

**Children Writing for Themselves, their Teacher, and the State in an Urban
Elementary Classroom**

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Two of the children we discuss in this paper passed the state writing assessment. Two of them failed. The purpose of the paper is to look closely at the complex relationships with writing that lie behind those test scores. These four children brought to their classroom views of writing, perceptions of their own competence in writing, and experiences within and outside of school that facilitated or challenged their success with school writing and state assessments. In this paper we present case studies of four students' experiences with writing in a fourth/fifth grade classroom. We focus on the following questions: What is the relationship between children's social and intellectual identities and their successes or struggles in writing? Given the complexities of those relationships, what do their scores on the state assessment reveal and conceal about these children as writers? The two girls and two boys we discuss were positioned very differently in relation to writing in this classroom. The children's teacher, a co-author of this paper, provided a wide range of writing opportunities incorporating many of the elements of "best practice" as recommended by proponents of process-oriented writing instruction (e.g., Calkins, 1994; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Yet, what worked for one child, often did not meet the needs of another and, further, the teacher's solutions to students' issues did not always translate to increased success on state writing assessments. These children's experiences demonstrate how identity and social and cultural resources impact students' successes and struggles as they negotiate the writing demands of the classroom and the state. The nature of those negotiations argues for instruction that capitalizes on children's diverse ways of engaging with writing. Further, examining the complexity behind assessment scores seems particularly important as these scores are imbued with increasing power in defining children's relationship to school success or failure.

Writing as Social Practice and the Positioning of Children

Our efforts to make sense of these children's experiences in writing are aided by previous studies that view literacy practices as inextricably linked to the social identities of those who perform them and to the social contexts in which they occur (e.g., Bloome and Egan-Robertson, 1993; Dixon, Frank & Green, 1999; Dyson, 1993; Egan-Robertson, 1998; Lemke, 1995). In addition to sociocultural theories that argue that language and literacy are socially, culturally, and historically situated tools used for particular purposes in particular contexts (e.g., Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998), we also draw on critical theories of literacy that emphasize that the social tools that literacy practices represent are always political and ideological, serving the needs of some more than others, and shaping contexts in which individuals respond and resist in ways that may or may not serve their best interests (e.g., Freire, 1974; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Street, 1995). As Gee (1996) has pointed out, being literate involves more than the ability to read or write; to be literate is to successfully negotiate the sometimes conflicting ways of interacting and of being in spaces, like school, where contexts converge.

The idea of the mutually constitutive relationship between social contexts and individual's ways of being in those contexts is becoming an increasingly important analytic lens in literacy theory and research (e.g., Mahiri, 1998; McCarthey, 2000; Moje, 2000). Issues of identity are a central problematic in social and cultural theory (e.g., Hall & Du Gay, 1996). Questions of how subjects are constituted *as subjects*, the origins of that subjectivity, and the relationship between subjectivity and the social constructs of gender, race, class and sexuality are contested within fields, such as cultural studies, let alone across fields where assumptions about identity can be starkly different (e.g., psychological approaches to identity versus

poststructuralist approaches to subjectivity in literary theory) (Gee, 2001). For our purposes, we turn to Gee's definition of identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (Gee, 2000). In addition, we draw on theories that view identity (or subjectivity) as discursive; that is, individuals' ways of being in particular contexts and how they are viewed in those contexts are constructed through the many storylines, or discourses, in a social space (e.g., Foucault, 1977; Davies & Harre, 1990). As Stuart Hall (1996) explains, "[This view] accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions" (p. 4). Within discourses, particular subject positions—or ways of defining oneself in any given situation—are made available.

We were interested to see what subject positions appeared to be available to children within the discourses surrounding writing events in this classroom. To explore the discursive nature of children's experiences in our classroom data, we draw on the idea of "positioning" as described by (Davies and Harre, 1990). They propose that to determine how individuals are being positioned and are positioning others through talk and interaction, the researcher must attend closely to the kind of language used and where and how certain stories are 'taken up' in particular contexts. The various ways that the children used the tools of literacy available in the classroom in relation to the discourses they brought with them provide insights into how they were positioned by others, and positioned themselves, as a certain kind of writer in that context.

Our focus is on the children's writing *practices*, as opposed to a focus on just the products or process of their writing. Street (1993) emphasizes that 'literacy practices' encompass not just literacy events—occasions in which reading and writing are central endeavors—but also "behavior and conceptualizations related to the use of reading and writing"

(p. 12). This includes their stances toward various kinds of writing across contexts, their body language and emotions during writing events, and their views of writing and themselves as writers. For April, the tears shed during the state writing assessment related to both her ongoing struggles with writers block and her identity as a successful, accomplished writer who understood the importance of doing well on the test. Philip's behaviors around writing—arms at his sides or playing with his pencil, eyes looking everywhere but at his paper—provided as much information about his relationship to writing as the products he produced.

As the children negotiated their writing in this classroom, the curriculum played a complex role in their experiences across the year. Their struggles and successes occurred in a classroom in which the teacher employed methods that “good” writing teachers use to encourage children to write—opportunities for children to write from their own experience, about things that matter to them, and with some choice of topic and in various genre (e.g., Caulkins, 1994; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). For instance, three of the children we discuss here, and many of their classmates, spoke of choice of topic as highly desirable in their writing. The children spoke of the instances when they had more control over their topics as their favorite writing experiences. Although many writing educators suggest that choice is an important element in successful writing classrooms (Beaumier, 1997; Boerst, 1997), research has shown that the idea of choice is by no means self-evident or straightforward (e.g., McCarthy, 1994). As research has also emphasized (Delpit, 1995; Lensmire, 1994), progressive methods of teaching writing may work in very complicated ways for some children and need to be examined critically, particularly in classrooms serving racially and ethnically diverse children. We will suggest that these instructional methods supported these children's writing in important ways. However,

each child's experiences speaks to the complex ways that instructional methods interact with the identities, as well as the skills, that children bring to classroom writing experiences.

Methods

The data analyzed for this paper were gathered as part of a two-year classroom-based study of children's experiences across literacy and mathematics in a fourth/fifth grade urban classroom. The research was a collaboration between university-based researchers and the classroom teacher. The university researchers visited the classroom two-four days a week throughout the school year. Data included fieldnotes of observations, audio and videotapes of lessons and discussions, audiotaped interviews with all students in the classroom, and written artifacts.

