

No Blood, Guns, or Gays Allowed!: The Silencing of the Elementary Writer

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No Blood, Guns, or Gays Allowed!: The Silencing of the Elementary Writer

JENIFER JASINSKI SCHNEIDER

In this article, Schneider shares interviews with teachers that offer insight into how teachers respond to potentially controversial writing topics.

Writing is often viewed as the ideal classroom activity within which students may take risks and think freely. Through their writing, students are expected to develop strong writing voices (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994). Calkins (1994) states that teachers should “invite children to bring their lives into the classroom” (p. 17) in order to “nurture the intangible spirit” (p. 21). However, when students actually bring their lives into writing, they are often met with resistance. For example, Mamchur (1994) describes a writing experience in which a classroom teacher scolded a hesitant writer for sharing his most embarrassing moment with a university professor. In front of other students, he was criticized for writing the word “fart.”

In another writing workshop example, McCarthy (1994) recounts the experience of Anita, a sixth-grade girl whose teacher wanted her to bring her life, thoughts, and “voice” into her writing. During a writing conference, Anita stated that she was planning to write about a camping experience. However, after examining Anita’s writing notebook, her teacher found a more “emotional” and “personally meaningful” topic; she strongly encouraged Anita to write about her father. Unfortunately, the teacher did not realize that Anita’s father was abusive.

These two incidents are examples of the ways in which some classroom teachers limit or direct children’s voices. However, there are other teachers who accept children’s written ideas and encourage them to write about topics of their choice without question. Dyson (1995) studied the writing behaviors of Sammy, a second-grade child. During a classroom activity called “writers’ theater,” in which children asked their classmates to act out their stories for the whole class, Sammy used his written texts to change his social position in the classroom. First, he wrote stories that were similar to those written by other boys in the class in that they were based on a popular cartoon series. Second, he invited only the high-status boys to act out the roles of his central characters, and he sought their approval for his storylines. Finally, he also asked one particularly high-status girl to play the love interest of one of the cartoon heroes—a role that actually embarrassed the girl. Dyson (1995) found that this opportunity for dramatically re-enacting text allowed Sammy to use his “text as a ticket” into a social relationship with boys who usually ignored him. Writers’ theater also allowed Sammy to use his story to fit in with

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the boys, even though he ultimately made a girl in the class feel embarrassed.

For some, Sammy's use of writing in this way may be viewed as a form of harassment, and the role of the teacher in this situation may be questioned. Why did she allow students to act out violent, cartoon-inspired scenes? Why was the girl made to feel embarrassed and demeaned? The boys were free to write on topics of their choice, but the boys' freedom made the girls feel uncomfortable. Therefore, were the girls really free? Should the teacher have questioned Sammy? Should she have controlled his writing for the sake of the classroom community?

Questioning students' goals and intentions may be deemed necessary in certain instances, but Lensmire (1994) mistrusts the "questioning" of student voice. He believes that teachers are in positions of power, and their questioning may serve as a form of coercion:

Advocates of critical pedagogy ask teachers to support *and question* student expression. In questioning student expression from their position of authority in the classroom, teachers once again run the risk of shutting down, silencing student voice in the classroom. . . . At times, critical pedagogists seem overconfident that student voice will flourish in the face of questioning. (Lensmire, 1994, p. 5)

I agree with Lensmire. In some classrooms, students may be unable to sustain their opinions in the face of adult questioning. They may be unable to prove their points or debate issues. But I also disagree with Lensmire. In a classroom environment in which freedom, voice, and choice are extended to students always, in all ways, many students may learn to negotiate with their teacher and sustain their opinions when questioned. They may learn to negotiate with adults. They may learn to negotiate with people who are more powerful. Although it may be argued that many children will bend to a teacher's demands despite the openness of the teacher, isn't it better that some students learn how powerful they can be? Isn't it better to have heated arguments, hurt feelings, and discussions of taboo topics than it is to have an educational "banking" system (Freire, 1970)? It may be asked, "At what cost freedom?" In response to this question, I must reply, "At what cost control?"

In examining these issues, an invisible line appears to exist—a line that children and teachers are not allowed to cross. Therefore, I interviewed a group of teachers in order to explore the following questions: (a) What topics do teachers consider "taboo" or "off limits" in children's writing, and (b) How do teachers deal with such issues that make them feel uncomfortable, nervous, or angry?

STUDY BACKGROUND

I conducted individual interviews with 12 elementary and middle school teachers in an effort to understand their perspectives and beliefs about writing topics within their classrooms (Bodgewic & Jamison, 1994; Kvale, 1992).

The Teachers

Given the possibly sensitive nature of many writing topics, I felt that I should interview teachers who knew me and would be willing to provide honest answers to questions that may involve their personal beliefs. Therefore, I used snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) to select three teachers who are personal friends, and they suggested two additional teachers. For the remaining interviewees, I contacted a colleague who conducts a yearly writing inservice for teachers. She supplied the names of 17 teachers who were involved in the writing course. Of the 17 teachers, she highlighted 7 whom she felt would be willing participants. I sent the 7 teachers a letter in which I requested their participation. Five teachers responded, and I interviewed each one. Throughout the interview process, I was aware that I had not included any men. Therefore, I requested participation from four male teachers with whom I had worked previously. Two of these teachers agreed to participate. One teacher was a Masters student enrolled in one of my courses, and the other taught in a school where I frequently serve as a consultant. Pseudonyms are used for all of the teachers, and a description of each person is located in the Appendix.

