JTAR

EDITORS

GIL NAIZER

APRIL SANDERS

LAURA ISBELL

TAMI MORTON

SUSAN WILLIAMS

Journal of Teacher Action Research - Volume 8, Issue 1, 2021,
practicalteacherresearch.com, ISSN # 2332-2233

JTAR

Journal of Teacher Action Research
Volume 8, Issue 1, 2021

JTAR

About the Journal

Founded in 2013, the Journal of Teacher Action Research (ISSN: 2332-2233) is a peer-reviewed online journal indexed with EBSCO that seeks practical research that can be implemented in Pre-Kindergarten through Post-Secondary classrooms. The primary function of this journal is to provide classroom teachers and researchers a means for sharing classroom practices.

The journal accepts articles for peer-review that describe classroom practice which positively impacts student learning. We define teacher action research as teachers (at all levels) studying their practice and/or their students' learning in a methodical way in order to inform classroom practice. Articles submitted to the journal should demonstrate an action research focus with intent to improve the author's practice.

Editorial Team

www.practicalteacherresearch.com

BEYOND THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE: CHOICE AND AUTHENTICITY IN MIDDLE SCHOOL NOVEL WRITING

Tyra G. Deckard
University of Louisville

Abstract Due to increasing weight on test scores and accountability, students rarely get the opportunity to participate in creative, authentic writing tasks in the language arts classroom. The purpose of this teacher action research study is to understand how middle school students' engagement, agency, and self-efficacy were affected when given agency, choice, and authenticity in a writing unit. The study collected qualitative data from a middle school novel-writing project to answer the questions: 1) how does providing choice and supporting student agency in an authentic writing task influence students' engagement in the writing process, and 2) how do middle school students develop their identities as writers when given choice and agency in an authentic writing task? When the student participants in this study were given choice and an authentic writing task, they showed increased self-efficacy and higher engagement in the writing process. The students used creative self-expression to represent their personal experiences, interests, and social worlds as they found their own identities as writers.

Keywords: teacher action research, agency, student choice, authentic writing, middle school, language arts, writing instruction

Introduction

"There's millions of voices in the world that need to be heard. They want to speak up, but they can't. They can't speak up because of the pressure of being the perfect person. That's why we have to let the voices be themselves and let them speak up" (excerpt from Amber's novel, The Kingdom).

Year after year, middle school teachers give students the same types of traditional writing assignments: expository essays (research papers, often on a topic dictated by the teacher), persuasive essays (with commonly suggested arguments such as whether schools should have uniforms or allow phones in class), and narrative essays (usually a personal narrative). I am no different; when I started teaching, I thought I was giving students creative choices when I told them they could write about anything in their lives. However, I got to a point in my teaching career where I could not take another "The Time I Rode a Rollercoaster" essay. And I was getting near that point with essays titled "My Birthday", "My Family Trip", and "The Day I Broke my Arm". We expect middle school students to read engaging, compelling,

and complex texts that represent their interests, personalities, and backgrounds. Shouldn't we expect the same of their writing?

As teachers, one of the challenges we face is how to implement writing assignments that not only meet school, district, and state requirements, but also inspire students to tap into the unique interests, creativity, and distinct abilities that each student possesses. In response to, and despite, all of these pressures and concerns, I designed a writing unit for my sixth-grade language arts students that required them to write their own novel in a month. My goal with this unit was to increase student engagement in the writing process, while effectively teaching them to use strategies and make decisions that "real" writers do. Although this had the potential to become an overwhelming task for those in their first year of middle school, all my students finished the unit with creative and unique narratives that they were proud to have written and were excited to share with their classmates, friends, and family.

As the students developed their novels, they used mentor texts, participated in writing workshops, and worked collaboratively in writers' groups. Using teacher observations, analysis of the students' finished novel excerpts, and an open-ended survey/reflection completed by the students at the end of the unit, this study seeks to examine the effects on student engagement, as well as how they developed their writing identities when given agency and choice. This study asks:

1. How does providing choice and supporting student agency in an authentic writing task influence students' engagement in the writing process?
2. How do middle school students develop their identities as writers when given choice and agency in an authentic writing task?

As I seek to answer these questions, I begin by examining the literature on authentic writing, student choice, and agency. Then I lay out the most relevant elements of the unit design and instructional methods. Finally, I will analyze the students' writing and reflections and discuss the implications of this study on future writing instruction.

