell me. When I am really upset about something, I will write it down. I wonder if Marie would benefit from having an extra journal to write about the things going on in her life. I will ask her tomorrow if she wants an extra journal.

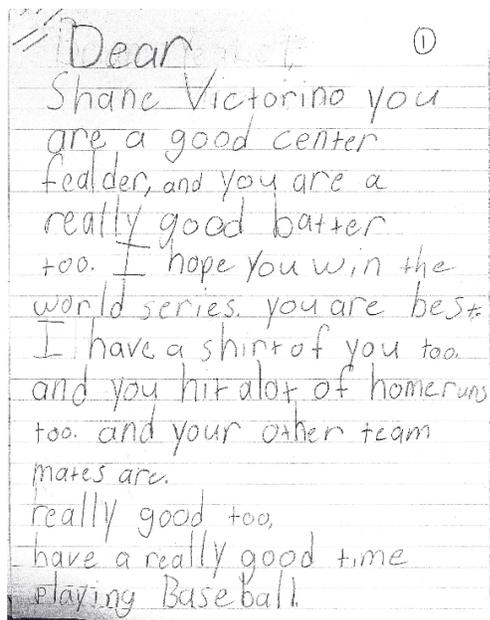
I am more than a little frustrated with Lucas. I spent a significant period of time working with him on his letter. Previously, I fixed all of his mistakes inside

of his journal so that he would have a nice published piece. Yet, when I read his published piece today, I noticed that he copied all of the mistakes from his journal onto the nice paper. This is just proof that fixing students' mistakes for them isn't really helping them. I need to help them find their own mistakes. I am hoping that I can get Lucas to do more quality work on his next letter.

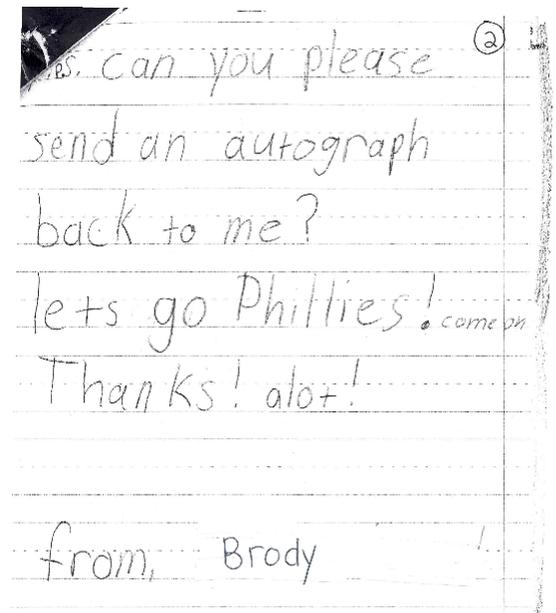
Dear Hu Jintao

Brody:

I know that I am a good student, but right now I am trying to be a nicer kid. Ever since my parents had a meeting with my teacher, I have been trying really hard to not get into trouble. I still make mistakes, like the other day when I said, "math sucks," when Miss Klaric asked us to get out our workbooks. I guess everyone makes mistakes. The one place where I haven't been making mistakes is in writing workshop. I especially like writing right now because Miss Klaric said it was ok if I write a letter to my favorite baseball player. I have been working on my letter to Shane Victorino. I am so excited because the Phillies are in the playoffs! I went to a game with my dad a while ago. I am excited to tell Shane Victorino that I have a shirt with his name on it. How cool would it be if he wrote back or even sent me an autograph!



Dear Shane Victorino ①
you are a good center
fielder, and you are a
really good batter
too. I hope you win the
world series. you are best.
I have a shirt of you too.
and you hit alot of homeruns
too. and your other team
mates are
really good too,
have a really good time
playing Baseball.



es, can you please ②
send an autograph
back to me?
lets go Philllies! come on
Thanks! alot!
from, Brody

Figure 11. Brody: Dear Shane Victorino.

Nellie:

I love both of my schools. Are you confused? I go to school during the day, and I also go to Chinese school. At my Chinese classes, I am learning to speak and write. It is a little bit hard, but I like it. I wrote a letter to the president of the United States for my first letter, and I was brainstorming about my next letter. I thought for a long time, and then it hit me. I am going to write a letter to Hu Jintao, the president of China. I told Miss Klaric my idea, and she loved it. I know how to say and spell a couple of things, so I am going to write to him in Chinese. Maybe I'll show it to my Chinese school teacher.

①
ní hǎo hujintao wǒ cǎn
speak a little bit of
chinese. wǒ jia nellie
wǒ jiāo zài bethlehem
wǒ live with my bàbà
māmā mèimèi and yī
gǒu. wǒ am qī years old.
wǒ want to be president.

②
wǒ live in USA in
pennsylvania.
zài jàn nellie
ps please write back.

Figure 12. Nellie: ni hao Hu Jintao.

Tucker:

The other day I wrote a whole sentence to the soldier. I know that I need to write some more. Miss Klaric told me to think about questions that I have for the soldier. That is how I come up with the horse question. I worry a lot about a lot of things. I wonder if soldiers worry about being safe. I raise my hand, and Miss Klaric comes over to me. I ask her if it is good to ask the soldier if he is safe. She said it was a good question, so I write it in my journal. Miss Klaric said that I should keep thinking of questions to ask the soldier, and that next time I don't have to ask her. She said that I have to make the choices about my own writing. That is really hard. I asked Devon what he would want to say to a soldier. He wanted to know if the soldier was hurt. So far, I have three sentences. I will keep thinking of more to write. Miss Klaric said that she is happy how much I have written. I don't know what else to write.

Aaron:

So my first letter to James Madison was good. Now I have to work up the courage to ask Miss Klaric the scary question. Can I write a letter to a Pokemon character? I sure hope she says yes, but she probably won't. She won't even let us carry around Pokemon cards! So why would she let me write to one.

So I asked her when she came to my table for conferences. I asked her if I could write to Richu, and can you believe it... she said yes! I am so excited! I say

to Miss Klaric, "I love writing letters!" It really is fun. Now, what should I write in my letter? I wonder if Richu needs an owner and what his powers are. This is really awesome. I can't believe I can write to Pokemons!

Marie:

So something really special happened today. Everyone in my class has a green journal. We use these journals for writing workshop time. I guess Miss Klaric must have noticed that I was writing in my journal things besides my letters. At first when Miss Klaric called me over to her desk, I thought that I was going to get into trouble. But she wanted to talk to me about writing. Miss Klaric told me that she likes to write down her feelings when she is really sad or happy or scared. She said that is what real writers do. She gave me an extra journal. It isn't green like all the others; this one is purple and pretty. She said that I could put it in my desk or take it home, and I can write or draw pictures in it. It is my own special journal. I can't wait to get started writing in it.

Teacher Reflection:

There was a special moment today. I was meeting with students during writing workshop, and at one point, I looked up to observe the whole room. What I saw and heard was amazing. The entire room was peaceful. Every student was working on exactly what he or she was supposed to be working on. Students were

talking to each other about their writing. I overheard Nellie say to her neighbor, “Do you think Miss Klaric will let us send these letters in the mail?” Aaron was reading the start of his Pokemon letter to his friend. Devon is sitting next to Tucker helping him think of ideas for his letter to a soldier. Even Brody’s behavior is perfect at this moment. This is exactly the writing workshop that I had envisioned.

For their first letters, many students chose topics from the list of ideas that I had given them. As they think of ideas for their second letters, I have noticed greater creativity and thought is going into the brainstorming phase. Students are choosing to write to the people or things that are important to them. Brody is writing to his favorite baseball player while Nellie is writing to the President of China. Aaron looked shocked today when I told him that he could write to a Pokemon character.