The Interviews

I used an interview guide approach (Patton, 1990, p. 288) to ensure that I asked each person similar questions about the same general topics. I determined the questions in several ways: (a) I read related literature to determine issues in children's writing that have been debated and discussed (e.g., Dyson, 1997, 1998; Lensmire, 1994; Mamchur, 1994), (b) I reflected on my own elementary teaching to identify topics that made me feel uncomfortable, and (c) I informally surveyed colleagues to determine which topics they felt I should include.

I conducted individual interviews with each teacher. I tape recorded each interview in its entirety, and then transcribed the tapes, yielding 97 total pages of dialogue. Some teachers also provided samples of students' work, or they gave me tours of their classrooms.

I began each interview with general questions about the teacher's writing program. I asked each person to describe his or her writing instruction and to indicate if and when students were allowed to write on topics of their choice. I asked the teachers which topics students usually wrote about, and I also asked if any topics were "taboo" or "off limits." Then I questioned each person about specific topics that I felt could be "inappropriate" in many classrooms. We discussed violence, racism, gay feelings or gay parents, religion, and sex. For each topic, I asked questions in the following manner, "Have you ever had students write about violence? If so, what did you do? If not, what would you do?" Based on each person's answer, I probed for more information. Occasionally, I suggested different scenarios to determine how the teacher would respond, as in the following example:

- JENIFER: Have you ever had kids write with a lot of violence?
- ALEXANDRA: Um, no, not with excessive violence.
- JENIFER: Anything with blood, or murder, or knives?
- ALEXANDRA: Nothing that stands out.
- JENIFER: What would you do if they did?
- ALEXANDRA: Well, I guess I would ask him why he wrote about it. Because I conference with them all of the time. So they're used to me asking questions. So it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for me to ask, "Why did you write this?"

During several interviews, teachers also asked for my opinion by stating, "I don't know. What would you do?" In those instances, I probed for their opinions first and then offered my own views.

Identifying Patterns and Themes

Once all of the interviews were completed and transcribed, I read through the conversations looking for emerging themes (Patton, 1990). At first, I searched for patterns within each topic (e.g., gay issues or violence). Yet, I did not find strong patterns among the teachers' responses to each topic. Next, I looked for patterns within each teacher's total interview. I found that each person's responses also varied, depending on the line of questioning. Essentially, I was unable to identify significant patterns within cases or within topics—each person was unique in his or her beliefs and responses. Then I looked for patterns across all questions and all teachers to determine the types of general responses the teachers provided (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). For example, I recognized that many teachers were unsure how to handle certain topics; therefore, they stated that they would ask the administration, guidance counselors, or peers for assistance. I found distinct patterns in the types of responses that the teachers supplied, and so I reexamined all of the interview transcripts as a whole, looking for the various ways that teachers had responded in general. After I identified the response types, I reexamined the data and placed individual teachers' comments under the corresponding type of response.

SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEWS

Most of these teachers had little experience dealing with writing topics that included violence, racism, gay issues, religion, or sex. Therefore, the majority of their statements reflected their conjecture as to how they would respond if these topics were to emerge in their students' writing. In the following sections, I provide an overview of the teachers' descriptions of their own writing programs, then I share examples of the ways in which these teachers managed students' writing choices.

Writing Programs and Free Choices

Each of the 12 teachers described a variety of writing contexts within his or her classroom (see Appendix for an overview). Alexandra, Jaime, Paula, Laura, Alice, and Ken utilized a form of writing workshop (Calkins, 1994) along with journal writing. For these teachers, writing workshop generally began with a 10–15 minute mini-lesson on writing strategies, followed by independent writing time, and concluded with some type of sharing. Students were encouraged to revise and edit the pieces that they wanted to publish. Journal writing consisted of personal writing along with some prompted journal topics. During writing workshop and journal writing, these teachers noticed that students usually wrote about their lives. Topics such as family vacations, pets, friends, and sports were frequently mentioned.

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Kay allowed students to select topics of their choice within an assigned genre structure.

The writing programs of Pam, Kay, and Seth were slightly different. Seth taught in a self-contained, elementary classroom, and Pam and Kay operated under middle school and high school schedules in which they taught three to six different classes per day. Although these teachers' schedules were different, each person's writing instruction focused on teaching various genre structures. Kay allowed students to select topics of their choice within an assigned genre structure. For example, when teaching argumentative or persuasive essays, Kay's students wrote about a variety of topics such as the benefits of teenage drinking, the unfairness of SAT scores, the influence of the Internet, the tobacco industry's responsibility in smoking-related deaths, and abortion. Pam and Seth also taught their students about various genre formats; however, they assigned topics more often than Kay. For example, Pam stated, "I've been finding that if I give them too many choices, or give writing assignments that are wide open, they have questions about it because they are used to having many guidelines. It creates more questions and turmoil than not."

