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Writer's Workshop and Students' Literate Identities

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Writer's Workshop and Students' Literate Identities

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Literacy Education

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Abstract

This research explored the implementation of Writer’s Workshop in a first-grade classroom. The purpose of this research was to better support all students by implementing Writer’s Workshop in the hope that it would improve writing and students’ literate identities in a positive way. Data were gathered using writing samples, transcribed audio recordings of interviews and conversations held during Writer’s Workshop conferences, as well as observation notes of the students participating in Writer's Workshop.
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Introduction

As I finish teaching a read aloud lesson, the upcoming transition to writing is in the back of my head. In my first-grade classroom, the students are so engaged and enthralled with read aloud lessons, and I know that in just a moment the attitude of the whole class will change. As I tell the students to get their skills workbooks out, the moaning and groaning begins to echo throughout the room. I hear snippets of conversations, "Ugh, I hate writing!" and "Writing is so boring, why do we have to do this every day!" How can my students go from engaged and intrigued to disgusted and defeated in just five minutes? Many questions come to my mind, but the main thing I wonder is, “Why do my students hate writing with such a passion?"

While continuing to think about my students and their literacy needs, writing is the constant theme that I keep focusing on. My students dread our daily writing lessons. It seems as if every day the climate of the classroom changes when we shift from reading to writing. I want my students to enjoy writing just as much as they enjoy reading. Miller, Berg, and Cox (2016) write about students participating in a writing workshop and found that students started to view themselves as writers, and enjoyed writing when they were given the opportunity to choose the writing topics. My students do not have experiences where they have been given the time or choice to write about topics they select. These are the reasons why I started to become concerned with my writing instruction and the quality of the students’ writing.

I decided to implement Writer's Workshop into our already existing literacy block. Writer's Workshops have become a highly beneficial way to teach writing. Magalas and Ryan (2016) point out that these writing workshops help shape students’ confidence in their ability to write and it takes place in an organized environment that follows a daily routine. If Writer's
Workshop ends up being successful, it could possibly change my students' literate identity and the way my students view writing.

**Topic and Research Problem**

Since the shift from state standards to the Common Core Standards, schools have implemented scripted reading and writing programs to meet increasing student needs. These programs focus on text genre and the construction of clear and understandable writing. Frequently the focus of writing in the classroom is grammar, mechanics, and being able to answer a question in writing successfully. Flint and Fisher-Ari (2014) argue that these scripted writing programs do not "address the linguistic and cultural diversity that students bring into the classroom..." (p. 635). Students often have little to no opportunity to write about their lives, feelings or experiences. When students in my classroom have the rare chance to free write, the writing pieces are weak and the students struggle. I believe this is because they are so used to the scripted lessons that are taught every day.

The scripted curriculum that I must follow does not meet the writing needs of my students. When children are writing, and following this curriculum, their literate identity is developing. Seban and Tavsanli (2015) make clear that students' successes in literacy, and how students view themselves, play a large part in how they engage in literacy learning and the creation of their literacy identity. My focus will be on teaching my students how to become better writers and, in turn, support the construction of their literate identity.

**Rationale**

Seeing my students struggle and not enjoy writing concerned me. Since I have spent time teaching second and first grade, I have experienced the strife that students have with writing. I
have observed that the students in second grade still struggle with writing and have the same bad outlook that first graders have about writing. I implemented Writer's Workshop to help these students feel positive about writing and become better writers in the process.

Since students usually do not have the opportunity to write about their lives and perspectives, their views of writing are negative and misconstrued. Laman (2014) writes that Lewis, Enciso, & Moje (2007) state, "identity, agency, and power are important constructs in learning literacy" (p. 3). Writer’s Workshop gives students the agency and the power to choose what they want to write about. The influence of students’ homes, environments and communities play a huge role in impacting their identities. The students in my class are generally poor writers and do not have an appreciation for writing. Although they are just first graders, it is concerning that they feel this negatively toward writing at such a young age. I believe giving students a choice of what to write about would be very powerful and influential for the construction of their literate identities.

As an educator, I have the responsibility of teaching 21st-century learners beyond words, grammar, and spelling. Students need to be taught the essential skills for writing for multiple purposes and audiences. These students view writing as just something that you do in a workbook to answer the question. I wanted my students to feel motivated to write and realize all the purposes of writing. It is my duty as their teacher to help my students foster an appreciation for writing, and assist them in strengthening their writing skills

Purpose

My purpose in implementing Writer's Workshop was to assist my students with their writing. I did not only want my students to become better writers, but I also wanted them to feel
more positive about writing and realize the many purposes that writing serves. My aim was for my students to have authentic writing experiences. Snyders (2013) argues that the core of student achievement "is having a sense of ability, or self-efficacy" (p. 1). The general view my students had on writing was poor, and many of my students felt like they did not have the skills to have strong writing capabilities. Seeing my students being so critical about writing at such a young age was concerning.

Helping my students is important to me. I wanted my students to feel confident and enjoy writing. Writer's Workshop will hopefully give my students an opportunity to build confidence in their writing abilities. With the implementation of Writer's Workshop, Snyders (2013) points out that when students see a skill presented in a "meaningful context for learning to write, it allows children to observe how written language functions in natural everyday settings" (p. 28). My hope was that the implementation of Writer's Workshop could help my students achieve a sense of achievement when it comes to writing.

Research Questions

Through this study, I answer the following questions:

How might Writer's Workshop affect students’ views of themselves as writers?

How might implementing Writer’s Workshop impact first-grade students’ abilities as writers?

Review of Literature

To have a better understanding of the topic, the following literature review provides a theoretical framework for Writer’s Workshop. Research on student-centered learning will be reviewed, to help understand why Writer’s Workshop has been so successful. Studies on literate identity give
more information on how students develop their literate identities and why this is significant. The following literature review addresses key ideas that play a vital role in writing and the development of literate identity.

**Student-Centered Learning**

Student-centered learning is a teaching approach that replaces lecture and direct instruction with more active learning and self-paced programs. In a student-centered learning environment, students are ultimately responsible for their growth in knowledge. This type of learning gives students independence and the ability to take control of their learning. Teachers are more of a facilitator rather than an instructor. This teaching approach is different than teacher-centered learning because the student takes on the more active role of the learner.

In a student-centered classroom, the students do not need to depend on their teacher all the time. Students do not just decide what they want to do and learn. Jones (2007) points out that student-centered learning is where teachers take into consideration the needs of the students and their learning process. Student-centered learning can help contribute to this need by giving students responsibility and holding them accountable. This type of environment can be beneficial to all learners because different learning strategies and learning styles of the students are taken into consideration. These types of learner-centered practices help give students a sense of ownership.

When it comes to motivation in school, students must feel the internal motivation to achieve success. Guay, Chanal, and Ratelle (2010) note that educational researchers and practices have long noticed the connection of school motivation and academic achievement. When students are motivated in school, their academic achievement increases. According to
Keaton, Palmer, Nicholas & Lake (2007), when there is a classroom environment that allows children the opportunity to construct their knowledge while actively engaged in learning, there is a high increase in motivation. Of course, teachers cannot interest all students all the time, but with a student-centered classroom, students can explore topics that are relevant to their interests.

Another important aspect of student-centered learning is the different opportunities students have. Students can talk about personal experiences and feelings that they probably would not share in other lessons. Since students will often be working together in student-centered learning, they will have the opportunity to “…share their experiences, ideas, and opinions” (Jones, 2007, p.14). When students work with one another, they can help support and encourage one another. With this support and encouragement comes the development of student confidence.

