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A Study of the Relationship between Personal Involvement in Writing Topics and Self-Esteem

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A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT
IN WRITING TOPICS AND SELF-ESTEEM

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate Committee of the
Department of Education and Human Development
State University of New York
College at Brockport
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Education

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if children with a low self-esteem rating chose fact-based topics in which they were personally involved less often than students with a high self-esteem rating.

The subjects of this study were 50 students from grades two through six of a rural school district in Western New York. One classroom from each grade level was administered the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Students whose raw scores fell within the five lowest and five highest extremes of their class were used as subjects for the study. The writing folders of these subjects were collected after a three month period of writing and analyzed to determine if the topic fits the definition of a writing in which the student is personally involved. Each student was then given a score based on the percentage of topics that contain fact-based personal involvement. A Pearson Coefficient of Determination analysis was used to determine the strength of the relationship between this score and the self-esteem score, and a Point Biserial

Coefficient of Determination was used to search for a global effect.

The statistical analysis indicated that there was no strong relationship found between self-esteem and the percent of personal involvement in writing topics chosen. The results also indicated that there were no strong relationships between grade level and the amount of personal involvement in writing topics.

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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Teachers of writing have been retraining themselves in recent years to take a step back and let children learn about writing by writing. They are learning not to be so critical and not to be overly concerned with mechanics. They are realizing the importance of allowing children to make their own decisions about their writing. They are encouraging children to evaluate their mistakes and choose their own topics. No longer does the first writing assignment of each year have to be, "What I Did on My Summer Vacation."

For some children this freedom of topic choice is a welcome relief from the dull days of assigned topics. These children finish one story and cannot wait to move on to the next. Their topic lists go on and on, and are constantly being revised.

Other children accept this freedom with some apprehension and need encouragement before they are comfortable with it. This is when the teacher steps in with activities that help generate topic

lists and expose children to different genres of writing. They allow children to share their pieces so that they may also get ideas from each other's writing.

Despite these efforts, there seem to be a few students in most classes that still have trouble finding topics they feel are important enough to write about. They are especially reluctant to write personal narratives or anything that may expose themselves. They tend to dwell on one topic or theme and have trouble venturing from it to something more personal.

Could it be that these children have such a low opinion of themselves that they do not feel they have anything important enough to say? Are their lives so insignificant they are not worth writing about? Is the self-esteem of children related to whether or not they choose to write about themselves?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if children with a low self-esteem rating choose fact-based topics in which they are personally involved less often than students with a high self-esteem rating.

Questions

1. Is there a strong relationship between children's self-esteem and whether or not they choose to write about a topic in which they are personally involved?
2. Is there a strong relationship between grade level and children's use of personal involvement in their writing topics?

Need for the Study

For the past decade, much of the literature concerning the teaching of writing emphasized writing as a process. There are several models of writing which teachers use to aid their students in understanding this process. Much has been written about these models which usually include steps such as planning, drafting, revising,

editing, and publishing. Also emphasized in these models is the importance of self-selected topics.

Although topic-selection is considered an important part in encouraging children to write, it is not well researched and needs to be looked at more closely. According to Graves (1989), many children have a very difficult time choosing a topic to write about because they do not feel there is much significance to their lives. Murray (1982) believes that some students do not find their own topics because they lack self-respect.

Statements such as these suggest that the ability to self-select a topic may be related to a child's self-esteem. However, there is a need for research that will determine if a strong relationship does exist between self-esteem and topic choice. Such research could motivate teachers to develop a writing program for their students that enhances self-esteem and allows all students to take risks and grow as writers.

Definitions

Writing Workshop Classrooms - Classrooms in which children write on a regular basis, at least 3 days per week, one-half hour per day on a topic of their choice.

Personal Involvement Pieces of Writing - Pieces of writing that are fact-based, although they may not be totally true. They are written from personal experiences. The writer may or may not be present, however the revealing of some aspect of one's self is present.

Self-esteem - Refers to the evaluation a person makes and customarily maintains with regards to him or herself (Coopersmith, 1981).

