

Graduating Paper

The Classroom Writing Centre: How and why teachers should implement a classroom writing centre

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the theory and research surrounding classroom writing centres and to provide suggestions as to how primary teachers can develop classroom writing centres that provide opportunities to enhance early literacy development. This paper looks at the importance of time management, physical space materials and the provision of authentic literacy experiences when designing a classroom writing centre using a workshop approach.

A review of the literature includes a look at emergent literacy perspectives and impact that emergent literacy study has had on literacy practices in the classroom and the ways in which writing, drawing and talking are intrinsically linked in literacy instruction. The literature further considers the role that the writing process and studies surrounding this topic have impacted current literacy instruction practices and the literacy development of young children.

In order connect theory to practice, I have prepared a workshop for teachers at my school that highlights the importance of including a writing centre in the classroom, the theory this idea and the success that I personally have had with the writing centre.

The paper concludes with implications for early primary teachers looking to enhance their classroom writing programs.

## The Classroom Writing Centre: How and why teachers should implement a classroom writing centre

Literacy education is a critical element of elementary school curriculum in British Columbia. In the early primary classroom, literacy education is even more important as it provides a basis upon which children begin to experience school life. As a Kindergarten teacher, I have grown increasingly aware of the importance of early literacy education in my own classroom and, throughout my two years completing my masters' degree in literacy education, I have significantly altered my own teaching practices to align with the research and methodologies that I have become familiar with.

Because of my interest in literacy and my education within the field, I, along with several other teachers and administrators at my school formed a literacy committee which meets regularly. The philosophy behind our school's literacy program is:

Literacy is the active process of making meaning of our thoughts, our community and the world through oral, written and visual communication. It is the foundation for developing lifelong learners, global citizens and internationally minded students who possess a strong cultural identity. Literacy is approached as a creative, constructive process that involves diverse, authentic experiences with language. Its aim is to produce critical and reflective thinkers who make a difference in the world (Macintyre, Moriarty, Obadia, Reirden, Thompson, Turnpenny, Scott & Yeung, 2008,p.1).

As a part of our commitment to the continuous improvement of literacy within our school we came up with several goals. One goal specifically pertains to my topic of writing centres in the classroom and that is to “ensure resources support and enrich literacy in the school at all grade levels.” I believe that through the classroom writing centre, literacy is, and will continue to be enriched in my classroom and, hopefully, in all grade levels at Stratford Hall School. This belief is not only rooted in my own positive experiences with classroom writing centres and their effectiveness in furthering a child’s writing development, but it is rooted in the research and work of many literacy researchers.

In conjunction with my work on the literacy committee at my school, I began to think about my own experience with teaching writing in the classroom and how drastically my own practice has changed over the past two years. I have developed a writing centre in my Kindergarten classroom that I believe provides students with a variety of meaningful and engaging literacy experiences, therefore adding to their overall literacy success. I have documented significant progress in their letter recognition, noted significant spelling improvement, drawing detail and, perhaps most importantly, a keen interest in writing itself. In fact, the writing centre has become a focal point in my classroom and an area which was popular throughout the entire school year as a place to spend “free” time in the classroom. I believe that this was because of the philosophy behind my writing centre, the physical space, the organization of materials and the way in students were able to spend their time in the centre.

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspectives that underpin my practices in the classroom and will be the ground work for this paper are based on Vygotsky's social cultural theory.

Vygotsky developed an approach that attempts to "theorise and provide methodological tools for investigating the processes by which social, cultural and historical factors shape human functioning" (Daniels, 2001, p.1). In order to create a writing centre that provides students with meaningful writing and literacy experiences in the classroom, I must consider the social and cultural contexts from which they come. Because of the importance of having students interact with literacy in a culturally meaningful way, the writing centre may look slightly different each year as different students enter the classroom. Objects and materials in the writing centre must be culturally and socially appropriate to students otherwise the impact of the writing activities will be significantly lessened. Scribner states that "Vygotsky's special genius was in grasping the significance of the social in things as well as people. The world in which we live is humanized, full of material and symbolic objects (signs, knowledge systems) that are culturally constructed, historical in origin and social in content. Since all human actions, including acts of thought, involve the mediation of such objects ('tools and signs') they are, on this score alone, social in essence. This is the case whether acts are initiated by single agents or a collective and whether they are performed individually or with others (Scribner, 1978). Thus, in order to keep with the Vygotskian notion that objects and materials are socially significant items, the classroom teacher must look to his or her students to select items in order to effectively develop a writing centre.

Vygotsky's theory of teacher support leading to inner control will inform this paper. This theory suggests that "when teaching supports self-initiated writing, more

child-generated learning results” (Clay & Cazden, 1990, p.210). Vygotsky's model of instruction would have teachers doing complex tasks in meaningful contexts with students helping as much as they can. Through repetitions of the task, students take on more and more of the responsibility, with the teacher helping as needed and naming the new strategies employed by the student. Eventually students do the task on their own. This paper will seek to demonstrate ways in which classroom teachers can use the writing centre as a forum to instruct students in this way and in which students will be able to explore self-initiated and collaborative writing activities which extend the more formal classroom writing lessons focusing on specific letters, sounds and strategies to do with writing.

The work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger further underpins my perspective on classroom writing centers and the way in which children may learn at a writing centre. Their work focuses on the “relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs.” Lave and Wenger ask “what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 15). They also look at the learning that occurs with certain forms of “social co-participation” whereby the “individual learner is not gaining a discrete body of abstract knowledge which (s)he will then transport and reapply in later contexts. Instead (s)he acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process, under the attenuated conditions of legitimate peripheral participation. This central concept denotes the particular mode of engagement of a learner who participates in the actual practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.101). Lave and Wenger’s work on social co-participation fits nicely with the work of a

variety of other scholars such as Barbara Rogoff and Eve Gregory who explore the notions of guided participation, apprenticeship and synergy between learners in social situations.

This paper will rely heavily on the work of these scholars and will not only consider the social and cultural history of the students, but will focus on how to make opportunities for students to socially interact and co-construct meaning and learning in the writing centre.

### Statement of Questions

In this paper, I hope to address these two fundamental questions.

- 1.) What does the theory and research say about why starting a classroom writing centre would be a good idea?
- 2.) How might a classroom teacher organize curriculum instruction designed to promote children's engagement in literacy activities and events? How could a writing centre be organized administered and developed in such a setting?

### Literature Review

#### *Emergent Literacy*

Traditionally, literacy in schools has been narrowly viewed as the ability to read and write. However, research in the late 1970s and 1980s began to change the definition of literacy as studies began to look at the role that young children played in making sense of. Researchers found "that even the very youngest were strategic literacy learners who paid attention to the print world, participated in it in their own ways, and developed theories about how it worked" (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p.7). From these theorists, a new field of study appeared - that of emergent literacy. In this new field of study, literacy

began to “be viewed as a much broader set of print-related behaviors than those conventionally experienced in education” (Gillen & Hall, 2003,p.11).