Twenty-three children participated in this project. Their school is located in a large northwestern city and reflects the city's shifting demographics. In addition to Native American, African American, white, and Asian American families who have lived in the U.S. for two or more generations, this school includes many families who have more recently emigrated from Africa (primarily Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia), Southeast Asia, Pakistan, and Mexico. Students' families were primarily working class and lower middle class with a few students living in poverty. Although this paper focuses primarily on four children, all of the children's experiences were relevant to our analysis of the classroom events we explore in this paper. We constructed case studies by sorting all classroom data by each focus child and then examining transcripts and other documents that provide context for each child's experiences.

We focus on four children's experiences in this paper: April, a biracial Japanese American/White girl in fifth grade; Max, a Vietnamese American boy in fourth grade; Mirabel, a Mexican American girl in fifth grade; and Philip, a Native American boy in fourth grade. We

chose these children as focal students after observing their experiences in writing for much of the year. Each child experienced the writing curriculum in ways unique to their experience, but also represented patterns that we saw across groups of children. For instance, April represented students who were very successful in writing, but whose needs were not well met by all aspects of the writing curriculum. Philip represented other students in his class who struggled with writing, but responded well to curricular adjustments that allowed more freedom in choice of topic. We attend to the uniqueness of each child's case, while also discussing ways that their case is instructive for thinking about the wider experiences of children, both within and beyond their classroom.

We drew on tools of grounded theory to ensure our continual immersion in the data and to identify, hone and revise themes that emerged from our notes and transcripts over time (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, we used critical discourse analysis to closely examine and learn from instances in the transcripts that confirmed or challenged emerging themes (Luke, 1995; Fairclough, 1989). A further step of discourse analysis involved drawing on the construct of "positioning" to examine how children positioned themselves and were positioned by others through the discourses surrounding writing events in the classroom.

We continually shared our evolving interpretations with each other; our collaboration provided multiple perspectives (classroom teacher, participant-observers) through which to check and re-examine some of our understandings. The research team met bi-weekly to discuss and analyze project data. We also examined our emerging understandings across data sources to ensure that themes and the understandings gleaned from discourse analysis were consistent.

Children's Experiences in Writing

In this section, we discuss each child's experiences in writing, drawing from observations recorded in fieldnotes, interviews, analyses of written work, student self-evaluations, teacher assessments of progress in writing and scores on state assessments. In discussing each child's experiences, we include: a description of how each child is positioned academically in writing; the child's own perceptions of writing, their sense of themselves as writers, and their motivations and challenges in writing. We include examples of classroom writing assignments, a state writing assessment, and other examples of writing relevant to each child's experiences. The children speak of some common writing experiences, including a journal that they kept as part of a unit of study on the Iditarod dog sled race and a story they each wrote as part of a 'Young Authors' celebration at their school. The children chose their own topics for this story and the published stories were shared with classmates and displayed in the school.

April: "I'm a pretty good writer". April, a fifth grader, was very positive and self-assured. She seemed to have positive relationships with all children in the class and appeared to particularly enjoy Ruth's sense of humor. She often sat in class with a small smile on her face as she listened to Ruth. April's father was biracial Japanese American/white and her mother was white. April identified with her Japanese American ancestry, attending Japanese language school and excitedly telling us that her grandmother promised to take her to Japan after she had learned the language.

April was a highly successful writer by any measure. She seemed to enjoy writing and feel confident in her writing. She was always diligent in her attention to writing assignments and classmates sitting at her table turned to her for help. Her scores on the state assessment reflect her facility with writing. She received 3.58 out of 4.0 on the state writing assessment. She also

received 3s and 4s on her report card, indicating work at and above grade level standards. Her scores rightfully attest to her strengths as a writer.

One of those strengths was her understanding of large-scale writing assessments, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpt:

I mean there's even a lot of narrative writing that's really boring, like, in stuff like [the state writing assessment], you often get topics like 'Write about what could happen if you were invisible' or something like that, that's really fun, but then at the same time, that's like 'oh, come on, everybody would think of that.' You'd want something totally different. I want to think of my own thing. I wish they could let you think of that, but then it wouldn't be, it probably wouldn't be much of a test because then everybody would be writing something different.

April understands that assessments are their own kind of genre; they are structured as they are for the particular purpose of comparing students' writing and, therefore, it wouldn't work to allow students to choose their own topics. Even as she critiques the pedestrian nature of the prompts in assessments, she understands their function.

April was also very aware of her own strengths and challenges as a writer, as shown in the following interview excerpt:

A lot of times, when I start writing, I get really bad writer's block. And, um, I got it even worse then because it just happened to have, like, a really hard topic and a really boring one. The hard topic was, well it was kind of hard. I was like, "Suppose you were in charge of recess activities that would involve all of your classmates for a month. What you do and why?" And, I can't think of stuff like that. That's not the kind of thing I'm good at. . . . I like stuff like Young Authors Story, and if I have, like, a favorite type,

like persuasive and all that, I like narrative a lot. The other types are, like, expository and persuasive, but I'm not that good at, and I'm not that good at them because, usually, well, when we do [that state assessment], my two topics were expository, and that kind of writing can be really boring.

April describes her struggles with writer's block and believes that they are related to whether she finds the topic engaging or "boring". She speaks knowledgeably about genre and knows what genre she prefers. Although she says she's 'not that good at' expository and persuasive genres, her understanding of those genres serves her well in both classroom writing and the state assessment.

April's success in writing could lead to the assumption that writing was not difficult for her, that here was a student that would not require a lot of the teacher's time and attention in writing. However, April experienced intense frustrations with the writing process. The 'writer's block' she mentions above was no small issue for her. In our fieldnotes, we noted several times when she seemed frustrated, sometimes to the point of tears, with a writing assignment. She often felt extreme anxiety at the start of writing projects. April seemed particularly paralyzed by "prewriting" activities, a key part of the writing process as taught in this and many classrooms. On several occasions April explained that many of the common pre-writing strategies that are emphasized in school do not help her. She explained, "the only way that I can prewrite, and it's not actually prewriting, is do it in my head. I can just think. I just have to think because I can't do any of those other things."

One day in early winter Ruth passed out a graphic organizer to help students organize their ideas for a writing assignment. April stared at the paper, tried several times to fill it out, and, on the verge of tears, raised her hand for help. She told Ruth that she could not think of

anything to write and that the graphic organizer was not helping her. Ruth told her she didn't have to use the organizer and suggested that she write "I don't know what to write" over and over until she thought of an idea. As April recalled later, Ruth came by several minutes later, saw a page filled with the phrase, and said, "Man, you're stubborn!" She and Ruth then had a conversation in which April said that she kept thinking about penguins, but wanted to write a tale from Africa. As April related it in a subsequent interview, "Ms. Balf's like, 'So, write about penguins,' and I'm like, 'But penguins don't live in Africa!' and she's like, 'Exactly. Write about them in Antarctica!' I was like, 'Oh, duh.'" She went on to publish a story about penguins set in Antarctica. From then on, Ruth never required April to use the graphic organizers she provided to support students' writing. It also became clear that conversation was often helpful at the start of writing projects as April sorted through her ideas and attempted to begin writing.