Strong Relationship - Having a rpb2 value of .16 or above.

Limitations of the Study

The following are variables that could have limited the results of this study:

1. Individual teachers may inadvertently encourage their student to write more personal experience stories rather than fictional stories and vice versa.
2. Although all participating classroom teachers were instructed to read the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale to their students, and were instructed to reword any items that could cause confusion to any children, some items could be misinterpreted, especially to those children at the second grade level.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

Much of the current literature concerning the teaching of writing is focused on the writing process, which could be considered the "how" with regards to writing, and the importance of writing in relation to other academic areas, which could be considered the "why" in regards to writing. However, research seems to be lacking in the area that can be a major stumbling block for fragile beginning writers as well as experienced writers--the "what". This review of literature has been focused for the most part on the "what" of writing.

The Writing Process and Topic Selection

When discussing writing as a process, Murray (1985) states that "there is not one process, but many. The process varies with the personality or cognitive style of the writer, the experience of the writer, and the nature of writing task" (p.4).

Topic selection is one part of this process. It is believed that allowing writers to self-select their own topics is important in their involvement and growth as writers. In her experience with teaching writing to her eighth graders, Atwell (1985) has observed that writers who are allowed to choose their own topics take chances trying new subjects, techniques, and formats.

They seldom lose pieces of writing; they talk about their writing with parents and friends; they spend much of their own time writing and thinking about their writing; they identify themselves as authors... Open topic choice allows young writers to tap their own, rich personal and academic resources (p.36).

The work of Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) shows how even very young children become committed to the writing process when they are given ownership of their own topics. Bently and Butler (1987) found that "by writing about aspects of their lives which are important to them, students are able to improve their writing fluency at the drafting stage and show more commitment towards editing and revising for publication" (p.9).

In his book, Expecting the Unexpected (1989), Murray states that assigning topics trivializes

the task of writing. He notes that "students are most likely to write-especially those students who are least likely to write-when they confront a personal problem that may be solved by writing" (p.109). Jackson (1987) reinforces this statement with a story about Harry. Whenever it was writing time in his classroom, Harry would open a book and copy at random. To him, that was writing and he evidently had nothing of his own to say, until the day his brother was in an accident. He wrote: "My brother hurt he hand. He had to go to the hospital. He alright now." Harry's teacher treated the story as an important one and asked Harry's permission to publish it in the class newspaper. Harry never copied in that classroom again (p.23).

Although there are many benefits to allowing children to choose their own topics, the task itself is not always an easy one. This may be especially true for the older students who have been conditioned over the years to depend on the teacher, and tend to be more self conscious. Some children feel they know nothing or have not had anything important happen in their lives. Murray

(1982) states "Too often in school we encourage the student's self-hate rather than his self-love. But no student will write well unless he believes he has something to say. He must feel he has worth before he will say something of worth" (p.131). Laskin (1983) reaffirms this in her statement that "many students believe they can't write, and many teachers only help reinforce their students' own negative image of themselves" (p.10).

So self-selection of writing topics is important, but what about these writers who have nothing to say?

Self-Esteem and Writing

Many teachers maintain that when children feel good about themselves, they do better in school. "In fact Stanley Coopersmith (1976), a child psychologist, has shown that self-esteem is a better predictor of a student's future academic success than the use of intelligence test scores" (Christensen, 1983, p.7). "Children today are not receiving enough positive, nurturing attention from adults, and therefore more and more students

have low levels of self-esteem" (Canfield, 1990, p.48). Canfield described a study conducted by Dusa in which she divided a highschool freshman class into three groups. In the self-esteem group, techniques were used to promote the subjects' self-esteem. The control group received no treatment but was monitored along with the self-esteem group, and the third group was not monitored and received no treatment. Dusa found that the self-esteem group had a higher percentage of students who completed their homework, participated in extracurricular activities, were more apt to hold class offices, and graduated from high school, than the control group.