The move towards emergent literacy study has had a significant impact on literacy practices in the classroom. Firstly, emergent literacy theory values the literacy experiences of children in their homes before they enter school rather than simply considering what goes on in the home as secondary to what goes on in the classroom. Shirley Brice Heath’s ten-year study (1993) continues to be perhaps the most influential study of family literacy practices today. Her study looked not only at family literacy practices but the literacy practices present in the community and across age levels. She followed the young students to school and observed how their family and community experiences shaped the impact of their schooling. Brice Heath’s study contributed to the overall notion within emergent literacy theory that literacy is primarily a social practice and that the experiences of the children and their skill acquisition are intrinsically linked (Heath, 1993).

The role of the family in children’s literacy education has therefore become widely recognized as critically important to not only the years before a child enters school but throughout a child’s education. Studies by Clay (1966), and Holdaway (1979) contributed to the knowledge about family support in relation to literacy experiences at school and showed that family support of literacy experience at home was foundational to later literacy learning, that guided interaction between parents / caregivers and children in relation to story reading or early print experiences was important, and that the development of the alphabetic code had its foundations in children’s early experiences of environmental print (Cairney, 1998, p.86).

The recognition of the importance of family literacy backgrounds is incredibly important, particularly, I would argue, for the Kindergarten teacher, the person who first introduces a child to formal schooling. Communication between teachers and parents / caregivers therefore is important as the teacher develops culturally appropriate literacy curriculum in the classroom.

Family literacy practices not only contribute to the way in which students interact with literacy experiences, they do impact “success” as measured in schools. Differences between the discourses of home and school can make a difference to the success of some children (Gee, 1990). By accepting the cultural difference that may exist between the home and school, educators can provide a “more responsive curricula that offer all children greater chances of success in learning” (Cairney, 1998, p.87).

Secondly, in order to consider the needs of emergent literacy students, teachers must not only recognize the complex backgrounds from which students emerge, but they must be effective literacy teachers in the classroom. Although there are varying opinions on how exactly to measure the “success” of a literacy teacher, there is some consensus about what successful literacy teachers tend to do in the classroom. “On the one hand, they provide extensive opportunities for their pupils to read and respond to children’s literature and to write for a variety of authentic purposes. On the other hand, they attend to the codes of written language: sound-symbol correspondence, word recognition, spelling patterns, vocabulary, punctuation, grammar and text structure” (Hall, 1987, p.45). Simply put, effective literacy teachers must consciously integrate the teaching of skills with authentic literacy experiences. Hall stated, “Such integration, would appear to be a salient feature [of effective] teachers’ practice” (Hall, 1987).

Teale elaborates further on elements that should be present in the classroom in order to see good progress in reading and writing in the early literacy classroom. These elements are as follows:

- 1.) Children should interact with adults in speaking, reading and writing situations.
- 2.) Children should explore print independently, initially through pretend reading and “scribbling” and later through rereading familiar storybooks and composing messages.
- 3.) Adults should model use of language and literacy (Teale & Sulzby 1986, p.39).

In addition to these elements of effective literacy classrooms, some research also suggests that writing instruction is best when it is integrated into content areas or other curriculum areas and also thoroughly integrated into reading. The researchers concluded that the “extremely strong presence of themes taught through cross-curricular connections was one of the most extraordinary characteristics of outstanding first-grade literacy instruction (Morrow, 1997, p.22).

Further to the elements of effective teaching highlighted by Teal & Sulzby, more recent studies by David Pearson and Barbara Taylor on classroom practices have indicated further qualities of effective literacy teachers, particularly at specific grade levels. In 2002, a study of eight high-poverty schools in the USA drew attention to more helpful and less helpful classroom practices.

Pearson and Taylor found that “in general, a shift in certain teaching practices, such as higher level questioning, style of interacting and encouraging active pupil

involvement” led to benefits in students’ reading and writing growth (Taylor, Peterson, Pearson & Rodriguez, 2002, pg.275). In particular, they noted that effective teachers’ interacted with students without telling or recitation. Rather, more effective literacy teachers preferred coaching as their primary interaction style (Taylor, et al., 2002, p.275).

Further to general observations about interactions, questioning and involvement, Taylor et al, noted that:

Several practices were found to be beneficial at particular grade levels: small group instruction (Kindergarten), active responding (grade one), word skill work (kindergarten), and higher level questions (grade four to six) (Taylor, et al., 2002, p.276).

The notion of cross curricular or themed literacy instruction links closely to the necessity of meaningful literacy tasks in the classroom. For example, if children are studying a particular topic in the classroom, then providing authentic literacy activities and opportunities that are linked to the topic of study only makes good sense.

Finally, when attending to emergent literacy perspectives in the early primary classroom, teachers must be able to recognize and celebrate the ways in which children begin to “author” their thoughts and ideas whether it be through writing, drawing, speaking, playing, etc. Deborah Wells Rowe defines authoring to include “children’s construction and expression of meanings in a variety of communications systems” (Wells Rowe, 1994, p.235). When looking specifically at writing, children become authors when they recognize that their message (although it may appear to be entirely unconventional to adult eyes) might be meaningful to others. Thus, in the kindergarten classroom where

students tend to be in the emergent literacy phase of development, children often ask the teacher “What did I write?” (Clay, 1975; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984, p.191). That question indicates a powerful understanding not only of the fact that print has meaning, but that they as individuals have unique thoughts and understandings that can be expressed through text.

There is considerable controversy when considering the ways in which children’s writing and texts progress over time. Some researchers such as Kamii and Gentry, 2001, found that children’s text production adhered to specific stages while some researchers disagree that there is a strict progression through the stages. Researchers like Clay (1975),

“challenge the notion of a fixed sequence of hypotheses or stages through which all children must pass. They suggest that the difference in children’s hypotheses and the sequence in which they are formed may be related to difference in their experiences and because they attend to difference aspects of their environments” (Wells Rowe, 1994, p.236).

Clay’s less prescriptive approach to text production, spelling, writing, and drawing certainly adheres to the social constructivist approach which considers the social environment to be the most important factor in a child’s literacy development. From this perspective, one would not anticipate children to follow a strict progression of stages when developing their writing skills or any other skill for that matter because of the different opportunities, experiences and things that they attend to in their everyday lives.

In addition to this notion that children’s writing progresses differently due to the social and cultural forces that are around them, there is much research that shows that the

very act of writing is itself a social act. “Children engage in writing events to initiate and maintain friendships with peers and to communicate with present and absent audiences (Dyson, 1989, p.12). She argues further that there is a “dialectical relationship between cognitive and social aspects of authoring. Children’s literacy strategies are developed to accomplish social purposes and those social purposes in turn shape the strategies children develop and explore” (Dyson, 1989).

When considering the ways in which children interact informally with their own written text, some educators may question the originality of a child’s text arguing that they are simply copying a peer’s ideas. However, there is no such thing as mere copying (Kress, 1997, p.40). Instead, children interpret texts through their own lenses and reconstruct the meaning, function and structure in their own way. Kress notes, “What young authors choose to appropriate from a demonstration is motivated by their current hypotheses, individual purposes and social interest” (Kress, 1997).

