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RESHAPING PRACTICE: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT EXPLORING WRITING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract The purpose of this action research study was to explore students' attitudes toward writing instruction during the implementation of a literacy project focused on authentic tasks. Data included student surveys, interviews, assessment data, observational teacher notes, and recorded teacher and student sessions. Using qualitative analysis, findings reveal the process by which authentic literacy opportunities during writing instruction supported the sophistication of student discourse in writing, attitudes, and perceptions, and an awareness of students' literacy skills. Implications for practice and future research are discussed as a way to support and empower teachers and students.

Introduction

Since the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* (1983) outlining the low achievement of today's youth, the nation has implemented a series of educational reforms aimed at improving the quality of education and literacy achievement. The landmark passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and the subsequent adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) were efforts aimed at achieving this goal. These reforms have changed the content and delivery of literacy instruction in schools across the country. The role of testing has been elevated to unprecedented heights and literacy curricula has narrowed emphasizing a skills and drills approach to instruction (Au, 2005; Vaughn, 2013; Rowan, Camburn, & Correnti, 2004).

Scholars have documented the negative impact of these recent educational reforms on the nature of writing instruction in today's schools (Vaughn, Penney-Pinkham, Hillman et al., 2015; Shanahan, 2006). Moreover, scholars have found that since writing is not measured by standardized assessments, teachers do not often include writing in their language arts block or may use the reading curricula as the primary mode of writing instruction (McCarthey, 2008). Despite this, some teachers support the teaching of writing and writing instruction as a process by which to engage students in critical thinking (Ghiso, 2011), projects that engage students in social justice issues (Vaughn, Hillman, McKarcher et al., 2017), and activities that serve as a catalyst to reengage reluctant readers (Gambrell, 2015).

To more closely examine the nature of writing and authentic writing instruction (building upon Author's 1 experience as a literacy educator and experienced educator of 5 years), Author 1 conducted a three-month action research project in her first grade classroom to document the implementation of an authentic writing project. Specifically, this action research project focused on creating authentic tasks anchored in writing for real purposes. The following question guided the research: What resulted for students as a part of their participation in an authentic writing project?

Literature Review

Writing instruction has evolved during the last two decades in schools ranging from (a) the process approach, (b) writing as a cognitive process, and (c) the role of genre (Klein & Boscolo, 2016). Briefly, these processes are outlined to contextualize the research. Within the process approach, notable teacher educators Calkins (1986) and Graves (1983) developed the Writer's Workshop approach that included providing opportunities for students to write about topics of interest, writing for real audiences, developing drafts via the revision process, and sharing work with peers. This approach is marked by a modeled mini-lesson led by the teachers followed by independent writing and teacher conferencing. Scholars note the impact of this approach. For example, Ghiso (2011) documented the impact of the Writer's Workshop on first graders as they discussed and analyzed writing that connected to their lives. Similarly, Tracy & Headley (2013) found a positive impact on fourth grade students' writing abilities when engaged in the workshop model.

Within the cognitive approach to writing, teachers emphasize instructional tasks targeted at producing a complete draft using explicit teaching strategies. Scholars documented the success of this approach (Olson & Land, 2007; Graham & Harris, 2006) but found that the cognitive approach emphasized a one size fits all to writing instruction that often neglected to support individual classroom contexts and the variability of instructional settings. Critics of the genre approach to writing emphasize how writing rarely aligns within a linear fashion as delineated by specific genres.

Within elementary schools, teachers adopt various forms of these three approaches to writing instruction. Yet, opportunities to engage students in writing instruction that is authentic as it pertains to writing for authentic purposes has been limited. According to Madda, Griffo, Pearson and Raphael (2011), many literacy educators engage in literacy

instruction which emphasizes unrealistic tasks often related with "doing school rather than doing life" (p.44). In other words, when it comes to writing instruction, students are rarely engaging in authentic writing opportunities.