The state assessment, though, required a prewriting process and prohibited any detailed conversation between teacher and student about their writing. It was difficult to watch April during the state writing assessment. She sat and stared at her paper. She stared into the space in front of her. She was clearly deep in thought, but did not begin to write. Several times she picked her pencil up and then set it back down. About a half hour passed and it was clear that April was close to tears. Elizabeth walked over and crouched by her desk. April looked up with full eyes and shook her head in frustration. Elizabeth asked her if there were things April enjoyed doing. Tearfully and quietly, April whispered, "I like to read." "That sounds like a skill you learned that made life more fun." April nodded and immediately began to write. She wrote non-stop until time was called and turned in the essay that would subsequently score so well.

It is not clear what the state would think about Elizabeth's brief conversation with April. It is clear that April's scores on the state writing assessment might have looked very different if

she had not been able to resolve her writer's block. With all of her strengths—her proficiency with conventions, organization, word choice; her understandings of genre, of the purposes of writing, and her own strengths and challenges; her confidence in her ideas and abilities—April's success in writing required certain things. She needed time to think through her ideas and she often needed conversation to work through the issues that sometimes kept those ideas from reaching the paper. Her assessment scores capture much about her strengths in writing, but they can not convey what it takes for her to demonstrate those strengths.

Max: "I need to do better in writing". Max was a quiet, responsible student. He only participated in classroom discussions if Ruth called on him. When she did ask him to participate, he looked uncomfortable and mumbled his answers. Although he didn't voluntarily speak up in class, he often appeared engaged—he smiled at Ruth's jokes, he copied notes from the overhead, he followed along on the right page. Although Max had a good rapport with Ruth and seemed to feel secure in her class, he was not socially connected to other children in the class. He generally kept to himself in the classroom, except when directed to work with others in small groups, when he would participate. On the playground he did not often interact with other children. He tended to walk alone around the playground or play independently amongst other children on the play structure.

Max passed the state writing assessment. Despite this, he believed himself to be a struggling writer. As we'll discuss, he had struggled to express his ideas in ways that made sense to others. He also felt strongly about what should and should not be shared in the public space of writing and this complicated some writing assignments for him. Max did struggle with certain aspects of writing, but his writing also had strengths that were not always apparent on a first reading.

It was Max's experience with the young authors story that initially caused us to focus closely on his experiences in writing. He had struggled for days to draft a coherent story. He would write, pencil scratching across pages of brown newsprint, Ruth would read, and more than once, Ruth had to tell him that she couldn't follow his story. It didn't make sense. He tried again. Finally, when the tears that had been threatening all morning began to spill down his cheeks, Ruth suggested that he write about something else, that he write about a boy who was having a hard time writing. Soon Max was writing, dry-eyed, and shortly thereafter published "The Boy Who Died." It made sense. This was Max's story:

The Boy Who Died

by Max Tran

Once at a school a boy had stresses about writing. He tried to watch TV, video games and computers to get ideas. Nothing worked.

He'd rather be in a war or get a trip to Russia or even Antarctica. He had the flu for two days!

He had one day to finish it, from rough draft to the end. He was depressed, really depressed.

He made two fictional stories. Both had five whole filled pages. They both didn't make any sense. He was so miserable. He died by not breathing.

In The Boy Who Died, Max wrote about the frustration of writing pages of stories that "did not make sense" and, indeed, Max's writing was often difficult to understand. For instance, in January, Max was reading the novel Dragons of Blueland and wrote about the book in his dialogue reading journal (see figure 2). In one of her responses, Ruth wrote, "I like your point that dragons aren't supposed to exist. Do you think dragons exist? Did they ever exist?" Max responded,

Dear Ms. Balf, Prabrally because suppose to be harmful and want they eat. Meat people count as what they eat but they don't in the story boris eat skunk cabbages and marsh marigolds.

Ruth responded, "Dear Max, I could not understand your letter. Please write it again, making sure that you have complete sentences that tell everything you're trying to say." Only after repeated readings and conversation did we begin to see the "sense" in the above journal entry. We believe Max meant something resembling the following: "Probably because they are supposed to be harmful and because of what they eat—meat. People count as what they eat, but they don't in the story. Boris eats skunk cabbages and marsh marigolds." It's still unclear, however, how that entry follows from the question Ruth posed about the existence of dragons (our best guess is that he may be explaining why people killed off the dragons). Although not all of Max's writing was this convoluted, it was very often difficult to follow his ideas.

All of us engaged Max in conversation throughout the year, both informally and in interviews and he was sometimes hard to understand. He talked in a stream of consciousness that could be difficult to follow. Ideas he expressed didn't always follow logically from one another. We observed him get frustrated with our inability at times to follow his thoughts. For instance, in an interview he had the following exchange with Elham:

E: Okay. Did you like pretending to be someone else [in your Iditarod journal]?

Max: Hmmm. I think so. Not very much, because if I was, like, pretending to be someone else, I would spend it differently.

E: How would you spend it differently?

Max: Well, I would be wrestling with other guys.

E: You would be wrestling with other guys?

Max: Yeah.

E: In the Iditarod?

Max: No.

E: No? But you would pretend like you were a wrestler, like a professional wrestler?

Max: Um. . . yeah. Ughh. (sighs)

Max is clearly frustrated with Elham's inability to understand exactly what he means.

After repeated listening of the audiotape of the interview, we realized he may have said 'racing' rather than 'wrestling,' but that is how Elham heard it at the time. Max drops the subject after this exchange and begins to talk explicitly about the Iditarod again. This is just one example of times when Max would give up on a topic because of his sense that we weren't able to follow his ideas.

In addition to his struggles to "make sense," Max expressed a sense of privacy that seemed to directly affect his writing. In an interview, Elham tried to talk with him about his Young Authors Story. She asked if he could tell her about writing "The Boy Who Died," and Max replied, "Ahhh. . .no. I don't want to talk about it.. . Yeah. It's kinda embarrassing telling your stories, they're like private." His comments could easily be attributed to the nature of that particular story—it was very personal and it was written only after much anguish over previous drafts. However, Max also brought up his discomfort with expressing feelings and anything that could be construed as personal in a discussion about books he had read. Max was consistently critical of books that he felt talked too much about people's feelings.