I gave Marie an extra writing journal today. I talked to her about how I often write my own feelings in a journal. I told her that she could use this journal to write about whatever she wants. I hope that this helps her, just like writing helps me to make sense of things. She keeps a lot inside, and hopefully writing can become an outlet for her emotions. When I gave it to her, she smiled.

Toy Island

Teacher Reflection:

Smiles beamed on students' faces as they proudly marched into the classroom this morning holding their first real projects. The social studies assignment required each student to create an island map. The final copy of the map needed to include: a title, capital city, two additional cities, various land features, a specific key, and a compass rose. When thoughtfully creating this project, I decided to add an enrichment section to the project guidelines. This optional list of ideas included designing a flag for your island and drawing your island to scale.

Already knowing the copious amount of student creativity in writing workshop, I was not surprised to see many original island ideas. Among my favorite islands were: Pizza Island, Eagle Island, Christmas Island, Lucas Island, and Reading Island. Devon's island, which was in the shape of a Jack-in-the-box, was appropriately dubbed Toy Island.

Each student discussed his or her island project with the rest of the class. When it was Devon's turn, he took out a story. He had written and typed a detailed story about the creation of Toy Island! Students intently listened to Devon's interesting story.

Writing a story about the creation of an island was not part of the assignment guidelines. It also was not a suggested enrichment activity. Devon

chose to write a story anyway. This student enjoys writing. This is proof that I must be doing something right.

TOY ISLAND

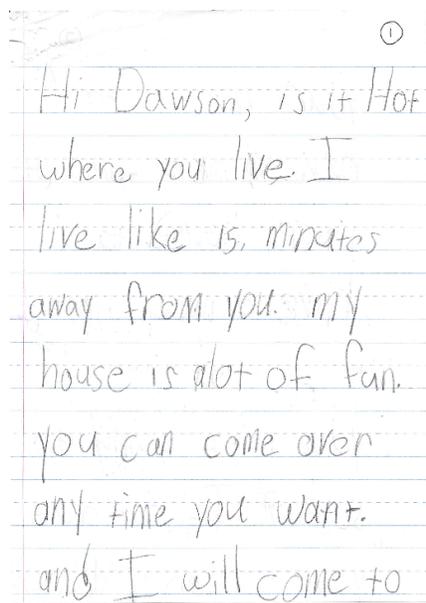
There once were three kids. They adored toys! Jess was the oldest. Her favorite toys were board games. On the other hand Sam, the youngest loved electronic toys. Then there was Amy (the middle child). She loved her stuffed animals. They wanted to I prove how much they loved toys to others, but they didn't know how. One day, their mother wanted to go on a cruise, and there were no available baby-sitters. That meant they had to go along. They were all having a great time with all the toys until the ship hit a gigantic rock. The boat started sinking. There were no life boats left, so they had to swim on their own. They reached an island. An abandoned island, that is. They were upset because all their toys were washed away along with their mother. After what seemed like hours, Amy had an idea. She suggested they make their own toys. But then, Sam had an even better idea! He said that they should create a whole island completely filled with toys and carve it into a jack in the box. They all agreed that it was a great idea. So they worked and worked for days. Then they were finally done! They invited kids from places all over the world to see their island. No parent in the whole universe has been allowed to see the island, because most would scold Amy, Jess, and Sam. The End.

Figure 13. Devon: Toy Island.

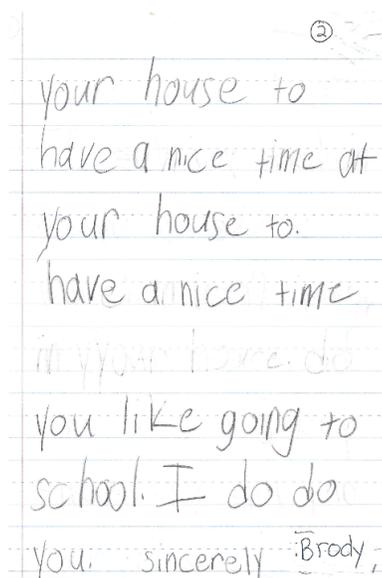
The Purple Journal

Brody:

Miss Klaric put my Shane Victorino letter in the mail. I really hope that he writes back to me. That would just be the coolest thing in the entire world. I need to think of another letter to write. I go back to my list of things that I like. I made this list at the very beginning of the school year. Here are some of the things on my list: Phillies, baseball, Mom, Dad, my sisters, recess, kickball, Dawson, swimming. Dawson is my best friend. He doesn't go to school here, but we go swimming together in the summer. He would probably like to get a letter from me. What could I say to Dawson? I wonder what his school is like, or even if he likes school. I like it better now that I don't get into trouble all the time.



①
Hi Dawson, is it Hof
where you live. I
live like 15 minutes
away from you. my
house is alot of fun.
you can come over
any time you want.
and I will come to

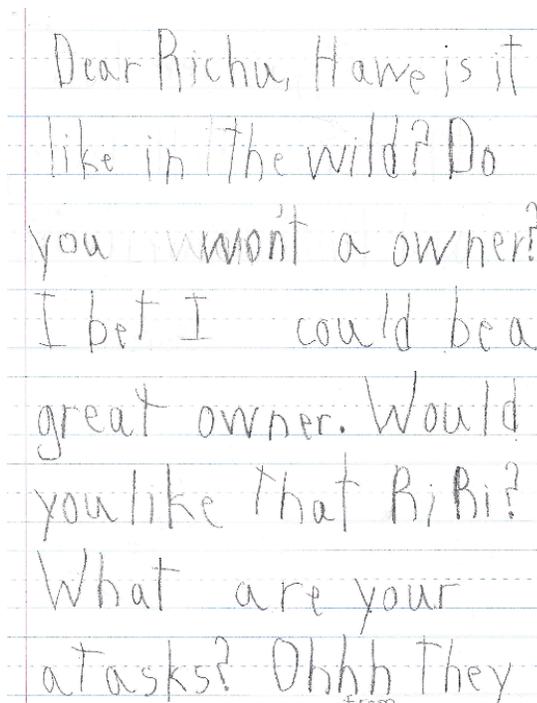


②
your house to
have a nice time at
your house to.
have a nice time
in your home. do
you like going to
school. I do do
you. sincerely Brody,

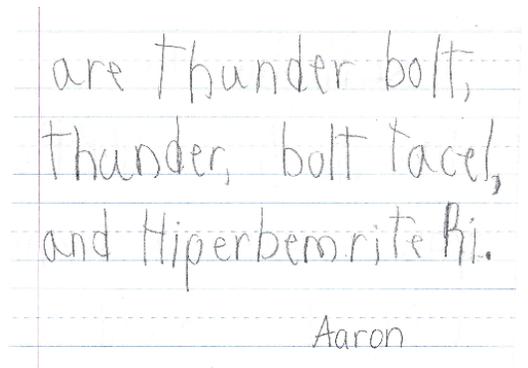
Figure 14. Brody: Hi Dawson.

Aaron:

I started my Pokemon letter at the last writing workshop. I wrote down a couple of things that I wanted to ask Richu. I have a bunch of questions for him. I especially want to know if Richu would want me as an owner. If I am his owner, I should have a nickname for him. I am going to call him RiRi now. If he does belong to me, I am going to have to find out what powers he has too. I hope they are good ones.