In contrast to the other teachers, Lana, Nicole, and Rochelle primarily used prompt writing that was based on the expository and narrative testing within their state and district. While all of the other teachers taught these formats and felt the pressure of testing, these three teachers focused primarily on preparing students for the test and relied on district training to guide and shape their writing programs. They did allow weekly or monthly free-writing times for the children, but, free writing was limited, and the students had difficulty developing their own topics. For example, Lana stated, "Even when they have free time, they want topics from me. So I give them ideas. They have a really hard time writing without a topic."

Taboo Topics

All of the teachers stated that their students were free to write on topics of their choice unless the specific task related to demand writing. When asked if there were any topics that were “taboo” or “off limits,” each teacher, except Nicole and Seth, felt that the students could write about any topic. Nicole explained which topics she limited:

Actually, when we do current events, I tell them that they can not pick inappropriate topics like murder. And last year, when we were doing current events, I told them that I didn't want any report on the president. Because, what was it about? Monica.

Nicole felt that children should not write about topics such as murder, sex, and Monica Lewinsky because they were inappropriate. She did not want children to write about “adult” content. Seth also had similar feelings, based on his own personal experiences. Seth stated:

I try to deter violence because it's our school philosophy. . . . But I do discuss it with them to see what their feelings and their thoughts are. I don't know if it's right or wrong, but I told them my two best friends died in violent ways, and without going into details, one was shot and killed. So, I always tell them that I don't appreciate any finger pointing with guns. So most of them do avoid that [in their writing] at least.

For different reasons, Seth and Nicole asked their students to avoid particular topics. They were aware of issues that made them feel uncomfortable, and they forewarned their students. Both teachers felt that the students appreciated the advance notice, and the children complied with their requests.

Types of Responses to Taboo Writing Topics

Although the other teachers did not identify “taboo” topics in their classrooms, when I began to question them with specific examples, they realized that there were many other issues with which they were not comfortable. In the following sections, I share the different ways in which the teachers responded to “taboo” topics.

Who Am I to Control Your Writing? Several teachers believed that writing is a form of self-expression and children need the freedom to write their thoughts and beliefs. During my interview with Laura, she stated that she was “hesitant” to control or stop students from writing about certain topics:

I'm so strongly entrenched with the idea that writing is sometimes your only outlet. Although I don't have a journal, I do understand that there are people who get out their emotion that way. So I would never want to stop [kids from writing], because I would think, “What if they don't have any other outlet, and I've stopped the last one that they had?”

Similar to Laura, many of the other teachers felt uncomfortable with the idea of controlling students' writing. Even when

certain teachers disagreed with the children or felt uncomfortable about the topic, they believed that children should be allowed to write freely. In the following excerpt, Kay shared her views on students writing about homosexuality:

JENIFER: What would you do if a student started writing about gay feelings or family members?

KAY: Well, I guess that would depend on what direction they were taking. Personally, I would be more disturbed about a student who was belligerently, violently anti-gay, “I'm going to go bash them all in the parking lot,” than someone who was honestly questioning, “Am I gay?” I probably would react a little more quickly to one who would have a violent attitude.

JENIFER: So having those feelings wouldn't bother you?

KAY: No. Some of my best friends are gay.

JENIFER: Well, some people feel, in the context of school, that those issues are taboo.

KAY: They are very touchy subjects. There's no doubt about it. But to call them taboo takes away students' freedom to express themselves.

JENIFER: Segue into religion. What if you have a student who is a fundamental Christian who writes an anti-gay paper from that perspective—not necessarily violence towards gays?

KAY: From a Southern Baptist perspective? [*Laughing.*]

JENIFER: Yes, exactly.

KAY: There you have the two sides. I would never, and a teacher has to walk a really thin line, I would never try to impose my own values on the students. I just think you cross that line, and it's dangerous. Let that Southern Baptist kid say whatever he wants as long as it's not violent or advocates violence. I know it's probably intolerant. But there is so much more going on in that kid's life that makes him believe that way. And I could never affect him. I believe that. And some people would say that's a chicken way out of it. You know?

JENIFER: Do you think some people would want you to address the issue and try to change that child?

KAY: My mother would, who is a Southern Baptist.

JENIFER: She would?

KAY: Yeah, because her preacher says it's wrong, so it's wrong. . . . And again, I would support his writing and his freedom to express his thought, but I would not try to change his attitudes. Is that a wimp?

JENIFER: No, I don't think so.

KAY: I just think that there are things out there that I would never affect any kind of change.

As revealed in this conversation, Kay's views were complex. She did not want to impose her beliefs on the students, so she supported her students' writing as long as they did not propose violence toward others. Yet Kay also realized that her support, or any effort on her part to alter her students' writing, really would not affect any substantial change in her students' beliefs. Basically, she felt that she could support and encourage their writing, but she could not change her students as people.