Some researchers have found that writing promotes self-esteem (Howgate, 1982; Ouzts, 1983). Ouzts (1983) states that, "Writing can become a natural vehicle for self-expression as well as for reading instruction. This writing may improve students' attitudes toward learning in the classroom and with this improved attitude a heightened sense of self-esteem may be achieved" (p.9). In a study conducted by Arnold (1982) in which she recorded the number of self-esteem

comments in letters which were exchanged by two groups of students, she comments that:

A pupil who sees himself or herself as a 'bad' writer is inclined to see himself or herself as not a writer at all. When pupils begin to see and include themselves in that category, then they develop a more realistic self-concept, with self-esteem subsumed within that (p.40).

She goes on to say: "When the writer's self-esteem is sufficiently stable he or she can take risks and reach out to audiences more distant from the self" (p.43). Christensen (1983) agrees in the following quote:

If a student is to build a positive self-concept, he must know himself--his thoughts, fantasies, abilities, limitations, views of the world. No matter how much positive feedback the rest of his world gives him, he needs to develop some positive feedback for himself. He fears what he doesn't know. The more clearly he sees himself, the greater the likelihood he can change what he doesn't like and feel good about what he does like. "Writing is a means--perhaps the best means--to make knowledge personal, connected, accessible to self" (Strong, 1983). Writing is accepted as a key to successful learning across the curriculum. Certainly it follows that it should be used in studying that most important subject, the self (p.12).

Giving students control of their own writing helps them to see that they have control of language, which according to Howgate (1982) leads to control of one's own life. This increases

self-confidence and enhances self-esteem. In an article written by Knight (1990), she cites a study by Gentry (1985) in which the students chose their own topics and were free to write about anything of interest to them. He found that "the free choice gave the students confidence in making decisions and their self-esteem grew out of their ownership of a journal" (p.8).

Writing Apprehension and Self-Esteem

Writing apprehension is associated with the tendency of people to approach or avoid writing. Highly apprehensive writers find writing unrewarding and therefore avoid, when possible, situations that require writing. The opposite is true of low apprehensive writers who enjoy writing (Faigley, Daley, and Witte, 1981). There are conflicting beliefs among researchers as to whether or not there is truly a relationship between writing apprehension and self-esteem. Some educators have observed that the way a student feels about himself affects how he writes. Students who are apprehensive about writing also tend to feel comparatively less positive about

themselves (Daly and Wilson, 1983). "Kasden characterizes basic writers as having poor self-images, low aspirations, and feeling of powerlessness. Lederman and Lunsford suggest that helping students improve their self-images might help them become better writers." (Minot & Gamble, 1991, p.119).

In a study performed by Faigley, et al., (1981), the subjects' writing apprehension was assessed by the Daly-Miller writing apprehension instrument. They also wrote two essays. The first writing assignment elicited narrative and descriptive writing, which drew on the writer's personal experiences. The second elicited argumentative discourse. Results showed significant effects for apprehension when the essay was a personal narrative. No effects were observed for the argumentative topics, which specifically asked students not to use personal experience. The narrative essay required more emphasis on self which this study concludes may be more difficult for high-apprehensive writers.

In a later study conducted by Daly and Wilson (1983), it was found that writing

apprehension and general self-esteem were inversely related to each other. "Individuals with high apprehension about writing may, to some degree, also suffer from lower self-esteem than their counterparts with low apprehension" (p.337). Minot and Gamble (1991) believed that they would have similar results in a study they conducted. The subjects were given pretest and posttests on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test. Based on the results of the 337 college freshmen who took the tests, they found one of the three basic writing sections, contrary to their hypothesis, to have the highest self-esteem and the lowest writing apprehension of all the 19 classes in the study which included 16 regular composition courses. This class contradicted the claims that basic writers are highly apprehensive and lack self-esteem.

Chapter III

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if children with a low self-esteem rating choose fact-based topics in which they are personally involved less often than students with a high self-esteem rating.