Authentic literacy opportunities highlight tasks and instruction that are connected to students' real lives, student-centered, open-ended, involves choice, and may include a project-based approach (Jones & East, 2010; Duke, 2014). Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower (2006) describe authentic literacy activities as activities "that replicate or reflect reading and writing activities that occur in the lives of people outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose" (p. 346). An example of an authentic literacy activity includes students writing a brochure for a nature center after researching and reading about animal life in ponds.

Highly authentic experiences take into account both the *text* used and the *purpose* or *function* of a specific literacy task. To be highly authentic, the tasks must consist of a "context and purpose to serve the communicative, real-life purposes or functions" (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007, p. 14). Duke, et al. (2006) identified three categories of authentic literacy experiences: a) literacy as response to *community need*; b) literacy as part of *problem solving*; and c) writing for a *specific audience*.

Scholars report a relationship between positive growth in student achievement or attitude as they pertain to authentic literacy experiences. For example, Chohan (2011) found in a year-long study of an authentic letter writing program that students' had greater gains in literacy, vocabulary skills, and writing development. Similarly, in their study of daily journal writing, Jones and East (2010) found, "All three categories—correct spelling, words used, and correct punctuation—depicted a steady upward trend in mean scores" (p.116). Authentic literacy experiences are designed to capitalize on real-world contexts, authentic learning opportunities, and instruction that fits the unique needs of her students. Such experiences according to Parsons and Ward (2011) are instrumental in developing engaging literacy spaces and "encourage a variety of oral language experiences, including teacher-generated questioning practices, explicit instruction, and large-and small-group discussion" (p. 464).

Methodology

Theoretical Framework. This study was informed by theories of social constructivism. Social constructivism suggests that learning is situated in settings and locally constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of this action research project, the student and teacher talk are highlighted to document the ways in which students used language and the tools available to make meaning of writing instruction, content, their understandings of literacy broadly, and their work as writers.

Author Background. Author 1 went to a large, urban university at the very beginning of the NCLB era and obtained her undergraduate degree in teacher education. After graduation, Author 1 taught for three years at a public charter school in a multi-age classroom. In this position, she was able to put into practice the elements of developing authentic literacy

opportunities for her students. In this context, she ultimately had the freedom to select instruction and materials that were needed given the unique instructional needs of her students.

After taking a hiatus from the classroom, Author 1 returned in 2013 when CCSS (2010) was in place. In the years that Author 1 had been absent from the classroom, the climate of public education had drastically changed. Reform efforts such as NCLB (2001) was 12 years old and the CCSS was recently adopted by 46 states in the nation. Given these changes, when Author 1 returned to the classroom the expectations for selection and delivery of literacy instruction were very different. Although, the district Author 1 returned to had adopted a literacy program that contained many of the elements of the Balanced Literacy Framework (Fountas & Pinell, 1996), instruction was not necessarily centered on authentic tasks. That is, the curriculum provided leveled texts that contained weekly sight words, vocabulary, and phonics patterns but lacked engaging texts and opportunities for writing for authentic purposes. Despite this, Author 1's district and administrator encouraged Author 1 and fellow teachers to develop literacy instruction in support of the individual and targeted needs of students. With this in mind, Author 1 started this action research project, as part of her capstone project for her graduate degree in curriculum and instruction where Author 2 was her major professor. The research reported here documents this capstone project and serves to examine how students' attitudes developed when engaged in authentic literacy tasks during writing instruction.

One of the functions of action research is to provide a method for thoughtful reflection on one's own professional growth and practice. Samaras and Roberts (2011) highlight the importance of teacher reflection in practice and state, "teachers critically examine their actions and the context of those actions as a way of developing a more consciously driven mode of professional activity" (p. 43). By sharing the results of this action research study, it is possible to offer insights for other educators interested in the issues surrounding authenticity and writing.

