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Author

Cortese, Antonella

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“Don’t We Write Today?” Children’s Writing and Their Attitudes About Writing in the Looking Glass Neighborhood

- Children typically come to the classroom with a vast amount of knowledge about how to communicate thoughts and ideas. Classroom activities encourage them to use oral communication skills to explain and express feelings and opinions about their everyday lives, including events unique to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. And although children come to school knowing what writing is used for, what it looks like, and how it is used in different contexts, it is often taught in a way that does not acknowledge what children bring with them into the classroom. This study looks at the results of an attitude survey, a number of children’s writing samples collected over a two-year period, and transcripts of interviews with children exploring their feelings about writing and their writing abilities. Findings illustrate that children do know what it means to be a good writer and why it is important. Additionally, children have opinions about the writing they do both in school and after school. We hope that our results will add to the continuing discussion of the ways educators introduce writing to their students, as well as how they perceive their students as writers.

Introduction

Imagine a classroom full of children asking the question, “Teacher, do we get to write now?” For many teachers, this is a powerful request; students’ desire to write is what dreams are made of. Unfortunately, most of the time, such a scene is only a mirage. Students do not usually have such a positive attitude. What is it about writing, as a skill itself or in the way it is taught, that makes students and adults feel less inclined, over time, to write, let alone think of writing as a form of communication in which they deem themselves competent enough to engage?

Many children come to school with a great deal of knowledge and understanding about writing and an incredible energy to write (Dyson, 1989;

Graves, 1983; Graves & Stuart, 1985). Children know what writing is used for and what it looks like, and many have already begun experimenting—writing their own stories or cards and letters to family members and friends. When children start school, they are often not allowed to use this energy and knowledge to write; personal writing is often downplayed or simply “put on the back burner” in favor of developing the beginnings of “academic discourse” and “classroom writing” (Adams, 1990; Cazden, 1982; Dyson, 1985; Edelsky, 1991; Graves & Stuart, 1985; Hudelson, 1989).

Historically, writing has been viewed as a solitary act of communication in which the writer and audience are not connected. Both are placed in distinct and distant spaces, one as the conveyor of a message, the other as the receiver; never do the two interact (Gere, 1987). Another view, summed up by Brodkey (1987), paints a typical picture of the writer as a solitary individual, writing to and for other people. In addition, most classroom research on writing demonstrates that the act of writing is often conducted in a silent, noncollaborative environment, frequently on teacher-generated topics with preestablished formats. It is the teachers who initiate the writing activity, deciding on its purpose, audience, and evaluation (Cazden, 1982; Dyson, 1985; Florio & Dunn, 1985). It is in this context that students learn to write and become writers. However, writing, like speaking, is not a set of isolated skills; it is an act of communication shaped by social and cultural contexts (Dyson, 1985; Erickson, 1988; Robinson, Crawford, & Hall, 1990). Even in the most academic of contexts, when individuals write, they place themselves in relation to others, crossing (textual) borders, be it for teachers, professors, or the anonymous graders of a college entrance test such as the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT®) (Flower, Higgins, & Petraglia, 1990). It is in this paradoxical environment that children learn to communicate using the written word, and as a consequence, formulate opinions and attitudes about writing and their ability to write.

This study will analyze the results of an attitude survey about writing, a number of children’s writing samples taken over a two-year period, and transcripts of interviews with children. In doing so, the results will provide a clearer understanding of children’s attitudes toward writing and their writing ability and how these attitudes may influence their writing. This paper will begin with a review of several significant studies of writing and attitudes about writing, which provide the theoretical grounding for the present study, followed by an investigation to reveal children’s reflective perspectives about their writing abilities and their attitudes about writing both in school and after school.

Literature Review

Margaret has just announced to her kindergarten class that today is Alex’s birthday. Christopher grabs a can of colored markers and a sheet of paper and heads for the classroom’s back table....“Alex! What’s your favorite color?” he calls out. [With] the favored red marker in hand, Christopher begins to draw a big smile, two approximately placed eye-

balls and a floating bunch of balloons....With a little help from an available adult, Christopher ends his production by spelling out "Happy Birthday to Alex". Soon....the birthday card is deposited in Alex's cubby (Dyson, 1989).