I'd Better Check with the Administration. Many times, the teachers were unsure if certain topics were "allowed" in the classroom. In the following discussion, Lana revealed her concern over legal issues:

JENIFER: What would you do if you had someone write about cults?

LANA: Oh God. [Pause.] Well, it depends on how much they bring into the room. I don't know. What would I do? If they're writing about cults and like how great it is, and how wonderful it is?

JENIFER: How great Satan is.

LANA: [Gasp.] Oh my God! I don't know what I would do. I'd have to get some advice from somebody.

JENIFER: What do you think?

LANA: My opinion? What I would want to do? Tell them absolutely not. You can't write about stuff like that in my classroom. Do I have the right to do that? No. Because if I let them talk about other things, if one person talks about her religion why can't other horrible children talk about the horrible things they believe in. I totally disagree with it, but I don't know how that relates to our school, and to the system, and if it's allowed, and all that other kind of stuff. But they have fine lines between stuff you can and can't say.

JENIFER: Where do you get that information?

LANA: That's not something I can get a hold of, but if I talked to my Assistant Principal or Principal, then they would have all the legal parts of it. There's a lot of stuff that I don't know that's out there.

Lana was appalled by the thought of children writing about Satan or witchcraft; yet, she bypassed her personal beliefs to defer to the authority and guidelines of the school system. She did not want to permit satanic topics in writing, but if these issues were part of the children's right to free speech, then she felt that she had to yield. However, Lana held out for the final determination to be made by the school. In this way, she could

circumvent her own moral reasoning and attribute the final decision to authority, thereby alleviating all societal, legal, parental, and moral pressures.

When I asked Paula how she would handle students writing about gay parents, she felt comfortable with the topic. But, just as Lana explained, Paula was also unsure of the legality of addressing that issue with children:

I would definitely take that to the guidance counselor to deal with because that's such a touchy subject. I teach human growth and development to the fifth graders, and you have to really be careful what you talk about. So I wouldn't want to cross the line and get myself into trouble. I wouldn't mind talking to a kid about it, but I would just want to ask someone, "What are the guidelines here? What can I talk about with this child?" Because I'm not quite sure what I'm allowed to say.

Many teachers had real fears about the legality of certain topics in the classroom. Although the teachers were sure that their districts had written policies on such matters, no one was aware of the information, where it could be obtained, or what it would dictate. These teachers deferred to authority, but it is unclear whether those in authority could or would help.

Get Thee to a Counselor. Throughout the interviews, I found that certain teachers felt that particular issues warranted a student's referral to the guidance counselor. The teachers' reasoning for sending students to receive counseling varied, depending on the topic and the individual. In the following interview, I asked Pam what she would do if a student wrote about homosexual feelings:

PAM: Pull them aside. I tend to just feel the student out first to see where they are coming from. Maybe it has something to do with a misunderstanding with whatever we're working on. Then, beyond that, if there seems to be an issue, I refer it out to guidance.

JENIFER: What if it's not an issue? What if a kid has a gay father with a boyfriend, and within the context of his writing it makes sense and it's a good story, but it's about his gay father. What would you do?

PAM: I would probably just leave it as it is. It's something that he perceives as normal. With the whole gay and lesbian movement being so open now, I would have to say that I would let him or her continue writing about it. Maybe it's an avenue for them to write.

JENIFER: So if it was about their own gay feelings, then you would send them to a guidance counselor?

PAM: Yeah, I try not to get into the issues too much.

JENIFER: Why?

PAM: Because I don't think it's my place. My place is to teach academics, not to get into the personal or

issue side. I mean I can deal with it to an extent, but beyond that, with all of the liabilities and everything else, I would just as soon refer it.

JENIFER: Does it make you feel uncomfortable?

PAM: No, not really. I would just talk to the students. Because, I think if you feel uncomfortable about something, then they can feel that. So if there is something wrong there, then you address it normally. Then I would quietly of course refer it. Nothing is ever blatantly open like I would call over the intercom, "We have a gay student here!"

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Pam revealed that she had no desire to deal with deep personal issues. She also revealed that sexual feelings, particularly homosexual feelings, should be dealt with by a guidance counselor. She would not embarrass a child, but she would ask the child to talk with someone else about these issues. Pam revealed that she felt that gay feelings are not appropriate for the classroom, and she was not equipped or willing to handle them.

As in Pam's case, some teachers revealed an unwillingness to deal with issues that made them feel uncomfortable, and they referred the students to expert others. On other occasions, particular teachers felt comfortable with the topic, but they sensed impending danger for the students. For example, when Rochelle noticed students writing about sexual content or behaving in sexually explicit ways, she referred them to the guidance counselor:

I've taken every single [sexual reference] seriously and sent them to the office. But I've also talked to the students. I had a little girl who was sexually abused, so I wouldn't send her to the office every time she mentioned it, but I would talk to her about it. I tell them that it's inappropriate for little girls or little boys to talk like that because they're sending a message that that kind of stuff is appropriate. So I would encourage her to be a young lady, and if it was a little boy, I'd encourage him to be a young man. And to protect themselves and not let people see them. [Rochelle then mentioned that some children touched or exposed themselves.] And by the end of the year, we were doing a lot better.