Eve Gregory (2001, p.311), also portrays writing as a social process for children. Gregory’s study of siblings’ writing interaction in the home setting provides an interesting complement to classroom studies. She noticed a kind of learning “synergy” that moved beyond the Vygotskian notions of scaffolding where learning opportunities are provided for the less advanced partner by the partner that is more advanced. Gregory noted however that writing interactions provided both children with opportunities to learn. Writing provided for the younger child

opportunities to observe demonstrations and to ask for and receive help. The young child, however, also served as a kind of ‘trigger’ for the older child’s learning by asking them to think, explain and assist.

Social interaction around authoring, then was a learning opportunity for both siblings” (Gregory, 2001).

Overall, attending to the principles of emergent literacy theory in the early primary classroom is perhaps the most important aspect of any good literacy program. Recognizing and attempting to understand family and community literacy practices of young students and subsequently designing a curriculum that is tailored to specific previous experiences will certainly lessen the difficulty adjusting to school life for young students. Hand in hand with the recognition of family and community literacy practices is the attempt by the teacher to be an effective literacy teacher, providing a wide range of literacy activities that value various ways of making meaning through speech, text, language, gesture, play, drawing, singing, etc. Effective literacy teachers also recognize diverse ways that children “author” in the classroom and, therefore, help to foster an environment in which students are willing to take risks in their literacy learning.

### *Writing, Drawing and Talking*

In my own classroom, I have observed a fascinating relationship between the writing and drawing that is done at the writing centre. These two seemingly different entities simply cannot be considered without each other as the students use them in conjunction to express themselves, particularly in the early primary classrooms. Further to my observations of children writing and drawing simultaneously in the classroom, I have observed the necessity of talking and interacting when the students are creating new texts. During our afternoon “centre time” in which students move between six centres as they please, I regularly observe the students negotiating their ideas and their written texts

with each other through talking. During centre time there is generally a low “humming” sound in which children are constantly interacting with each other in order to create texts and to play.

In 1986, Anne Dyson presented a small case study based on her observations of students and their interactions during journal writing time in a Kindergarten, Grade One and Grade Two classroom. Her observations followed two students over the course of several grade levels. Dyson observed how, at the beginning of kindergarten, children’s drawings and their written texts were often quite separate and that “children’s written texts are often afterthoughts; they are, in fact, often not embedded in their social and intellectual lives” (Dyson, 1988, p.3). To develop as writers, Dyson thought, “All children must find reasons for not just writing the pictures. Children’s written texts must become progressively more embedded within – more involved with – their artistic, social and wider experienced worlds” (Dyson, 1988).

When observing the students, Dyson noticed the positive impact that the classroom environment had on their children’s writing development. The classroom teacher created a space in which:

She accepted their chatter as the normal by-product of children together, and she gave them further opportunities to formally share their work. Thus, the teacher established structure within which a community of children could grow and in which children might use writing as a helpful tool within their evolving social and intellectual life” (Dyson, 1988).

Dyson followed one boy, Jake, through several years of schooling and noticed the way that his drawing and writing development linked to his social world. In the

beginning of Kindergarten, Jake drew dramatic action pictures in his journal. Dyson observed him explaining in detail his drawings to his peers and he often provided dramatic commentary to accompany his drawings, which, his peers would question. At this point in his development, Jake did not talk about his written text with his friends. As he continued to develop, Dyson noticed a distinctive shift in the work that Jake did during journal time and the way in which he developed his texts. Rather than focusing on his drawings as the predominant characteristic of this texts, Jake began to focus on his writing, seeking out advice from his peers and developing complex texts that were accompanied by perhaps only one drawing rather than the usual one drawing – one sentence ration of writing. Jake's writing development soared during this time, largely due to his drawing creation of "the bubble car" which inspired him to write a great deal of text (Dyson, 1988, p.8). This "bubble car" was an imaginary car which Jake created that was propelled by blowing giant bubbles. These bubble cars had a variety of unique and daring features, they could fly, blow up other vehicles and get into serious accidents themselves.

The next major change in his writing came when Jake began to incorporate a real element of his life into his text, namely, his classroom peers. Jake was no longer only creating a purely imaginary world, he was combining elements of imagination with elements of his real life.

By the end of Grade Two, Jake had not only begun to include his peers and other characters into his writing but also had begun to consider the thoughts and feelings of his characters often discussing these issues with his classroom peers.

The observations in this study highlight the importance of the social context of writing and how students and their writing growth really cannot, and should not, be looked at in isolation as their development is intrinsically linked to their social experiences in the classroom. Jake's dramatic writing development over the course of two years was supported by drawing and talking with his peers in a variety of ways, including more frequent movement through time, the inclusion of characters' feelings and the movement of drawing more often serving the text (Dyson, 1988). Dyson notes that teachers must:

Consider the opportunities they provide for children to interact, not only about but during writing, and we might consider the social groupings that might make a difference for individual children. For it is the children themselves and their relationships with each other that, for many of them, can provide the key to school writing growth (Dyson, 1988, p.25).

In addition to observations and conclusions such as those from Dyson in her case study, other researchers have noticed the importance of social interaction – of talking – in the classroom when considering writing development. While there has been considerable focus on the ways in which social interaction and talking inspires students and provides support for their writing, there has been other researchers that have documented the ways in which students actually become writing teachers in the classroom and the impact that this role has on both the teacher and the student.

The concept of “scaffolding” within the teaching-learning situation or context refers to one participant as the “expert” and the other participant as a more passive

participant. While the term scaffolding is still widely used (during my teaching degree this term was constantly referred to), the concept has come under some criticism as it implies that the learner is effectively passive (Addison-Stone, 1998). Instead of scaffolding, there has been a shift to something Rogoff terms “guided participation” in which the role played by the child or the learner is equally as valuable as the role of the “teacher.” However even this model implies an “unequal relationship between participants in that learning is unidirectional from the older or more experienced person to the younger child” (Gregory, 2001, p.317).

Gregory’s work in a family literacy context recognizes another level beyond scaffolding and guided participation to which she refers as synergy, “a unique reciprocity whereby siblings or peers act as adjutants in each other’s learning, i.e. older children ‘teach’ younger siblings (or peers) and at the same time develop their own learning” (Gregory, 2001. p.302). Gregory’s concept of ‘synergy’ is one that I recognize regularly in my kindergarten classroom and, specifically, in the classroom writing centre. Students not only work together to develop texts, or draw from each other’s ideas, they actually learn and develop their skills by helping others and sharing their knowledge. Without the simple act of talking, this ‘synergy’ would simply not exist in the classroom and, therefore, the students’ writing development would be impacted.

Finally, when considering the important supporting roles that talking and drawing play in a child’s writing development, one must consider how drawing can provide indicators about a child’s overall development and may be an important sign making system that children experiment with before they begin to write. It is generally thought

that mental growth depends on the continuous stimulation of the brain in ways that enhance its functioning. Rhonda Kellog states that

giving young children letter-sized paper and one black crayon for marking their scribbles is an excellent stimulus to eye and brain.