Literature Review

This writing unit was designed to give students both authentic writing opportunities and choice during writing instruction. The concept of offering students choice and authentic writing opportunities during instruction are widely recognized as best practices that support students' learning (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). However, they can often prove to be quite difficult to put into practice in the typical classroom, especially in the current educational environment that focuses heavily on scores from standardized tests that do not allow any room for student choice or authentic writing tasks. Applebee and Langer (2006) observed that requirements of most state and district writing assessments expect students to respond to narrow prompts in limited genres, thus restricting the scope of authentic and meaningful writing students are asked to do in the writing classroom. Furthermore, students cannot easily develop their identity as writers within the rigid genres of traditional school writing

assignments, and they frequently adopt a negative attitude toward writing and their self-efficacy as writers (Williamson, 2019).

Authentic Writing. Students rarely can engage in authentic literacy activities. In a society that focuses on test scores as a sign of academic achievement, teachers often find themselves pressured to teach to the test. Reading passages assigned as part of the curriculum are designed to mimic those that would be found on a standardized test, and writing assignments are often designed with the standardized test grading rubrics in mind (Applebee & Langer, 2006). Despite studies that have suggested that students make gains in achievement when they are engaged with learning through authentic literacy activities (Behizadeh, 2014; Freire, 2018; Morrell, 2008; Winn & Johnson, 2011), many schools still disregard such activities in favor of more traditional "doing school rather than doing life" activities (Roll & Vaughn, 2019, p. 79).

According to Roll and Vaughn (2019), "authentic literacy opportunities highlight tasks and instruction that are connected to students' real lives, student-centered, open ended, involve choice, and may include a project-based approach" (p. 79). Authentic writing opportunities should have a specific, real audience and reflect writing that would happen in the real world, while still connecting in meaningful ways to the actual lives of the students engaged in the tasks.

Behizadeh (2014) posits the question, "*What* constitutes the real world and *who* decides if a school task such as an academic essay is authentic?" (p. 28). Considering that a student's own judgement of a writing task determines authenticity, Behizadeh suggests positioning the student as the authority when deciding what constitutes authentic writing (2014). As students bring their own personal interests, family and cultural experiences, and social life into authentic writing opportunities, they alone have the right to decide whether a writing task is connected to the world, and to their lived realities (Behizadeh, 2014, p. 29). Thus, authentic writing may look different from one student to another and may vary from classroom to classroom.

Student Choice. An essential part of fostering authenticity in writing instruction is providing students with choice in the classroom. Classroom choice is a widely recognized, research-based teaching practice in which texts, tasks and collaborative groups are determined by the students (Meier, 2015). When students are given choice in the classroom, they are more likely to be engaged and put more effort into an assignment (Parsons et al., 2015). Not only that, but choice increases self-efficacy, or confidence in the students' own abilities, and involves students in the learning process, giving the students a sense of ownership of their learning and writing (Ruben & Moll, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Nelson, 2019).
Allowing student choice in writing tasks, whether it be in purpose, genre, audience, or style, allows students to express their identities and form a more personal connection with their writing (Williamson, 2019). For middle grade students, writing can allow them to find meaning in their personal experiences, and to "explore their innermost thoughts, their struggles with identity, relationships, cancer, love, religion, and fears (Ruben & Moll, 2013, p. 12).

Student Agency and Writing Identity. Agency refers to the ability one has to act upon their world, and in turn is "the ability of students to give significance to the world in purposeful ways with the aim of creating, impacting, and/or transforming themselves, or the conditions of their lives" (Vaughn et al., 2020, p. 534). Fostering student agency in education is an important but often neglected aspect of writing instruction, as it allows students to develop as independent, confident writers (Vaughn et al., 2020, p. 534). Although agency is essential to students' growth as independent learners, the unfortunate truth is that most students, particularly students of color or with low socioeconomic status, do not have a sense of agency over their learning in a typical classroom setting.

Throughout their school experiences, students often find themselves positioned as certain types of readers and writers: low, high, struggling, advanced, among other labels students may be given because of testing, tracking, or other types of evaluating and grouping. Students have very little agency over the reading/writing identities ascribed to them institutionally and reinforced through classroom practices (Frankel & Fields, 2019). They do, however, have the agency to either work within the confines of their labels, or eschew them. Sadly, though, once a student has been identified in such a way, it is quite difficult to remove or change the label, especially when they feel they have little to no agency over their school and learning environments.