Learning is not only about knowledge or memorizing facts and rules. Guay et al. (2010) points out that through student-centered learning, the teaching takes into consideration the students’ interests and needs. Students take control of their learning, and they can share more about themselves in this learning process. When students can take control of their learning, the entire setting of the classroom changes. Jones (2007) writes that the focus on presenting a long lesson and evaluating the results of the lesson is no longer needed. In a student-centered classroom, teachers can observe their students in the process of learning, listening, and responding as needed. For this reason, the teacher and students then build a different kind of relationship where the teachers and students are partners. Since students are taking on their goals, the learning becomes more meaningful to them and helps build on their internal motivation.

When we think of a regular classroom and all the diverse needs that a teacher is expected to address, it sometimes feels impossible to help each student. With a student-centered learning
environment, the teacher can address the needs of each student and differentiate the learning. This type of environment is beneficial to all learners. The students’ interests and needs are being addressed, and they feel intrinsically motivated to complete tasks.

**Literate Identity**

Children are constantly building their literate identities from a very young age. Literate identity is a combination of social identity and personal views of oneself as a reader and a writer. Seban and Tavsanli (2015) emphasized that “students’ literate identity development is a complex and social process and influenced by a variety of factors (school practices, home literacy, practices, race, gender, second language learning, etc.)…” (p. 218). Students are developing their literate identity in a variety of places from a variety of different people. The most significant factor in students’ literacy learning is the classroom teacher and literacy practices in the classroom. Children’s literate identity is one of the most important factors that needs to be taken into consideration when children have an opportunity for literacy learning.

Students’ writer identity is how they see themselves as writers. Leung and Hicks (2014) state that writer identity “incorporates all of the elements that make up a person-culture, socioeconomic factors, and experiences” (p. 588). All students end up developing a way that they see themselves as writers. Writers develop a voice in their writing, and this voice relates to how the writers express themselves in their writing. McCarthey and Moje (2002) touch on identity that is expressed through voice is “that broader identity which results from the intermingling of social, cultural, and historical contexts” (p. 231). All experiences that students have helped contribute to their literate identities.
When students are reading and writing, they are involved in the process of becoming literate. It is significant to know that reading and writing practices and identity are connected. Teachers must value the characteristics that students use to identify themselves. Compton-Lilly (2009) draws attention to the fact that students’ personal literacy histories, as readers and writers, their successes, failures and struggles, all contribute to the way that students view themselves. All students come from different backgrounds with diverse social groups, opportunities, and options. As McCarthey and Moje (2002) state, “identities are situated in relationships; power always exists within these relationships, and it affects how children are positioned within classrooms” (p. 231). It is essential that teachers remember this power so they can help extend each student’s learning and assist them to expand their literate identity.

**Constructivism**

Constructivism is a learning theory in which students construct their knowledge. Sharma (2014) states that “learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current or past knowledge” (p.13). Constructivism is all about the process a child goes through to develop and create ideas. Children enjoy learning when they are actively involved in authentic tasks. Using constructivism, learners use their knowledge and can apply it to authentic real world tasks.

In a classroom informed by the constructivist theory, the instruction and environment differ from a typical classroom setting. Fosnot and Perry (2005) point out the following information about constructivism:

Rather than behaviors or skills as the goal of instruction, *cognitive development* and *deep understanding* are the foci; rather than stages being the result of maturation, they are understood as *constructions of active learner reorganization*. Rather than viewing
learning as a linear process, it is understood to be complex and fundamentally non-linear in nature. (p. 3)

The focus on instruction in a constructivist setting is mainly about the understanding of what students can accomplish. The skills that are taught are differentiated to meet the needs of all students. Non-linear learning is about experiences, and the content of lessons can connect to students’ life experiences. This differs from a linear classroom where the focus is on the same skills being taught to everyone the same way. Learning in a constructivist classroom is similar to a non-linear setting, unlike a linear classroom setting.

A constructivist approach to learning shows student-centered practices. Armstrong (2015) discusses Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as “a realm in which learning conditions can be optimized through the identification of competences that the learner could mature if only with the right assistance” (p. 134). When learners reach the point where they can learn past their current level of development, teachers can assist these students to ensure they are succeeding. When teachers work with students in their ZPD, they are helping students expand their ideas based on their knowledge and experiences.

Students gain and improve their knowledge every day in the classroom. Oswald (2002) concurred that the constructivist approach to writing results in more motivated, engaged, and empowered writers. In Writer’s Workshop, students can construct their writing, and be the decision makers. As children build their knowledge and increase their writing time, learning takes place. Students will empower themselves by using their knowledge and applying it to meaningful tasks. In turn, students will also empower others by listening to their writing and providing positive feedback.
Social Constructivism is a theory based on the ideas of Vygotsky. Gredler (2011) writes that Vygotsky believed that culture plays a significant role in the intellectual growth of a person. The way in which children are raised, and the experiences that they go through, all contribute to their identity. McKinley (2015) states that the social constructivist theory shows that “human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others” (p. 1). The theory of social constructivism is all about how meaning and understanding come out of a learner’s social interactions. Children build their knowledge and identity by learning and interacting with others. The students use their experiences in their writing and turn them into ideas. Writer’s Workshop is the ideal place for students to share their knowledge and to interact with others.

**Writer’s Workshop**

Writer’s Workshop is a framework for teaching writing. Writer’s Workshop is all about developing and creating ideas, as well as applying them to authentic tasks. In a Writer’s Workshop, students have the opportunity to think and write like authors. Magalas and Ryan (2016) write that “the writing workshop is one of the most successful and highly encouraged methods of teaching literacy in the classroom, especially in the younger grades” (p. 8). This method of teaching writing not only allows students the freedom of choosing their writing topics, but also gives students confidence.

The practice of teaching writing involves many different aspects. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) express the difficulty of teaching writing:

Teaching kids how to write is hard. That’s because writing is not so much one skill as a *bundle* of skills that includes sequencing, spelling, rereading, and supporting big ideas with example. But these skills are teachable. And we believe that a writing workshop
creates an environment where students can acquire these skills, along with the fluency, confidence, and desire to see themselves as writers. (p. 1)

Writer’s Workshops are an ideal solution for teaching students how to write, to appreciate writing, and experience how it feels to become an author. In a Writer’s Workshop, students are working in a rigorous learning environment where they are made responsible for their learning.

All Writer’s Workshops have the same basic framework and have four primary parts: mini-lesson, writing period, conferencing, and share time. Fletcher and Poratalupi (2001) write that “mini-lessons are short, focused, and direct” (p. 10). In the mini-lesson teachers can discuss grammar, mechanics, or reteach a topic students are struggling with. Fletcher and Portalupi (2005) raise a theme that the topic of mini-lessons will usually fall under four categories: procedural, writer’s process, qualities of good writing, or editing skills. There is no specific script for the teacher to follow because the topic of the mini-lessons will vary depending on the needs of the writers.

After the mini-lesson is taught, the writing period and conferencing follow. Magalas and Ryan (2016) write that during the writing period and conference time students can choose their own topics to write about and they can work on this for as long as they need to. During this time, students are “rough drafting, planning, proofreading, or conferring with other students” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2005, p. 10). While students are writing, teachers will move around the room and confer with students as they write. Writing conferences are considered the heart of Writer’s Workshop, because this is when teachers get the individual time to work with students. Calkins (1994) writes that “We are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by ‘what might help this writer’ rather than ‘what might help this writing’ ” (p. 15).
During the writing and conferencing portion of Writer’s Workshop, the biggest responsibility that the teacher has is to listen. Students will do most of the talking, and the teacher will listen. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) write, “It puts kids into an active stance, both when they write and when they confer” (p. 49). In order to have a successful conference, teachers must be responsive to the individual needs that each student has.

The final component of Writer’s Workshop is a sharing time or an “author’s chair”. The sharing time is when students can share their work with the class; every student should share their writing at least once a week. The sharing time helps students take ownership and pride in their writing. During Writer’s Workshop, students are “afforded opportunities … to make connections to one another’s texts as readers and writers and to continue to raise their meta-awareness of their writing processes” (Laman, 2004, p. 138). Sharing time is the perfect opportunity for students to give and receive responses to each other’s writing. When students share their writing they see themselves and their classmates as authors.