Scribbling and drawing are the best mental preparation I know for enabling children to learn to read and write easily and well at age six (Kellog, 1979, p.7).

Although many child psychologists and early childhood researchers have noted the significance of children's drawings, many adults continue to disregard the study of scribbling and early drawings. Kellog (1979) suggests "No doubt the dominant one is that for centuries adults have been brainwashed in childhood into thinking that scribbles are meaningless." Generally, the drawings of children are not considered as important or something that should be assessed. They are more likely to be considered something fun and meaningless by both parents and educators.

When considering, however, multiliteracies pedagogy which, according to Cope and Kalantzis, is literacy pedagogy that "focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (New London Group, 2000, p.15) children's drawings suddenly begin to carry more weight. A multimodal approach to literacy in the classroom is an approach to learning that takes seriously and attends to "a whole range of modes involved in representation and communication" (Kress, 2003, p.41).

In the face of every changing technology and increasingly culturally diverse classrooms, literacy instruction simply must attend to a variety of multiliteracies. Students come from a variety of different backgrounds and with different ways of

expressing themselves to the classroom. When children begin to represent their own thoughts and communicate with other people without using oral language, their drawings are often the first sign system which they use effectively (Kress,1997,p.46). Although drawings are not typically valued as an important sign-making practice by adults, the practice of drawing may be the first opportunity that a child has to represent their own thoughts and then communicate them to the audience. The process of moving from the representational to the communicational, therefore, that children experience when drawing, is very similar to the process that they will later encounter when writing and sharing text. The production of drawing texts, therefore, is an stage of development in early literacy pedagogy and within multiliteracy pedagogy. It indicates a powerful understanding by the child of the position they are in as the sign maker and that they are preparing their message for the reader or audience.

Overall, teaching writing can simply not be separated from talking, writing and drawing in the early primary classroom. The writing centre should be used as a forum in which students use all three skills – drawing, talking to one another and writing to express themselves and develop texts that are meaningful to them.

### *The Writing Process*

The concept of a writing centre in the primary classroom is not a new one. Rather, when I began my teaching career I knew that a “writing centre” was something I wanted to incorporate into my classroom space. So, like many other teachers, I designated a space for this writing centre, posted up a “Writing Centre” sign and supplied a few markers and pieces of paper for this centre. I figured that this was all that was required to engage children in writing in a meaningful way and that soon they would be writing and

drawing spectacular works with very little guidance from me, instead, collaborating with their peers. How wrong I was! In those first two years of teaching, I found that my “writing centre” was a virtually abandoned nook in the classroom which was never attended to or used. Students rarely wanted to write during their free time, instead preferring to play with a variety of other centres.

It was not until I began graduate studies that I began to understand the flaws in my writing centre and the reasons why children were not interested in using the space. As I took a variety of literacy courses I began to explore the question of how to teach writing to young children and, subsequently how to create a writing centre that students would want to visit, that provided them with the opportunity for unstructured writing, that was somewhat exciting and new and that connected to our current classroom units of inquiry and discussions.

One of the most influential scholars and practitioners when considering the writing process and the act of teaching writing in the classroom is Lucy Calkins. Her approach to writing has had a profound impact on classroom instruction. Although she is perhaps best known for her work with “writer’s workshop,” it is her philosophy surrounding writing, its purpose, and how we respond to the writing of our students that closely links to the concept of a classroom writing centre.

Calkins says that “writing allows us to turn the chaos of our lives into something beautiful, to frame selected moments in our existence” (Calkins, 1986. p.3). She says that “we write because we want to understand our lives.” (Calkins, 1986. p.3). Her belief is that writing is a deeply personal act at any age and that an effective writing teacher must recognize that every individual has their own story, their own experiences, their

own areas of interest and expertise that they wish to write about. “Only when writing is personal and interpersonal, will we care about it” (Calkins, 1986, p.4).

Lucy Calkins and her work on writer’s workshop has positively changed the face of writing instruction in the classroom. She provided teachers and students with an instructional model of teaching writing that considers the personal issues and contexts that students are dealing with.

In Calkins’ *The Art of Teaching Writing*, she describes a typical reaction to a class of students who are engaged in writers’ workshop and this story highlights the extreme difference between her model of writing instruction and one that has traditionally been used. In this anecdote, a school principal visits a classroom to observe a teacher. When he walks in:

There was no sign of the teacher. Two students worked at the chalkboard, drawing. Other children worked at their desks, some scrawling furiously – or doodling idly – on pads of legal paper, and some carefully copying their work onto white paper. Occasionally a child would turn around and read a line or discuss a point with a classmate. On the edge of the classroom, children met in twos, listening to each other. The principal finally spotted the teacher who was sitting alongside one student in the midst of the workshop; the principal made his way across the room to where she sat and said “I’ll come back when you are teaching” (Calkins, 1986, p.11).

I would like to believe that this reaction to such a classroom environment is less common now, as research on writing instruction has greatly increased since the publication of Calkins' book. However, I believe it is still a relevant reaction to a non-traditional approach to teaching writing.

While the principal in this particular anecdote may not have considered these students to be engaged in traditional teacher led lesson, the writer's workshop, in fact, requires a great deal of organization and direct instruction to hum in such a way. Calkins describes a variety of elements of a successful writer's workshop which can be easily transferred to a writing centre. In fact, a classroom writing centre can almost be thought of as an integral part of writer's workshop.

The elements that Calkins (1986) insists be present in a classroom in order to run an effective writer's workshop are as follows:

- 1.) Adequate time. She urges teachers to set aside an hour a day, every day, for the writing workshop. She recognizes the difficulty in schools to set aside such a large amount of time but she encourages teachers to look critically at their curriculum and eliminate unnecessary time spent. If one hour a day is not possible, she encourages teachers to do as much as possible, perhaps one hour, three days a week.
- 2.) Predictable time for writing. Calkins talks about the amount of time that teachers often spend attempting different, creative ways of delivering writing instruction and she herself was guilty of such practice. Upon observation of students, she realized that predictability was a huge factor for children when they were writing

as it allows them to take control of their own writing processes as they can develop strategies and plan their writing.

- 3.) Topics of their choice. Students must be encouraged to select and develop topics of their own choice when writing. If students are able to write about personal issues, then they are far more likely to be engaged, therefore, allowing the teacher more time to move freely between students during the workshop.
- 4.) Simple clear rules. Calkins insists that rules in the writer's workshop setting are consistent and clear to students. For example, Calkins suggests that conferences are held in a specific area of the classroom so as not to disturb other students. Each teacher will clearly have their own rules but these should be understood and enforced throughout the writer's workshop time.
- 5.) Author's chair. One of Calkin's most adamant points regarding the teaching of writing is that students have the opportunity to share their writing. She is very particular about this aspect of the workshop insisting that students need to be heard while they are learning to write.
- 6.) Materials. In the primary classroom in particular, Calkins encourages the use of a variety of materials. She notes how providing different shapes and sizes of paper can drastically change a students' work. She also insists on editing materials such as scissors, tape, staplers and staple removers.
- 7.) Mini-Lessons. Calkins suggests beginning each writer's workshop block with a mini-lesson on an element of writing such as a particular letter sound, a writing genre, a specific grammar topic etc. She discusses the critical importance of the

content of these lessons, ensuring that while particular elements are taught, they are taught using topics of interest to the students.