Setting. The location for this study took place at Duncan Elementary (pseudonym), a K-5 elementary school in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Situated in a rural region of the country, the school serves approximately 275 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. The town is located near two large public universities. The community also has a strong agricultural presence. At the time of the study, 37% of students enrolled in Duncan Elementary were free or reduced lunch, and 91 % of the students were of European American descent, 3% were Latino, and 7% were African American or identified as Other. The study took place over the course of three months in Spring 2016.

Participants. A letter of consent inviting students in Author 1's class was sent home. Fifteen out of the twenty students returned the consent forms. One student moved during the course of the study. The student demographics included 1 African American student and 13 European American students. One student was from an Eastern European background with

a second language spoken at home. Another student was on an Individualized Educational Plan for speech and language issues. In order to protect student identities, all student names used in the research are pseudonyms.

Authentic Writing Unit. The guiding question for the writing unit was, "How do we care for pets?" This topic was selected based on informal feedback and student responses about what they wished to write about for the semester. The Writing Workshop (Caulkins, 2006) model was used to structure lessons and occurred for approximately 30 minutes 2-4 times a week over the course of project. As part of the unit launch, a local veterinarian visited the class. She described her job and spoke to the issue of animal care. As she concluded her visit, she issued students a writing challenge, "Other kids need to know how to take care of pets too. Can your class help by writing how-to books about pet care? You can put them in your classroom library and make them available online for other kids." In this way, the writing task: a) met a need within the community (other kids need to know how to take care of pets too); b) would solve a problem (teaches others to care for pets); and c) set a specific audience (other kids). Thus, the unit was considered "authentic" as described by Duke et al. (2006).

After meeting with the veterinarian, students chose a pet to research. They gathered information about how to care for their pet from a variety of sources including other books, information from the veterinarian, and through discussions with one another, family members, and in-class discussions. Throughout the writing process, students participated in mini-lessons (See Appendix A) focused on a specific writing task (i.e., voice, writing for a real audience). Two types of writing conferences were held once a week during the duration of the project: student-to-student and student-to-teacher. At the conclusion of the unit, the veterinarian, parents, and other adults from the school community were invited back the classroom for an author celebration. Products of the unit were shared with the larger community via in-school library and at the veterinary clinic.

Data Collection and Analysis. The data collected during this study consisted of interviews, assessment data, reflective teacher notes, and recorded teacher and student sessions. In the following, data collection and data analysis procedures are discussed.

Interviews. Pre and post student interviews were administered in this study. Questions were open-ended in nature and pertained to broad questions about students' attitudes towards writing (i.e., How do you feel about writing? Are you a good writer? Why do you think that? Why do we write? What kind writing you do at school? In your journal, is there a page that you really like, why that page? Tell me about something you have written? How do you feel about what you wrote?). These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Reflective teacher notes. Teacher reflections were collected throughout the study (roughly about twice weekly) as a tool to examine the affordances and obstacles of implementing this action research project. These reflective notes included journal reflections about the project and anecdotal notes about practice as it pertained to the project. These methods of inquiry about practice are consistent within the effective design and implementation of action research (Bradshaw & Vaughn, 2016; Mertler, 2008; Rose, Vaughn, & Taylor, 2015). These reflections were read by both authors for important themes and patterns as they pertained to the research question. Such analysis provided the direction of findings as they pertained to the analysis and data within action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Recorded teacher and student sessions. A total of seven whole group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. Additionally, five student-teacher conferences were audio recorded and transcribed. The purpose of this data was to determine the kind of discourse that occurred between teacher and students in the context of the project. The data were used to contextualize the findings.

Data Analysis. Using a grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2013), authors reread each interview transcript and made memos and notes. In this way, salient themes were uncovered and two categories were drawn from the data (positive and negative/other) that related to students' attitudes toward writing based on the student interviews. Positive responses were noted when students reported words like "fun, good, proud." Negative/other, responses were coded based on student responses like, "I don't like it, kind of, not good at, a little bad and little good, nervous, etc." Frequency counts were tracked and totaled. This data provided information about overall student attitudes.