Rochelle had experiences with several abused children; therefore, she treated their writing and discussions with urgency. She also acted within state guidelines to report suspected abuse. In these instances, the children were not exploring their feelings but reporting events that placed them in possible danger. Rochelle responded by referring students to the proper authorities for consultation and follow through.

It's Personal, Keep it to Yourself. Many of the teachers felt the need to deal with students' writing within their own classrooms, and yet other teachers relied on the administration or guidance counselors for support. However, there were a few teachers who did neither. For these teachers, the topic was

not dangerous or emotionally charged—the topic was merely inappropriate. For example, when discussing homosexual issues, Nicole revealed that she would not allow her students to write about gay parents or issues and then share the writing with others:

NICOLE: I wouldn't let them share it. Because it's against, and I know that if anybody . . . it's against my moral beliefs. And it's against a lot of kids' moral beliefs. So that's something that I think should be kept private. Just like divorce. I think that's private. And the parents' sexual preference should be private.

JENIFER: What if a child wrote about his mom, her girlfriend, and the family going to Disney World. You know, the kind of thing that's not explicitly about being gay?

NICOLE: I probably wouldn't let them share it, because what's going to happen is they're going to start getting asked questions. And how are they going to feel when these kids start making fun of them? Sooner or later, they're going to get made fun of. Once the kids find out that mom's gay, and she has a girlfriend, what do you think the kids are going to do? And I wouldn't want that child going through that. It's not his fault or her fault, the parents are, you know, the way they are. . . .

JENIFER: If you grow up in that type of family, you may not realize what other people think.

NICOLE: It's going to happen sooner or later, so you try to protect them as long as you can in elementary school, because once they get older, that's it. Kids don't show any mercy. I probably would go talk to my administration and have them tell me what to do.

JENIFER: So you would check with your administration?

NICOLE: Yeah, but see, maybe I wouldn't. Because if everyone's sharing their papers, how am I going to tell this child, "No, I don't want you to share it," without them getting upset? That would be a touchy subject. Now, I have no idea how I would handle that. Because if I let them share it, even forget my moral issues, this child will be made fun of. If I don't let them share it, then what are they going to think? How is that going to affect them too? It's going to hurt them. [Pause.] So, the parents should stop! [Laughing.]

At first, Nicole stated that her students would not be allowed to write or share papers that dealt with gay issues. Her feelings were based predominantly on her moral beliefs, but she also expressed concern for the students' feelings. Through further discussion, Nicole recognized that her initial stance would probably hurt the students' feelings as well, so she began to contemplate her opinion. She could not reconcile

her incompatible beliefs and statements; therefore, she directed her ire toward the source of her moral dilemma—the parents. If only the parents were “normal,” then she would not have this problem.

For a different reason, Alice also prohibited certain types of writing. During specific situations, she felt that students’ individual writing choices should be censored for the good of the whole class. In the following excerpt, she explained how violent topics were inappropriate:

JENIFER: What would you do if a child wrote about violent topics?

ALICE: I would probably talk to the guidance counselor. I would probably also contact the parent to see where this was coming from. “Is this from TV, older siblings, or different things like that?” I don’t think I would say, “You can write about it,” but I would say, “I prefer you to use this type of writing at home.”

JENIFER: So you would determine the nature of [the writing] and talk with the guidance counselor, but you would stop it at school?

ALICE: Yeah, because we talk about things that are appropriate in school. Do I really want to hear this? Do other students? Is this going to help them? Is this going to make them afraid to hear this? We’re all here to support each other, but I don’t know if this [violent topic] would.

In an effort to protect other children, Alice revealed that she would ask students to refrain from writing about violent or gory topics. Although she would prohibit the writing in school, she would suggest that the student continue writing at home, thereby hoping that the student could still express herself or himself under the supervision of parents or guidance counselors.

What about the Parents? Although parents are not frequently discussed as part of children’s classroom writing processes, several teachers felt the presence of parental judgment in the context of writing instruction. The real or imagined threat of parental repercussions was clearly discussed by several of the teachers. In the following excerpt, Lana revealed the topic that she felt would most likely incite parents:

LANA: Evolution would bother me totally. It bothers me that kids talk about their Mormon religion. I don’t like it.

JENIFER: But do you let them write about it?

LANA: Yeah, because it’s not my place to tell them anything. They’re not at church. They need to know that there are a lot of different beliefs out there, and we talk about that. People believe one way, that’s one great thing about America—you have that right. Just because I don’t believe in it, doesn’t mean

that I’m going to tell them, “You can’t do this. You can’t believe that way.” I’d have those parents down my back real fast.

Whereas Lana felt that she could not control students’ writing choices due to parental repercussions, Ken felt that he should limit students’ topics so that parents would not get upset:

JENIFER: When your student wrote about his gay father, was there a chance to share it with others?