These six elements of a classroom which uses a writer's workshop model to enhance writing development can, in my view, be used when starting a writing centre. Many of the same priorities are necessary in order to motivate, enthuse and stimulate students about their own writing. In addition, implementing a writing centre without some direct instruction, such as the "mini-lessons" of which Calkins speaks, would not be very effective as students would not be able to implement specific skills and knowledge into their own creative writing.

The context in which Calkins developed her writing centre approach and therefore discussed the limitation and drawbacks was in the U.S.A. And while many similarities exist between Canadian context and American context, I believe there are several differences which may impact writing development in Canada. Calkins says of the American way that

We live in a one-draft-only society, a land of instant diets, frozen waffles, and throw-away razors. We choose ephemeral, 'quick' and easy solutions in the United States. Our society allows little time for sustained effort, for knowing what it is to do one's best and then make one's best better (Calkins, 1986. p.23).

I would argue, that, although our world is increasingly fast paced, Canadians do not have quite the same love for the instant, the fast, or the 'quick and easy' solutions which, therefore, works in the favor of teachers who are looking to teach writing using a writers' workshop model. Our education system tends to be less regulated

than those in the United States and certainly there has been less of a focus in Canada on testing and the subsequent “back to basics” movement has also largely not impacted Canadian classrooms. As a result, I would suggest that the average primary teacher in Canada, or at least within British Columbia, would have an easier time finding adequate time and resources for implementing effective writing instruction utilizing a workshop approach.

While Lucy Calkins remains the “guru” of writing workshop research in North America, she has worked closely with some Canadian teachers and researchers. In Adele Fiderer’s 1981 book *Teaching Writing: A Workshop Approach*, she builds on many of Calkins’ ideas when changing her own practice of teaching writing. She describes the workshop as “a setting in which artists or craftsman [*sic*] are involved in a variety of hands-on creative activities and a workshop leader is a facilitator, working with individuals or small groups and doing very little up-front lecturing” (Fiderer, 1995, p.5).

Fiderer’s model of a writing workshop links even more closely to the idea of a classroom writing centre as she discusses the advantages of centralizing materials in the classroom, much like the writing centre I use in my own classroom. She “sets up her classroom at the beginning of the year with a wide choice of writing tools and materials in a particular area and then invites students to help themselves to paper when they need it. Also on the shelves are tools for writing – such as a date stamp, scissors, scotch tape, staplers and staple removers” (Fiderer, 1995, p.8). She also goes on to describe how she provides dictionaries, thesauruses, laminated samples of work and publishing tools:

In another accessible area I place a collection of picture books, poetry, plays, magazines, short story anthologies, travel brochures and non-fiction

books. These books and materials serve as sources and models to help students learn about writers' techniques and the wide variety of forms that written products can take (Fiderer, 1995, p.11).

Including real world materials and examples such as travel brochures, magazines, newspapers, letters, grocery lists etc, also links to some of the research done by Victoria Purcell-Gates and her contemporaries on what she describes as "authentic literacy." Although this topic is familiar to many teachers, Purcell-Gates notes that, when asked to define authentic literacy, many pre-service and in-service teachers responded with "notions of interesting or motivating, relevant topics or classical and contemporary children's literature" (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall & Tower, 2006, p.345).

The authentic literacy activities which Duke et al. have studied however, move beyond those that are simply of interest to students and are defined as activities in the classroom that replicate or reflect reading and writing activities that occur in the lives of people outside of a learning-to-read- and-write context and purpose. Each authentic literacy activity has a writer and a reader – a writer who is writing to a real reader and a reader who is reading what the writer wrote (Duke et al., 2006).

By including such authentic literacy tasks to instruction many teachers have reported that "students came alive when they realized they were writing to real people or for real reasons or reading real-life texts for their own purposes" (Duke et al., 2006). In addition to the enthusiasm and interest that students have shown when engaged in authentic literacy tasks, Purcell-Gates goes on to note that research results regarding authentic literacy tasks show that the more authentic literacy activities that are included

in every day curriculum, the greater growth in the ability to read and write new genres (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007).

The effectiveness of the authentic literacy activities, reported on by Purcell-Gates, et al., can be used to support the use of authentic writing activities in a classroom writing centre. By engaging students in the writing centre using authentic literacy topics and tasks, it is more likely that students will demonstrate enthusiasm and interest in their work. Further to this, incorporating authentic literacy tasks into a writing centre would hopefully have the same impact which Purcell-Gates, et al. (2007) found -- that there is greater growth in reading and writing ability.

The work of Calkins, Fiderer and Duke et al. highlight some of the key foundational aspects of effective writing instruction, including time management, importance of physical space, the necessity of authentic writing tasks and the value of sharing work. I believe that by considering these key elements, effective classroom writing centres can be developed and maintained and will provide students with the opportunity and the inspiration to write creatively and in a way that helps them to practice their own skills and to make sense of their worlds.

### *Summary*

There is a vast amount of research to consider when looking at writing development in the early primary classroom setting, and in this paper, I have provided only a sample of the work of influential scholars who have helped to inform my own construction of an effective writing centre which furthers the writing development of my students.

To summarize, I believe that the classroom writing centre must be grounded in the social-contextual framework developed by Vygotsky. Social interaction, context and experiences form the basis of our students' lives and without considering these elements, teachers will be putting children at a great disadvantage. All teaching instruction should consider the complex social and historical backgrounds from which students come, including the instruction and learning that goes on in the writing centre.

In addition to an approach that is rooted in social-cultural theory, writing teachers should consider emergent literacy theory and the notion that literacy is not simply the ability to read and write, but reaches more widely "to be viewed as a much broader set of print-related behaviors than those conventionally experienced in education" (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p.8). Teachers must value a variety of literacy related practices such as speaking, listening, drawing, reading and writing when looking to further their students' literacy development because without considering a wide variety of ways that students make meaning, a teacher will have a difficult time understanding how and why a student writes what he or she does. The influence and role of socialization and speaking to one another in the classroom is a critical part of writing development as students act not only as springboards and inspirers for writing texts but they actually benefit from helping one another, whether they are in the role of the "teacher" or the "student."

In addition to a deep understanding and appreciation for emergent literacy practices, an understanding of the writing process should be considered when developing a writing centre. There should be less emphasis on the finished product when instructing students on their writing and revising, reworking and rethinking should be important

parts of the writing process rather than onerous revisions done at the end of a writing task.

Writing, therefore, is an increasingly complex area of instruction in the classroom which must be given adequate time and consideration and must be grounded by notions of emergent literacy theory, the modern writing process and the importance of speaking, listening and drawing while writing and developing texts.