Closely tied to agency, identity is a complex and much contested term (Alvermann, 2001; Gee, 2000; Moje & Luke, 2009). For this article, I will focus on students' identities *as writers*, which is still a multifaceted concept. A students' writing identity "involves different positions or stances authors take up as they compose texts and engage in conversation, ... relationships authors form with others as they compose, and individuals' self-ascribed and externally imposed concepts of self-efficacy" (Williamson, 2019, p.252). Giving students choice and agency in their writing means encouraging students to bring their cultural, social, experiential backgrounds and varying literacy practices into their writing. Recognizing their cultural and social knowledge as an asset to a student's writing not only informs the stances they take and the voice they assume, but it also builds their self-efficacy, which could lead to a positive self-ascribed identity as a writer.

Methodology

Setting. This qualitative study took place during my fourth year of teaching in a middle school in a large, urban school district located in the Midwest. The school includes grades six through eight and has 987 students. Of the enrolled students, 86.7% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The novel writing unit was implemented in my two sixth-grade advanced placement (AP) English language arts classes. I was not able to teach this unit in my regular Language Arts classes, as they were planned collaboratively in a professional learning community (PLC), leaving me very little autonomy to adjust content or instructional units. Unfortunately, the PLC planning sessions frequently resulted in the more traditional "doing school" type of

lessons, in response to administrative and standardized testing pressures; sadly, this is often the case across schools, especially when involving instruction geared towards "low" or "struggling" students (Finn, 2010). Given that I was the only teacher in the school teaching 6th grade AP Language Arts, I had more independence to design innovative and authentic instruction that aimed to provide students with more choice and student-centered, creative learning opportunities.

In the two 6th grade AP language arts classes, there were a total of 58 students; each class had 29 students, which was the maximum class size for a 6th grade classroom in the district. While many of the students had qualified for advanced placement through the district AP test, some students in the classes were chosen as "sit-ins" based on state test scores and teacher recommendations from previous years.

The Unit Design. The unit design incorporated several key literacy strategies, including the use of mentor texts, writing mini-lessons, and collaborative learning. As an inquiry-based writing unit, most of my writing instruction and student outcome expectations revolved around the question: What are the moves and strategies an author uses as they write a novel? Each class period was structured based on the writing workshop course design (Atwell, 2015; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). A typical day of class consisted of a mini-lesson, collaborative writer's group discussions, and writing time.

Mini-Lessons. Writing mini-lessons allow the teacher to present a strategy, technique, or procedure before then allowing the students to apply the learned strategies to their own writing. According to Atwell (2015), mini-lessons should be no more than ten to fifteen minutes; long enough to present an idea without losing the interest of the students.

Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) explained that there are four different categories into which the writing mini-lessons fall: procedural, writer's process, qualities of good writing, and editing skills. The procedural mini-lessons were used to guide students as they created accounts or navigated websites, practiced classroom procedures for using the class set of keyboards, and learned how to use features or format their word document, like finding the word count of their novel or double spacing. These procedural mini-lessons were just as important as those teaching writing strategies and editing skills because the students needed clear instructions and guidance as they navigated new technology, such as Google Drive, iPads, and USB keyboards.

For the other categories of mini-lessons, I presented strategies and technical skills that the students could use as they wrote their novels. To reinforce these new ideas and see how other authors use the writing strategies, the students often referred to their mentor texts for examples. At the beginning of the unit, the students had been asked to choose their favorite novels, or something they had read and enjoyed recently, as their mentor texts. These represented a variety of authors and genres and were used as an example and guide throughout the writing process. The mentor texts were essential to the mini-lessons, but they also extended beyond that and were an important part of each student's individual writing journey. Gallagher stressed that "mentor texts are most powerful when students

frequently revisit them throughout the writing process" (2014, p. 28). The students were also encouraged to share examples from their mentor texts with other students as they worked in their collaborative writers' groups.

Collaborative Writers' Groups. Throughout the unit, the students worked in groups of four or five students to support and encourage each other as they wrote their novels. With their collaborative writers' group members, they explored and discussed strategies of storytelling, world-building, and writing skills together. Each class meeting had designated time for the students to discuss their writing with their groups. Sometimes they were prompted to discuss questions or topics presented in the mini-lessons, but other times they shared parts of their novels and asked for advice and feedback from the members of their groups.