Writer’s Workshop creates an environment where students can transform their writing. Students have the power to choose the topic they are writing about and can empower their voices through their writing. Writer’s Workshop creates an environment “where students can play around with the process they use to craft texts” (Kissel & Miller, 2015, p. 78). All parts of Writer’s Workshop have a significant impact on the students, and are equally important. During the Writer’s Workshop time, students can connect their life experiences, listen to their own voices and become authors.

Summary

In conclusion, my goal is for students to be able to construct their literate identity in a student-centered learning environment. The greatest growth will be seen when students are in control of their learning. When a classroom is a constructivist classroom, it is shaped to meet the
needs of all students. In a Writer’s Workshop, the instruction is more individualized, and each student is getting one-on-one time with the teacher to confer. Writer’s Workshop is the perfect opportunity for students to write about their experiences, opinions, and ideas in a way that makes sense to them.

Students rarely have a chance to write about the elements that make up their writer identity. In Writer’s Workshop, students have more independence and time to explore topics that are meaningful and relevant to them. Students will construct their writing pieces using their knowledge and ideas from experiences, as well as different opportunities they have encountered in their lives. Students will not only improve their writing, but also become authors.

Methodology

This study focused on the implementation of Writer's Workshop being woven into my daily literacy instruction. I implemented Writer's Workshop to investigate students' literate identities and the evolvement of the students' writing through the development of the workshop. With the implementation of Writer’s Workshop, there was more time dedicated to individualized instruction, rather than whole group instruction. The research gathered from the study in my classroom supported the idea that Writer’s Workshop creates an environment that produces quality writing.

The data from Writer’s Workshop were collected for a period of four weeks using different collection methods. Data were gathered using writing samples (pre, during and post), transcribed audio recordings of interviews and conversations held during Writer's Workshop conferences, and observation notes of the students participating in Writer's Workshop. I also kept a reflection journal, where I recorded my thoughts throughout Writer’s Workshop. Notes and observations from the reflection journal were used in the data.
Participants

The participants in this study were selected because they were all students in my first-grade classroom for the 2016-2017 school year. This first-grade class was made up of 11 girls and 11 boys; the students in my class were Black or African American, apart from two students who were Hispanic/Latino and one student that was Caucasian. Their participation was based on parental consent and each student’s assent. Out of 22 students, ten were reading on grade level, and 12 students were reading below grade level. All students were interviewed, however, data were collected only from the students whose parents consented to their participation in the study. The students who were of academic concern received Response to Intervention (RTI) instruction from myself. I was the sole instructor of direct instruction in all academic areas including, English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies. I did have a full-time teacher aide who assisted the students in small group instruction during literacy and math center rotations.

Setting

The setting for this study was in a first-grade classroom in an urban elementary charter school that included grades K-8. This urban elementary charter school was in a small city in New York State. The charter school was a diverse institute and served urban children from all over the city. At the time of the study, the school provided an education to 404 students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade.

The students in this school community primarily came from a low socioeconomic status, and all students received free lunch (New York State Report Card, 2016). The school functioned under several philosophies. The central philosophy of the school was the essentiality of strong student-teacher relationships in student motivation, engagement, and achievement. One of the
goals of the school was to prepare students for college and career, and to defy the demographic destiny of poverty. Students, as well as teachers, committed to creating a community where everyone felt safe, appreciated, and welcomed.

The classroom environment was warm and welcoming, filled with student work, anchor charts created by students and the teacher, and colorful posters. In the classroom, there was a relaxing space for the classroom library. Additionally, there were bean bag chairs, pillows and colorful crate seats that students could use to sit comfortably while they were writing or reading. Our Daily 5 reading groups met at a kidney bean shaped table where the groups ranged from 4-6 students per group at a time. The reading groups were different from the writing groups. The writing groups were chosen based on the pre-writing samples. Students were grouped according to writing skills and similar writing needs.

Positionality

My background and experiences have affected me as a person and now affect my role as a teacher researcher in the classroom. Using my class, gender, education, and personal beliefs helped provide a framework for my study. I grew up in a rural area in a working-class household, and I am a first-generation college student and graduate. I am a married, Caucasian woman in my late 20's, and I now live in an urban area. I have gone back and forth teaching second and first grade every other year since the 2013-2014 school year. I have taught second grade twice, and first grade twice. I am in my fourth year of teaching, and my third consecutive year at my current school. I firmly believe that every child deserves a proper education, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or the gaps that they enter the classroom with. It is my job to help support and encourage these students to achieve success.
Methods of Data Collection

As the teacher, I was the researcher and the participant observer in this qualitative study (Clark & Creswell, 2015) regarding Writer's Workshop. This qualitative study about Writer's Workshop involved the gathering of data through interviews, conferences, observation notes, and student work samples. I made the instructional choices based on the students' writing during Writer's Workshop. To protect the students’ confidentiality, all names were replaced with pseudonyms. The pseudonyms are used in the paper when describing students’ work and the transcribed conversations from audio recordings.

I used a double entry journal (see Appendix A) to write down my observations that took place during Writer's Workshop. I then went back to the double entry journal and recorded my thoughts, questions, and implications. I took field notes during Writer’s Workshop to remember and record the behaviors and events that I observed. I also kept a reflection journal that I wrote in weekly. This reflection journal was used to reflect on events that happened throughout the week.

I wanted to investigate how students' literate identity might impact their writing. Students were interviewed and asked questions about their literate identity (see Appendix B). I conducted the interviews before and during the implementation of Writer's Workshop. The interviews took place in a quiet corner of the classroom, while the rest of the class was partaking in their normal literacy learning centers. I also interviewed students during writing conferences. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) emphasize that “In a conference, there is a natural flow that begins with understanding and moves toward teaching a particular skill, technique or strategy” (p. 52). During a writing conference, I made suggestions and listened to each student’s needs. Kissel and Miller (2015) write that during the writing period and conferencing, teachers will offer encouragement, make suggestions and honor student work.
The interviews and conversations that took place during Writer's Workshop were audio recorded and then later transcribed. I interviewed students and collected data about their writing. While examining their writing, I looked for trends, such as improvements in their writing content or grammar. I also interviewed students before, during and after Writer's Workshop, and asked questions about their literate identity.

**Procedures**

I began by explaining my study to the students in a small group setting. In the small group, I obtained the students' assent only after their parent/guardians' consent had been given. Once I explained the study, I first taught students about the writing rubrics and what I expected from their writing. The students got a writing prompt, and I collected this writing prompt to have as a pre-assessment. After the writing exercise was completed, I then described how Writer's Workshop would operate.

I explained to the students that they would participate in Writer's Workshop every day during the literacy block. Magalas and Ryan (2016) state that "the design and frequency of the writing workshop are left to the educator" (p. 9). Most Writer's Workshops follow the framework of a mini-lesson, writing period, conferencing and then sharing. I followed this framework of in my first-grade classroom.

Writer's Workshop began with a mini-lesson (5-15 minutes) on a single topic that was new information, or something students were struggling with in their writing. The content of the first week of mini-lessons was on the different procedures of Writer's Workshop. The students’ writing needs determined the following mini-lessons. After the mini-lesson was taught, students then had time to write on their own. During the individual writing time, I was able to conference
with individual students or small groups daily. During the conferencing time, I was working with the students on their writing, and talking about their literate identity. After the independent writing, there was a share time where students presented their writing to the class.

**Trustworthiness**

The design for my case study met the criteria for trustworthiness because all the information that I provided for the protection of my students is correct. I only conducted procedures that had been previously approved by the IRB and my professor. Data triangulation occurred using multiple types of data such as interview questions, observational notes and writing samples collected from multiple participants. My analyses will be confirmed or disconfirmed by my capstone project advisor and my research partner. The data was documented by using audio recording and observational notes. All data that I collected was reported as it was found. I never altered the data to help prove a point in my study.