In his interview at the end of the school year, Max talked about his own sense of himself as a writer.

E: Would you say, Max, that you like to write?

Max: (giggles) No!

E: No. How come?

Max: Because I'm not good at it, and I need go to summer school because I need to focus on writing more.

E: Uh huh. Tell me about that. How do you feel about that?

Max: I think it's good to help me.

E: Yeah?

Max: Yeah.

Max thought of himself as someone who was not good at writing and needed to spend more time focusing on writing. His self-assessment was closely tied to his impressions of how others judged him as a writer. He supported his comment, "I'm not good at it" with the evidence that he had been told that he needed to go to summer school to improve his writing. He did not seem to begrudge his summer school attendance, believing that it was good for him to get extra help. He had internalized the message he had received—that writing was difficult for him, that he needed to improve. For a boy who had put immense energies into his writing, it is interesting that he used the phrase "need to focus on writing more." Given his experiences with the Young Authors story and other writing throughout the year, it is also intriguing that he still seemed motivated to work toward improving his writing. He got frustrated at times, but he had not given up.

Max's written self-assessment at the end of the year was also revealing of his sense of his own writing abilities. He wrote: "I think I only improved a little bit. I think using paragraphs is the one thing I most improved on. I think writing neatly is the one thing I most have to improve on and work on." He was willing to give himself only a little credit for improving in writing,

even though it was an area in which he had worked very hard. He also focused on using paragraphs as his strength and handwriting as his weakness, statements that do not express the more sophisticated understandings of writing that were reflected in some of his work and of which he spoke in an interview. In that interview he described how he could recognize good writing: “Like, organization, print neatly, like, have enough space so like people think, like, when you put, like some kind of swerve together, they think, just like some kind of, I don’t know. . and there are many things, punctuation, paragraphs, and it has to be two pages.. . Well, it has to be, like, en-ter-tain-ing. And you should think of what, think of what you write about, and think of the subject and what it equals.”

Max’s response addressed two understandings of what good writing is: the first focuses on mechanics—organization, neatness, punctuation, and length; the second focuses on content—it must be entertaining, and the subject, or plot, should be considered carefully. Max seemed to have very clear ideas of what good writing entails. What we discovered was that, his self-assessment aside, Max’s writing demonstrated all of these traits. Further, he had a strong sense of what he needed to do to improve his writing. Even more, his writing often made perfect sense.

Max’s understandings of writing and the writing process, as well as some of his struggles, were apparent in his experience with the state writing assessment. He received the persuasive prompt, “Should pets be allowed in school?” Below is Max’s response, showing the changes he made from first draft to final version (again, ALL CAPS do not appear in rough draft but do appear in final).

~~It’s not good to bring pets to school. Unless maybe bring the pet after school. Or if you live near a summer school and its summer. After summer school show your pet if it a dog. Pet make TRANSOFRM a school to a zoo. If you bring a pet to school. Where are you going to put it? Pets make people distracted are distracting at school and make a mess. A cat would mess and~~

~~may~~ scratch worksheets. A dog would be wild and that ~~would~~ leads to a mess. Besides pets need food and if a dog would be sick eating pizza and other type of food instead of dog food. ~~Pets would be sick eating our food.~~ they get sick eating food like pizza. PETS WOULD NEED TO GO TO THE VET EVERYDAY. WHICH TAKES LOT OF MONEY.

Pets cost lots ~~and lots~~ of money. If ~~they~~ PETS were stolen ~~someone would sell them someplace else or maybe even in a different countrie.~~ YOU BE SAD EVEN IF YOU HAD A NEW PET. The person who stole somebody pet will sell to ~~maybe scientists who test medicine, chemical, and stuff like that~~ Reseach, Chemical, Medicine and more department for money. I THINK THEY SHOULD GO TO A CASINO. ~~The person who stole the pet would sell to scientists is because experimts.~~ The scientist will do test as in expermint to pets. Besides all this pet can run away. THE PET MIGHT NOT COME BACK SO YOU HAVE TO PUT A PICTURE OF THE PET AND MAKE SURE YOU WRITE ON IT: LOST (PET KIND) BOUTY: (SHOULD BE CLOSE TO THE PET PRICE) PHONE: (YOUR PHONE NUNBER. SOME PEOPLE MIGHT LOOK FOR THE PET.

Pets need caring but you can't care for it when you are in school ~~because you have pay attention in class. Plus pets make distraction.~~ Pets should stay at home. When you come ~~back home have a great time and remmber when homework time ether put your pet in a doghouse or littbox and basket.~~ AFTER SCHOOL SPEND SOME TIME WITH YOUR PET.

Max's changes to his draft show attention to grammar, word choice, and flow and coherence. His revisions to his introductory paragraph, for example, resulted in a much more engaging and coherent opening to his argument. His second paragraph, in contrast, showcased some of the issues that had marked Max as a struggling writer. He made some good choices in his revisions in this paragraph, but, overall, it is easy to lose the coherence of his argument. On close examination the points he makes are in fact closely related to the topic. He is concerned that pets will be stolen if they are allowed in school. He then imagines that those who steal pets might try to profit by selling them for scientific research. He argues that a better way for these people to get money would be going to a casino. In addition to the risk of being stolen, pets brought to school might run away. This would lead their owners to have to put up lost pet posters with all of the necessary details. Although the paragraph lacks a topic sentence, it is all about the risks of bringing pets to school. The stream-of-consciousness style that so often characterized his writing is apparent here, but, as in other instances, he was not as off topic or

incomprehensible as it can first appear. Max's final paragraph in this essay echoes his introduction as a more conventionally successful, well-organized, closing to his argument. His revisions to that paragraph again result in a tighter, grammatically cleaner, version. He makes good choices.

Max stated strongly that he was not a good writer and he sometimes struggled to make his writing comprehensible to others; yet, he achieved at grade level on state writing assessments and close analysis of his writing showed sophisticated understandings about writing process. Max's strong personal feelings about what was appropriate to be shared in writing impacted his ability to successfully engage in writing projects that required him to express emotions that he considered private.

Mirabel: "It's more fun when I get to decide what I wanna write about, instead of being told what to write." Mirabel was a Latina fifth grader, tall for her age and more physically developed than most of the other girls in the class. For most of the year, she was quiet in class and did not have many friends or social connections. Our fieldnotes indicate that Ruth spoke early in the year about Mirabel as one of the students who did not seem to have friends in the class. At recess, Mirabel often opted to stay in the classroom and look at the Japanese anime books she brought from home or chat with Ruth or other adults in the room. She sometimes spoke to classmates who sat near her, but mostly she watched and listened. As we'll discuss, Mirabel's social positioning in the classroom changed radically toward the end of the year.