Then, student interview responses were further examined to understand the focus and content of student discourse. To examine the underlying themes within the discourse, student interview responses were examined to determine if they fit into one of Ivanic's, (2005) six categories of writing discourses (skills, creativity, process, genre, social practices, and socio-political). After reviewing the literature, this framework for analysis was used to document the writing discourse because it provided a lens by which to explore the curricular aspects of writing instruction in schools and the specific writing discourse students may adopt within writing activities. Student responses were coded as pertaining to skills discourse, creativity discourse, genre discourse, process discourse, or social processes discourse. In order to be coded as skills discourse, the response had to contain language about "set linguistic skills" (Ivanic, 2005) such as letter or word formation, punctuation, handwriting, phonics, etc. Responses coded as creativity discourse contained language about imagination, self-selection of topics, or writing from life experience. "Within this discourse the writing has value in its own right, so no purpose or context for writing needs to be specified, and most of the content comes from the students' own experience" (Ivanic, 2005, p. 229). Responses falling into the genre category mention specific types of writing including non-fiction, and how-to writing. Within the process discourse, dialogue that mentioned the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising) were coded. Responses coded as creativity discourse contained language about imagination, self-selection of topics,

or writing from life experience. Similarly, responses coded as process discourse mentioned the writing process: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, etc.

Students were then sorted into two groups according to their perspectives about writing instruction: six of the twelve interviewed students fell into Group A and reported positive feelings about writing in the pre-study interview, and six students were categorized into Group B because they expressed negative feelings about writing in the pre-study interview. Sorting the students into two groups provided a context to explore the findings. Each group's transcripts were then reread to examine student attitudes and talk as they pertained to the research question. Themes from each group were compared to determine changes in student attitudes and the discourse used. The teacher reflective journal was then analyzed for themes relating to implementation and teaching practices.

Results and Discussion

When asked about writing instruction and purposes for writing, students expressed positive and negative feelings about writing. Overall, students who were in Group A were overwhelmingly positive about writing instruction in the pre-interview. For example, when asked, "How do you feel about writing?" Cecile said, "I love writing, I can't stop. I love making stories" (Interview, 3/1/2016). She was not alone in this feeling as others in this group shared similar responses. For example, Mark said, "I feel happy because you can use your imagination and write like what you think might happen in the future" (Interview, 3/1/2016). Similarly, Elizabeth shared that writing was also about having a good time. She said, "It's[writing is] fun. You can do funny things" (Interview, 3/1/2016). When asked why she wrote, Felicity responded positively "It's fun," and "because I can make-up whatever I want" (Interview, 3/1/2016).

Interestingly, there appeared to be a connection for Group A between positive feelings and their ability to choose what they wanted to write. For example, when answering the question "Is there a page in your journal that you really like?" Elizabeth responded, "if you [get] to think of something, you usually just like it" to the question, (Interview, 3/1/2016). Cecile said something similar in response to the same question and "I like all of them because I've used my imagination and I've done what I want in my journal" (Interview, 3/1/2015). By stating that she gets to write about what she wants, such a response suggests that choice in topic was an important dimension in considering her perspective on writing.

When looking at the pre-study interview, responses from Group B, indicated a more negative attitude toward writing. Specifically when asked, "How do you feel about writing?" responses to this question included feelings of boredom or negativity as seen in the following, "Umm… pretty bored, cause I don't like writing" (Interview, 3/1/2016),"I don't really like writing" (Interview, 3/1/2016) and "Kinda nervous, that I might mess things up" (Interview, 3/1/2016). When asked, "Are you a good writer?" students responded with negative feelings. For this group in particular, skills held high importance in their relationship to writing. For example, Linda reported, "I'm not very good. I make a lot of mistakes. I always think it's a letter and then it's a different letter sometimes." Ian

responded similarly, "I say medium but I do really good [at writing] a's" (Interview, 3/1/2016). When asked, "Is there a page in your journal that you really like?" Sean responded negatively stating, "I don't really like it at all" (Sean, 3/1/2016). Ian shared, "I feel like I don't even want to write. I just want to draw pictures but [the teacher] asks me to [write]" (Ian, 3/1/2016).