**Analysis**

Throughout the course of this study, I used several strategies to analyze my data. To begin, I analyzed the student interviews that were conducted before Writer’s Workshop began. I examined all the interviews, and looked for common themes in the students’ answers. I then coded the interviews by putting the students’ answers into separate categories. I analyzed this data by using the constant comparison method. Clark and Creswell (2012) describe constant comparison as “deriving categories from data over time, and then using the categories to build theory” (p. 143). These methods helped provide insight into answering my research questions.

During Writer’s Workshop, I kept a double entry journal where I recorded data, and my reflections and observations from conferences with students. I also went back through my notes
and included questions I had and patterns that had emerged so far. Similar to the interviews, I looked for any themes or similarities in my conferences with students. I compared and contrasted the data across the participants by examining writing pieces throughout Writer’s Workshop. At the end of Writer’s Workshop, I analyzed the interview questions that I asked at the end of my study. I coded themes, identical to my coding process for the interviews before Writer’s Workshop. I coded each theme that emerged using the constant comparison method.

**Analysis**

This research was designed to explore how Writer’s Workshop might affect students’ views of themselves as writers. The research was also designed to look at how implementing Writer’s Workshop might impact first-grade students’ abilities as writers.

My findings are presented chronologically, so I can show how Writer’s Workshop affected my students.

**The Beginning**

Before I began the actual Writer’s Workshop, I interviewed my students and asked them different questions about writing. Through interviewing my students, I found two significant findings.

**Finding One:** Students view writing as the mechanics of writing and not content based. Students view themselves as good writers.

In response to the five questions that I asked, students mentioned the mechanics or the conventions of writing almost every time, instead of the actual content of their writing. The first theme had two ideas intertwined with one another, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. The second theme that emerged was the fact that most students had a good understanding of what writing is used for and the importance of writing in everyday life.

Students were asked five different questions (appendix B) regarding writing. Throughout the interviews, each student mentioned some characteristic about writing conventions in at least one
of their answers. Through analyzing and coding the data, I discovered characteristics that students associated with what makes a person a good writer.

The following chart displays the characteristics that students associated with what makes a person a good writer.

![Pie chart showing characteristics associated with good writers](image)

Figure 1: What makes a good writer? This figure shows students responses to what makes a good writer.

The number next to each section on the graph represents the number of times that particular answer showed up throughout the eight interviews. After analyzing the data, five themes kept appearing when asking students about writing: spelling, finger spaces (spaces between words), writing letters correctly/neatly, writing fancy (cursive), and staying in the lines.

During the interviews, many students were excited to talk about writing. As I sat down to speak to each student, an emerging theme of how the students viewed writing kept coming up. In the following excerpt, I sat down with Jake and asked him some questions about writing:
Mrs. Howell: Who is a good writer that you know?

Jake: Hmm, well, probably you!

Mrs. Howell: What makes me a good writer?

Jake: You don’t mess up words, you don’t write sloppy, and your stories make sense.

Below is another conversation I had with a student, which also displays the trend of writing being about mechanics and not content.

Mrs. Howell: Who is a good writer that you know?

Mary: My mom and aunt, because they practiced a lot when they were kids.

Mrs. Howell: What makes them good writers?

Mary: They know how to write letters the right way, and they can write in cursive.

The students could identify “good” writers that they know. However, the characteristics that they all attributed to good writing were never about the content of their writing. The students mostly identified a good writer by describing the conventions and mechanics of their writing. When I interviewed my students this was a trend I saw in every student interview.

To expand on the topic of mechanics, many students viewed themselves as good writers, because of the mechanics of their writing. Out of eight students who were interviewed, five students believed that they were good writers, two students felt that they weren’t good writers, and one student was unsure of his writing capabilities. The following charts demonstrate why my students believe they were or were not good writers.
Figure 2: Reasons Why Students Think They Are Not a Good Writer. This figure shows students responses to why they thought they were not good writers.

Figure 3: Reasons Why Students Think They Are a Good Writer. This figure shows students responses to why they thought they were good writers.
A majority of the students associated being a bad writer with the following conventions of writing: needing to work on spelling, writing sloppy, not including spacing, and going out of the lines. Most students, who thought they were a good writer, contributed it to the neatness of their work.

**Finding Two:** Students understand the purpose and importance of writing.

The second theme that emerged from my interviews was the fact that most students viewed writing as important and knew what writing was used for. Every single student who was interviewed communicated that writing was important. The following are answers that students gave when asked about the importance of writing:

**Mrs. Howell:** Do you think writing is important?

**Max:** Yes, because if we didn’t have writing and didn’t know how to say words, we wouldn’t have words because we wouldn’t know how to write.

**Mrs. Howell:** Do you think writing is important?

**Roger:** Yup, if we didn’t know how to write, we wouldn’t know how to do things, and also if you lose your voice, you can write things down to tell people.

Although the students’ answers varied in their reasoning of why writing is important, each student had a valid reason for the importance of writing.

Each student was also able to provide reasoning as to what writing is used for. The following table displays the answers to the question: What do we use writing for?
What do we use writing for?

- to get better at spelling
- doing your letters and spelling
- writing lists for chores or groceries*
  - to get used to using your hands
  - to write on envelopes and to mail letters*
  - to teach people important things*
- to be smart
- to write information down*
- to become better writers
- paying bills*
- for jobs*
- to pass tests

*referenced parents doing this type of writing

Figure 4: What do we use writing for? This figure shows students responses to what writing is used for.

When interviewing the students, many of the children referenced their parents as the people they observe writing and listed examples of how they used writing. The students were not asked about their parents using writing, but through content analysis, it was found that five out of eight students mentioned their parents when answering this question.

Although there was not a lot of authentic writing instruction in my classroom prior to this study, the students could name many ways that people use writing. This finding was appealing to me because written communication is a necessary skill, which students should be able to utilize in all different types of mediums. When analyzing the data, I found it compelling that so many students referenced their parents using writing without being asked about them. This finding led me to believe that many students associated writing with practices that they see their parents using outside of school. Before interviewing my students, I did not believe that they would consider outside of the school environment when thinking about writing. This theme made me reconsider my students’ views on writing, and made me realize that my students are being exposed to many different types of writing inside and outside of school.

During

During Writer’s Workshop, two major themes emerged, that I will discuss in the following section.
**Finding One:** Students are self-reflective of their writing when they read their writing pieces aloud.

Prior to beginning Writer’s Workshop, most students viewed writing as the mechanics of writing and not the content. Through conferences with my students, I discovered them expanding their thoughts on writing and becoming more self-reflective. During Writer’s Workshop conferences, I would sit one-on-one with a student and we would discuss their writing piece. The student would read their writing piece to me and then we would discuss how he/she felt about their writing piece. I let the student guide the discussion, so I could hear the thoughts and opinions that they had without influencing them. After reading their story, the student would tell me how they felt about their writing piece. I would then ask them to give me a reason why they liked their writing piece or why they did not like it. Together we would discuss their story, and what he or she did well on and what he/she needed to work on.

Through observations, and analyzing the data, I began to realize that the students became exceedingly reflective of their writing pieces after reading them aloud. Two students, Abbie and Mary, were particularly self-reflective when reading their stories in conferences and the author’s chair with their peers.

**Abbie**

At the beginning of Writer’s Workshop on February 15, Abbie only talked about the mechanics of her writing. The knowledge that she displayed about her writing was weak. In the first conference that we had together, Abbie and I discussed one of her first writing pieces.