Mirabel struggled with certain aspects of writing. Conventions of spelling and grammar were very challenging, making it difficult sometimes to read and understand her writing. In a report on Mirabel's progress, Ruth noted that Mirabel's primary challenges were spelling and the use of complete sentences, both of which she thought might be ESL related. As Ruth also noted,

Mirabel's writing was consistently coherent and she was capable of writing a lot. Her reading response journal and the journal from the Iditarod unit both indicate that Mirabel wrote relatively lengthy entries. In our observations, she was often engaged during writing tasks. Although her writing was not particularly neat and she used much inventive spelling, the organization and appearance of her work seemed to matter to her. The following description is from our fieldnotes in March as children worked on their Iditarod journals:

I notice that Elisabel has erased an entire page of her journal. I ask her why she erased. She said that she had written on the wrong page. She showed me that she had recopied the entire entry onto the page it should have been on (to be consecutive). It was worth it to her to recopy the entire thing rather than have a page out of order or to have to skip journal pages.

However, Mirabel was not experiencing success in school writing. She received a score of 1.8 and 2.3 out of 4 on two state writing assessments, both of which were below proficient. In fourth grade she had not passed the state assessment in either reading or writing. On her report card she received 1's (significantly below grade level) on sentence fluency and conventions, 2 (below grade level) for word choice, and 3's (at grade level) for ideas and content, voice, and organization. Although she received some positive feedback from Ruth, her scores on writing assessments indicated only one thing about Mirabel as a writer: that she was decidedly incompetent. Indeed, her struggle with conventions would make it difficult to give her a passing score [see figure X]. However, her writing for the assessment does showcase her highly competent use of voice, organization and narrative structure and what the scores cannot capture is Mirabel's devotion to writing and her self-identification as writer.

Despite the feedback she had received via assessment scores, writing was Mirabel's favorite subject. When asked about her favorite subject in school, she said, "I like to write, and

that's all." She went on to discuss her dislike of reading and math. Her discussions of writing indicated some of the parameters of school writing that hindered or supported her desire to engage with the writing process:

Mirabel: Well, um, when I was in Ms.Farnum's class, I didn't really like to. . . I did *like* to, I *sort of* liked to write, but, then, when it came, and I had to revise it, I didn't want to, because it was no fun. I hated revising.

E: Interesting.

Mirabel: I just like writing it, but I never liked revising. But, when I got into Ms. Balf's class, with her young authors, I really wanted to finish the book.

E: Right, and so how did revising it feel then?

Mirabel: Well, it was something I *wanted* to write, I worked really hard on it, so I wanted to write that more than other things.

Reflecting on her writing across the year, Mirabel even more emphatically emphasizes the importance of choosing her own topics:

ED: I don't remember you doing this much writing at the beginning of the year as now.

E: Yeah I hate writing.

ED: Yeah so how did that happen?

E: Well, it just um, I just really didn't like the writing that I had to do, I hated that. I didn't, I don't like writing the log.

ED: But this was very different.

E: Yes, cause I got to decide. It just depends if I get to decide what I want to write I'm really interested in doing that.

It was the young authors story that came to represent a significant shift in Mirabel's experiences in Ruth's room. Soon after the young authors stories were published and shared with the class we learned that Mirabel was particularly prolific in her out of school writing. Her story, written in early spring, launched a series of lengthy sequels that she wrote in the ensuing months. The ongoing saga featured herself and some of her classmates in key roles. She began bringing these stories into school and sharing them with classmates. She was extremely engaged and enthusiastic about her writing. Like many professional writers, Mirabel spoke of her characters compelling her to write her stories. Describing her motivation to write, she speaks of the role played by her protagonist: "It's like, every time I write it, it's like Rosy, I'm writing it

for Rosy, because Rosy wants me to write it.” Soon after Mirabel ‘went public’ with her writing, we noticed the beginnings of what became a transformation of her social positioning in the classroom. Her writing seemed to serve as a social catalyst and she changed from a very shy girl with few social connections to an outgoing child who had forged friendships with a socially dominant group.

Mirabel’s decision to share these stories was a particularly risky move. These were romance stories and almost all of her primary characters were named for classmates, including the object of the female protagonist’s affections. As she recalled in her interview, the initial sharing of her young authors story was not entirely comfortable:

E: Okay. So, how did that go, and do you enjoy sharing your story to the whole class?

Mirabel: Sometimes.

E: Yeah. What’s fun about it, or not so fun about that?

Mirabel: It’s, like, when we read the book, they kind of were, like, they said they liked it, but they said, like, it was impossible, cuz they thought I was talking about me, and I wasn’t.

E: Oh. . .

Mirabel: I was talking about. . . it’s, like, it’s a different person, a different life, who wasn’t me, just had something that happened in my life, and I put it in my story.

E: Right. . . and people were confused about that?

Mirabel: Yeah. They thought I was writing about me, but I wasn’t.

Even though she had not given her protagonist her own name, her classmates ‘read’ her story as autobiographical. They questioned some of the facts of the story, interpreting it as non-fiction rather than the fictional story she had written. Despite this initial discomfort, Mirabel began to bring her sequels into school and her classmates and Ruth read them, passing them from one

reader to the next. Her classmates seemed enthusiastic about her stories and their roles as characters.

Mirabel began to talk with others about her writing process. She explained that she turned to friends for ideas: “Well I was writing the fourth book and I didn’t know what to write and Harmony gave me the idea, why don’t you have some more, new characters, and I thought that’s a good idea! So then I asked some more people and they just said it was okay with them, so I wrote. So, I got a bunch of ideas for it.”

Mirabel’s practice of talking through her writing ideas with others is also illustrated in a discussion with Ruth that occurred one spring day during:

Mirabel: Alan wrecked the car and something.....brother... How's the car getting out of the way?

RB: How about a tow truck?

Mirabel: I know, I was going to do that. I don't know. Know what I'm going to write at the end? He gets glowing blue eyes because he's using his mind to get out of the lake.

RB: Oh, my, you have magical powers and ET powers?

Mirabel: No, Peter does. This is Ian; this is Lindsay; this is Alan; this is Melody (showing Ruth the pictures she has drawn)

Mirabel: I got it Ms. Balf! I know what I'm going to write. I have to think really, really, really before I write. Sean tries a little bit with his mind, but his mind isn't big enough and then um, um, Jed's brother, his other brother, Alan’s brother and Jed's brother helps us, he gets the car out. And that's where Tiffany’s meets him and they get married. And then April does, and that's where it ends. That’s the fourth story. For the fifth, I have no clue.