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 50 students from grades two through six of a rural school district in western New York. One classroom from each grade level was administered the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. The subjects were chosen based on the scores of this instrument. Students whose raw scores fell within the five lowest and the five highest extremes for their class were used. The classrooms were known by the researcher to practice writing workshops on a regular weekly basis.

Materials

Materials for this study consist of:

1. Copies of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale for each of the students tested in grades two through six.
2. A collection of writing pieces from each subject.

Procedure

The teachers of one classroom from each grade level in grades two through six administered the Piers-Harris Self-Concept scale to their entire class. The scale contains 80 items in which the students must circle "yes" if the statement is true for them or "no" if it is false. The items were read to the students by the teachers. Completion time was approximately 10 minutes.

The researcher collected and scored the responses. The raw score was used to establish the two extreme groups - high self-esteem/low self-esteem. The researcher then asked participating teachers to make copies of all pieces of writing done by these students during the classrooms' writing workshop time. It was

emphasized that only writing in which the subjects were free to choose the topic should be used. The collection period was approximately four months.

At the end of the collection time, the researcher analyzed the writings of each student to determine if the topic of each piece of writing was a topic that fits the definition of a writing in which the student is personally involved. Appendice B gives an example of such a writing piece. Each student was then given a score based on the percentage of topics that contain fact-based personal involvement.

The criteria for which category the writings would fit under was determined by the researcher. Writings that were counted as personal involvement pieces included personal experience stories such as stories about family get-togethers, holidays, family members, adventures with friends or siblings. Anything which appeared to be based on fact and revealed a part of the writer's life was included.

Writings not included as personal involvement pieces were fictional stories with elements of fantasy, or stories that really did not have any

of the self involved. Stories about football and favorite players and teams for example were not counted. A horror story with the writer as main character would not be counted because it is fantasy.

To be sure that this criterion was reliable, the researcher and another person analyzed three or four non-selected students who scored near to the limit points on the self-esteem inventory to see if the scores were reasonably close.

Analysis

The statistical procedures used to analyze the relationship between self-esteem and personal involvement in writing pieces were a Pearson Coefficient of Determination and a Point Biserial Coefficient of Determination (rpb2) analysis. The following was used to determine a relationship:

rpb2 <.10-----no relationship
=.11 to .15-----minimal
=.16 to .25-----definite relationship
>.26-----real evidence

An examination through breakdown analysis was used to find any relationship between grade level and the personal involvement score.

Chapter IV

Analysis of the Data

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if children with a low self-esteem rating chose fact-based topics in which they were personally involved less often than students with a high self-esteem rating.

Questions

1. Is there a strong relationship between children's self-esteem and whether or not they chose to write about a topic in which they were personally involved?
2. Is there a strong relationship between grade level and children's use of personal involvement in their writing topics?

Findings and Interpretations

A Pearson Coefficient of Determination (r^2) analysis was used to see if there was a predictive relationship across all of the subjects used in this study regardless of grade, between the Piers-Harris scores and the percent of writing pieces with personal involvement. The self-esteem scores were calculated as the (x) variable and the percent of pieces with personal involvement were calculated as the (y) variable.

Table 1 below displays the results of this analysis:

Table 1- Pearson Coefficient of Determination for Predictive Relationship Between High or Low Self-Esteem and the Percent of Personal Involvement

$$\begin{aligned} r &= .1122253 \\ r^2 &= .0125945 \\ b &= .0942817 \end{aligned}$$

n=50 strong relationship=.16 to .25

Therefore, knowing the Piers-Harris score explained only one percent of the amount of personal involvement in the writing samples,

however 99 percent remained unexplained. A value of r^2 this low is conventionally interpreted as a significantly weak relationship. The slope (b) indicates that as the Piers-Harris score increases by one point, the percent of personal involvement increases nine one-hundredths. However, this relationship between two variables is so weak that it is unwarranted to predict the percent of personal involvement by looking at the self-esteem score.