Dear Richu, How is it like in the wild? Do you want a owner? I bet I could be a great owner. Would you like that Ri Ri? What are your attacks? Ohhh They



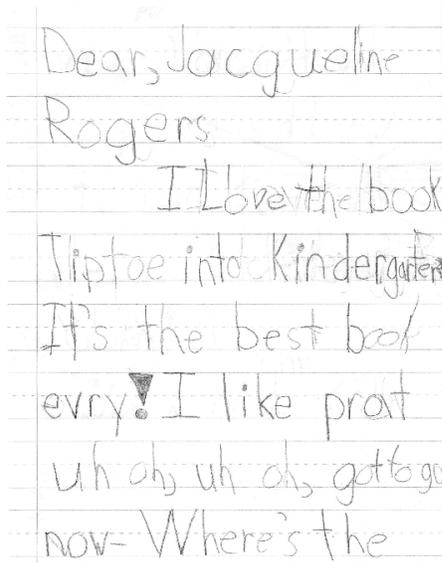
are Thunder bolt, Thunder, bolt tace, and Hiperbeam rite Ri.
Aaron

Figure 15. Aaron: Dear Richu.

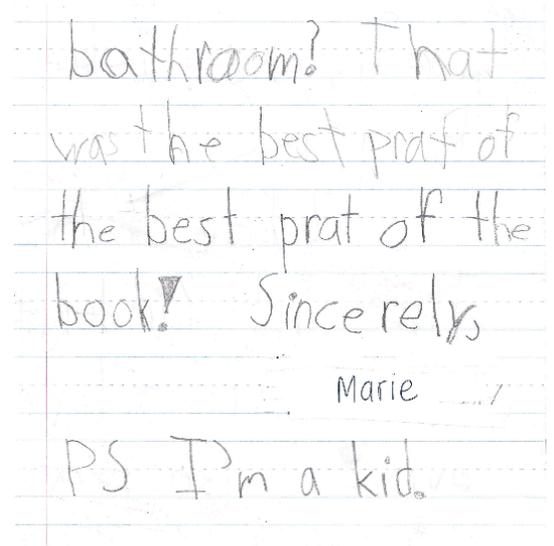
Now I can draw my picture. I think I will probably like my picture more than my letter.

Marie:

I have been writing in my purple journal during recess. I am not going to show it to anyone. It is just for me. It makes me feel special to have this journal. Right now I have my regular green journal out on my desk. I have to think of a new letter. Miss Klaric really liked my letter to Lizzie Rockwell, so she would probably like it if I wrote to another author too. I have a book in my desk from the library called Tiptoe to Kindergarten. I like this book a lot because it is funny. It is written by Jacqueline Rogers. I think I'll write a letter to her. Now what should I tell her. I'm not really sure, so I am going to look inside the book. I love this part of the book where the kid was looking for the bathroom. I should tell the author my favorite part. I should probably make sure she knows that I'm a kid too. I'm all done. It's perfect!



Dear, Jacqueline
Rogers
I Love the book
Tiptoe into Kindergarten
It's the best book
evry! I like prat
uh oh, uh oh, gotta go
now- Where's the



bathroom? That
was the best prat of
the best prat of the
book! Sincerely
Marie
PS I'm a kid.

Figure 16. Marie: Dear Jacqueline Rogers.

Tucker:

I finished my letter today. I wrote a lot of questions to him. This is my finished letter.

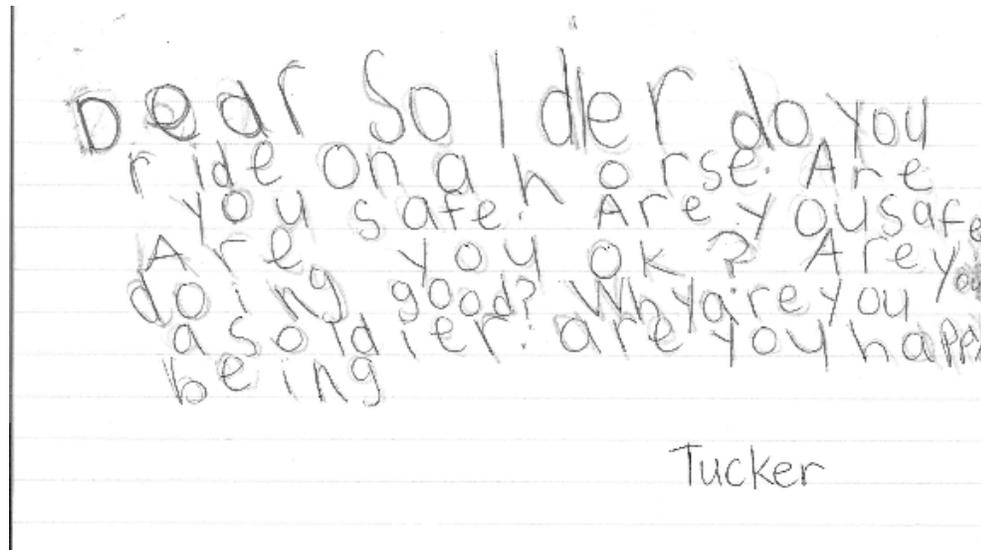


Figure 17. Tucker: Dear Soldier.

I published this on nice paper. Miss Klaric said that she was happy that I finished it. I have to write one more letter for writing workshop. I don't know what to write already. I raised my hand. Miss Klaric told me to look at my list of things that I know a lot about and my list of letter ideas. I looked at them, but I still don't know what to do. It is really hard to think of ideas.

I already know that I can write a letter to a soldier. I wonder if I can do that again. I asked Miss Klaric, but she wants me to come up with a different idea. So I go back to thinking. I still don't know who to write to.

Teacher Reflection:

Most students are finished with their two letters and have been free writing in their journals. I know that I keep saying this, but I am just amazed at the creativity of my students. It is interesting to think of how much time I used to spend on coming up with interesting writing topics for my students. Now I recognize that students are more motivated and enthusiastic when they come up with the ideas.

Tucker really wants to write another letter to a soldier. I am torn about the idea. I want him to grow as a writer and expand his ability by coming up with another letter idea. But, the one reason that I am tempted to just say it is ok to do the same thing is because it took him so long to decide on writing a letter to a soldier in the first place. I am going to give him a list of letter ideas tomorrow that are specific to the things that he likes. We will see what he chooses tomorrow.

During recess, Marie was writing in her purple journal. I saw a few curious kids go up to her and ask her where she got it. She told them that she got it from me. Within seconds, those students came up to me and asked for a purple journal too. I gave each of these students an extra journal. Then, these students

started to write in their new journals. By the end of recess, I had four more students ask me for a purple journal. I could not believe it. These kids love to write! So I made an announcement, “*Does anyone else in here want an extra journal?*” All but one student raised a hand.

It's Just So Hard To Decide

Teacher Reflection:

I introduced another important choice to my students today. This choice relates to what students should do when they are finished with the required work. I used today's mini lesson time to talk about free writing, because that is what a lot of students are doing at this point. After students have completed two letters, they can then write about whatever they want in their journals. I modeled an example of a free write. I wrote about a personal memory when I went swimming with sharks on vacation with some of my friends.

Nellie:

Miss Klaric said that I can start doing free writing in my journal, but I really like writing letters. I want to write a third letter, and I want this one to be longer than both of my other letters. I've already written letters to the presidents of China and the United States of America, so now I want to come up with a different idea. So I took out Miss Klaric's letter writing idea paper. I really like one of the ideas on there where I would write a letter to myself and then I have to put it away until I graduate from high school. I would probably want to tell myself about what I like in second grade.