Dyson's 1989 account of classroom life demonstrates the incredible power that literacy engenders when left in the hands of the student. In direct contrast to this power is a traditional educational practice, which views writing as an individual act that children practice in silence and isolation. Knowledge about the "when," "where," and "how" of writing resides with the teacher who, imparting the knowledge in a directional/transmission model, controls the resulting notion of writing as a communicative and social event in a very restricted and confined context (Cummins, 1989; Harste & Burke, 1980; Shannon, 1995). In fact, most writing research has focused on children's academic writing in the classroom, often concentrating on literacy development in terms of skills taught to children in school (Dyson, 1985; Hall, Crawford, & Robinson, 1997; King, Kelly, & Edwards, 1992). And though researchers may make conclusions about children's writing behaviors that result in better teaching and understanding, they rarely consider students' attitudes or opinions about their own writing when interpreting these behaviors. This section will consider a few studies in which children's voices are heard and their writing and feelings about their writing are examined (Cleary, 1993; Corona et al., 1998; Dooley, 1987; Ulanoff, 1993).

Becoming Writers and Liking It

Ulanoff (1993) examined the writing development of two language minority students (both Spanish dominant) over the course of three years, from the beginning of the second grade to the end of the fifth. The study looked at students' dialogue journals in order to focus on developmental patterns in their writing: the development of mechanical control (surface features), and the change in content over the three-year period. In addition, students' attitudes toward and perceptions about writing and the degree of correspondence with their actual writing were examined. Data was collected based on observation, interviews, and documentary analysis. The writing patterns, as well as changes in content, perceptions, and attitudes were observed within the context of the initial literacy instruction received by the students: English-only, or transitional bilingual education with initial literacy instruction in the first language (L1) and then a "transition" to English, the second language (L2).

Results of Ulanoff's 1993 study illustrate that the two students' writing developed over the three years and that they exhibited control over the process and product of writing across the modalities examined. Students' perceptions of and attitudes toward writing also changed from the beginning to the end of the observed period of study. During the course of the three years, students were observed initiating writing by themselves for the sheer pleasure of writing (48) and began perceiving themselves as good writers. The

findings support the conclusion that writing instruction needs to take a more holistic rather than mechanical view. As with other studies (Dyson, 1985; Edelsky, 1986, 1991; Robinson et al., 1990), Ulanoff (1993) reinforces the position of “active” interaction—that using the written language system in cooperation with a partner can aid students’ ability to negotiate meaning and develop higher order writing skills in the second language. Moreover, as students feel a sense of ownership to the written text, they will begin to take on the role of “writer.”

You Are What and How You Write

Dooley (1987) considered the instructional use of dialogue journals over a five-month period, looking at the writing of 10 third-grade Native American students living on an Indian reservation in Northern Michigan. Students were required to write a daily entry of at least three lines, which was confidential between the teacher and the student, to encourage honest, experience-based writing that would foster self-awareness. Dooley’s original objective was to encourage students’ confidence in self-expression and academic ability, and results indicated that 90% of the students had positive feelings about writing; a majority reported that they enjoyed sharing reading and writing with their classmates.

Dooley’s 1987 work suggests that minority students often perceive that their writing assignments in school do not pertain to their interests and needs. Feelings of frustration intensify, especially if students have difficulty understanding the material and are unfamiliar with the preestablished format of the writing assignment. As a result, Dooley found some students may become bored and resentful as they struggle to learn material that they feel is unrelated to their lives, given the cultural context of communication in their home communities. Students learn very little and retention is limited. Findings in Dooley are similar to those in Edelsky’s research (1986) that looks at minority students’ attitudes and perceptions of their education in mainstream American culture. Edelsky found that minority language speakers in a mainstream American classroom setting felt that when they were assigned by the teacher to exhibit correct academic writing, they were expected to create a different persona for themselves.

Similarly, Cleary (1993) reported on a case study investigating the literacy development of one bilingual child, Carlos, over the course of his 11th-grade year in a New England high school. In a series of in-depth interviews, Cleary examined Carlos’s past and present experiences with writing via his writing process, using composing-aloud sessions and classroom observation. Cleary found that Carlos’s view of himself as a student and writer shifted profoundly over time, from elementary to high school, resulting in a change in his academic standing. As Cleary states:

Most of Carlos’s worries promoted a consciousness which should have improved his written expression. But together with concern about capitalization, spelling, language, punctuation, reading and organization,

Carlos had little room left in his conscious attention for the actual writing process. (p. 386)

Cleary chronicles that Carlos's feelings about himself as a writer were not always negative. As he tells Cleary, only a few years before, during elementary school, he felt he was a very good writer and enjoyed writing and school. During the course of the year, Cleary and a tutor helped Carlos regain his confidence as a writer; Carlos began seeing himself as "*behind* instead of dumb"; his feelings of inadequacy and defensiveness about writing subsided, making him more willing to continue as a writer.