Post study interview analyses revealed that Group A continued to remain positive about writing with 97% of their responses positive. All students in this group responded positively to the question "How do you feel about writing?" and often gave responses similar in nature to those given in the pre-interview, "Good, it's just fun" (Jason, 5/13/2016). In the post study interview, Group B had a shift in their perspective. That is, Group B was initially negative about writing in school but changed to have a more positive attitude toward writing that in their pre-study interview. Overall, in the post-interview for Group B, 76% of responses were positive. For example, Brandon, a student in Group B, when answering the question, "How do you feel about writing?" in the pre-interview responded, "I don't really like writing" but after the project reported, "I feel kind of happy [about writing]" (Brandon, 3/1/2016 and 5/15/2016). A similar result was found in Ian and Linda when asked in the post study interview, "How do you feel about writing?" both shared positive responses: "[I feel] pretty good… when I practice I gain confidence" (Linda, 5/16/2016) and "[I feel like I'm a good and normal [writer]" (Interview, 5/16/16)

Writing Discourse. Initially, the most frequently occurring discourse used across groups in the pre-study interviews was the creativity discourse. The creativity discourse contained language about imagination, self-selection of topics, or writing from life experience. Interestingly, groups did not use any language from the genre discourse in the pre interviews. In the post study, Group B used more language form the skills discourse than they did in the pre-study interview. In the following, each group's results as they pertained to the type of discourse used is discussed.

Group A. In the pre-interview, 65% of the responses from Group A contained language from the creativity discourse including events from the students' lives and imaginative stories. For example, Cecile, when talking about what she liked to write about at school, responded, "Journal writing because everything that I imagine and some things in real life I write about like my little brother, he drives me nuts" (Interview, 3/1/2016). The journal was a place for her to record her thoughts and ideas about her life. Ownership was also an important theme within the language of the creativity discourse occurring in many of the student responses. As one student shared, "when you think of something, if you think of something you usually just like it" (Interview, 3/1/ 2016). Felicity, Cecile, and Mark also shared that they too liked "doing [my] own writing," (Interview 3/1/2016) when interviewed about their writing which indicated a sense of ownership about their writing.

Within Group A, language from the skills discourse occurred in 15% of the pre-interview responses. These responses generally referred to learning a skill like handwriting, spelling, or practice of a skill from a previously taught lesson. Elizabeth talked about the writing at

school, "we write for our spelling test and sometimes we have to write for our packet [seatwork]" (3/1/2016). This kind of skills language was also found in responses from Jane and Cecile. When answering the question, "Why do you write?" Jane explained a need to practice, "So we can get better at writing" (3/1/2016).

Language from the social practices discourse occurred in 21% of Group A's pre-interview responses. Students discussed the importance of text messaging, writing for teaching purposes, and to share knowledge. Interestingly, only one student from Group A used language from a social practices discourse in relationship to writing. When asked, "What kind of writing do you do at school?" Jane responded "At writing time, in my journal and I get to write letters to [teacher] because I read a book with her and I need to write letters to her so she can know how I think about the book" (Jane, 3/1/2016). Such a response underlines the purpose of writing as a mode of sharing communication with others.

Figure 1: Discourses in Group A

In the post study interview, the largest change in discourse for Group A was a decrease in language from the creativity discourse to an increase of language to the genre discourse. There were no responses from the genre discourse in the pre-interview; however, in the post-interview, language from the genre discourse was found across 21% of responses. Students in this group talked more about the importance of writing how-to books, nonfiction, and fiction genres. Cecile shared in the post study interview, "We do non-fiction and make up stories" (5/16/2016). The identification of genres such as nonfiction and fiction was found in other responses about writing. Mark, when asked what kind of writing he does at school, shared, "We write how-to books" (5/13/2016). Statements like this were also found in Elizabeth, Jane, Jason, and Felicity's responses.