Dear Nellie Alexandra Fisher,
I'm in 2nd grade. My
friendes are Kayleen,
Shannon, Sara, Jadya,
Lizabeth, Meadow.
I like to do reading,
writeing, sometimes
math. When I grow up be

presidend. I want to
go to my dad's colage
where he workes at
Ncc. The teachers that
I had ave in kinder tin
is Miss Done Portor. In
First grade Mrs. DePalma.
And in second grade

Miss Klaric.

From,

Nellie Alexandra Fisher

Figure 18. Nellie: Dear Nellie Alexandra Fisher.

I am done for today. This is way better than a free write.

Tucker:

Miss Klaric talked to me today about my next letter. It is just so hard to decide. She said that it would be neat to write a letter to a lifeguard because I like swimming a lot. She also said that I could write a letter to my Grandma because I really like my Grandma. I don't know. I still want to write a letter to a soldier. Miss Klaric said that was fine. So I write Dear Solider on my paper. Then I raise my hand. I don't know what to write.

Teacher Reflection:

Frustrated? I definitely am. I finally gave up and decided to let Tucker write a letter to a solider, and as usual, he does not know what to write. It is upsetting to see so much creativity from every student in the class, but then Tucker is at a standstill.

Another frustration that I have is that Lucas never started his second letter. When students finished their letters, they were supposed to put them in the finished work folder and put a check next to their name. I noticed today that he only had one check next to his name, so I asked him what he was working on. He was drawing a picture for his first letter, which he finished about a week ago. He put a significant amount of importance on the picture, but this was not a

successful way of prioritizing. I think this was his way of avoiding writing, which I know is difficult for him. He said that he is going to get started on his next idea.

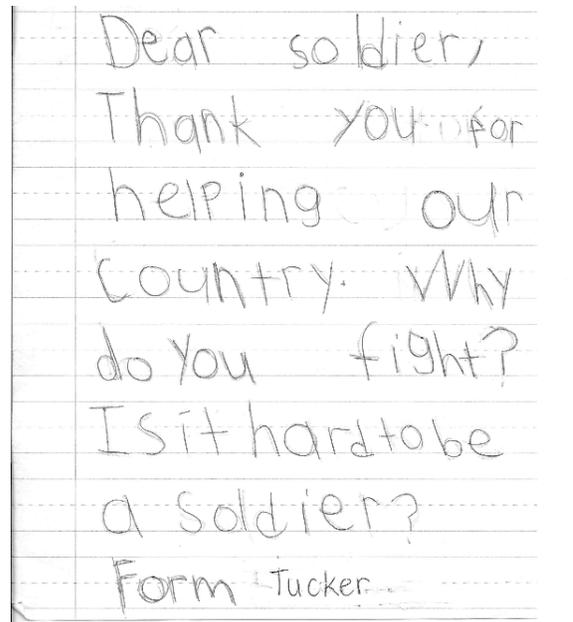
On another note, many students have chosen to write more letters instead of free writes. Nellie is writing a letter about herself for when she graduates from high school. For two of her three letters, she has chosen a topic from my idea sheet that I passed out at the beginning of the writing unit. She also used her letter to Barack Obama as a springboard for her second letter, writing to the President of China. Now she is writing a letter to help her remember her second grade year. I am really impressed by her work ethic and creativity. I am hopeful to see more progress as this study continues.

Writing Resources

Tucker:

I also have a new seat for writing workshop. Now I sit at a table in the front of the room. I like it here because I don't spend so much time looking around at what is going on in the classroom. I don't know why it is so hard to come up with things to say to this soldier. I wonder if I can just say the same things that I said in my first letter. Do you think Miss Klaric would notice?

Miss Klaric helped me come up with a few ideas that I could write to a soldier. She said that I should thank the soldier for fighting for our country. I like that idea. Devon also was trying to help me too. He thought that I should ask the soldier why he fights. I like their ideas, so I write them down.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Dear soldier, Thank you for helping our country. Why do you fight? Is it hard to be a soldier? Form Tucker." The paper has a vertical margin line on the left and horizontal lines for writing. The handwriting is somewhat shaky and shows signs of being a child's work.

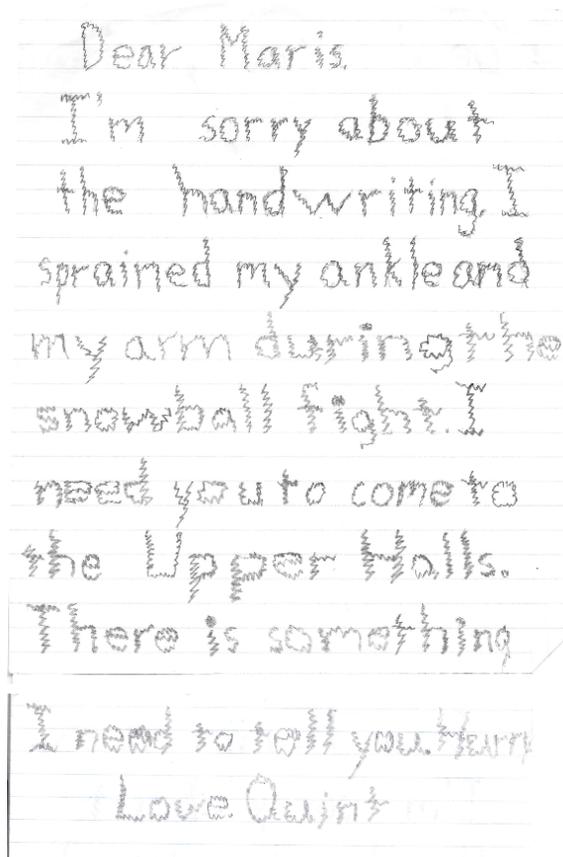
Dear soldier,
Thank you for
helping our
country. Why
do you fight?
Is it hard to be
a soldier?
Form Tucker

Figure 19. Tucker: Dear Soldier.

Devon:

During the mini lesson today, Miss Klaric asked us to come up with things in the classroom that could improve our writing. She called these tools writing resources. We all have these books in our desks called Words I Use When I Write. Inside is an alphabetical list of words that are spelled right. We also were able to practice using a thesaurus. Even though I knew what a thesaurus was, I never really used one. I think this is really going to help me when I have to write something new. The last thing that Miss Klaric showed us was a book of synonyms. My favorite page in here is the Said Is Dead page. It gives a whole bunch of words to use instead of saying said. I think these writing resources are really going to help me be a better writer.

It took me a long time to finish my first letter from Quint to Maris. That is probably because my PS was so long. I know that I have to finish another letter by the end of this week, so this one is going to be shorter than the first. I really want to write another letter from the characters of the Edge Chronicles. This time, I have this idea to write my letter all messy. This is because Quint has hurt his arm in a snowball fight.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a cursive, somewhat shaky hand. The note is addressed to Maris and explains that the sender, Devon, is sorry about the handwriting because they sprained their ankle and arm during a snowball fight. They are asking Maris to come to the Upper Halls to talk. The note ends with a signature 'Love Quint' and a small scribble.

Dear Maris.
I'm sorry about
the handwriting. I
sprained my ankle and
my arm during the
snowball fight. I
need you to come to
the Upper Halls.
There is something
I need to tell you. Hear?
Love Quint

Figure 20. Devon: Dear Maris.

This is going to be Quint's second attempt to get help from Maris. I don't have time for a PS this time. Oh well.

They Are So Proud

Teacher Reflection:

We used this writing workshop time for students to share their letters with the rest of the class. Each student, one by one, walked up to the author's chair to read his or her thoughtful and unique letters.