Cleary's observations and findings in working with Carlos reflect much of what may be happening in classrooms around the US today, especially with regard to minority and bilingual students (Cummins, 1989; Edelsky, 1986, 1991; Hudelson, 1989). This type of research is essential because it gives educators and researchers a truer picture of the perspective of the individual experiencing the process of writing (Corona et al., 1998; Robinson et al., 1990).

"Do As I Say, Not As I Do"

The work done by Corona, Spangenberg, and Venet (1998) looked specifically at students' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes about writing in order to develop a program for improving student writing in the areas of technical skills and creativity. The participants were students in grades 1-4 and kindergarten to fifth-grade classroom teachers in three Midwestern school sites, all of similar socioeconomic status. Researchers gathered pre- and postprogram data using a teacher survey designed to measure teachers' attitudes about themselves as writers and teachers of writers, as well as their perceptions about their students as writers. They also employed a student survey, asking students to rate themselves as writers, and an observation checklist that described students' writing processes, and they assessed a sample of students' written work. Results of the pretest surveys and observation checklists demonstrated that although teachers did consider themselves writers and enjoyed writing (84%), they also felt that mechanics and vocabulary hindered their writing process (62%). Teachers expressed the same comments when responding to statements about their students; 84% reported that students had problems with mechanics and spelling and lacked rich vocabulary in their writing. When students were asked for their perceptions about their own writing, most reported they enjoyed writing and liked to share their writing in class (75%). And though most students indicated a positive attitude about writing, many also expressed their perceived obstacles as limited vocabulary, poor spelling, and faulty punctuation. The writing samples that were collected and evaluated confirmed students' perceptions and indicated that two components of the writing process—organization and revision—were substantial barriers, and the activity environment itself also affected students' writing, with 83% of students not beginning or progressing in a timely fashion.

The pretest analysis by Corona et al. (1998) is consistent with work done on writing and the activity of writing (Eller et al., 1988; Fletcher, 1994; Graves, 1994). Based on their pretest findings, Corona et al. developed a series of strategies, resulting in three categorizations of interventions: enriching the language environment, creating settings that motivate student writing, and collaborating through peer counseling. The objective was to reduce the obstacles that students experience as writers. Posttest data results, using the same pretest measures, indicate that the program interventions did have a decided effect on overall perceptions about writing, for both teachers and students, and a positive impact on students' actual writing. Posttest results showed a gain of 13% in students' perceptions of enjoying writing and a 26% gain in students' perceptions of themselves as writers. In the area of technical skills, students reported that words came more easily (+37%), which was substantiated by the observation checklist data collected.

Results from Corona et al. (1998) further illustrate the general consensus in classroom writing research. Students felt that they were not able to express themselves because they lacked words and time, and they continued to perceive that once a written piece was completed, it was set in stone. Students consistently disliked revision and editing, which confirms that there needs to be a continued commitment to strategies that encourage and motivate students to write, as well as a reconsideration of the classroom learning structure and orientation (Calkins, 1994; Edelsky, 1991; Erickson, 1988; Gere, 1987; Graves, 1983).

The Looking Glass Neighborhood (LGN): Building Academic and Social Communities of Writers

Following the lead of the research previously cited, this study investigates the attitudes and perceptions of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade children participating in an after-school program, the Looking Glass Neighborhood (LGN), in which writing plays a principal role. In this study, children's writings produced in the LGN were analyzed and results of a writing attitude survey were reviewed. In addition, six of the children participating in the after-school program were interviewed in order to understand better their perceptions about themselves as writers and their attitudes about writing in general and in specific contexts.

The after-school program, the Looking Glass Neighborhood (LGN), was organized around an activity "maze" that mixed education and play using both computer and board games. Each game consisted of a task card that asked children to carry out a literacy-based activity, be it reading or writing, based on the game they were playing. For purposes of this research, we focused on the writing activities in which children in the program participated, examining the qualitative development in writing given the activity environment and noting how it corresponded to participants' personal perceptions about writing and their writing ability.

The Context of the Study

Young children participate, by virtue of their daily experiences, in writing that serves a defined purpose, public and private. Children write letters and cards as well as various types of lists and signs both inside and outside the classroom environment—all are examples of written communication with meaning. When learning to write in the school environment, their natural connection to writing as a literacy event often disappears. The acquisition of school literacy is customarily accomplished in an activity devoid of intrinsic meaning for the writer, with much less support as a communicative, social event (Dyson, 1985; Hudelson, 1989; Ulanoff, 1995).