Social practice discourse decreased slightly in this group from 21% of responses in the pre-interview to 17% in the post-interview. This may be due to a shift in student thinking about the purpose and function of writing. Responses pertaining to a skills discourse within Group A remained generally consistent throughout the study.

Group B. In the pre- study interview, 39% of the responses contained creativity discourse language. Typical responses from the creativity discourse were similar to those given by the students from Group A. Life experience and creative stories were featured heavily within this category. When asked to tell about something important, Brandon shared, "I have written about my mom and dad and that's it." (Interview, 3/13/16). Adam shared about a big storm that had recently happened in the following response, "It was about a storm, a real life storm. I did draw a picture of it breaking down a fence, it damaged a car" (3/1/2016). Linda wrote about a dragon and a hunter. "I feel proud that I worked so hard on a story" (3/1/2016). This group also used language from the skills discourse in the pre-study interview almost as frequently as language from the creativity discourse. Within the responses from skills discourse, students often mentioned skills based activities like spelling, handwriting, letter formation, and practice. When asked if she was a good writer, Linda responded, "I'm not very [good]. I make a lot of mistakes. "Why do you think that?" (Author) I always think it's a letter and then it's a different letter sometimes" (Linda, 3/1/2016). For Linda, good writing was linked to letter formation. Skills discourse language also appeared in the responses to the question about the kind of writing done at school. Several students from this group mentioned school-only tasks like seatwork, spelling tests, or handwriting. "We do work writing [seatwork]," Edward says (3/1/2016). Ian mentioned handwriting "we do these joke things [handwriting practice] now" (3/1/2016). "We do a spelling test…and that's it" (Brandon, 3/1/2016).
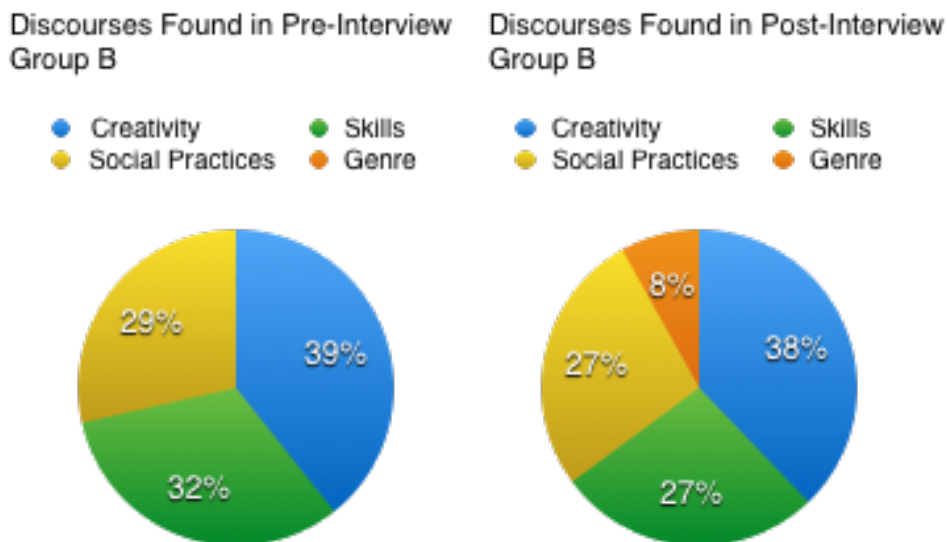

Figure 2: Discourses in Group B

Post study interviews revealed that students in Group B changed in the way they thought about writing as evidenced in their discourse in several ways. First, the number of responses from the skills discourse decreased from 32% to 27% in their responses. Second, responses containing language from the creativity discourse remained generally stable but changed minimally from 39% of the responses in the pre-interview to 38% in the post-interview. Third, in the pre-study interview no responses from this group contained language from the genre discourse. In the post-study interview, 8% of responses contained language from the genre discourse. Specifically, students in this group spoke of how-to

books and non-fiction writing now in their responses. Social practices discourse decreased slightly from 29% of responses in the pre-interview to 27% in the post-interview.