RB: Write the 4th first.

Mirabel: I don't have enough time....

Mirabel uses this conversation to work out her ideas for the story. She seems unconvinced by Ruth’s suggestion to include a tow truck, but the process of talking about her story leads her to new ideas that she enthusiastically relates to Ruth. She explains that writing is

a process of “really, really, really thinking.” In addition to this private thinking, Mirabel appeared to thrive on conversations about her writing with her teacher and classmates.

If all writing is social, the social aspects of writing were quite explicitly and literally apparent in Mirabel’s experience. As she shared her writing with others, Mirabel began to forge relationships with her classmates. Between March and the end of the school year she had become close friends with a group of socially well-connected and well-liked girls in the class. She no longer spent her recesses in the classroom, but walked the playground with her new friends, talking and giggling and occasionally stopping at the bars to twirl and spin. During an interview, Mirabel commented on the connection between her writing and her changing social life in the classroom. Elizabeth asked her if she thought her writing had impacted her relationships with others in the class and Mirabel replied, “I’m not sure (pause). Well sort of, when I started to write then its like I got. . . I was like a loner in the beginning of the year and then me and Brittney started hanging out a lot of the time cause we were sort of alike like we liked a lot of the same things. So I got a lot of more friends. I just got some more friends and they have been really helpful in school.”

It is hard to imagine a more successful fifth grade writer than Mirabel. She viewed herself as a writer, spoke about writing in ways reminiscent of professional writers and had an engaged audience that eagerly awaited each publication. Writing was an extremely social process for Mirabel—the writing served her social experience and her social experiences served her writing. What does it mean for this writer that her failing score on the state writing assessment is one of the key pieces of information by which assumptions will be made about her abilities? What is the best approach for a child for whom the conventions of spelling and

grammar mean the difference between her being viewed as a success or failure in the very subject that so defines her own sense of intellectual identity?

Philip: “We do too much writing”. Philip was a Native American fourth grader. He had a mischievous smile and enjoyed sharing jokes with Ruth. Although he shared his smile often, he also would become easily frustrated and sometimes had conflicts with other children on the playground (rarely did this happen in the classroom). He seemed to have positive social connections with his classmates, particularly on the playground where he was an enthusiastic participant in soccer, basketball and other sports. Given the trauma he had experienced, it is not surprising that Philip might experience some challenges at school. At the time of this research, Philip and his older brother lived with their grandmother following the violent murder of their mother two years earlier. His uncle, chief of their village at the nearby reservation, was also actively involved in Philip’s life.

Philip struggled with every aspect of writing, rarely completing an assignment. Indeed, he struggled in almost every subject. Our data files tell their own story in Philip’s case. Our collections of student work, at least three inches thick for most students in the class, are a slim ½ inch for Philip. In our fieldnotes, we soon came to recognize a common description of what we came to call Philip’s “writing stance:” sitting at his desk, his arms hanging beside his body, pencil lying next to his paper, and his eyes alternately staring at the page or exploring the room around him. When observing writing activities, we consistently noted Philip’s disengagement. For instance, when the children were to be writing in their Iditarod journals Ruth would periodically stop by his desk urging him to write and repeating the directions: “Okay, you need to get going. In the first paragraph, you have to write where you are, when you got there, how many dogs you have. Then you have to write a story about what’s going on.” These were

directions that were consistent every day of the month-long Iditarod unit. Our fieldnotes of writing events include descriptions such as, “I notice Philip in his usual routine of writing a sentence or two and then playing. Now, he is stretching, using his pencil to scratch his back;” “For the past several minutes, Philip has been looking straight ahead;” “Philip yawns and looks at the clock.”

Philip’s scores on the state writing assessment reflect his struggles with classroom writing. He received a 1.7 and a 1.2 out of 4 in November and February respectively. Interestingly, he had produced a lengthy and very coherent response to the assessment prompt. Our notes during the assessment closely track Stephen’s writing process and it was painful to watch. At 35 minutes into the assessment, we noted that he had written three sentences. He holds his head in his hands, he plays with his pencil, he sits for several minutes at a time without picking up his pencil, he gets a drink, he plays with a piece of paper. We worried that he would have nothing resembling a completed essay. However, at some point he focused long enough to produce a rough draft that he neatly copied onto the test paper (see figure X). His essay is full of violent imagery, which possibly relates to the violence he had experienced in his life. But, the response does include a coherent plot and some vivid descriptions. He engages the central idea of the prompt, but leaves out the detail about the bag having ‘strange writing’ on it. Philip’s response also includes inventive spellings, incomplete sentences and other grammatical errors. Although the score this writing received was hardly surprising, this piece of writing also displayed an ability and inclination to produce coherent ideas and an engaging (if violent) plot that Philip rarely displayed in his classroom writing. Failing score or not, it signaled Philip’s potential as a writer.

The state assessment was one of a few times when Philip produced a completed piece of writing. Although he seemed to struggle throughout the process of writing the state assessment, there were two writing events during the year when even this struggle seemed absent and we were provided glimpses of motivation to write. One of these was the young authors story. As with much of Philip's writing, we do not have a copy of his story—he said he had taken it home or lost it prior to when we collected them. However, he recounted it in detail during his interview. Ruth related that he had seemed very engaged in his writing of the story. His story was called “The Goat, the Farmer, and the Chickens,” and in Philip's words, “It was about, like, how this guy found a goat, and, um, he was, um, he had thorns in his legs, so he took him home, patched him up, and then he was trying to let him go a week later. . .” He goes on to describe an elaborate plot involving the developing relationship between the goat and the farmer, culminating in a cougar attack on the farm in which the goat and farmer save each other and the chickens. He recounted his story with enthusiasm, remembering details about the story even though it had been more than four months since he had completed it.

This enthusiasm did not extend to his general feelings about classroom writing. In an interview he explained that “we do too much writing. . . I've got to just sit there, and just think, and sometimes you get cramps.” He conveys well the frustrations with writing that we had observed. Philip also suggested that it was important to him to have some control over the content of his writing. When talking about his feelings about writing, Philip recounted experiences in his third grade classroom and compared them to his experiences in Ruth's classroom:

Philip: “If you're like in my other teacher's classroom, Ms. P's, you've gotta, soon as you walk in that door, you've gotta start writing, for at least four hours.

E: Wow!