The LGN after-school program was established in the fall of 1997. Situated in the neighborhood of Fairmount Village¹ at Rolando Park Elementary School, it serves a Latino, Vietnamese, Sudanese, Laotian, African-American, and White Anglo school population, principally children in grades third to fifth. LGN was created to serve as not only an academic link, but a link to the community for both children and parents, making it both multicultural and multigenerational as a functional system of academic and sociocultural expansion and sustenance.

The two most distinctive artifacts used at the LGN are (a) the game/activity maze, within which the children travel to select their games, and (b) the cyber entity, “Mao.” The maze is a map of Harbor Heights, where the children live. The Harbor Heights maze reflects specific locales, streets, and historical areas whose names and locations are familiar to participants, being part of their day-to-day interactions. The second artifact is the cyber entity, Mao, a mysterious, playful cyber cat who acts as both a motivating mechanism to help participants progress through the maze and the organizing principle around which the site functions and evolves. Discussions among the LGN participants about “who Mao is” are always in flux; however, such disputes allow for lively conversations about gender, rules, and responsibility (Cole, 1996). As the patron of the LGN site, Mao is at the center of the daily activities and events of the site. Participants forge a relationship with Mao as he/she/it provides encouragement or mischievously creates problems with computer circuitry. Mao supports a true notion of community on a personal, real world plane, which is reflected in the consistent communication it maintains with the children and adult participants via handwritten and computer-generated mail.

In traditional classrooms, children are often given topics for compositions, as well as activity sheets with discrete skills to be learned, all of which are assigned and evaluated by the teacher upon completion. In due course, students begin to see the act of using written communication as no more than an exercise in grammar, spelling, and punctuation (Cleary, 1993; Corona et al., 1998; Eller et al., 1988; Wilkinson, 1988). Feedback is often given, not on how effectively students accomplish their communicative purpose, but in the form of a grade or brief comment; “success” is defined as the fulfillment of requirements set forth by a defined curriculum. Students, especially language minority students, are profoundly and negatively affected by such

writing instruction (Bissex, 1990; Cleary, 1993; Dooley, 1987). They struggle not only with the acquisition of verbal communication skills in a second language, but with feelings of incompetence and frustration caused by their limited success at expressing their ideas on paper. By contrast, within the LGN the intense and consistent communication with Mao aids in creating and sustaining a relationship that goes beyond the functional/practical discourse related to a participant's maze progress. It also encourages a familiar and almost intimate communication, as shown in the following correspondence:

26 October, 1998

Dear Mao

I Do Forgive you is it tru that you spik Español?? What dose yo soy tu mejor amiga mians. I playd Jenga today a lose 2 times and Jade wins 2 times it is't fear.

Con mucho cariño

Mariana Torres (3rd grade)

Earth Date 26 October, 1998

Mariana!!

Thank you for forgiving me...Is it true that I speak Español? ¡Ma si que es la verdad!! A test?? You are giving me a test....oooookay: "yo soy tu mejor amiga" means in English "I am your best friend"...

You are?! You are my dearest too!! ¡Que linda que tu es por escribirme este mensaje, mija!!

I know it isn't fair that you lost at Jenga, but now that you know how to play, you will win next time! Besides, the important thing is that you have fun and learn something about what you are doing so to do it better the next time, no??

Un abrazo,

Mao

The above letter exchange is only one example of the kind of relationships developed by the written interaction between the children and Mao. In the correspondence, Mao encourages Mariana, who lost at the game Jenga, to use what she learned from having played in order to win the next time. Mao is an all-knowing authority figure to whom children and adults on site look for answers to questions about the maze and resolution of disagreements. Mao also takes on the character of a godmother or godfather, someone the children relate to as closely as a family member.