In Phase II of the analysis, because of the weakness of the relationship in Phase I, a Point Biserial Coefficient of Determination (r_{pb2}) was used to search for a global effect. In each grade level the five highest Piers-Harris scores were coded as high self-esteem, and the five lowest scores were coded as low self-esteem. These codes were entered into the (x) variable while the (y) variable remained the percent of personal involvement.

Table 2 below displays the results for this analysis:

Table 2- Point Biserial Coefficient of Determination for Global Relationship Between High or Low Self-Esteem and the Percent of Personal Involvement

	$r = .2747078$
	$r_{pb2} = .0754644$

n=50	strong relationship = .16 to .25
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These results indicate no strong relationship between self-esteem scores and personal involvement in writing pieces. Only eight percent of variation in the percent of personal involvement was explained by knowing whether the person had either high self-esteem or was categorized as low self-esteem. Knowing whether the subject falls in the high or low extreme of the Piers-Harris scale does not help predict the percent of personal involvement. If anything the tendency was to go in reverse of the hypothesis.

The same statistical procedure (r_{pb2}) was used to determine the relationship between grade level and the percent of writing pieces with

personal involvement, which addresses question #2 of this study. Table 3 below displays the results:

Table 3-Coefficient of Determination for Grade Level and the Percent of Writing Pieces with Personal Involvement

$$\begin{aligned}r &= .1336974 \\r_{pb2} &= .017875\end{aligned}$$

n=5 strong relationship= .16 to .25

Again, no strong relationship was found. Knowing the grade level explains only one percent of the amount of personal involvement in the writing samples.

Summary

According to the data collected in this study, no strong relationships were found between self-esteem and the percent of personal involvement in writing topics chosen. The results also revealed that there were no strong relationships between grade level and the amount of personal involvement in writing topics.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if children with a low self-esteem rating choose fact-based topics in which they are personally involved less often than students with a high self-esteem rating.

Questions

1. Is there a strong relationship between children's self-esteem and whether or not they choose to write about a topic in which they are personally involved?
2. Is there a strong relationship between grade level and children's use of personal involvement in their writing topics?

Conclusions

No strong correlations were found, therefore it is concluded that for this group of students from this particular school district, when using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale to measure self-esteem, there were no strong relationships among the variables. Any relationship that does exist among any of the scores for any individual student is coincidental. It was noted by the researcher however, that 74% of the subjects in the study wrote a higher percentage of pieces that were categorized as pieces with personal involvement than were without personal involvement. This included all subjects-both with high and low self-esteem.

Implications for Research

Further research is needed in the area of writing and topic choice. Although this study did not find any strong relationships between self-esteem and topic choice, the majority of the subjects (37 out of 50) wrote a higher percentage of personal involvement-type pieces than fictional-type pieces. A follow-up

qualitative-type study could be done in which the researcher interviews the subjects to find out why or how they chose their topic. This could generate some insights into what goes on in the minds of students during their planning process and could be used to help those who have difficulty with topic choice.

A survey could be administered asking students if they prefer self-selected topics or assigned topics, and that could be studied to see if there is a relationship to self-esteem.

This study could be replicated in a school with the Whole Language philosophy versus a more traditional school, with an added element of writers' attitudes to see if any relationships exist among writing topics, self-esteem and attitude towards writing, and whether or not these relationships vary with the different school philosophies.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Although no relationships were found between writing topics and self-esteem, there was a trend for students (both with high self-esteem and low self-esteem) to write personal involvement stories more often than fictional stories. Therefore, it is important for teachers to give students the opportunity to write about aspects of their lives, and to share them with others. This allows children to grow in many ways. They may gain confidence in their writing, or they may develop a self awareness that could lead to an increase in self-esteem.

Teachers must remember the varying personalities and ability levels of their students. There will always be some reluctant writers. Classroom teachers need to give these children guidance and encouragement. Activities need to be conducted that help to generate topics so that the very first stage of the writing process does not become a burden that discourages rather than encourages a writer to write. It is important to celebrate even the smallest

accomplishments and let children know that what they have to say is important and worth writing about. The classroom teacher needs to be a role model who writes and shares along with the children. Writing pieces should be displayed and possibly published in the school newspaper or on the kids' page of the local newspaper.