The writers' groups created a social aspect to writing, a task which is often perceived to be independent and solitary. By working together and sharing ideas, the students could build on each other's strengths and expand their ideas. As the students helped their peers, they also became the experts on novel writing, thus increasing their self-efficacy and agency. In addition, they provided a network of support and encouragement to each other as they wrote, which improved motivation and engagement.

Writing Time. For the last portion of the class period, the students engaged in writing time, in which they worked independently on writing their novels. During this time, the goal (unless otherwise specified later in the unit) was writing a first draft of their novels. The students were encouraged to turn off what we called their "inner editor" and just write. This portion of the class was where the students applied writing strategies and creative ideas to their own writing. They often referred to their mentor texts during writing time, as a tool to assist with genre, plot, style, or just to help generate ideas when they became stuck. In this case the mentor texts allowed the students to find their voices and build their confidence and productivity while writing (Newman, 2012).

During the students' writing time, I conferenced individually with students to check their progress, give feedback, and provide encouragement to keep writing. I kept notes from each student conference that I could refer to in our next conference. Conferencing with students is a key element of writing workshops (Atwell, 2015), and allows the students one-on-one personalized time with the teacher, which is often rare in large classes like these.

Data Collection. The majority of the qualitative data for this study were collected after completion of the novel writing unit. The primary data source for analysis consisted of the students' final writing products, their novel excerpts. These excerpts, selected by the students to represent their larger manuscript, went through the revision and editing process, and then were shared with their classmates. The second source of data consisted of student reflections; these were distributed in a digital, open-ended survey form, and were completed by the students at the end of the unit. According to Yancey (1998), the process of reflection allows students "to participate with us, not as objects of our study, but as *agents of their own learning*" (p.5). The reflection consisted of four open-ended questions:

1) Do you think this was a good learning experience? Why or why not?
2) How did your writing improve during this experience?
3) Do you think you were successful in writing a novel? Why or why not?
4) What could you or Ms. Deckard do differently next time to make the experience better?

Additional data sources included my observations of the classroom and notes taken during student conferences.

Data Analysis. The data analysis combined thematic analysis with discourse analysis techniques. Inductive, holistic thematic analysis was initially used to identify patterns in the students' novel excerpts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Focusing primarily on themes that supported my research questions, I began by identifying novel excerpts that were representative of the students' use of choice, agency, self-efficacy, and writing identity. Upon second look at the excerpts, I identified two salient themes that emerged: choice of genre and connections to students' social worlds. I repeated this thematic analysis with the reflection surveys, which were largely focused on students' engagement, self-efficacy, and perceived identities as writers.

In the next stage of analysis, I selected exemplary sections from the student writing samples, as well as thoughtful responses to the reflection survey. I felt that these texts represented the students' expressions of agency, self-efficacy, and positive development of writing identity. I conducted a closer analysis of each set of samples using discourse analysis techniques. Classroom discourse analysis examines how students use language, and how it reflects the context of use (Rymes, 2016). I considered the following questions in the discourse analysis of students' written narratives: 1) how and in what ways did the students express their unique writing identity, and 2) how did the students reflect on their engagement in writing during the unit?

Results

At the beginning of this unit, the students were given authority to make their own decisions about the genres and topics of their novels. While many were inspired by their mentor novels and favorite genres of fiction, some chose to use this writing activity to address social issues, writing novels based on situations and experiences from their own lives. The students' identities as writers were discernable through the topics and genres they chose, as they wrote about issues that were personally important to them and chose genres and writing styles that they enjoyed as readers.

Furthermore, the students' reflections on their writing and experiences throughout this unit were overwhelmingly positive. These responses indicated the students' engagement in their novel writing, as well as the self-efficacy students developed from writing their own novels. In the following examples and excerpts, students' names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Social Worlds. Lewison and Heffernan (2008) observed that when students used their personal stories to analyze and critique their social worlds, the writing "acted as a tool to disrupt students' naturalized ways of 'doing writing' ..., encouraging them to analyze and critique issues they described as important in their lives" (p. 436). Several students in the class chose to write about issues that had affected their lives, and issues that were connected to their personal and cultural experiences; these issues ranged from racism and mental health to first love and conflicts with friends.