3/18/99

Dear Mao,

Jackie wasn't listening to me. I told her to go to everybody but she jush egnored me. She got on my nervous. Well I had fun when I was playing. Well you are my best friend too. And you are such a sweet heart too. I did

a word puzzle to me in expert level but, Erika to it I think so.
Your best best friend,
Clarissa (4th grade)

3/23/99
Clarissa, ma belle!!
Yeah, I noticed that Jackie was kinda NOT all there on Thursday, but everybody has a day where they just don't feel like listening....even me MAO...don't you worry my dear, Jackie is cool and she will be more Jackie-like today.... You and Jackie are becoming some real LGN know everythings!!! Loved the puzzle you all did! Heehee, and you thought College Cat Erika took it....hehehe, I grabbed it with my tail as she was leaving and replaced hers with a copy!! heeheehaha!! I am still working on it and so give me some time...you are all way to smart for little old me Mao cat....
See you around and about my dearest!!
Mao

The correspondences above and the ones that follow illustrate that students have a vast amount of knowledge of how language works, having learned to communicate in their own home environments. It is in this manner that children come to school, wanting to write. That writing becomes an academic skill that they are perceived to lack and therefore must learn takes away from any initial confidence students come to school with in the first place (Cazden, 1982; Cleary, 1993; Eller et al., 1988; Scollon & Scollon, 1982; Shannon, 1995). Language minority students often find themselves torn between a traditional language arts educational setting and the setting from which they have come, where they acquired skills that are seen as useless—or worse yet—incorrect (Adams, 1990; Dyson, 1989; Fletcher, 1994, Graves, 1994).

The Students

The students participating in this study ranged from third to fifth grade; some younger siblings enrolled under special family circumstance were also included. Table 1, below, outlines the breakdown according to grade.

Table 1
The Breakdown of Students

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
1	1
2	2
3	14
4	8
5	4

All students in this study were enrolled in either the mainstream or sheltered English programs at Rolando Park Elementary School. Because of the initial scope of this study, specific program enrollment was not taken into account. All participants lived in homes in which parents or caretakers principally spoke a language other than English (mostly Spanish). Approximately half the children reported that they did not speak the second language at home unless family members who do not speak any English were present. Based on examination of the written data collected from the LGN in winter 1999, only 5 of the 29 children who participated in the study wrote letters to the cyber entity in their second language (Spanish).

Methods

At the onset of the LGN after-school program, the act of writing was introduced mainly as the kind of activity children would participate in when playing the games (with task cards), and when communicating with Mao. The children were expressly told that their writing was not a formal activity dictated by an academic goal, but a collaborative activity bound only by what they chose to write and communicate to Mao. In this manner, children were made to understand that the goal of writing was not simply to complete a task for its own sake; rather, to use writing to interact and to disseminate information to other children; for example, what was learned about a certain game or new information that was acquired through activities (see Appendix C).

Communication at the LGN

Children came to the LGN either on Mondays and Wednesdays or on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Children wrote and mailed letters to Mao two or three times a week, depending on the activities they did and their desire to write. During the LGN year, from the beginning of February 1999 to the end of March 1999, approximately 250 letters were written to Mao, including the writing that children did as part of their task card work (mini-library projects, drawings, etc.). Because this study's goal was to examine children's attitudes about writing, quantitative analysis regarding the frequency of their writing was not investigated; rather, the written data collected was used to highlight results of the attitude questionnaire and interviews with the children. In doing this, we hoped to provide a clearer understanding of the children's attitudes toward writing and their writing ability and how these may have influenced their writing in the school context.

The instruments developed for this study were an attitude assessment measure, the *Elementary Writing Attitude Survey* (see Appendix A) and interview questions. Both were administered in order to understand the children's perspectives, their attitudes about their own writing abilities, and their attitudes about writing in school and after school (see Appendix B). The attitude survey consisted of 11 items which asked participants to indicate on a 4-point Likert scale their level of agreement or disagreement to illustrated statements: *strongly agree* (4), *agree* (3), *disagree* (2), *strongly disagree* (1).

The format for the measure was selected for the children participating in the LGN after-school program and administered during the last week of the winter 1999 session. Also, eight interview questions were designed to garner children's perceptions and feelings about their writing in both the classroom and the after-school program. Interviews were conducted approximately three weeks after the closing of the after-school program with six of the children who participated at the LGN during the winter 1999 session. Results of both the questionnaire and interview questions will be discussed in the context of the written samples we collected and analyzed.

Findings

Questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire (Appendix D) indicated that most the children enjoyed writing and considered themselves good writers: 65.5% of the children felt that they were good writers at the *strongly agree* level, 27.6% at the *agree* level. Only 2 respondents answered *disagree* and *strongly disagree* for each level, respectively. Because writing is a skill closely tied to reading, both on the cognitive and affective levels, and reading was an intricate part of the LGN activities alongside writing, the questionnaire included statements for students to respond to regarding their attitude about their reading ability (Adams, 1990; Cazden, 1982; Grant-Hennings, 1997). Responses to the statement, "I am a good reader" showed an almost perfect correlation to the statement, "I am a good writer": 65.5% of the children indicating *strongly agree*, 20.7%, *agree*, with 6.9% for both *disagree* and *strongly disagree*.