Reflections from teacher notes and an anonymous Writing Attitude Survey (Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000) administered to the students before and after the study revealed insights about writing instruction. After administering and scoring the survey according to the procedures outlined by Kear et al. (2000), Author 1 reflected about the overall attitude of her class before and after the intervention as found in the following:

In the pre writing survey, there was a very obvious split in my class. The students who felt positively towards writing felt extremely positive. Five of the eleven students that correctly completed the WAS were above the 75th percentile on the survey indicating that they felt very positive about writing. The remaining seven students scored below the 25th percentile indicating that they felt very negatively about writing. After the intervention, only two students were below the 25th percentile on the Writing Attitude Survey (WAS). Overall, the percentage of students at or above the 40th percentile on the WAS increased after the intervention by five students or 42%. Overall, the students felt more positive after the writing project. (Journal, 6/1/16)

Other reflections revealed the increased enthusiasm about writing that students seemed to feel after the writing project. For example, Author 1 shared the following, "One of my students from Group B was so excited about the author celebration he convinced his mom to come into school immediately after I announced it, one week early" (Journal, 5/14/16) and "Another student whose father worked an hour away, convinced his dad to take time off from work to come in." (Journal, 5/18/16). When examining the discourse that was used during student and teacher sessions, it was interesting to note the type of language used during sessions. Author 1 shared the following insight about the project:

This of course makes sense; my goal was to teach writing skills, processes and features of genre. In fact, during the mini-lessons was the only time throughout the entire project when process discourse was used. Process discourse was used frequently talk about the next steps in the project like drafting, conferencing. The only time that students used process discourse was in direct response to my questioning.

The skills discourse was also found throughout the discourse between student and teacher. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of this type of discourse was used either teaching an explicit skill based lesson (e.g. how to edit) or during teacher-student conferencing. Despite this focus on skills discourse during writing conferences, conferences were not overwhelmingly discoursally hybrid (Ivanic, 2005), or conversations where the language went back and forth between a variety of discourses. However, in the recorded sessions, one conference was indeed discoursally hybrid where the conversation switched seamlessly back and forth between skills discourse and social practices discourse. Notice in the following how the discourse started as the social practices discourse but then moved to the skills discourse where discussion ensued about adding clarifying details to help the reader understand the

text- switch to skills discourse- spelling patterns, and then switch back to social practices discourse.

> Author 1: (*reading aloud*) "it needs the right size…" right size what?
>
> Mark: shelter…
>
> Author 1: (*reading aloud*) "Then give your hamster exercise. He should have a wheel and a ball." To do what in?
>
> Mark: um…run around in…
>
> Author 1: To run around in. (*reading aloud*) "Last, care of for your hamster" How do you spell CLEEN? Do you need to have check ups"… who does he have check ups with?
>
> M: with the vet.

This exchange illustrates not only how quickly the discourse switches back and forth, but as Ivanic (2005) stated, how social practices discourse often involve implicit understandings while skills discourse is more about explicit teaching of skills. Mark recognized the need to write for an audience (social discourse), but then the use of correct spelling came into the conversation which signified skills discourse.