When Lucas read his letter to the class, he noticed that he had made mistakes when copying his final letter. He said at one point, "This was supposed to be a capital letter." He paused again and declared to the class, "I forgot to put this word here." I was happy to see that he knows what is correct, even if he did not see it as he prepared his final copy. I wished that he looked at his published piece prior to turning it in. The sharing of Lucas' letter inspired me to teach a mini lesson in the future on what to do when you think you are finished with your writing. I wanted Lucas and other students to realize that writing is a process, and it is important to reread your work and try to make it better.

The room was quiet when other students were reading their letters, but it changed as Devon walked up to the author's chair. It was as if students were frozen with anticipation; they did not want to miss a word of his letters. The room was still. Devon cleared his throat and began. He read with such wonderful expression. Even though he was the only person that had read the *Edge Chronicles* in the classroom, we all felt a connection with Quint. We understood his desperation for help. As Devon finished, he walked back to his seat. As papers

started to crumble and students fidgeted in their seats, I realized that the classroom had returned back to normal.

The last time that Tucker came to the author's chair, he was so nervous that he would not read his work. He could not even face his classmates; his back was turned to them as I read his firefighter letter to the class. This time, things were different. He sat in the chair and read his two letters to soldiers. He seemed nervous, but when he finished his classmates clapped louder for Tucker than for any other student. They were so proud of him.

Nellie was the last student to share her work. As she finished reading her letter to the President of China, hands flew up in the air. The students wanted to know what she said to Hu Jintao, and how she knew how to speak and write in Chinese. Nellie translated each part of her letter for the class, and even taught the class how to greet others in Chinese.

After all the students read their letters, they went to lunch. When I returned to the classroom, the lights were off and the room was peaceful. I saw the author's chair, and I took a moment to reflect. I thought about what my writing workshop looked like when we did our firefighter letters, and what it looked like now.

When students wrote their letters to the firefighters, I was in charge of every aspect of writing workshop. I told them what to write. I gave them ideas to use in their writing. I told them when they were finished. I corrected every

mistake. Student letters were oddly similar because they wrote what I wanted them to write. I took the element of creativity away from every student.

The letters that students shared today were completely different. Their writing was personal and purposeful; it was about the things that were important to them—whether Pokemon or a book that they could not put down. I developed a controlled writing workshop, where students chose their own topics, came up with their own ideas to write, and improved their work because I provided suggestions instead of corrections with a red pen.

Data Analysis

There were various types of data collected for the purpose of my study. The most important data collected was the work that my students completed throughout the study. Student work included two letters, free writes, quick writes, and extra stories written outside of the classroom. Letters provided an abundance of insight about student motivation, creativity, writing quality, and improvement.

Three times throughout my study I conducted student surveys. They focused on students' attitudes toward writing, how they saw themselves as writers, and if they believed that they were decision makers. As the study progressed, I added two additional questions to the mid study survey and the post study survey. These questions were related to developing themes: writing outside of school and students' attitudes towards choosing writing topics.

At the conclusion of my study, I conducted individual student interviews. Questions included: how they felt about being a writer, what they liked most and least, the process of writing workshop, the decisions that they made, and what they were proud of. I recorded their discourse and used it as even more insight into their attitudes and abilities as writers and decision makers.

Observations were frequently added to my field log throughout the duration of the study. Observations were specific, and they detailed each student's progress as a writer. Included in these observations were student comments to each other, as well as to the teacher. The student collaboration served as a

powerful source of insight into individual attitudes toward writing. I discovered that students often discussed writing outside of the writing workshop setting, and these observations were recorded into my field log. I revisited my field log often, initially by reflecting on what happened each writing workshop day. Periodically throughout my study, I would go through the field log to code the information. By coding, I would record keywords to describe the occurrences of writing workshop. Then, these codes were logically structured into the form of a list. Finally, these codes were reorganized into bins based on correlations and importance.

Lastly, I utilized an on-task behavior chart. During writing workshop, I would keep a class list of students on my clipboard as I walked around the room while conferencing. I would use this list to check off which students were on task and which students were not doing what they were supposed to be doing at one particular time. Charts were then combined to see which students were using their time sensibly throughout the study.

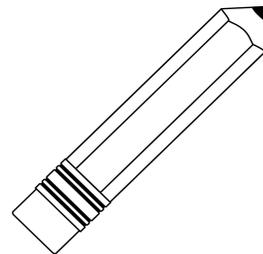
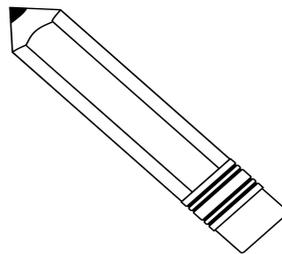
Bins

CREATIVITY

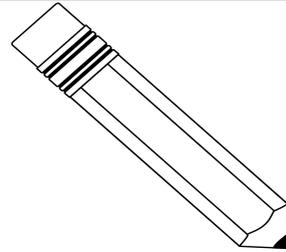
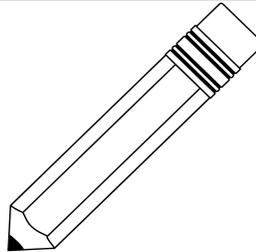
- ❖ Meaningful Choices
- ❖ Unique Stories
- ❖ Interests
- ❖ Prior Knowledge
- ❖ Motivation

POSITIVE ATTITUDES

- ❖ Enthusiasm
- ❖ Extra Journals
- ❖ Work Completion
- ❖ Writing Outside of School



What are the observed and reported experiences when students are given choices in writing workshop?



IMPROVED WRITING

- ❖ Mini Lessons
- ❖ Modeling
- ❖ Conferences
- ❖ Differentiated Instruction

DECISION MAKERS

- ❖ Choosing Topics
- ❖ Thoughtful Reflection
- ❖ Utilizing Resources
- ❖ Student Collaboration

Theme Statements

Creativity enables motivation. When students are given choice in writing topics, they decide to write about the things that are meaningful to them. Each student's unique writing experience is defined by his or her individual knowledge and interests.

When students have positive experiences in writing workshop, they are more likely to be enthusiastic about writing, complete assigned work, and write outside of the classroom environment.

In a student-centered writing workshop, the quality of each student's writing improves as a result of purposeful mini lessons, valuable modeling, and flexible conferences.

Students are capable of making significant decisions in writing workshop. They are able to choose what to write about, when to use additional resources, and when it is necessary to seek feedback from others.

Findings

Creativity

Creativity enables motivation. When students are given choice in writing topics, they decide to write about the things that are meaningful to them. Each student's unique writing experience is defined by his or her individual knowledge and interests.

Fountas and Pinnell believe that students are the best writers when they write about familiar topics (2001). When students are told what to write about, they are stripped of the opportunity to be creative. I decided to run my writing workshop differently than a typical school writing environment. I provided options to my students, and they were able to choose from a list of writing topics. They were also given the option to come up with their own idea. The result was that they wrote about the things that were meaningful to them.

All students were thoughtful and creative. Nellie, in both of her letters, wrote about things that were most important to her—her adoption and her culture. Brody wrote to his favorite baseball player and his best friend. Aaron wrote to a Pokemon character. In Devon's letter, he escaped to the fantasy land of Sanctaphrax. He wrote letters between two characters from his favorite book of the *Edge Chronicles* series. Every student's letter was unique; each letter was dramatically different from the next. They wrote about the things that held purpose in their lives.