### My Classroom Writing Program

The context within which I teach is important to note when considering the experiences and successes I personally have had with using writing centres in the classroom. I teach at an independent, co-educational non-denominational school in East Vancouver. Our school is an authorized International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program school. This program “focuses on the total growth of the developing child, touching hearts as well as minds and encompassing social, physical, emotional and cultural needs in addition to academic development” ([www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org)). Curriculum in this program is developed through inquiries into six transdisciplinary themes of global significance. These six themes are: *Sharing the Planet*, *Who we are*, *Where we are in time and place*, *How we express ourselves*, *How the world works* and *How we organize ourselves*. These themes are supported and balanced by six subject areas: Language, Social Studies, Mathematics, Arts, Sciences and personal, social and physical education. The subject areas, such as language, are therefore embedded into the curriculum. Teachers teach in-depth units of inquiry within which the majority of all curriculum areas

should be taught. This means that, during a unit of inquiry, language arts, science, math and social studies work relates to the topic of study as much as possible.

During a kindergarten unit on making and keeping friends, for example, teachers will provide students with writing activities that relate to the topic. This may include applicable journal topics, choral reading poems, read aloud stories, role playing centres or letter writing materials.

In addition to the language arts work that is linked to our units of inquiry I teach letter recognition and formation as a stand alone unit throughout the year. For 26 weeks at school students study a particular letter, starting with “short” letters, those lower case letters that fit below the dotted lines, then teaching “giraffe neck” letters, those letters that reach to the top line and finally “monkey tail” letters, those lower case letters that reach below the line. During the week, students do a variety of activities surrounding the letter of the week that involve reading and writing through an approach that uses both phonemic awareness and whole language.

Phonemic awareness activities include orally saying words and deciding if they begin with the letter of the week, clapping the syllables in words that begin with the letter of the week and introducing students to particular “blends” that the letter of the week may frequently be used in, for example the letter “t” may often be used with “th” and therefore makes a different phonetic sound than t without the h.

The whole language approach that I use in the classroom focuses on the spelling and recognition of irregularly spelt, commonly used words. Students are taught to recognize and spell these words by sight, not by phonetic sounds. By using both phonics

and whole language instruction, children will have more cognitive tools available to them when they are attempting to spell or read a word independently.

### Designing a Classroom Writing Centre

#### *Difficult Topics*

When designing a primary writing centre, I believe that the teacher must think about the theoretical implications behind the centre. Will students be allowed to write or draw about topics of their choice? Are there certain topics that are strictly off limits to students in the classroom setting? Dyson (1995) noted that “some classroom teachers limit or direct children’s voices. However, there are other teachers who accept children’s written ideas and encourage them to write about topics of their choice without question” (Dyson, 1995, p.11). Furthermore, Calkins (1986) states that teachers should “invite children to bring their lives into the classroom,” and, by extension, into their writing. However, as Calkins notes, (and I myself have been guilty of) “When students actually bring their lives into writing, they are often met with resistance” (Calkins, 1986, p.3). As a classroom teacher, I was guilty of such practices, encouraging my students to draw and write about topics of their choice in the writing centre, but then feeling uncomfortable when they introduced topics that were controversial, namely, those that included violence. I, like all other teachers, am impacted by my own beliefs, values and upbringing and as a teacher, I must be aware of this and careful not to impose my own views on my students or to let my own views impact their freedom of expression.

With continued classroom experience and further education on the topic of expression through writing in the classroom I have significantly altered my approach to difficult topics in the classroom. Instead of silencing the writers in my classroom, I use

the writing centre as a place in which writers are permitted to write or draw on topics of their choice, as long as they are not hurtful to their classmates. I have attempted to provide students with time to write on topics of their choice in the writing centre without evaluation, criticism or grading. Jennifer Jasinski Schneider states that:

Teachers should reflect on their biases, expectations, and cultural assumptions and what impact these have on their instruction and their interactions with children. Teachers do not have to change their beliefs, but they should heighten their awareness of the impact of their beliefs on their teaching (Schneider, 1993, p.425).

By being aware of their own biases, students may be more likely to express themselves in meaningful ways through their writing and may be more inclined to use writing as a way in which to make sense of their own world if they are not being constantly judged and evaluated. When setting up a writing centre, I believe that the most effective centre is one that allows children to explore a variety of topics without the fear of being criticized or evaluated.

Once a teacher has considered their own particular approach to the classroom writing centre, there are a variety of other areas which must be considered before the writing centre can be fully functional within day-to-day classroom practices. The following is a “how-to” guide when setting up a writing centre in the classroom that is based on the literature review in this paper and on my own “trial and error” experiences in the classroom.

### *Time Management*

When setting up a writing centre the classroom teacher must consider when this centre will be used. Lucy Calkins recommends that writer's workshop should be done for one hour per day; however, the writing centre is a little different. Teachers must consider when students can use the centre and this will vary from grade to grade.

I have attempted a variety of options with the timing and structure of the writing centre; however, I have found one way that works most effectively for the students in my class. That is, I offer the writing centre as a choice each afternoon during centre time. Centre time is a popular time of day in which a variety of activities are offered such as building blocks, Lego, trains, books on tapes, board games, home centre, store centre, camping centre, library time, puppet theatre, teacher centre, magnets, card games etc. I manage this time by having students in charge of their own movement to and from centres; however I select the centres that are offered each day to ensure that the students experience a variety of activities. The one exception to my own organization strategy of varying the activities is that the writing centre is always offered. I have found it a necessity to have the writing centre available everyday at this time because so often the students use writing in their play. For example, when the students play at the puppet theatre, they often go to the writing centre to create tickets, title pages and beginning and ending signs. When students play in the home centre they often write grocery lists, phone numbers, newspapers and magazines in the writing centre. Even when students play with cars and blocks, I notice that they like to use the writing centre to develop signs for the streets which they work on collaboratively for the towns and worlds they create.

I have ensured that, at the Kindergarten level, I reserve 45 minutes per day for centre time and during this time, the writing centre is always available for use. I find it is the time of day in which the students do the most collaborative play, build relationships and use the writing centre in the most meaningful ways.

### *Space*

Adele Fiderer speaks about the physical space required to manage a writing centre and, although her centre was used in a writer's workshop format, I believe the same sentiment applies to a classroom writing centre. The writing centre should be in an easily accessed location of the classroom that is used largely for the purpose of writing. Early primary students tend to thrive on routine and thus, the same space should be used throughout the year if possible.

The writing centre should be an inviting area in which students enjoy spending time. It should be conducive to talking and communicating and movement perhaps including a workspace conducive to this type of collaboration. Materials should be organized in a practical way and items should be able to be reached by all students. They should be labeled accordingly so that, while at the writing centre, students interact not only with the language of their own texts and that of their peers, but of the words of the items that they are using such as scissors, paper, pencils, pens etc.

I have found it incredibly effective to use a wall in the writing centre nook as a sort of display wall for frequently spelled words. Pat Cunningham developed this "Word Wall" as place to systematically display words in the classroom . In Kindergarten, I begin this wall by putting a picture and written name of each student in the class and continue

to add important people and things to the wall in the same format. After this, the students and I are able to add words and images throughout the year.