KEN: It was an assignment that they weren’t sharing at the time.

JENIFER: Would you have let him share that?

KEN: [Pause.] I probably would not have because that’s not common to the other kids in the class. I think that maybe if it was a little more common, it might be [okay], but I would still be apprehensive. I probably would go to my principal and ask because those are real sensitive social issues that I think that you want to be very careful about the message that you send. Because children do go home and tell their parents about what has been talked about in school. So I think that that would send up a red flag that we would want to take precautionary measures before we go in and say, “Okay, you can express this to the whole class.” I don’t think it’s something that [parents] would receive well.

While Lana allowed one topic (religion) for the sake of diversity, Ken discouraged another topic (homosexuality) for the sake of the status quo. Despite their intentions and theoretical orientations, Ken and Lana both revealed a common concern: “What will the parents think?” In addition to this fear, Alice posed another scenario: “All I need is an irate parent and the newspaper to get a hold of it. So you try to cover yourself.” Whether it was parents, newspapers, or administrators, the teachers felt the scrutiny of outside others who are in positions to judge their teaching, intentions, and lives.

Wouldn’t You Like to Write about Something Else?

Throughout the interviews, I found that many teachers were hesitant to stop students from writing on certain topics, but they remained uncomfortable in dealing with the issue of contention. Therefore, as revealed in the following conversation with Laura, several teachers opted to avoid the taboo issues by encouraging students to write about different topics:

JENIFER: So if racist comments came up in writing, what would you do?

LAURA: Probably start with conferencing, and address it there. Why are you feeling this way? Who are you hearing this from? What happened to you to make you feel this way? Because I tend to think with children this age it’s probably something learned, something they’re hearing. Very rarely is it that

they've experienced such abuse by someone of another color.

JENIFER: So, would you allow them to continue writing?

LAURA: Yeah, probably. Well, it depends. . . . I guess my philosophy would be that I never want to perpetuate that kind of thinking. . . . I think a lot of these kids don't think that way, and they wouldn't think that way until someone introduces it to them. So, I wouldn't want to chance introducing it to them.

JENIFER: What if they didn't want to stop writing about it, then what would you do?

LAURA: I would probably start to introduce them to other topics, as opposed to saying, "Absolutely not, you're not going to write about that." Because I don't want to squash their writing. And I don't want them to think, "Well I'm not going to write because I don't have anything to write about now." I would just try to come up with different interests or introduce them to something else.

Laura did not want to "promote" a particular line of thought. Yet other teachers asked students to write about "something else" because they did not feel that certain topics were appropriate for children to write about in school. For Alexandra, Pokémon was discouraged. For Jaime, the topic of "guns" elicited other suggestions. And for Seth, "devil worship" caused him to redirect students' writing.

If Your Beliefs Are like Mine, They're Fine. Most of the teachers were quite diplomatic when discussing issues that were in deep conflict with their own personal beliefs. They struggled with a desire to impose their own beliefs on their students, and questioned their "right" to censor students' writing. However, on several occasions, individual teachers allowed the strength of their personal convictions to outweigh the curriculum or students' freedom of speech. In the following excerpt, Nicole discussed the issue of religion:

JENIFER: What do you do if students write about religion or religious beliefs?

NICOLE: As long as it's my religion, it's fine with me. [Laughing.]

JENIFER: What if it's not? What if a child's mom is a Wicken, a witch?

NICOLE: I can't have that! I wouldn't let him share! I don't care! Get me in trouble!

JENIFER: What do you say?

NICOLE: I'd find a way to not let them share. I'm sorry. No!

JENIFER: Tell me.

NICOLE: Well, when my kids start talking about it, I say, "That's something personal, you need to keep that to

yourself." And that's probably what I would tell the kid. . . . Stay away from me! I'm sorry. [What followed was a brief discussion about a girl in the Columbine high school incident who was a Satanist and then became a Christian.] And this might be a terrible thing to say, but if I had a choice between my daughter being Satanic, or know that if she changes and believes in God that she's going to get killed, I would choose that she gets killed. I don't know what I would do if my child was involved in Satan worship.

JENIFER: Now, what if [their writing] was religious and about God.

NICOLE: I'd let them read it. [Laughing.] Because I'm a firm believer—I think that's what's going on in the schools. We're taking all of the morals out of the schools. Morals are usually based on God, and doing the right thing. And all that's being taken out. You can't talk about God, but you can talk about evolution. You can talk about other religions, Hanukkah, and all that, but don't teach ours. Everyone's so scared.

Nicole was adamant about her stance on religious issues. As a Christian, Nicole could not accept or tolerate certain beliefs. In many instances, she was willing to risk "getting in trouble" to eliminate certain topics from the classroom such as evolution or to promote certain morals and notions about God.

Although no other teacher was as resolute as Nicole, several other people possessed strong beliefs that guided their instructional decisions. For example, Jaime also possessed Christian beliefs, but she attempted to balance her role with caution:

JAIME: They write about God. And it's a piece of writing just like anything else is. Because I'm a Christian myself, I kind of get scared when I remind them to capitalize G because it's his name. Which in a way, it feels like to me, that I'm agreeing with their belief.