Routman (2000) reminds teachers that it is a mistake if we constantly expect students to come up with good ideas. This is why I decided to provide choices to my students, while also allowing them to come up with their own topic. It is also important to remind students that sometimes they will not be able to choose a writing topic. There is a purpose for students to write to a prompt, and it is necessary for students to recognize the importance of these assignments as well. Routman (2000) also warns teachers that students, when given opportunities to choose writing topics, will choose trivial topics in order to simply get the assignment done. Modeling and conferencing will assist students to make meaningful and purposeful choices.

Positive Attitudes Towards Writing

When students have positive experiences in writing workshop, they are more likely to be enthusiastic about writing, complete assigned work, and write outside of the classroom environment.

It was obvious that students were enthusiastic about writing during writing workshop. Johnson (2001) suggests that students are more motivated and interested in writing when they are able to write about things that interest them. This excitement towards writing even left the classroom; it transcended into extra journals and writing assignments outside of school.

Marie was the first student to request an extra journal. I had given her another journal when I realized that she was writing about her sad feelings in her writing workshop journal. Subsequently, other students also requested extra journals. The majority of the extra journals did not collect dust; students were constantly writing outside of writing workshop. Some students even took journals home to continue writing on their own time. Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2006) state that when students are able to choose writing topics, they will feel more ownership over what they write.

When students were given choices, they completed the assignment work. Many students even did more than what was required. At the beginning of the writing unit, students were directed that they must complete two excellent letters. After that, they had to make a decision. They could continue to write letters or they could write freely in their journals. Many students went on to write multiple letters or extra stories in their journals. At the end of the unit, every student finished the assigned two letters.

Students were given surveys three times throughout the study. This chart shows the progression of students' attitudes towards writing. At the conclusion of the study, there is not a single student who never likes writing. Exactly half of my students love writing.

Table 1
Attitudes Toward Writing

	Pre Study	Mid Study	Post Study
I really love writing	6	10	12
I like to write most of the time	7	6	7
I sometimes like to write	9	7	5
I never like writing	2	1	0

A few weeks into the study, I noticed that students were writing during free time or when they finished other assignments. Students were curious to obtain additional journals, they were anxious to show me what they were writing at home, and a student decided to turn her first grade teacher into a pen pal. When it was time to give my students a mid-study survey, I added an additional question to my survey. The results showed that 21 students at the middle of study were writing outside of the classroom. At the end of my study, every single student in my class was a writer outside of school.

Table 2
Writing Outside of School

	Mid Study	Post Study
I always write outside of school	6	3
I sometimes write outside of school	15	21
I never write outside of school	3	0

Improved Writing

In a student-centered writing workshop, the quality of each student's writing improves as a result of purposeful mini lessons, valuable modeling, and flexible conferences.

Routman (2000) emphasizes that teachers must do more than to simply give students choices. Choices must be accompanied by modeling and support throughout each step of the writing process. I gave students the opportunity to choose topics in writing workshop. Did this make them better writers? One reason to suggest that students became more accomplished writers is the focus on the mini lesson. Every writing workshop began with a mini lesson. These flexible and quick lessons varied in topic throughout the entire study. There were lessons to introduce units, enhance writing strategies, teach specific mechanical aspects of writing, and even how to utilize classroom materials in order to improve writing. These mini lessons were student driven. In my field log, countless times I reflected on what individual students needed to do to write more successfully. Often times, it was as simple as using capital letters or commas. When I saw that several students were struggling with the same concept, I would end up using their mistakes as motivation for the next mini lesson. Each lesson was concise yet thorough. A skill was taught and explained. Many students would make comments about the mini lesson during their independent writing time; Nellie

proudly proclaimed one day that she utilized a comma with a conjunction in her writing the same day that I taught students how to stretch out their sentences.

In addition, quality work was modeled for the students. During mini lessons, I wrote examples and shared them with my students. As I was writing, I talked about my own thought process, and how I made decisions as a writer. Beers (2003) claims that think alouds are one of the most valuable activities to improve student writing. Modeling was not only limited to me. A few times throughout the study, I made an overhead of quality pieces of student work and projected them for students to evaluate. I asked the rest of the class what they liked about that particular letter. Each time, students were capable of discussing the good qualities in a piece of literature. For example, they stated that the formatting was correct or good details and questions were included in the letters.

Conferences were another aspect of writing workshop that helped students' writing improve. Calkins (1994) stresses that conferences are the heart of writing workshop. During conferences, it became evident that each student was working at his or her ability level. It was during this valuable time that I was able to help each student become a more successful writer. While some students struggled to write one good sentence, others were writing pages of quality work. I was able to conference with students to discuss what they wrote, what decisions they made, and how to improve their writing. Calkins (1994) states that the teacher's role during a conference is to be a listener. Students, while discussing

their writing during a conference, will converse about even more than the words on the page. This dialogue guides students along a knowledgeable path to help them improve their writing (Calkins, 1994). I lost my red pen, and really wanted to get into each student's head. I utilized this valuable time for discussion about what they wrote and why they made certain decisions along the way. During the conference time, if I noticed that a student was struggling to figure out where periods belonged, I used the time to specifically help that student. I pointed out a place where correct punctuation was used, and I assisted that student to recognize his or her mistakes. This valuable conference time was a chance for the student to learn and improve.

Students were given opportunities to assess their ability as writers three times throughout my study. At the beginning of the study, 20 out of 24 students thought they were really great or good writers. At the end of the study, 21 students thought they were either really great or good at writing. The end survey shows a slight positive shift. One more student considered himself or herself as a really great writer and there is one less writer in the I am an ok writer section.

Table 3
Ability as a Writer

	Pre Study	Mid Study	Post Study
I am a really great writer	12	10	13
I am a good writer	8	8	8
I am an ok writer	3	6	2
I am not a good writer	1	0	1

My class consisted of a few exceptional learners. While two students already had a gifted Individualized Education Plan, there are three more students in the process of being tested for the gifted program. A student-centered writing workshop provided opportunities for even my strongest writers to improve. One thing that surprised me was how many students wanted to do research on a topic and incorporate the information into their letters. For example, one student wrote a letter to a general in the United States military. With very little help, he typed the general's name into World Book, printed out information, and used the information in his letter.

Decision Makers

Students are capable of making significant decisions in writing workshop. They are able to choose what to write about, when to use additional resources, and when it is necessary to discuss their writing with others.

The first week of my study was partially successful. On one hand, students were starting to be creative and thoughtful. However, my students were incredibly needy. I spent the majority of my time during the first few writing workshops answering questions about spelling or simply approving students' ideas. I found that this was not a valuable use of my time, or my students' time.

That was when I decided to alter my philosophy of writing workshop. The entire emphasis of my study was supposed to be surrounding choice, but initially I had only really planned on the students making one decision—choosing a writing topic. Established authors make countless choices including word choice, topics, plot, and many more. The students are capable of making similar choices in their own writing. I needed to empower students to become decision makers! Making choices did not stop once students decided what to write about. One piece of writing is the combination of a myriad of conscious choices. I decided that each student was now in charge of his or her own writing every step of the way.

Were my second graders up to the challenge? Absolutely! I used mini lesson time to motivate my students to become independent writers. I wanted to make sure that my students knew how to handle situations ahead of time. For example, I would ask them: *What do you do when you don't know how to spell a word?* We discussed that there are many of things you could do, and you have a choice to make. You can ask a friend. You can look it up in a dictionary. You can try your best to spell it on your own. There are many things that you could do, but ultimately, it is your decision.