During one of the first student writing conferences, Kara told me that she planned to write a novel for Black girls like her, so that they could read something inspiring and positive about people like themselves. She recognized that there are few novels with young black women as the protagonists and wanted to address that issue by writing one. Although her original genre and plot ideas changed throughout the process of writing, conferencing, and discussing her story in the writers' groups; she had a clear vision of the audience for her novel and showed a strong sense of her identity and agency as a writer. She ended up writing a suspense story about an obsessed friend-turned-stalker in a middle school. The characters in her story were modeled after herself and her friends, and the story was set in a middle school like her own.

Ben based his novel on a traumatic experience from his recent past. He wrote about a boy who was unwillingly "outed" as being gay in the fifth grade. Drawing from his own experience, he was able to articulate the embarrassment and discomfort of his character's situation, depicting the thoughts going through his head as he went through the day at school knowing his classmates had learned something very private about him. In writing on this topic and sharing with his classmates, Ben was able to assert his own identity as LGBTQ and gained authorship over his story. Through this topic, he was also critiquing issues such as sexual identity and bullying, which were relevant within his own social world. This excerpt from Ben's novel illustrates how he expressed his character's thoughts and feelings in the context of these social issues.

> "Later that day at lunch he ran into Connor and Brian said 'I know what you said. I thought we were friends, but I guess not anymore.' Connor had no response and went on with his day. People were calling Brian names like faggot or homo. But Brian didn't bother to say or do anything about it. Later that day, he ended up going down to the counselor to tell her everything that had happened. While he was talking to Mrs. Bonet, he was thinking, 'Great. Another person to know what no one was supposed to know'" (excerpt from Ben's novel, *Nobody Knows*).

In this excerpt Ben wrote about a day in his character's life, based on Ben's own experience, in which everything seemed out of the protagonist's control. In doing so, Ben was able to reclaim power through his writing as he addressed the very personal issues of sexual identity and bullying in middle school. Davies (2006) claimed, "as a sense of writing the self develops, a sense of possibility as an active agent in one's own life emerges" (p.227). Likewise, as Ben developed his voice and identity as a writer, he was also able to gain ownership of an unpleasant experience from his past.

Genre and Style. Not all students, however, based their novels on their social reality. Given the choice to pursue their own interests and identities as readers/writers, some students relied on mentor novels to delve into genre and style. Lana, who had been reading a series of fantasy novels in which the characters were cats, chose to write a novel based on that series. In the following excerpt, Lana showed an expert use of detail, character development, and dialogue, as she wrote within the genre of her choice.

> "Crowberry padded into camp, fur bristled, standing on end. His blue gaze darted around, alert, as if ready for a cat to attack him at any moment. I guess running in the forest, when the sun was setting, could do things to you.
> 'Crowberry! What happened? Where were you? You were supposed to be on a patrol, not hunting by yourself!' Nightwillow scolded her brother, stomping up to him, her cat brows furrowed with anger" (excerpt from Lana's novel, *Black Pelts*).

Using writing techniques practiced in the mini-lessons and demonstrated in her mentor novel, Lana was also able to develop her style and build a positive writing identity in her novel. The choice provided in this unit allowed Lana to write a novel that was authentic to her own interests, and reflected her social world, building off her identity as a reader. Choosing a genre that she was comfortable and familiar with allowed Lana to feel motivated and competent in her writing skills, a key to building self-efficacy in writing (Nelson, 2019; Ruben & Moll, 2013).

In another example of a novel influenced by genre, Rissa wrote a fantasy novel inspired by the very popular vampire genre. Referencing her mentor text, as well as other popular young adult novels, she was able to develop her use of description and tone to build suspense and mystery, as is often seen in this genre.

> "The bat flew in through the closed window, passing through the glass like light. It was so darkly colored that it was almost imperceptible. Luna only noticed it when it flew in front of the star clock, blocking the faint gleam radiating from the timepiece. Light was blocked by the black void of the bat's fur. The sudden dark spot appeared in the corner of Luna's vision. She reached out to feel for the item obstructing the view of the clock. Her fingertips brushed the coat of the bat. The feeling was soft, but harsh. Luna didn't know how the sensation was even possible. The magic feeling filled her with cold and peace and a sense of belonging, and she didn't move her hand until the bat rushed up to her face" (excerpt from Rissa's novel, *A Fall with Fate*).