JENIFER: And that makes you feel uncomfortable?

JAIME: Just because of the pressure of society and how much trouble we can get into for teaching [about God]. And even though it's not teaching a belief, but it is, because if you don't believe that God is God the Almighty, then you wouldn't capitalize it. So it is [teaching a belief], I guess. Right?

JENIFER: Well, I guess someone could take it that way. I think it would be ridiculous.

JAIME: And I do it, but it's just something always in the back of my head. I would teach at a private school, I went to a Christian school, so I would teach there in a heartbeat. It kills me that I can't teach these wonderful Christian songs. So I know it's something

I have to be very cognizant of, that I'm not, by any means, sharing my beliefs with the children.

Jaime believed that she should not teach her beliefs to students, and even though she made a concerted effort to control her Christian values, her convictions were dominant. She was not sure that she should tell children to capitalize G, but she did it anyway.

POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Although these teachers gave their students opportunities for free-choice writing, the children's topics and ideas were controlled by their teachers in some way. At one end of the spectrum, teachers encouraged students to express themselves even if the topics were awkward or made them feel uncomfortable. For these teachers, children could write about difficult topics because writing was a form of expression, and the children needed to write as an emotional outlet. Yet, often, these written texts were not shared out loud or the teachers directed the students toward other topics. At the other end of the continuum, teachers blatantly limited, controlled, or stopped children's writing. These teachers did not apologize for or regret their decisions to curtail writing topics, redirect children's thoughts or feelings, or reprimand for writing about certain issues. Interestingly, each individual teacher could vacillate across this continuum of response, depending on the topic.

Teachers were required to teach particular genres . . .

Even the most accepting, accomplished, and confident writing teachers revealed that writing was constantly controlled in their classrooms. Teachers controlled the type of writing, the amount of writing, and the length of writing time. Teachers also limited students' writing choices by assigning writing topics, encouraging "other" topics, or directly prohibiting certain topics. In addition to teacher control, state and district testing also monopolized the teachers' time, and subsequently, the students' writing. Teachers were required to teach particular genres, administer writing tests, and ensure that students could "pass the test." The teachers were also guided by internal and external pressures. Parents, administrators, and society at large placed moral (How does this fit with my beliefs about God or right and wrong?), ethical (Should I report this or respect a student's privacy?), and legal (Will I get in trouble?) pressures on the teachers, and subsequently put pressure on the students. Each teacher revealed some uncertainty—or in some cases, fear—about the way in which she or he should handle particular topics.

For all of these teachers, it appears that their personal beliefs directed their writing instruction and helped them de-

fine that invisible "fine line" that they should not cross. Personal life experiences may have altered their views about what is appropriate, or their personal beliefs may have conflicted with the "legality" of topics. Given that no person responded to each topic in the same way, the teachers' morals, ethics, and values appeared to influence the differences in their responses to different topics, and subsequently, their teaching of writing. Therefore, in classrooms, writing is never really free. It is wrapped in the layered contexts of school and guided by the beliefs, goals, and decisions of the teachers as well as the students.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Although these interview results are limited to teacher self-reports, and they do not allow for comparisons across a large population, they do reveal some of the issues that affect writing instruction and writing topics in many classrooms.

First, the interviews reveal that the amount of direct and indirect control of classroom writing is not merely a concern but a source of consternation. Teachers must begin to examine their writing instruction and curriculum for all of the ways that writing is controlled, and then work to develop classroom routines and expectations that support both individual and group freedom of expression.

To support student expression, teachers need to provide students with the time to write on topics of their choice, in genres of their choice, without fear of criticism, exposure, or grades. Similarly, teachers need to think about the ways in which they can make this type of open writing happen within classrooms that are simultaneously being directed by their own belief systems. Teachers should reflect on their biases, expectations, and cultural assumptions and what impact these have on their instruction and their interactions with children. Teachers do not have to change their beliefs, but they should heighten their awareness of the impact of their beliefs on their teaching.

Second, there will be occasions when affording students writing freedom and choice will lead to topics, issues, and ideas that may be "inappropriate" in the classroom. Students may use their writing to explore their thoughts about certain undesirable issues. In fact, students may use their writing to change or cement their thinking on particular issues. Students may also use their writing to purposely manipulate and antagonize a teacher or humiliate and intimidate a peer (Dyson, 1995; Lensmire, 1994). When faced with these circumstances, teachers must develop fair and thoughtful methods for handling these situations. Although disruptive or corruptive writing could be banned from the classroom, many teachers elect to deal with troublesome issues so that students may have some type of feedback, some type of guidance.

Because many of the teachers whom I interviewed struggled with the notion of controlling students' writing for any reason, universities, school districts, national organizations,

and teachers also need to address these issues and share ideas for handling difficult topics and identifying the elusive “fine line.” For example, the NCTE (2000) website provides information intended to help teachers define and defend their instructional methods for the teaching of written expression. They provide strategies and rationales for teachers who allow children to write personal, potentially inappropriate texts. In addition, teachers may join together to form writing groups in which they share their own writing, examine student writing, and discuss their reactions to children’s writing topics, thereby gaining different perspectives on the issues, the children, and the writing.