During one of the last mini lessons that I conducted prior to ending my study, I asked my students what they know how to do in writing. Their answers astounded me. Lucas stated that he knew that periods go at the end of sentences. Another student knew to use a capital letter for proper nouns and at the beginning

of sentences. One student decided that she knew how to describe things well. Nellie proclaimed that she was good at making her sentences longer and better. Lucas raised his hand again and said that it is important to reread what you wrote to make sure that it makes sense. Another student said that she tried her best. As a teacher, I could not have asked for a better response. It was during this mini lesson that I was convinced that my students knew what to do to become accomplished and independent writers.

Throughout my field log were many instances of students making decisions. For example, after instructing students how to utilize additional resources in the classroom, I recorded many observations of students using a thesaurus and additional resources in order to improve their vocabulary in their writing. One day Devon looked puzzled with a thesaurus open on his desk. When I questioned him, he was confused why the word vortex was not included in his student thesaurus. I applauded him for thinking outside of the box, and I allowed him to use a computer to look up the word vortex using an online thesaurus.

I provided students with an editing checklist. This checklist was explained to students during a mini lesson entitled: *When you think you're done, you've just begun*. During this lesson, students brainstormed possible choices that they can make when they are finished writing in their journals. After students discussed ideas together, they provided a concrete list of things that they could do when they think they are finished with their writing. Suggestions included: checking for

capital letters at the beginning of sentences and for proper nouns, rereading what you wrote to make sure that it makes sense, trying to add humor into the story, checking punctuation, checking spelling, stretching sentences out to be longer and more detailed, and have a friend read what you wrote. Students generated a comprehensive and thoughtful list of ideas. After they discussed their ideas, I distributed the editing checklists and discussed how this list can help students when they complete the drafting process. Students should reread what they wrote and check off the corresponding suggestions on the list. I did not make the list a mandatory component of writing workshop; the checklist was merely another tool that students could use to improve their writing. I made a folder for these checklists, and I made sure that students knew where to find them if they decided to utilize this resource. For the duration of the study, many students chose to use the checklists.

Students could also choose to have a friend help them during writing workshop. Burns (2001) believes that student collaboration is a positive way for students to exchange feedback and ideas. I informed students that real authors have peers and editors look over what they write to offer suggestions. I noticed throughout the study that students discussed ideas with each other. They provided advice and suggestions. They were anxious to share their ideas with their friends. Students recognized their peers as another resource to help improve their writing.

I wanted my students to recognize that they were making valuable and important decisions in writing workshop. In all three surveys, I asked students if they were decision makers. As the study progressed, students increasingly recognized themselves as decision makers. The survey results illustrate that students were progressively more aware that they were making important contributions and decisions concerning their writing.

Table 4
Decision Makers

	Pre Study	Mid Study	Post Study
I am a always a decision maker in writing	9	10	15
I am sometimes a decision maker in writing	15	13	8
I am never a decision maker in writing	0	1	1

It was apparent throughout the study that students were conscious of the decisions that needed to take place. This is not simply choosing a topic; decisions need to be made from the brainstorming phase through publication. Berry and Herald (2009) agree that it is important for students to understand that they constantly make decisions that ultimately impact the quality of their writing.

Summary of Findings

When I first decided to provide choices to my students in writing workshop, I did not know what to expect. I discovered that young children have a lot to say. They are absolutely capable of being thoughtful and creative. When given choice, students will write about the things that are important and meaningful to them. They may be interested in a baseball team, hobby, or a political question. Ultimately, the final decision is in the hands of the individual student.

One of the shining moments of my study was when every student in my class, except for one, requested an additional journal for writing. When students are motivated and positive, they can do anything! Although there were a couple speed bumps along the way, there was not a single student who expressed a negative attitude towards writing.

Initially, this study was about choosing writing topics, but took it to the next level. Students became decision makers during every step of the writing process. They decided if they needed to discuss their writing with others or if they needed to reflect individually. They were also given opportunities to utilize resources to improve their work. Aside from non-academic times like recess and lunch, students are rarely given opportunities in school to decide on anything. At the conclusion of this study, my findings support that young children are accomplished decision makers.

Most importantly, a student-centered writing workshop improves the quality of student writing. In a whole group setting, students learned about writing resources, grammar, mechanical aspects of writing, and how to write descriptively. But during one-on-one time, students were given direct feedback on how to improve their individual writing. When students write about the things that are meaningful to them, the quality of their writing improves.

What's Next?

Originally, I had planned on implementing an additional unit for the purpose of my study. In this supplementary unit, students were going to write both fiction and non-fiction stories all related to the book *Charlotte's Web*. Unfortunately, I was unable to include this in my study because the letter-writing unit took much longer than anticipated. Therefore, the results of this unit are not available for analysis for this study.

For months, my students were given opportunities to write about things that were important to them. They were in charge of their own success. Some may believe that second graders are not capable of such big decisions, but this study suggests otherwise. I found that students were more motivated writers and thinkers when empowered to choose writing topics. Students had positive experiences with writing, and many students decided to write outside of the writing workshop environment. Students made countless decisions during writing workshop including: what they are going to write about, when to work with a friend, and how to utilize classroom resources effectively.

Due to the positive feedback from students, I plan to continue to provide writing choices for the remainder of this school year and in upcoming years. I recognize that students, with teacher and peer support, are capable of choosing creative and meaningful writing topics.

In the future, I would like to continue to learn about effective writing strategies. Through an immense amount of my own reflection, I was able to create a unique classroom environment. Much of what I did was trial and error. For example, I learned that the way that I was conferencing with students was not effective for the majority of the class. Therefore, I altered the way that I met with students. Instead of having students bring work to me, I was the one moving around the classroom. I dropped the red pen, and asked students questions about their work. In the end, satellite conferences were much more helpful for students because they were the ones improving their work. I also recognized that my half hour block of time was not supportive of a student-centered writing workshop. For my classroom, I discovered that we needed a longer period of time for students to effectively make progress with their writing. I altered my schedule to have fewer writing workshop days, but we extended the amount of time dedicated to writing.

This year, with careful reflection, I was able to create a community of writers. Every year in the classroom, I will have a new group of students, and different challenges will arise. I will continue to reflect and determine what is best for each particular group of students. I will make the necessary adaptations to the writing workshop environment to ensure that every student in my class becomes a confident decision maker.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Letter Choices

<p>Write a letter to a character in a book.</p>	<p>Write a letter to a relative or friend who lives far away. Tell them about your community, and ask about his or her community.</p>	<p>Write a letter to someone in history (example: George Washington, Martin Luther King, etc.). It can be someone who is alive or dead.</p>
<p>Write a letter to a soldier. It can be someone you know or someone you do not know.</p>	<p>Write a letter to the president. Discuss ideas you have about changing and improving the country.</p>	<p>Pretend you are somewhere you have never been. Find out more about this place. Then write a postcard about what makes this place unique.</p>
<p>Pretend you are a character in a book. Write a letter to another character in that book.</p>	<p>Write a letter to yourself that you will not open until you graduate from high school. Remember to say some of the things that you like and enjoy in 2nd grade.</p>	<p>Think of the mean characters in fairytales like the Wicked Witch of the West or the Big Bad Wolf. Write a letter explaining your side of the story.</p>

Appendix B

List of Familiar Topics

Name: _____

Know It All List

*Directions: Make a list of twelve or more things, people, places, and activities that you are **knowledgeable** about. Use this list in writing workshop while brainstorming ideas for stories and free writes. You can add onto your list throughout the school year.*

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

Appendix C

List of Unfamiliar Topics

Name: _____

WANT TO KNOW List

Directions: Make a list of twelve or more things, people, places, and activities that you are curious about. Use this list in writing workshop while brainstorming ideas for stories or free writes. You can add onto your list throughout the school year.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

Appendix D

Second Grade Coaching Rubric

Name _____



Second Grade Coaching Rubric

FOCUS	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tell main idea or topic.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stay on topic when writing.