**Mrs. Howell:** Abbie, how do you feel about your field trip story?

**Abbie:** It’s not the best. It needs work and I didn’t put capital letters.

All Abbie could talk about was capital letters, and could not give me any more reasons as to why her writing needed work or what she thought she did well. As Writer’s Workshop progressed, Abbie’s reasoning and thoughts developed when she self-reflected over her writing. Toward the end of Writer’s Workshop, Abbie became more of a self-reflective writer. In a conference with Abbie, she shared why she thought she did a good job on her writing piece.
Mrs. Howell: Abbie, I would like you to read your writing piece that you have been working on. What is the title of your story?

Abbie: The title is Going to School. (reads story aloud to me)

Mrs. Howell: Abbie, I think that you did an excellent job using transition words, to show the reader the order of your story. How do you feel about this writing piece?

Abbie: I tried my best to spell the words right, and I used the word wall.

Mrs. Howell: I did notice that you tried your best on your spelling. One thing I think you could work on is writing more information, so the reader can learn more from your story. What do you think about that?

Abbie: I can probably use more details like I did in my Christmas story!

When Abbie began Writer’s Workshop, she was not feeling confident about her writing. She could barely give any reasons as to why she did not like her writing. Abbie believed that her writing was not great because she did not have capital letters. At the end of Writer’s Workshop, Abbie began thinking like a writer. Abbie recognized that she needed to add details to improve her story and become a better writer.

Mary

From the beginning of Writer’s Workshop, Mary was critical of her writing pieces. Mary never said that any of her writing pieces were good. In one of the first conferences I had with Mary, we discussed her story about Valentine’s Day. After Mary read her story to me, I asked her how she felt about it.

Mary: (gave me a thumb down) My story is not that great. It doesn’t make sense at all.

Mrs. Howell: What do you want to do to make your story better?

Mary: Well there is barely any punctuation! I want to read more stories, to see what other people do, and add more details, so it makes more sense.

Mary was very precise while going over her writing, and had an idea of what she needed to do to improve it. Later, in Writer’s Workshop, Mary continued to be critical of her writing, but she
also began to point out specific mistakes she made while writing. This conference conversation happened during the third week of Writer’s Workshop.

Mrs. Howell: Mary, what is this writing piece about?

Mary: It’s called My Day, so it’s about My Day, you know on my birthday yesterday.

Mary read her writing piece, and while reading her writing piece, she is realizing and pointing out a mistake that she wrote.

Mary: Oops, I wrote Mya instead of My, and I wrote Dad instead of Day. That doesn’t make any sense.

Mrs. Howell: Do you think it helps us realize our mistakes when we read our stories aloud?

Mary: Oh yes! I never knew I wrote those words until I read them aloud. If I never would have read it to you, then it would have been wrong, and no one would know what I meant!

At the beginning of Writer’s Workshop, Mary vocalized that her story did not make sense, but she did not give exact details as to why it did not make sense. As Writer’s Workshop progressed, and Mary had more exposure to all the components of Writer’s Workshop, the reflecting of her writing pieces became more constructed and precise.

Abbie and Mary

Through conferences and reading their stories aloud, both Abbie and Mary learned to self-reflect on their writing pieces. In the first Author’s Chair portion of Writer’s Workshop a few students shared their writing pieces, and the class was learning how to give compliments and constructive criticism. The students had difficulty with this, and their comments were limited. Violet shared a writing piece about being a Jehovah Witness.

Mrs. Howell: Does anybody want to give Violet a compliment or some constructive criticism?

Abbie: You (Violet) did a good job, and I liked it.

Mrs. Howell: Abbie, can you give her a reason why she did a good job?

Abbie: (shrugs her shoulders) No, she just did a good job.

Mary: I think she did a good job because she filled up the whole page, that’s good writing!
Similar to the two girls’ first writing conference conversations, their reasoning is limited and focused on mechanics, and not much thought goes into the content of the author’s writing piece. Just as their self-reflecting became more advanced, their conversations during Author’s Chair also progressed. On the very last day of Writer’s Workshop, Violet shared her writing piece titled, *How To Be A Teacher*. Abbie and Mary discussed the writing piece:

**Mary**: That was great. She made it a long story, she made it interesting, and said words like exciting, like she did a voice with her writing.

**Abbie**: She did first, middle, and ending, with great pictures and actually a lot of details.

**Mary**: …and she gave a great title for a great story.

Now, when the girls were giving compliments, they used relevant writing vocabulary to back up their reasoning as to why Violet did a good job on her writing. Abbie also shared a writing piece called “School”.

**Mary**: I think she did good, but she needs to work on remembering to put the words, but she still did a great job.

**Abbie**: Yeah, well, while I was reading, I noticed that I forgot an o in the word “to” and that didn’t make sense. I also wrote “tine” instead of “time” and it was hard to figure out what I was reading when I read my story.

**Mary**: But that’s good because you will remember next time to do it before you read!

As a result of Writer’s Workshop, Abbie and Mary were exposed to more lessons about writing, had the opportunity to engage in independent writing time, and had time to share their writing. When Writer’s Workshop began, both students struggled with giving reasons as to what they needed to work on in their writing. Hall (2014) discussed sharing writing during Writer’s Workshop by saying, “When children assume the leadership role during sharing time, they feel a sense of ownership in their writing and recognize that they are valuable and respected members of their writing community” (p. 29). While all students made gains in their reflecting, Abbie and Mary made the most significant gains when it came to self-reflecting and giving constructive criticism to their peers.

**Finding Two**: Students’ writing improved from the first week to the fourth week.
From the first week of Writer’s Workshop to the fourth, and final, week of Writer’s Workshop all students showed some sort of improvement in their writing. Students were evaluated using the Lucy Calkins Writing Pathway rubrics (2013) for first-grade narrative writing. Students would evaluate themselves independently after they had finished a writing piece. After students evaluated themselves, we would then discuss their evaluations together in a conference. Together each student and I would discuss each section on the checklist and answer the question: “Did I do it like a first grader?” The students would check one of three options: not yet, starting to, or yes! The following chart shows the standard of ‘Yes!’ that all students met with their first writing piece.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>I tried to make a beginning for my story.</th>
<th>I put my story in order. I used words such as First, Next, Last.</th>
<th>I found a way to end my story.</th>
<th>I used all I knew about words and chunks of words to help me spell.</th>
<th>I spelled all the word wall words right and used the word wall to help me spell.</th>
<th>I ended sentences with punctuation.</th>
<th>I used capital letters.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Did I do it like a first grader? This figure shows standards that students met in their first writing piece during the first week of Writer’ Workshop February 14th -February 17th, 2017.

Each box that is marked in the above chart shows that the student met that standard in their very first writing piece. By using the information in the chart, I could tell that most of my students were using punctuation at the end of their sentences. Most students were also using spelling strategies to help spell words. My students lacked the skills to make a beginning for their story, using transition words, and providing an end to their stories. Many students were also not capitalizing the first letter at the beginning of a new sentence. I used the information from the
checklists to help plan my instruction for mini-lessons and to help guide individual student conferences.

The checklists helped students self-reflect on their writing during conferences. In the second week, I had a conference with Max, where we talked about using the checklists to help inform our writing. Max said, “Yesterday I felt good about my writing, but today I feel proud about my writing because after I used the checklist this time I had more ‘yes’ checkmarks!” The students used the checklists to help them remember what they needed to include in their writing. As a result, the checklists helped structure their writing to a greater extent than it was at the beginning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbie’s First Writing Piece</th>
<th>Violet’s First Writing Piece</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Abbie's First Writing Piece" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Violet’s First Writing Piece" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Student Writing Samples. This figure shows a picture of Abbie’s and Violet’s first writing pieces from February 3, 2017.
After the four weeks of Writer’s Workshop had concluded, I examined the students’ last writing pieces. The following chart shows the standard of ‘Yes!’ that all students met on their final writing piece.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>I tried to make a beginning for my story.</th>
<th>I put my story in order. I used words such as First, Next, Last.</th>
<th>I found a way to end my story.</th>
<th>I used all I knew about words and chunks of words to help me spell.</th>
<th>I spelled all the word wall words right and used the word wall to help me spell.</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7: Did I do it like a first grader? This figure shows standards that students met in their last writing piece on March 17, 2017

Each box that is marked shows that the student met that standard in their last writing piece. The boxes that are marked with a red “x” show growth in the students’ writing pieces since their first writing piece. As evidenced by the chart, all students were using punctuation and spelling strategies to help spell words; most students were also using capital letters. I continued to check the students’ checklists throughout Writer’s Workshop, and used the constant comparison method to compare their writing pieces during the four weeks. In the final writing piece, all but two students used transition words in their writing. This was a huge shift because, at the beginning of Writer’s Workshop, only one student used transitional words in their writing.