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Although I do not believe that there is one correct way to handle all of the topics and issues that students bring to their writing, I believe there are better alternatives than silencing, avoiding, or redirecting. For example, Seth and Alice used their schools’ philosophies to guide discussions of the difficult topics children brought to their classrooms. In addition, Paula shared one way in which she involved students in a dialogue and the decision-making process. When I asked her what she would do if a child started writing racist comments, Paula replied that she held class meetings:

I would pull the child aside, or if I saw that it was a problem with a couple of kids, I do these classroom meetings within the school day. It’s just another way of managing the class where the kids come together in a circle. And we start off with a friendship song, then we compliment each other, and they have an agenda book in which, when they’re having problems in the class, then they write down the problem or any discussion. For example, someone wanted to put their backpack on the back of their chairs, so that was something we brought up, and we discuss it as a whole class. And we try to really team build and feel that this is our class, and you have a say within your class. So I might even bring up [the racism issue] as a little role-playing or mini-lesson of what would happen. So that’s the way I would handle it. And then from there, if I needed to go outside to get help, I would.

Paula’s classroom requires more work, a willingness to accept children’s ideas, and an ability to look critically and/or openly at one’s own beliefs and behaviors. Instead of a silent curriculum, or even an “anything goes” curriculum, Paula opted for an inclusionary curriculum in which the children (and Paula) had a voice. Although it is tempting to offer students “writing welfare” (Graves, 1976) in which we assign topics or redirect them toward “acceptable” topics, I believe it is more beneficial to follow Paula’s lead and include children in the process.

Finally, although these teachers stated that they rarely dealt with the “taboo” issues that were discussed during the interviews, children can and do think about these topics because they live them. If children live within a world that is redolent with many things we may not want them to think about (like violence, racism, sexuality, and religion), and whether they experience it through television or real life, they will think

about it, and they may write about it. Teachers need to be prepared to handle these issues so that they may be less likely to embarrass, demean, or silence a child.

CLOSING COMMENTS

During my interview with Seth, he stated, “I’ve been lucky that everybody’s written fairly innocent, adolescent-type stories.” At the end of my interview with Laura, she stated, “Whew! I thought you were going to ask me about dogs and trees.” I could have. We could continue to think about children’s writing as “innocent” and “sweet” (Hwang, Lamb, & Sigel, 1996; Lensmire, 1994). We could continue to confine writing to predetermined moments, taught in predetermined sequences with predetermined methods, using predetermined and “acceptable” topics. But I would rather know what children are really thinking, seeing, and feeling. Do children honestly enjoy writing about dogs and trees, or would they rather laugh out loud as they write about dogs peeing on trees? Do children want to regurgitate the details of their weekend, or would they rather write about monsters, joke books, and Pokémon? I don’t know, but I think the decision should be theirs to make. And when they make the decision, we can learn so much more about them and their writing. Therein lies the dilemma—some teachers, parents, adults in general don’t want to learn too much. We are afraid to know what kids are thinking, or we are not sure how to handle their ideas when we find out.

Writing is difficult to teach because it is not only about narrative and expository genres, grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but about voices, thoughts, ideas, and experiences of real and sometimes “messy” people. An easy solution would be to ensure that each child is placed with a teacher who possesses the same morals, values, and beliefs about life as the child and her or his parents do. Because this is neither possible nor desirable, as teachers, we need to ask the challenging questions, we need to acknowledge our biases, and we need to get ready for anything the human mind (albeit a young one) can create. It is difficult and challenging work, but I feel teachers are ready and willing to take the lead. If not, students are ready to lead all of us in the right direction—their direction. ●

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APPENDIX: DESCRIPTIONS OF THE TEACHERS

Name	Grade Level	Type of Writing Curriculum	Race	Gender	Number of Years Teaching	School SES	Type of School
Jaime	K–2	Writing Workshop	Caucasian	Female	4	Low–Middle	Public
Alexandra	1	Writing Workshop	Caucasian	Female	10	High	Public
Rochelle	1	Demand Writing	Caucasian	Female	6	Low	Public
Laura	2	Writing Workshop	Caucasian	Female	3	Low	Public
Ken	3	Journals/Free Writing	African American	Male	2	Low	Public, Charter
Alice	3	Writing Workshop	Caucasian	Female	10	Low	Public
Nicole	3	Demand Writing	Caucasian	Female	7	High	Public
Paula	3–5	Writing Workshop	Caucasian	Female	7	High	Public
Lana	4	Demand Writing	Caucasian	Female	11	High	Public
Seth	5	Genre Study/Demand Writing	Caucasian	Male	3	High	Private
Pam	6	Genre Study/Demand Writing	Caucasian	Female	2	Low–Middle	Public
Kay	9–12	Genre Study	Caucasian	Female	30	Mixed	Public