Not only did Rissa reflect her interests and reading preferences in her writing, but she also created a character who mirrored herself in many ways. During the reading conferences, several students, including Rissa, explained that they had based the main characters of their novels on themselves. McCarthy and Moje (2002) claim that "readers and writers can come to understand themselves in particular ways as a result of a literate engagement" (p. 229). Using first-person point of view, dialogue, and physical description, Rissa wrote into existence a character much like herself, who is facing struggles of self-acceptance and a

desire to "belong" (in this case through a supernatural gift), feelings that sixth grade students often grapple with.

Engagement and Self-Efficacy. Analysis of the students' novel excerpts showed how the students' engaged in the agency of self-expression and the development of their positive and authentic identities as writers. Next, I turn to the students' reflections on their novel writing experience to look more closely at their perceptions of their success as writers during this unit. There were three main themes apparent in the students' reflections: engagement, self-efficacy, and writing identities.

Some students commented not only on their own writing, but also on the overall engagement of the class towards the novel-writing project.

- "A lot of kids were excited over it. People would come in happy to write. Once everyone was finished, they felt as if they were a writer."
- "Every time I was writing I came up with more ideas. This was very exciting to keep writing and getting to our goal."
- "I feel that I was successful in writing my novel because it made me happy while I was writing it, so that's always a plus."

Self-efficacy and engagement appear to go together, based on these students' comments. The second comment reflects the engagement the student experienced while writing, as she kept coming up with more ideas. This comment also indicates the self-efficacy gained as the students were "getting to our goal". Through observations, I observed how the students' engagement in writing their novels was influenced by their confidence in their writing abilities. Moreover, as the students were "excited" about the unit, engaging in the process of setting a goal and meeting it, they were also building their own perceptions of themselves as capable writers.

The following students' responses also indicated increased self-efficacy and development of their identities as writers, as they described their perceptions of how they had grown as writers.

- "It was a good learning experience because I was able to try out new things in my writing to improve what I already knew. It taught me the magic of add[ing] lots of detail for almost everything, like surroundings and people around the main character."
- "I improved because that was the most I ever wrote"
- "It really made me think like a real author…"

In response to the agency and choice afforded in this unit, the first student was able to "try out new things" with their writing, a freedom that traditional writing units rarely grant. The "magic" of adding detail was one strategy they felt had elevated their writing. A goal of this unit was to "think like an author", using strategies and writing techniques that are used by authors of the students' favorite novels. In doing so, the young novelists gained confidence and began to see themselves as "real authors".

Discussion

While teaching this novel writing unit, I often found myself spending more time than the five or ten minutes which had been originally planned on direct instruction during the mini-lessons; this was usually due to overplanning the mini-lessons, but also resulted from my desire to follow up completely on all students' questions and comments. My tendency to go over the planned time was not a response to the students' learning and engagement, but more of a teaching habit I needed to overcome to move towards more authentic and student-guided learning. During direct instruction, a teacher has control over the classroom and the content of the learning. Naturally, this is more comfortable for many teachers, but as studies have shown, allowing for more choice and student-centered learning can increase engagement and self-efficacy (Behizadeh, 2014; Meier, 2015). Several students commented in their reflections that they wished they had been given more time for the collaborative writing groups, and much more time for writing.

As far as engagement and motivation, especially in writing, every class seems to have students who need a little extra encouragement and nudging towards task completion. Although the student choice and agency involved in this unit increased overall engagement and motivation, my classes were no exception to the rule. I conferenced with all students throughout their novel writing journey, but I attempted to meet more frequently with those who were not making the same progress towards their goal as their peers. I also helped those students by assigning them to groups with highly motivated and helpful students. Due to my specific teaching circumstances, this unit of instruction and study were restricted to AP classes. As is often the case in public schools, the AP classes do not fully reflect the diversity of the school and district. This unit, however, could be adapted for instruction of students of all levels and abilities. Allowing the students to set their own writing goals, based on their level and ability is one way to make the task more attainable for younger students and those who have been labeled as struggling writers. The unit provides an authentic, student-centered writing option that defies the rigidity of traditional writing instruction.