Philip: Um, only sometimes we have to do a little math, and, um, well, we just gotta sit there and think and think and think. We can't make stuff up. But, in the Itarod, you got to make up stuff, because you couldn't see what they were doing. [In the other classroom] we had to write what she told us to. Like, um, bubbles, how they make them round, and what they put in it."

E: So, you think that's what makes the difference?

Philip: Yeah, because in this class, here, this year, you get to actually do whatever you want. Like, you get to write fake stuff. But in her class, we have to write what she wants us to.

The young authors story was an example of an writing event that allowed the children full control over their writing. They were required to write a story from rough draft to publication, but there were not restrictions on the content of their writing. In the above conversation, Philip referred to the Itadrod journal as an example of writing that allowed choice and the opportunity to 'write fake stuff.' Given the lack of engagement with the journal that we observed, we were surprised to hear him speak so positively about the writing experience. However, his comments about the journal, his negative response to his third grade writing experiences, and his experience with the young authors story suggest that having control over his writing was important to him.

Interestingly, one of the writing assignments that seemed to most engage Philip involved a specific prompt. The prompt was a homework assignment that required the children to imagine that they were a child in one of the villages along the Iditarod route and write about how they felt

and what they did when the Iditarod racers rode through their village. The following day, Ruth showed us Philip's homework. This is what he had written:

I live in a small village in lower Elwha. how we lived was we hunted Olympic forests for Elk, Deer, Bear, for meat to eat and share with the rest of the village. the hides were used to keep warm for bedding and wraps. most of all the hide gave us shelter. We used canoes up and down coast of Juandefuca to fish halibut and crab. The Elwha river is special to us because she gave us so much. she gave us fresh water everday to drink, and cook and clean ourselves. In the summer time we all met at the river to have fun swimming and playing water games. But most of all she provided us with delicious salmon witch filled everybodys belley's. In my village we alwas gave thanks to our greate father with songs and dances and to our mother earth we owe our lives for being so kind to our people.

The writing assignment did have a prompt, which Philip almost completely ignored. Instead, he seized an opportunity to write about his own tribal village and the tribe's relationship to the environment. We wondered what it was about the prompt that allowed Philip to interpret it in this way. Perhaps it was the word "village" that provided his opening to write about his own experiences in his village (which was the term he used when talking about his relatives' home). It may be that he identified with the Native Americans in Alaska who he assumed to be living in the villages along the Iditarod route. When we asked him about this piece of writing, he was very please to share it. He smiled and said, "Yeah, native." He explained that his uncle often told him stories of his tribe and he had written some of them down for this assignment. His reinterpretation of this prompt was the piece of writing in which Philip seemed to take the most

pride. It also represents writing that he completed on his own, independent of Ruth's prompting and the structure of the classroom. This was rare for Philip.

Philip appeared to be largely disengaged during classroom writing and he struggled with conventions and grammar. His struggles with writing were reflected in his state assessment scores. A close examination of his writing practices, though, revealed important instances of engagement and his own ideas of what worked for him in writing instruction.

Discussion

These four children's experiences reveal the array of perceptions, perspectives, skills, and social contexts that influenced school writing practices and children's designation as successful or struggling, designations both self-ascribed and ascribed by teachers and test scores. In this section, we discuss the children's writing practices, and how the children are 'read' through those practices, by identifying tensions that we see illustrated within and across their experiences. These include tensions between: common elements of a 'progressive' writing curriculum and children's individual approaches to and beliefs about writing; children's perceptions of themselves as writers and their achievement in writing; the flexible and shifting discourses about writing within the classroom and the fixed notions of writing in state assessments.

The writing curriculum and children's approaches to writing. The writing curriculum in Ruth's classroom included many elements of workshop classrooms: the children worked through all the steps of the writing process in several projects across the year; they wrote in various genre, to particular audiences, and shared their writing with one another. The curriculum worked to support all of these children in important ways. However, some aspects of the curriculum seemed to impede the children's writing. Here the curricular issues that complicated children's

writing were resolved only through Ruth's knowledge of individual students' needs and her flexibility to make adjustments to meet those needs. For instance, April needed permission to ignore the pre-writing tools that Ruth developed as part of writing instruction. Rather than viewing these tools as a necessary part of the writing process and insisting that they be filled out by each child, Ruth viewed them as a scaffold that could be used or not depending on a student's need. This flexibility arguably made an important difference in how April experienced the writing classroom and, further, how she was positioned as successful or struggling.

Max's experience points to tensions between public and private in classroom writing curriculum. Progressive writing programs often celebrate the airing of private thoughts in a public forum and this aspect of the curriculum potentially conflicts with the values and sensibilities students bring to the classroom. That conflict had consequences, both academic and social, for Max. For instance, he became anxious when asked to share his writing with classmates. Also, his discomfort with this kind of writing potentially contributed to the seeming incoherence of some of his writing. This contributed to his construction as "struggling" in writing—with classroom volunteers hovering over his work—and his construction of himself as someone who was not good at writing.

With the exception of Max, the children express views of writing that evoke notions of writing (e.g., 'free choice' and 'ownership') that is embedded in process approaches. April, Mirabel, and Philip view writing primarily as a tool of creative self-expression. They also prefer narrative and want to have control of the topic and form of their writing. Max is the only child who does not express a preference with narrative; indeed, he is critical of narrative because of his discomfort with the idea of expressing feelings. The 'romantic' assumptions embedded in process approaches to writing have been critiqued for the ways they inscribe particular kinds of

expression as more authentic than others (Lensmire, 1994; Delpit, 1991). As Dyson writes, earlier researchers and educators assumed children would engage in sophisticated composing processes when producing personal narratives. But, . . . children's composing processes—their crafting of words—are supported by a sense of the social purposes and expectations of a kind of textual practice (2001, p. 3). Although the assumptions underlying some process approaches to writing instruction need unpacking, these children suggest that they might benefit from more control over their composing processes. The role of teacher control in writing genres and topics is complex. Some researchers argue that some teacher control of genre might be necessary if children are to write beyond their 'comfort zones' (e.g., Hogan, 1987; Lensmire, 1994). April, Mirabel and Philip preferred narrative, a preference that might be understandable given research that shows that genre's dominance in elementary literacy classrooms (e.g., Pappas, 1993; Duke, 2000).

Children's perceptions of themselves as writers and their achievement in writing

The children's ideas about themselves as writers were consistent with achievement for only two of the children. April believed herself to be a successful writer and, indeed, she achieved well, despite her challenges with the process. Philip thought he had trouble in writing and his achievement was consistent with his self-assessment, despite the promise he was showing.