Overall, students appeared to feel more positive about writing after engaging in this authentic writing project. This writing project was designed to be highly authentic as described by Duke et al. (2006) in that it had both a specific purpose (i.e., to educate other kids) and replicated a real world writing task (i.e., how-to book). Students appeared to increase in their attitudes toward writing as well as the kinds of discourse used to explain their ideas about writing. Although Group B was more negative before the project than Group A, they also showed the most growth in attitude. The discourse in both Groups A and B held true to a variety of discourses. The benefits of conducting an authentic writing unit like this are seen in the growth of students' positive responses about writing and the increase in the kinds of discourse used to describe writing. Incorporating authentic writing projects into the fold of literacy instruction is an important step in the right direction for students, teachers, and schools.

Conclusion

This study documented writing instruction and the type of discourse students engaged in as they participated in writing activities. One recommendation for administrators and policy makers is to encourage action research as a reflective tool of one's practice and the potential benefits of such careful thought and reflection on student outcomes. As seen in this action research study, action research was used as a tool to uncover students' attitudes about writing instruction and their interest in writing pursuits. Implications for other educators include exploring the dialogue students engage in as they participate in writing activities. Future research should explore the long-term impact of authentic writing instruction on students' attitudes and achievement.

The need to support authentic writing instruction in classrooms today is imperative. Instead of mandating teaching to fidelity to mandated literacy programs, honor teachers' creativity, flexibility, and their adaptive decision-making. In doing so, authentic writing activities like the one documented in this action research can become commonplace in schools rather than viewed as an add-on. Our students deserve to engage in authentic writing activities like the one documented in this research.

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Appendix A: Writing Unit Activities Sample

Lesson 1: Unit Launch (2 Days)	
Overview	Unit anchor and launch- veterinarian visit Create anchor chart of what pets need based on visit. Pick animals to write about.
Activities-	• Explain to class that a special visitor will be coming to talk with them today. Host a local veterinarian in the classroom for a talk about pet care. Make arrangements ahead of time to have the speaker issue a writing challenge to students. • *"Other kids need to know how to take care of pets too. Can your class help by writing how-to books about pet care? You can put them in your classroom library and make them available online for other kids."* • After the veterinarian leaves create a chart with notes students remember from the presentation. (*Pets need: Food, Water, Shelter, Exercise and Care).* • Create a class list of the pets students would like to write about. • Between this session and the next gather information in the appropriate reading level for students to use/ OR schedule a trip to library.
Lesson 2: Researching and Defining the "How-To" Genre (2 Days)	
Overview	Research by reading exemplars of the how-to genre Create a class definition.
Activities	Day One: • With the class discuss the challenge issued by the guest speaker. *We need to create "how-to" books that explain to other kids how to take care of a pet. What makes something a how-to book?* Draw attention to this question, elicit ideas from students and keep a list on chart paper under the heading, What makes "how to" writing? • After exhausting students' ideas, pose the question, *Are you sure that this list contains all of the things that make "how to" writing*? Students should recognize that there might be features that are not yet on the list. • Pose the question, *How can we find out what else might be a part of writing a "how to" book?* If students don't come to the idea naturally, suggest looking at how to writing already published. • Introduce the mentor texts. Using the resources from the school library create a bin of how-to texts, saving one example back to serve as a read-aloud. Explain that students will be working with a partner to buddy read one of these books. • Assign partners to a "how to" text. As they finish, ask them to go back and re-read a second time looking for the features that make it a "how to" book. Ask them to record their thinking on the "How-to book Recording Sheet" • Start class Anchor chart of what makes a book a how-to book. Day Two: • Gather students together. Briefly review the task issued by the veterinarian. Discuss the progress on researching the "how-to" genre so far. Explain that today you will read aloud a "how to" book. Ask them to listen for the features they noticed yesterday and add to anchor chart. • Read aloud the selected book (or a section) of it. Discuss the features of a "How to"

	texts and complete anchor chart. Make sure at a minimum it includes:
	    o Step by Step directions
	    o Use of transition words: First, then, next, last or numbered steps
	    o Pictures for each step
	    o Procedural warnings
	    o Text features: table of contents, glossary, index, etc.
	• Post the class definition in the room for further reference.