Although there was a significant amount of improvement, there were still two areas that students did not make large gains in; making a beginning and ending to the story. Most students began to eliminate choppy sentences and started connecting sentences to each other.
Nevertheless, students generally did not have a beginning to their story; they usually just dove right into the story without an introduction. Many students also did not have an ending to their writing, and abruptly stopped their writing at the end without a conclusion.

The Writer’s Workshop data were only collected for four weeks. The students had just started truly writing for the first time this year, were still learning how to write, and how to organize their writing. Leung and Hicks (2014) write that a Writer’s Workshop provides “learners with the motivation to acquire new knowledge into their existing knowledge, and an opportunity to apply their knowledge” (p. 585). For the first time, students had an opportunity for an authentic writing experience, and they truly thrived. Students’ last writing pieces are on the following page.
While reading Abbie’s first writing piece, it is hard to determine what she is writing about. In her first writing piece, Abbie attempted to write her story in order and began to use transition words. Abbie did not use punctuation or capital letters properly. Her story generally did not make a lot of sense.

After four weeks of Writer’s Workshop, Abbie’s writing improved drastically. In Abbie’s last writing piece, the reader can clearly tell that Abbie is writing a story about her day at school. Abbie has a title for her story, “My School,” and introduces the topic in a clear manner. Abbie also used details about the school day to support her story. In addition, Abbie also used capital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbie’s Last Writing Piece</th>
<th>Violet’s Last Writing Piece</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Violet's Last Writing Piece" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Student Writing Samples. This figure shows a picture of Abbie’s and Violet’s last writing pieces from March 17, 2017.
letters and punctuation correctly. From her first writing piece, to her last writing piece, Abbie showed a large amount of growth as a writer.

When looking at Violet’s first writing piece, she started off her story with a beginning sentence. Throughout her story, Violet is basically repeated the same thing, “I had a dog, and it got bigger” and her story lacked details. Violet used capital letters and punctuation inconsistently throughout her first story. She also started to use transition words, in order to make sure her story flowed.

By the end of Writer’s Workshop, Violet showed a large amount of growth in her writing. Violet starts off her story by having a title called, “how to be a teacher”. In her story, Violet is writing about a typical day in our first-grade classroom. She is again attempting to use transition words to connect ideas in her story. She did improve on using capital letters more consistently, but this is something she could still work on.

Within four weeks of participating in Writer’s Workshop, my students showed significant improvement in their writing. The students went from writing pieces that had no organization, to writing pieces that told a story and made sense. Transitional words started to be used so that the writing flowed and was unified. Students were more consistent with starting each new sentence with a capital letter and used punctuation at the end. Their writing went from sentences on paper to telling a story that made them feel like an author.

After

Finding One: Students identify the importance of writing by making real world connections.

After the conclusion of Writer’s Workshop in March, 2017, I asked my students a series of post-interview questions. One question that I asked, “Do you think it is important to be a good writer?” displayed impressive answers from students. All students articulated that it is important to be a good writer. In their responses, most students related the importance of writing to succeeding in the real world.

The students answered this question citing the importance of writing in real world situations. The chart below shows some student responses to the question:
### Do you think it is important to be a good writer?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>Yes, so people can learn if you make a book, people will be able to read your stories when you make a book. Writing is important because it helps you become a better writer and a better story maker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Yes, if we didn’t have writing, then we wouldn’t have words to write down, and then what would happen is there would be no words in the world and no words in books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>It’s really important, you need to learn how to write, so when you grow up in 10th grade, and you don’t know how to write, then you will fail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>Yes, it will help you when you get older and then you will get a job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Yes, because if you can’t write, then you can’t write notes or lists that you need when you go to the store.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>Yes, because if you are not a good writer, then you won’t be able to go to college like how you’re in college.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Do you think it is important to be a good writer? This figure shows student answers about the importance of being a good writer during the week of March 20, 2017.

It is significant that three out of eight students cited writing as essential for college or having a career. During Writer’s Workshop, none of the lessons were centered around using writing for college or using writing at a job. Still, the students made the connection of using writing outside of school. All students mentioned the importance of writing, and six students associated being a good writer with a real-world situation.

In addition to students associating writing with jobs, many students referenced being able to teach people with writing. Mary talked about the importance of writing and expressed that “You want to be able to show people you can write, and you want to hear them say “Wow! you’re a good writer, I want to be like you, and then you can teach them how to write.” Not only does Mary believe that writing is important, but she also wanted to show people her writing and teach them what she knows about writing. Kissel and Miller (2015) discuss the power of Writer’s Workshop:
We sometimes think that the only power children have is the authoritarian power that comes from self-selecting topics. But power lurks in other aspects of the workshop-in the power children gain among their classmates, assuming new writing identities; or the power children yield when they realize their role in the workshop can influence peers. (p. 84)

Along with the power of choice, students built new identities as teachers and started realizing the impact that their writing could make on others.

Roger also discussed teaching writing in his response to the importance of writing. When discussing the importance of writing, Roger expressed the importance of writing by saying, “It’s important to be a good writer, because then my friends can learn from my writing. If they look at my writing, I can teach them to have, like, details and to always have capital letters and punctuation.” These students are showing that they are indeed thinking about the impact that their writing will have on others.

It is of great significance that students associate writing with activities other than the work they do in school. This means that these students realize the real importance of writing. These students are thinking outside of school and thinking about the applications of writing in real world situations. The fact that students associated writing with success is tremendous because they integrated what they knew about the world and what they were learning in school and applied that knowledge to the idea of the importance of writing.

Finding Two: The power of choice motivates students’ desire to write.

When students can choose what they want to write about, they are more likely to want to write. Magalas and Ryan (2016) state, “We need to give students a reason to want to write, and the best way to do that is to let them choose what they want to write about.” (p. 18) On many occasions during Writer’s Workshop, students would mention how they liked the kind of writing we were doing as opposed to our regular skills writing. In our skills writing, the students practiced restating and answering questions and copying the sentence down from the smart board into their workbook. One student, Mary, said, “I like writing my own stories better than what we do in skills because I like writing my own stories that I come up with.” The power of choice
aligns with the theory of student-centered learning, where students are in control of their learning.

At the beginning of Writer’s Workshop in February, it was difficult for the students to think of topics to write about. They were so accustomed to being told what to write, that when they finally had the autonomy to choose their own topics, they were lost. The students were familiarized with structured writing, and restating questions; the freedom to choose what they wanted to write about was unsettling for them. In a post interview that I had with Mary, we talked about the impact Writer’s Workshop had on her as a writer.

**Mrs. Howell:** Did participating in Writer’s Workshop change the way you feel about writing?

**Mary:** Yes it did.

**Mrs. Howell:** How did you feel about writing before Writer’s Workshop?

**Mary:** Because, before I didn’t like writing, because I didn’t know what to write, and what to do and it wasn’t fun.

**Mrs. Howell:** How do you feel about writing now?

**Mary:** But now it’s fun because we can choose what we want to write about and I know how to write a lot better.

As Writer’s Workshop progressed and the students had exposure to writing every day, the students began expressing that having a choice in what they wrote about made writing easier.