CONTENT	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Include specific details that are interesting to the reader. (Characters, setting, events or facts about the topic.)

ORGANIZATION	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Writing has a strong beginning, a middle, and an end.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Writing makes sense and events are in order.

STYLE	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Write in complete sentences.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use exact nouns, action verbs, and describing adjectives to make the writing more interesting.

CONVENTIONS	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Spelling is proofread so that it is easy to read.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Capitals and punctuation are mostly correct.

Appendix E

Letter Writing Rubric

Letter Rubric	1	2	3	4
Format	Salutation and/or closing missing	Salutation and closing have 3 or more errors. One or both not correctly placed	Salutation and closing have few errors and are placed appropriately	Salutation and closing have no errors in placement, punctuation or capitalization
Content	Many sentence fragments or run on sentences. No evidence of paragraphing	Most sentences are complete and well written. Paragraphs are unorganized.	All sentences are complete and well written with no fragments or run-ons. Paragraphing is generally well done.	Sentences and paragraphs are complete, well-written, varied sentence structure and vocabulary.
Conventions	Many errors in spelling and/or grammar in body of letter that make the letter illegible.	Several errors in grammar or spelling in body of letter that interfere in meaning.	2-3 errors in capitalization or punctuation in body of letter that do not interfere in meaning.	No errors in grammar or spelling in body of letter

Appendix F

Letter Format and Example

5 Parts of a Letter

1. Heading -- tells when the letter was written (date).

Place in top right corner.

2. Greeting -- says hello and usually begins with “Dear.”

3. Body -- the main part of the letter where you tell something or ask questions

4. Closing -- says goodbye

5. Signature -- tells who wrote the letter

Example:

October 1, 2009
Dear Goldilocks,
We have something very important to tell you. It is against the law to break into houses. It was especially unkind of you to eat our breakfast, break chairs, and take a nap at our home. If it happens again, we will have to contact the police. Please be more careful.
 From, The Bears

Appendix G

Student Survey

Name: _____

WRITING SURVEY

1. I like writing workshop.

always

sometimes

never

2. Writing is important to learn.

always

sometimes

never

3. Writing is _____.

Really easy

easy

hard

really hard

4. Circle the statement that best describes you.

I always write outside of school.

I sometimes write outside of school.

I never write outside of school.

5. Circle the statement that best describes you.

I always like being able to choose my writing topics.

I sometimes like being able to choose my writing topics.

I never like being able to choose my writing topics.

6. Why?

7. The easiest part of writing workshop is:

8. The hardest part of writing workshop is:

9. Circle the statement that best describes you.

I really love writing.

I like to write most of the time

I sometimes like to write.

I never like writing.

10. Circle the statement that describes your ability as a writer.

I am a really great writer.

I am a good writer.

I am an ok writer.

I am not a good writer.

11. Circle the statement that best describes you as a decision maker.

I am always decision maker in writing workshop.

I am sometimes a decision maker in writing workshop.

I am never a decision maker in writing workshop.

12. Please write any comments or questions that you have about writing workshop or being a decision maker.

Appendix H

Student Observation Sheet

Teacher Observations

Student # _____

Student # _____

Student # _____

Student # _____

Appendix I

Student Interview

Student Interview Log

Student # _____

Date: _____

Question: Do you consider yourself to be a good writer? Why or why not?

Answer:

Question: What do you like most about writing?

Answer:

Question: Tell me about writing workshop.

Answer:

Question: What decisions do you make during writing workshop?

Answer:

Question: Is there something that you have written that you are proud of? What is it? Why?

Answer:

Appendix J

Human Subjects Internal Review Board Approval



September 15, 2009

Colleen Klaric
2031 W. Green Street
Allentown, PA 18104

Dear Colleen Klaric:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal: "Students as Decision Makers: The Effect of Student Choice in Writing Workshop." Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

This letter has been sent to you through U.S. Mail and e-mail. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone (610-861-1379) or through e-mail (browerg@moravian.edu) should you have any questions about the committee's requests.

George D. Brower
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1379

Appendix K

Principal Consent

September 17, 2009

Dear ***, *****,

I am currently enrolled in the Master's of Education program at Moravian College. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a study on student choice in writing workshop. The title of my research is "Students as Decision Makers: The Effect of Student Choice in Writing Workshop." I am hopeful that students will benefit from my study in multiple ways including engagement, motivation, and the quality of writing.

As a part of this study, students will be asked to fill out surveys and participate in interviews about writing workshop and student choice. The study will begin on September 21, 2009 and will conclude on December 23, 2009.

All students will provide survey feedback, but data will only be analyzed from students who have permission to participate in the study. Student data will include scores on writing assessments and student work. The data will be collected and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. My research results will be presented using pseudonyms. No participants' names will appear on my final report. I will store my data in a protected location. At the conclusion of the research, the data will be destroyed.

A student may choose at any time not to participate in this study. However, students must participate in all regular class activities. In no way will participation, non-participation, or withdrawal during this study have any influence on any aspect of the class. There are no anticipated risks for those who chose to participate. However, in the event of unanticipated psychological distress, parents or students can contact the school guidance counselor, , by phone at (610) 868-5994.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact my professor, Dr. Charlotte Zales, by phone at (610) 625- 7958 or e-mail at crzales@moravian.edu. You can contact me with any questions at cklaric@beth.k12.pa.us or by phone at (610) 868- 5994. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Miss Colleen Klaric

I hereby confirm, that as the principal of the teacher conducting the study, I have read and understand this consent form and received a copy. Colleen Klaric has permission to conduct her research study at ***** Elementary School in ***** Pennsylvania.

Principal's Signature

Date

Appendix L

Parent Consent Form

September 17, 2009

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am currently enrolled in the Master's of Education program at Moravian College. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a study on student choice in writing workshop. The title of my research is "Students as Decision Makers: The Effect of Student Choice in Writing Workshop." I am hopeful that students will benefit from my study in multiple ways including engagement, motivation, and the quality of writing.

As a part of this study, students will be asked to fill out surveys and participate in interviews about writing workshop and student choice. The study will begin on September 21, 2009 and will conclude on December 23, 2009.

All students will provide survey feedback, but data will only be analyzed from students who have permission to participate in the study. Student data will include scores on writing assessments and student work. The data will be collected and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. My research results will be presented using pseudonyms. No participants' names will appear on my final report. I will store my data in a protected location. At the conclusion of the research, the data will be destroyed.

A student may choose at any time not to participate in this study. However, students must participate in all regular class activities. In no way will participation, non-participation, or withdrawal during this study have any influence on any aspect of the class. There are no anticipated risks for those who chose to participate. However, in the event of unanticipated psychological distress, you can contact our guidance counselor by phone at (610) 868-5994.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact my professor, Dr. Charlotte Zales, by phone at (610) 625- 7958 or e-mail at crzales@moravian.edu. You can contact me with any questions at cklaric@beth.k12.pa.us or by phone at (610) 868- 5994. In addition, you may contact the principal of ***** Elementary School at (610) 868-5994. Please return the bottom portion of this form to school only if you choose to have your child participate in this study. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Miss Colleen Klaric

I hereby confirm that I am the legal guardian of the aforementioned child and have read and understand this consent form. Additionally, I agree that my child may participate in the study and know that at anytime, I may choose to remove my child from serving as a research participant. I understand that my son/daughter can choose not to participate at any time.

Parent/ Guardian Signature

Date

Student's Signature

Date