Creating a word wall with frequently used words which the students can add to helps to give the students some form of ownership over the centre. There should also be an area for students to display their work. I use a bulletin board on which finished works and works in progress can be displayed. This is also a good place to display materials that students may model their own writing after such as Pokemon cards, letters, books, newspapers, and magazine articles.

### *Materials*

The writing centre should be a place in which a variety of materials are easily available to students at their discretion. Materials should be something the students can access without speaking to the teacher first. I have found that some writing centre materials should be there for the entire year, while other materials may be introduced throughout the year, thus, generating some excitement about new genres of writing. The following items should always be within the centre and able to be reached by all students: paper of a variety of sizes and colours and with and without lines, pencils, erasers, coloured pens, crayons, coloured pencils. I keep a variety of “special” writing instruments at the centre including “Mr. Smelly” markers and brightly coloured gel pens. These are not essential but tend to be very popular with students. There should also be a variety of editing tools much like those described by Fiderer (1995, p.7). These include a working stapler, a staple remover, tape and scissors. Finally, there are also a variety of picture dictionaries and laminated examples of various writing samples that reside permanently in the writing centre.

In addition to the “permanent collection” of supplies that resides in the writing centre, the teacher should use his or her own discretion to provide students with materials that are of interest to them. Some popular items are envelopes, writing paper, post-it notes, recipe cards, recycled cards, large paper, pre-made books and playing card-sized cardboard. Each of these materials tends to link specifically to a genre of writing which should be introduced by the teacher before putting the materials in the writing centre. For example, a mini lesson on writing letters could be taught and then the writing centre could be stocked with letter writing supplies and even a classroom mailbox. If students (such as those in my class) are particularly interested in *Pokemon* cards then the information on each *Pokemon* card should be studied and then the cards and perhaps some sample cards could be placed in the centre.

In my own early primary classroom, I have found that students particularly enjoy writing materials that they perceive to be real-world texts, especially when they see these texts used in the classroom. Home-made books made by cutting paper into a variety of sizes and shapes and stapled together have been very popular in my classroom. Students also particularly enjoy anything to do with letter writing, envelopes, mailing labels, note cards, printed writing paper. They also enjoy writing letters when they can put their letters into a classroom mailbox. I have had success with a number of other written ideas such as lists, calendars and recipe cards, all of which can be simply created by cutting paper and printing templates off of the computer. I tend to provide materials that are applicable to my current unit of inquiry in the classroom, for example when learning how to be a good friend and how to make and keep friends at school in the early months of

kindergarten, I provide students with a variety of letter writing materials so that they can demonstrate their caring ways and their love for their friends through writing.

The writing centre materials should reflect the social worlds from which the students come and therefore should include materials of interest to them. For example, this year, the students are particularly interested in writing newspaper articles, presumably because they see newspapers in their regular life. Because of this interest, a variety of newspaper articles have been enlarged and laminated in the centre so that the students can follow the format of the articles. In previous years, students were particularly interested in the characters from the *Rainbow Magic* fairy book series. Because of this interest, I provided images from these books for students to observe and copy. Each year, therefore, the classroom writing centre may appear a little different depending on the make-up of the class.

By including students in the design and décor of their writing centre, I believe they will feel a greater sense of ownership and therefore be more likely to use the centre in a way that allows them to take risks, to be creative and to think outside the box. I have witnessed this various times when the students have begun to take over the decoration surrounding the writing centre. For example, I have often seen students showing other students the work that they have done that is posted on the wall, demonstrating a strong sense of pride. This sense of pride is then shared with the other students who, also, want to feel such an emotion. Students also enjoy the photos that are in the writing centre, and, during student led conferences, they show their parents the photos and names of important people in the school community. It is human nature to take risks when one feels comfortable in an environment, and if the students feel that the writing centre is

their space, then they are much more likely to attempt to write new and unfamiliar words, original texts and a variety of genres.

Clearly, each teacher's writing centre will be different and reflect his/her own priorities when considering the teaching of writing. These centres, however, should be very user friendly, well maintained and organized and the students themselves should be very much a part of the centre through the materials provided, the words on the word wall and the work displayed.

### The Role of the Writing Centre in my Classroom

The writing centre is an important part of the classroom in which I teach. It has evolved into a place in which students who may or may not particularly enjoy school writing tasks can experiment with writing without being judged or evaluated. In the centre, they are able to work independently or collaborate with others on writing and drawing tasks of their choice.

Because of the freedom that the writing centre affords students, I have witnessed their ability to apply what they are learning to their writing. They begin to use traditional spelling, to mimic formatting and to copy genres used in school. I have also witnessed some of the most creative and unique text production in the writing centre, texts like letters to specialist teachers, lists of daily chores and tasks, stories, newspaper articles, comic books, information texts and much more.

Without the freedom of the writing centre, I believe that some of my students would not have the opportunity to experiment with language and spelling and therefore would have less experience and practice with writing.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, writing this paper has afforded me the luxury of an in-depth reflection on my own teaching practice, and I have realized that I personally have come a long way as a writing teacher from my first year of teaching until now. The writing centre in my classroom is no longer simply a place for students to express themselves creatively with a modest amount of materials and limited instruction. It now plays a pivotal role in the instructional writing that is done in my classroom and I strongly believe that it enhances the writing skills of my students. And, having considered the tremendous amount of research surrounding writing instruction and the theory behind current instructional practices, it is now clear to me as a teacher that a writing centre is not simply an appendix to a writing program. It is a carefully developed, implemented and supported element of any good writing program.

In reference to the questions asked at the beginning of this paper, teachers can successfully engage young children in literacy through a writing centre that is organized, welcoming and full of interesting materials. In addition to these more practical aspects of the centre, teachers must ensure that they consider the social context of students – their social and family histories – when creating the centre. Teachers also must attend to emergent literacy theory and attend to all elements of emergent writers, including their drawing, speaking and writing. Perhaps most importantly, teachers must be willing to use the writing centre as a legitimate part of their writing program, not simply an afterthought. Teachers must value the process of writing over the final product in order for students to feel comfortable enough to write freely. A teacher's commitment to a classroom writing centre is critical to an effective centre.

The theory and research says a great deal about writing instruction and the benefits of a writing program that include time spent in a writing centre or in writer's workshop. Researchers that I have cited to support my paper have generally agreed that writing requires more time in the classroom, a less rigid approach and an open-minded teacher. The teacher must be willing to put up with some noise, constant activity and topics that may be frightening to him or her

Finally, writing this paper has helped me to realize that my writing program and, by extension, my classroom writing centre will constantly evolve. Different students, different ideas and interests will each year shape the centre. In addition, my own knowledge and understanding of the theory and research will continue to grow and, as a result, I will be constantly altering my practice. I have come to understand that this -- this constant improving and search for the best possible way to support my students -- is my goal and that it is one I may never fully reach. And I am OK with that.