When it came to writing and the ability to choose their topic, students were very pleased that they could write about whatever they wanted to. While talking about the power of choice, Max said, “I like to choose, because you know what you want to write about and you’re not being told what to write about.” Another student, Violet, also expressed that she feels happy when she gets to choose, “It makes me feel happy because I like writing what I want to and I get to add my own details that I can think of.” For the first time, students were getting to choose what they wanted to write about, and it helped them enjoy writing.

Due to having a choice when it came to writing, students became more interested in the practice of writing. Abbie communicated that she felt good when she got to pick what she writes
about because, “Writing is colorful, and you can make whatever you want when you get to pick what you write. I like being able to pick out what I want to write about.” Students thrived on the power of choosing what they wanted to write about. When students had a choice, they were able to provide extra details in their writing, because they were an expert on what they were writing about. The independence that my students exhibited during Writer’s Workshop grew exponentially from the first day to the last day. Students had the ability to take control of their learning during Writer’s Workshop, Sam stated, “I get to write what I want, and I’m not being told what to do.” Writer’s Workshop was the one time of day, every day, where the students were in command of their learning, and had the power of choice.

Finding Three: Writer’s Workshop changed the way that students felt about writing and being a good writer.

At the end of this study, five out of eight students believed that they were good writers and three students thought that they were “kind of” good writers. When we began Writer’s Workshop five students believed that they were good writers, two students felt that they were not good writers, and one student was unsure of his writing capabilities. As a result of Writer’s Workshop, now none of the children thought that they were bad writers. All students had a much more positive outlook on writing.

Before we began Writer’s Workshop, my students attributed mechanics as to why they were good or bad writers. After Writer’s Workshop, my students expanded their thoughts beyond mechanics when discussing writing. While students still mentioned mechanics as to why they were a good writer, they also talked about the content of their writing.

At the beginning of Writer’s Workshop, many students thought that they were a good writer if they used capital letters and punctuation. As the students were exposed to writing every day, they began to become more aware of what it means to be good at writing. The following is a conversation I had with Mary about being a good writer.

Mrs. Howell: Do you think you are a good writer?

Mary: Kind of, but I’m still learning about writing.

Mrs. Howell: What are you still learning?
Mary: Well, I’m good at writing neater now, but I need to work on writing more stories. I want my stories to be longer and longer with more details, and be more interesting to read!

Mrs. Howell: Did participating in Writer’s Workshop change the way you feel about writing?

Mary: Yes, because before Writer’s Workshop I was nervous about writing because I didn’t know how to write and it wasn’t fun.

Mrs. Howell: How do you feel about writing now?

Mary: Oh, now it’s so fun because we can choose what we want to write about.

Mrs. Howell: Do you think your writing has improved?

Mary: Yes, it helped me learn to write and I got to practice writing every day. Now I can write neat, and I got better at making stories.

At the conclusion of Writer’s Workshop, Mary went from being nervous about writing to having a good time while writing. Along with enjoying writing, Mary now has goals for herself to become a better writer, by adding details to make her stories interesting to read.

Another student, Max, also felt nervous about writing before participating in Writer’s Workshop.

Mrs. Howell: How did you feel about writing before we started Writer’s Workshop?

Max: Very nervous, because I didn’t know how to make my words in my stories make sense.

Mrs. Howell: How do you feel about writing now?

Max: Happy, it just makes me happy.

Mrs. Howell: Do you think your writing has improved?

Max: Yeah, I write longer sentences now, and make punctuation all the time. I also make sure that my stories make sense and I try to write neater.

Although Max still talks about the mechanics of his writing, he is also talking about the craft of writing. He is now putting punctuation in the same category as adding details to his stories to make his stories more exciting.
All students displayed some type of a growth in their mindset when it came to talking about writing. In their post interviews, every single student mentioned something about the craft of their writing. Students still mentioned mechanics, but now they are also thinking more about the content of their stories rather than just the mechanics.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of Writer’s Workshop on first-grade students’ writing abilities and literate identities. This study focused on the following research questions:

- *How might implementing Writer’s Workshop affect students’ views of themselves as writers?*
- *How might implementing Writer’s Workshop impact first-grade students’ abilities as writers?*

**Summary of Findings**

Data were collected through interviews, observations, and conferences over the course of six weeks to answer my research questions. Although this study was based on only six weeks of data collection, I was able to draw significant conclusions on the impact of Writer’s Workshop. During this study I found that Writer’s Workshop impacted my students’ writing development, and my students’ literate identities in a positive way.

Writer’s Workshop is a basic framework for teaching writing where, “teachers learn more about their students’ experiences, prior knowledge, and academic strengths and needs...” (Flint & Fisher-Ari, 2014, p. 636). Data analysis revealed, at the beginning of Writer’s Workshop, students believed they were good writers because of the conventions they used while writing. Leung and Hicks (2014) discuss writer identity as “…the skills and process students adopt and internalize, and how they describe themselves in terms of writing” (p. 588). At the beginning of Writer’s Workshop, students felt they were good writers because they were including capital letters, punctuation, and writing neatly. However, at the conclusion of Writer’s Workshop students became more focused on the writing they were producing and not just the conventions of their writing.

Data also showed that students understood the importance of writing. Leung and Hicks (2014) wrote that “…culture, socioeconomic factors, and experiences-is the umbrella under which
writer identity rests” (p. 588). During Writer’s Workshop, students can write about culture, socioeconomic factors, and life experiences. When students write about these things their identity is prevalent in their writing. Before and after Writer’s Workshop, students discussed writing and the way writing is used in the world: for careers, and for college.

Findings showed that because of Writer’s Workshop students’ writing improved, students began to self-reflect on their writing, and students’ views on writing changed. Snyders (2013) writes about Writer’s Workshop giving students an opportunity for authentic and rigorous instruction:

Writing… is a creative exploration, an adventure, an outlet for imagination, and the growth of a child’s spirit. A child’s success in writing workshop is not black or white, or right or wrong. It requires a step into the unknown. There is magic when children believe in their writing abilities through the exploration of literature in writing workshop. They can write. (p. 414)

During Writer’s Workshop, students had an opportunity to creatively write about whatever they chose. Students thrived on being able to choose what they were writing, instead of being told what to write. The students’ attitudes and feelings about writing transformed because of their participation in Writer’s Workshop.

Conclusions

Exposure to authentic writing tasks every day will help students become better writers.

In a Writer’s Workshop, students can “write about their natural, functional authentic experiences within their worlds” (Kissel & Miller, 2015, p. 78). A Writer’s Workshop builds on students’ experiences and allows them to engage in the writing process by asserting their voice as an author. During Writer’s Workshop, the students could write about their experiences in an authentic writing setting. The consistent exposure to writing is shown through the gains in the students’ writing.

Writer’s Workshop creates a rich writing environment where students are being exposed to writing every day. The data analysis showed how exposure to writing every day helped students show growth in their writing skills. Jones and East (2010) write about the practice of daily writing and how it “has the potential to increase students’ writing confidence and control
over written language” (p. 11). Before Writer’s Workshop, the students did not have daily exposure to authentic writing tasks. There was little to no opportunity for the students to be engaged in genuine writing tasks that would help them improve their writing. While having a chance to write every day for four weeks, the students showed improvement in their writing.

In a Writer’s Workshop students have time every day to write. When students have consistent exposure to authentic writing, they are “able to increase their knowledge of their strengths and begin to create attainable goals for themselves” (Jones and East, 2010, p. 11). Since students get to write every day in a Writer’s Workshop they know what they are capable of, and what they need to do to set goals for themselves to become better writers. Findings showed that students produced authentic writing pieces that showed improvement over the course of the four weeks.

**Writer’s Workshop transformed the way students felt about writing, and themselves as writers.**

Before Writer’s Workshop, students felt unsure about writing. Students expressed that they were nervous to write because they ultimately did not know what to do. As Writer’s Workshop progressed, students became more confident in their ability as writers. Students’ feelings went from scared and nervous to excited and engaged. Writer’s Workshop became some of the students’ favorite time of day.