The classroom teacher's role during writing workshop is to motivate, encourage, and guide the writer so that he will take pride in his writing and feel good about his accomplishments.

Summary

Based on the analysis of the data, this study found no strong relationship between self-esteem and personal involvement in writing topics. However it was noted that the majority of the subjects wrote a higher percentage of pieces that contained elements of personal involvement than fictional pieces. There is a need for further research in the area of topic selection to help guide the classroom teacher in helping the reluctant writer.

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APPENDICES

SCORING STATISTICS

I.D.	P.H. Raw Score	P.I.		WOPI		High = 1 Low = 0 Group	Grade
		#	%	#	%		
1.0	77	2	40	3	60	1	2
1.1	76	4	57	3	43	1	2
1.2	75	3	33	6	67	1	2
1.3	72	12	75	4	25	1	2
1.4	70	4	80	1	20	1	2
1.5	57	4	40	6	60	0	2
1.6	55	13	81	3	19	0	2
1.7	53	4	44	5	56	0	2
1.8	51	2	33	4	67	0	2
1.9	48	15	79	4	21	0	2
2.0	80	7	78	2	22	1	3
2.1	77	11	92	1	8	1	3
2.2	75	5	71	2	29	1	3
2.3	73	10	71	4	29	1	3
2.4	72	7	58	5	42	1	3
2.5	38	4	67	2	33	0	3
2.6	47	5	36	9	64	0	3
2.7	47	7	70	3	30	0	3
2.8	48	3	43	4	57	0	3
2.9	58	6	60	4	40	0	3
3.0	79	4	67	2	33	1	4
3.1	71	5	71	2	29	1	4
3.2	71	4	67	2	33	1	4
3.3	70	5	71	2	29	1	4
3.4	69	5	71	2	29	1	4
3.5	38	4	80	1	20	0	4
3.6	46	4	67	2	33	0	4
3.7	45	3	43	4	57	0	4
3.8	45	2	50	2	50	0	4
3.9	51	5	83	1	16	0	4
4.0	78	4	57	3	43	1	5
4.1	76	5	83	1	17	1	5
4.2	76	5	63	3	37	1	5
4.3	75	6	67	3	33	1	5
4.4	75	6	86	1	14	1	5
4.5	15	4	44	5	56	0	5
4.6	28	6	75	2	25	0	5
4.7	29	4	67	2	33	0	5
4.8	53	6	86	1	14	0	5
4.9	57	5	83	1	17	0	5
5.0	75	5	71	2	29	1	6
5.1	74	3	60	2	40	1	6
5.2	73	4	44	5	56	1	6
5.3	73	3	60	2	40	1	6
5.4	71	4	50	4	50	1	6
5.5	34	3	60	2	40	0	6
5.6	33	6	75	2	25	0	6
5.7	17	4	67	2	33	0	6
5.8	28	4	57	3	43	0	6
5.9	42	4	57	3	43	0	6

Example of a writing piece
with personal involvement :

34

When I got stitches

When I got stitches I was 3
years old. I was walking in
the kitchen with bare feet
and I stepped on glass. I
went to a hospital but
they could not get it out because
I was moving too much so they
put a straight jacket on me.
I hurt bad.

When I got stitches

When I got stitches I was 3
years old. I was walking in
the kitchen with bare feet
and I stepped on glass. I
went to the hospital but
they could not get it out because
I was moving too much so they
put a straight jacket on me.
I hurt bad.

Example of a writing piece
without personal involvement:

35

My Naima

In a faraway land, lives
a Tasmanian Devil that eats
all kinds of animals, and when
he comes he spins like a
tornado, and he also has a
family. he has a mom, a da-
d, a brother and a sister.

In a faraway land lives
a Tasmanian Devil that eats
all kinds of animals, and when
he comes he spins to make a
tornado. And he also has a
family. he has a mom, a da-
d, a brother, and a sister.