Conclusion

Students' motivation and engagement are often tied to their achievement. To increase student engagement and motivation in writing, authentic writing opportunities and student choice should be available to students throughout their classroom experiences. Unfortunately, due to pressure from districts and administrators to improve test scores, many teachers feel discouraged from incorporating innovative teaching practices and providing tasks that are truly authentic to students, such as the novel writing project described in this article. This is despite the fact that increasing student engagement can lead to long term improvements in test scores (Gunuc, 2014). As Behizadeh argues, the academic community "needs to support teachers in establishing authenticity as a shared goal with students, utilizing flexible pedagogies that honor students' funds of knowledge while providing choice and opportunities for expression and impact" (2014, p. 40). In doing so, we

can best prepare our students to write effectively and confidently about topics that matter to them.

About the Author

Tyra Deckard is a Ph.D. student in curriculum and instruction at the University of Louisville. Her research interests include identity, agency, and activist literacies. She previously taught English in Chile, South Korea, and Turkey, and middle school language arts in Kentucky. Email: tyra.deckard@louisville.edu

---

References

Alvermann, D. E. (2001). Reading adolescents' reading identities: Looking back to see ahead. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 44*(8), 676-690.

Applebee, A. N., & Langer, J. A. (2006). *The state of writing instruction in America's schools: What existing data tell us*. Albany, NY: Center on English Learning and Achievement.

Atwell, N. (2015). *In the middle: A lifetime of learning about writing, reading, and adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Behizadeh, N. (2014). Adolescent perspectives on authentic writing instruction. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education, 10*(1), 27-44.

Davies, J. (2006). Hello newbie!** big welcome hugs** hope u like it here as much as i do!: An exploration of teenagers' informal online learning. In D. Buckingham & R. Willett (Eds.) *Digital generations: Children, young people and new media* (pp. 211-228). Routledge.

Finn, P. J. (2010). *Literacy with an attitude: Educating working-class children in their own self-interest*. Suny Press.

Fletcher, R. J., & Portalupi, J. (2001). *Writing workshop: The essential guide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Frankel, K.K., & Fields, S.S. (2019). Disrupting storylines: A case study of one adolescent's identity, agency, and positioning during literacy tutoring. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 58*(3), 142-163. https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2019.1588437

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury, USA. (Original work published 1970)

Gallagher, K. (2014). Making the most of mentor texts. *Educational Leadership*, *71*(7), 28-33.

Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 25*(1), 99-125.

Gunuc, S. (2014). The relationships between student engagement and their academic achievement. *International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications, 5*(4), 216-231.

Lewison, M., & Heffernan, L. (2008). Rewriting writers workshop: Creating safe spaces for disruptive stories. *Research in the Teaching of English, 42*(4), 435-465.

McCarthey, S. J., & Moje, E. B. (2002). Identity matters. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *37*(2), 228-238.

Meier, L. (2015). Choice and the reader's identity. *Journal of Teacher Action Research*, *2*(1), 21-28.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. Sage.

Moje, E. B., & Luke, A. (2009). Literacy and identity: Examining the metaphors in history and contemporary research. *Reading Research Quarterly, 44*(4), 415-437.

Morrell, E. (2008). *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. Routledge.

Nelson, S. (2019). Reflections: Exploring student writing self-efficacy in the online environment. *Journal of Teacher Action Research, 5*(2), 39-55.

Newman, B. (2012). Mentor texts and funds of knowledge: Situating writing within our students' worlds. *Voices from the Middle*, *20*(1), 25-30.

Parsons, S. A., Malloy, J. A., Parsons, A. W., & Burrowbridge, S. C. (2015). Students' engagement in literacy tasks. *The Reading Teacher, 69*(2), 223-231.

Roll, K., & Vaughn, M. (2019). Reshaping practice: An action research project exploring writing instruction. *Journal of Teacher Action Research, 5*(2), 77.

Ruben, B., & Moll, L. (2013). Putting the heart back into writing: Nurturing voice in middle school students. *Middle School Journal, 45*(2), 12-18.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*(1), 54-67.

Rymes, B. (2016). *Classroom discourse analysis: A tool for critical reflection*. Routledge.

Vaughn, M., Premo, J., Erickson, D., & McManus, C. (2020). Student agency in literacy: Validation of the student agency profile (StAP). *Reading Psychology, 41*(6), 533-558.

Williamson, T. (2019). Authoring selves in school: Adolescent writing identity. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice, 68*(1), 250-270.

Winn, M. T., & Johnson, L. P. (2011). *Writing instruction in the culturally relevant classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Yancey, K. B. (1998). *Reflection in the writing classroom*. All USU Press Publications.