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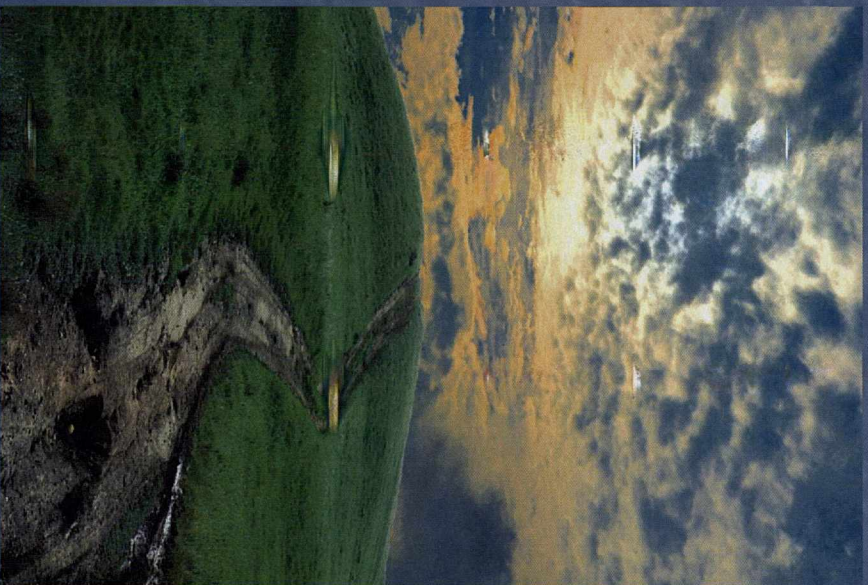
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*The Classroom Writing Centre:*  
*How and Why Teachers should implement a*  
*classroom writing centre*

*By Sarah Scott*

*September 23, 2008*

# Background



- How did I get here?

A short history of my own teaching experiences, my work at a graduate level in the LED program, and my experiences with a classroom writing centre last year that led me to my graduating paper topic.

# Big Questions

- 1.) How can a classroom teacher successfully engage young children in literacy through a classroom writing centre? How could a writing centre be organized administered and developed in such a setting?
- 2.) What does the theory and research say about why starting a classroom writing centre would be a good idea?

# The Theory



- "The Big V" .... Vygotsky and Social contextual theory.
- Vygotsky developed a theory within which "social, cultural and historical forces play a critical part in development" (Daniels, 2001), from which they come.
- What does this mean for writing?

- Remember this guy?

# More Theory

Lave and Wenger

- What kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place?
- Social co-participation, what is it?
- How is a learner effectively engaged?



# What does the research say?

## Emergent Literacy

- Traditionally defined as the ability to read and write?
- 1970's and 1980's - "even the very youngest were strategic literacy learners who paid attention to the print world, participated in it in their own ways, and developed theories about how it worked" (Gillen and Hall, 2003).
- *Emergent literacy* refers to "the reading and writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy," notes Sulzby (1989).

# Emergent Literacy...

- This shift towards an emergent literacy perspective has several implications for the classroom. Including:

- **1.) The role of the family** in children's literacy education has become widely recognized as critically important to not only the years before a child enters school but throughout a child's education.



# Effective Literacy Teachers

2.) **Effective Literacy Teachers:** Simply put, they must consciously integrate the teaching of skills with authentic literacy experiences. "Such integration, would appear to be a salient feature [of effective] teachers' practice" (Hall, 1987).



# Effective Literacy Teachers

(Teale)

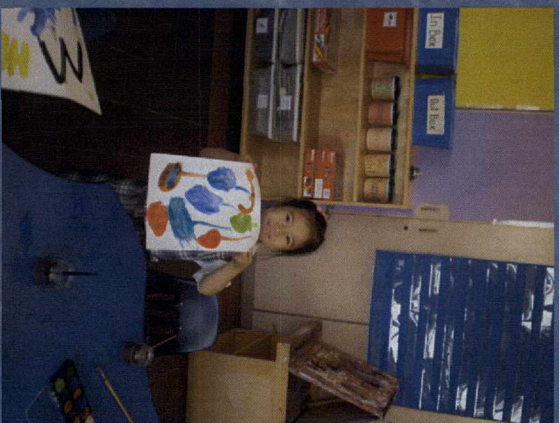
- A.) Children should interact with adults in speaking, reading and writing situations.
- B.) Children should explore print independently, initially through pretend reading and “scribbling” and later through rereading familiar storybooks and composing messages.
- C.) Adults should model use of language and literacy (Teale and Sulzby 1986).

# Authoring in the Classroom

3.) teachers must be able to recognize and celebrate the ways in which children begin to "author" their thoughts and ideas whether it be through writing, drawing, speaking, playing etc.



# Examples of Authoring...



# Writing, Drawing and Talking

- My own observations about writing, drawing and talking in the classroom...



# The Writing Process

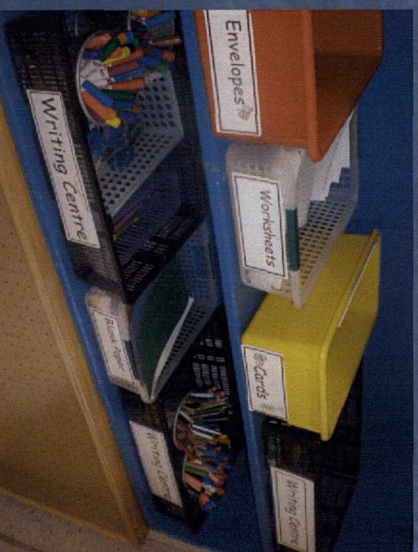
- Lucy Calkins anecdote: A school principal visits a classroom to observe a teacher. When he walks in “There was no sign of the teacher. Two students worked at the chalkboard, drawing. Other children worked at their desks, some scrawling furiously – or doodling idly – on pads of legal paper, and some carefully copying their work onto white paper. Occasionally a child would turn around and read a line or discuss a point with a classmate. On the edge of the classroom, children met in twos, listening to each other. The principal finally spotted the teacher who was sitting alongside one student in the midst of the workshop; the principal made his way across the room to where she sat and said “I’ll come back when you are teaching” (Calkins, 1986).

# Elements for effective writing instruction

- Adequate time.
- Predictable time for writing.
- Topics of their choice.
- Simple clear rules.
- Author's chair.
- Materials.
- Mini-Lessons.
- Authentic literacy activities.

# Designing your own writing centre (My experiences)

- Physical Space. Accessible, tidy, cozy, and students should see elements of themselves in the centre.
- Materials. Materials should reflect the interests of the students. Some materials can reside in the centre for the whole year and some may be introduced throughout the year.
- Display space. Students should be able to display their work in the centre.
- Word Wall. This has been an incredibly effective tool in my classroom.
- Author's chair. A time to share their work is critical for students to feel that their work is, in fact, being read.



# Conclusions...

- There are a variety of reasons to incorporate a writing centre into your classroom.
- 1.) It fits with progressive social-constructivist theory.
- 2.) There is considerable research demonstrating that a writing centre approach significantly improves writing performance in the classroom.
- 3.) It provides opportunities for students to express themselves.

I have used it in my classroom, and it works. 😊



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