In contrast, both Mirabel's and Max's feelings about themselves as writers were inconsistent with their achievement. Mirabel increasingly claimed an identity as "writer." She spoke as a writer, describing relationships to writing and her characters in ways reminiscent of professional writers. She was very confident in her writing by the end of the year. Her writing was a personal, intellectual and social investment. She spoke of her writing as an outlet for her

creativity. Her writing seemed to be the primary source of her intellectual identity—she liked writing and did not speak positively about other subjects. The nature of her stories and her willingness, even eagerness, to share them seemed to facilitate positive social connections. Given Mirabel’s struggles with conventions, it would have been too easy for both her accomplishments and her identity as writer to be overlooked in the classroom. Because Mirabel the writer was recognized, her score on the state assessment signaled particular areas of spelling and grammar in which she could work to improve her writing. Had her writerly self been invisible to her teacher, that score might have worked to confirm that she was indeed a struggling writer. Mirabel used writing for her own purposes and her story provides important lessons on recognizing children’s talents and finding ways to capitalize on those talents to support achievement.

Max had begun to construct an identity as a struggling writer based on his experiences in writing throughout his school career. He readily accepted the idea that he was in need of remediation based on the kind of help he received from classroom volunteers, the feedback he received that his writing didn’t make sense, and the school’s recommendation that he attend summer school. We are not arguing that Max needed no support in writing. He definitely did need support in crafting writing that clearly expressed his ideas. However, provided with that support from Ruth, his writing improved dramatically across the year, he scored quite well on two state writing assessments in the spring and, yet, he *continued* to describe himself as a struggling writer. His perceptions of himself did not reflect the successes and improved understanding that became apparent to us through close examination of his writing.

Flexibility of the classroom and the fixed notions of writing in state assessments

Almost by definition large-scale assessments cannot honor the good teaching practice of attending to individual student's needs and helping them to negotiate the writing demands of school in ways that work with, rather than against, the intellectual and social identities they bring to writing practices. As April expressed so well, tests wouldn't be tests if they allowed students to write whatever and however they wished. This meant, though, that the state writing assessment taken by these children risked positioning the children in just the ways that would frustrate rather than promote their attempts to put their best writing on the page. This tension between the writing practices of children within the classroom and the requirements of the state assessment seemed present in each of these children's experiences.

Is it possible, for instance, that Max passed the state assessment because he received the persuasive prompt rather than the narrative. He had proven in the classroom that he could write narrative when required, but he certainly felt more comfortable with non-narrative writing. The arbitrary nature of genre assignments in writing assessments has its logic: children should be proficient in all genres, so it shouldn't matter which they receive. However, the reasons for children's struggle in a particular genre might be perceived as relating to the amount and kind of instruction received and opportunities to practice, rather than a function of a child's identity. In another example, April froze when confronted with the pre-writing requirements of the state assessment. Although the pre-writing isn't assessed, the directions tell students to use a provided space for their pre-writing work, and this seemed to contribute to April's writers block. Further, the assessments require that a process that is inherently social be practiced silently and individually. In Dyson's words (2001), "Through interaction, children potentially generate the social energy that helps initiate and guide authoring decisions at varied discourse levels (e.g., topic, discourse form, spelling)" (p. 15). An enforced lack of interaction changes the nature of

the writing experience for many children, in this case particularly for April and Mirabel, both of whom sought and benefited from conversation about their writing.

Although Philip continued to struggle with many aspects of writing, he did begin to experience successes with classroom writing that had long eluded him. Unfortunately, these classroom successes did not translate to increased success on the state writing assessment. The discovery that he could be motivated to write if able to write from his own experiences, engage with an important aspect of his identity, and construct his own topics were highly useful realizations for Ruth. She could be mindful, then, of providing those opportunities and, over time, the increased practice might work to improve his facility with conventions. Philip's state assessment score cannot account for the significant, if still too few, positive writing experiences he experienced that year.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we point to some of the specific implications of these children's experiences for research and practice. These include the need to address issues of identity in classrooms, the significant risks of relying on single measures to judge the ability and potential of children, and the need to retain flexibility in writing instruction and curriculum.

Understanding the identities that are brought to classrooms and constructed within them is crucial to supporting students in ways that will foster success in school writing. As Greeno (2001) argues, thinking about classrooms as spaces of identity construction has implications both for how educators might better understand children's experiences in classrooms and how we conceptualize the fundamental aims of education. Attention to identity leads to different kinds of goals; for instance, the creation of spaces where children do more than achieve curricular objectives in measurable ways, but who also develop views of themselves as able and successful

learners. This can only happen if teachers attend closely to both children's work and their relationship to writing.

Our findings also demonstrate the complex and often problematic relationship between children's experiences and achievements in writing in the classroom and their performance on state assessments. Assessments inscribe a dichotomy between 'success' and 'struggle' that is defied by the nuanced writing practices of children. We are not arguing that large-scale accountability measures have no place. As one measure of a child's facility in writing, those assessments can provide useful comparative information. However, as researchers have emphasized, when those scores become *the* measure of a child's competence, they cease to be useful and become potentially harmful (Elmore, 2002; Linn, 2000). This misuse of test scores is potentially facilitated by recent federal emphasis on standardized assessments as the primary measure of accountability. The increased reliance on test scores to define achievement seems especially harmful for children like Mirabel and Philip, whose scores are so low that their very real potential could be overlooked. Further, this move is even more significant for these children given that Mirabel and Philip belong to racial groups that are often positioned on the 'wrong side' of the achievement gap. As test scores increasingly define the educational bottom-line (Karp, 2002), it is tempting to search for quick-fixes and focus our hopes on those children whose potential is most obvious.

Finally, these children's experiences point to the need to increase rather than decrease flexibility in the writing curriculum. In response to Reading First legislation many states are providing districts with a short list of two to five suggested commercial programs that are deemed to address federal requirements (Manzo, 2004). Our findings suggest that, in writing, many children are apt to be poorly served by this decreased flexibility. Our cases illustrate the

need for flexible approaches to instruction that can capitalize on the diverse ways that children engage in writing.

It would have been easy to make quick judgments about each of these children's abilities in writing; however, on close examination, their relationships to writing were much more complex. What looked like struggle masked successes—large and small—on which Ruth could help Philip, Mirabel and Max build. What might have looked like unambiguous success could have hidden April's very real challenges. As attention to issues of identity and learning increase in research on literacy, it is critical that we begin to build understandings of how those issues relate to achievement, particularly for students of color in urban schools.

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