The literacy tasks that students are involved with on a daily basis shape the way students feel about themselves as a reader and a writer. Seban and Tavsanli (2015) write about the impact literacy practices have on students in the classroom, and state that they are the “context of their learning environment… a benchmark for students’ literacy identity development” (p. 229). Students’ literate identities are shaped by their involvement in the literacy practices that take place in their classroom. Writer identity includes all of the elements that make up a person’s social identity, and also refers to “a sense of self as a writer, a growing foundation of writing knowledge and skill, and ownership over one’s own writing process” (Rosean, 1993, as cited in Leung & Hicks, 2014, p. 588). As a result of Writer’s Workshop, the students’ literate identities began to evolve. The students’ successes in Writer’s Workshop started playing a role in the students’ perceptions of themselves as writers while learning the writing process.
By implementing Writer’s Workshop in my classroom, students began to have higher self-confidence in themselves and their writing. Since students were being exposed to authentic writing tasks every day, they started to feel more confident about the writing process. Rather than feeling like the writing was a task that had to be completed, the students began to enjoy writing. During a Writer’s Workshop students are involved in authentic interactions, such as independent writing, conferences and author’s chair, which can help re-craft the identities of students in a school context. Students started thinking and feeling like writers.

**Implications**

**Students need exposure to authentic writing tasks every day.**

For students to learn and grow as writers, they must have exposure to authentic writing experiences. Students will not show a significant amount of growth in writing when they are taught from a scripted writing program. Flint and Fisher-Ari (2014) argue that the scripted writing programs “… present writing as a decontextualized skill with little connection to students’ lives and experiences.” (p. 635). When the writing curriculum is scripted and guided it is hard for students to be engaged. There is little to no opportunity for the students to share their life experiences and perspectives.

When students are provided with opportunities to access their cultural and social resources and apply it to their writing, they are evolving their literate identities. Compton-Lilly (2009) writes that teachers need to, “actively seek opportunities to merge students’ interests and ways of being with literacy learning to help each child to recognize the ways literacy can contribute to his/her personal goals and interests.” (p. 74). While giving students a chance to write about their interests, teachers are helping students appreciate writing and students have a desire to write. By exposing students to authentic writing tasks, they will become more invested in their learning, and be able to make connections to their learning and their personal lives.

**Students should have a choice in what they write about.**

When thinking about a daily routine in a classroom, students are usually being told what to do all day long. In a classroom where Writer’s Workshop is implemented, the students have the autonomy to choose what they want to write about. As cited in Magalas and Ryan’s (2016) research, Jasmine and Weiner (2007) wrote about the impact of the writing workshop model
saying that it was an effective instructional method in teaching first graders the writing process, and “it meant more to the students when they chose their own topics.” (p. 13). When students choose their own topics, they become more invested in their learning.

By giving students a choice in what they decide to write about, we are valuing the literacy resources that the children are bringing to school unknowingly. Compton-Lilly (2009) talks about a challenge that teachers face, “Utilizing the cultural resources that children bring entails recognizing and valuing diverse resources grounded in childhood culture, and divergent literacy practices that are often considered unworthy of school attention.” (p. 60) The cultural resources that students bring to school do not always match the curriculum that is being taught. However, in a Writer’s Workshop, students have the opportunity to use those cultural resources in their writing.

Students need to be given the opportunity to choose what they are writing about. When students have a choice, they are actively engaged and less likely to lose focus. By giving students a choice, they realize that their voices matter and what they are doing is worthwhile. Magalas and Ryan (2016) state, “We need to give students a reason to want to write, and the best way to do that is to let them choose what they want to write about.” (p. 9). When students choose what they are writing about, they have the power to choose what is interesting to them, and they realize that their ideas are valuable.

**Further Research**

Based on my research, I will continue Writer’s Workshop in my classroom for the rest of the school year. I will continue to look into growth in my students’ writing, and their literate identities. It would be beneficial for myself, and other researchers, to implement Writer’s Workshop at the beginning of a school year, and be able to look at student growth throughout the whole year. I will start off each school year implementing Writer’s Workshop, and place more of an emphasis on constructing a positive literate identity. Based on the impact Writer’s Workshop had in my classroom, a suggestion would be to look into how Writer’s Workshop can continue to affect students’ literate identities, and writing abilities in the following school year.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study include the short time frame, the participants in my study, and being the sole researcher. Due to time constraints, I was only able to collect data for a six
week period of time in the middle of the school year. For my study, I only had eight first-grade students as a sample size. In regards to academic standing, the eight students that I met with would be considered all around “partially meeting grade level standards or meeting grade level standards.” I was unable to work with students who were not meeting grade level standards. I was also only able to work with first-grade students, so I was not able to see the impact of Writer’s Workshop across other grade levels. Since I was the sole researcher, I was not able to discuss ideas and theories with anyone else about the study.

**Overall Significance**

The findings in this research study have provided insight into the development of literate identity, and an instructional approach to teaching writing. This study is significant for any teacher who follows a scripted literacy program that does not include enough authentic writing tasks. My study can also help any teacher who is looking at students developing their writing abilities or observing the impact of literate identity in student writing. This study is significant to me specifically because I noted a lack of writing instruction in my curriculum and students acting negatively towards writing. I wanted to see why my students disliked writing so much, and if there was a solution to teach them the writing process while enjoying writing. The findings in this study can inform any teacher so that they can better understand the importance of literate identity and writing instruction.
References


Miller, M., Berg, H., Cox, D. (2016) “Basically, you have to teach them to love what they are writing about”: Perceptions of fourth grade writing teachers. *National Teacher Education Journal, 9*(1), 57- 64.


Appendix A

Double Entry Journal Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw Data/What I Observed</th>
<th>My Interpretations and Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Writer’s Workshop Interview Questions (Pre)

1. Who is a good writer that you know? What makes them a good writer?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

2. What do we use writing for?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

3. What do you like to write about?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

4. Do you think writing is important?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

5. Do you think you are a good writer? Why or why not?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
Appendix B cont.

**Writer’s Workshop Interview Questions (Post)**

1. How can you learn from your classmates writing pieces from writer’s workshop?  
   How can your classmates learn from your writing pieces from writing workshop?

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

2. How do you feel about writing?

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

3. Do you think it is important to be a good writer? Why?

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

4. Do you think writing is important? Why?

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

5. Did writer’s workshop change the way you feel about writing? Why or why not?

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

6. Do you think you are a good writer? What are you good at in writing? What do you need to work on to become a better writer?

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
## Narrative Writing Checklist

### Grade 1

**STRUCTURE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I wrote about when I did something.</th>
<th>NOT YET</th>
<th>STARTING TO</th>
<th>YES!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did I do it like a first grader?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried to make a beginning for my story.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One hot sunny day I went to play soccer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and then so</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I put my pages in order. I used words such as and, then, and so.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We won! I felt so proud</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found a way to end my story.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wrote my story across three or more pages.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Narrative Writing Checklist (continued)

### Grade 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did I do it like a first grader?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I put the picture from my mind onto the page. I had details in pictures and words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I used labels and words to give details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Narrative Student Checklists**

# Narrative Writing Checklist (continued)

## Grade 1

### LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did I do it like a first grader?</th>
<th>NOT YET</th>
<th>STARTING TO</th>
<th>YES!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[Image of student illustrations]</td>
<td>I used all I knew about words and chunks of words to help me spell.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image of student illustrations]</td>
<td>I spelled all the word wall words right and used the word wall to help me spell other words.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image of student illustrations]</td>
<td>I ended sentences with punctuation.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image of student illustrations]</td>
<td>I used a capital letter for names.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image of student illustrations]</td>
<td>I used commas in dates and lists.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>