Results of the questionnaire illustrate that the children were well aware of the importance of writing in the context of school success; 72.4% indicated strong agreement with the statement, "Writing helps me in school." That children are conscious of needing to have writing skills and to be "good" writers in order to succeed further supports the research that looks at how children feel when they do not have good writing skills (Cleary, 1993; Corona et al., 1998; Dooley, 1987; Edelsky, 1991; Halley, 1982). However, when children were asked to respond to the statement, "I like it when my teacher asks me to write," most responded *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree*, with 48.3% (14) and 27.6% (8), respectively. Previous research (Cleary, 1993; Corona et al., 1998; Cummins, 1989; Harste & Burke, 1980) has discussed this particular aspect of children's attitudes about classroom writing, noting reasons from a lack of confidence in their writing skills (technical and lexical) to the types of activities done during "writing time." In order to confirm the findings of this study, more research needs to be done, specifically in the classroom context, where most of children's day-to-day writing takes place.

Writing was an important aspect of the LGN, both to promote literacy and as the principal means of communication with Mao. All the handwritten correspondence data illustrated that the children and Mao got to know each

other via their daily written interactions, and knew each other quite well as a result. Like all good friends and companions, Mao was always there to lend an ear: Mao was enough of a gossip to be “in the know” and yet trustworthy enough that the children had no hesitation “talking” to Mao frankly:

Letter from week 10/19/98-10/23/98

Dear: Mao why you didn't write to me a letter. I like ED because he is cool to us. I play the trobone its to heavy I could barely carry it.
Frend Henri (4th grade)

Earth Date 26 October, 1998

Henri!!

I haven't sent you any letters??? What do you mean?? Ahhhhhh!! I think I did send you one letter, except that I addressed it to the wrong LGN Citizen!! You wouldn't happen to have twin, by the name of "Front Page newspaper star Fernando", would you?

If not, that is your letter, collecting dust, growing mold, spider webbing in the mailbox...I keep wondering why you don't pick it up! I just thought maybe you didn't want to talk to me....meeeeeh....

Anyhoo, that is for YOU! SoSorry about the confusion!

Yes, Ed is pretty cool and just a nice guy! He has gotten to know you pretty well, I imagine.

You play the trombone!?? THAT is really COOL!!!! You think you could bring it in sometime to show us all how to play?? How long have you been playing?? Maybe we can get Maribel or Antonella to help carry it. How about Ed? He is pretty strong.... OOOOHHH, this is really neat-O! I don't know many Earth people who play instruments....

TaTaForNow!!

Mao

Responses to the statement “I like writing to friends” were overwhelmingly the most positive, with 82.8% (24) of the children marking *strongly agree*. However, because children did a considerable amount of writing beyond the context of the after-school program, writing notes to friends during school and recess, and letters to pen friends and family members from home, more research needs to be done in order to identify precisely what children mean by these responses. What is articulated within the interview transcripts to follow did confirm initial findings on the questionnaire administered and led this researcher to infer that communication with the cyber entity did have a considerable effect and as a consequence generated a positive response to writing.

Interviews

To confirm the results of the questionnaire and gain a better understanding of how the children perceive writing as an activity and how they

view their own writing skills in the classroom and in the after-school program, interviews were conducted with six of the children participating in the LGN. Table 2, below, is a chart outlining each child's grade level, age, home language(s), and place of birth:

Table 2
Student Interviews

<i>Student</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Home Language(s)</i>	<i>Place of Birth</i>
José	3	9	English/Spanish	USA
Ricardo	4	10	English/Spanish	USA
Irina	4	10	English/Spanish	USA
Carmen	4	11	English/Spanish	USA
Alejandro	5	12	Spanish	USA
Gina	5	12	English/Spanish	USA

Answers to the interview questions (Appendix B) were examined with reference to the results of the questionnaire and written material produced by the children during their participation in the LGN after-school program.

Interview questions resulted in responses that, in most cases, reflected attitudes expressed on the questionnaire. The questions were divided into two groups, referring to the classroom context and the after-school program. The interview was conducted in a group situation given the availability of the students. Analysis of the interview questions about classroom activities illustrated that the students' writing seemed to be teacher centered and principally based on the classroom curriculum and on classroom "free choice time" for some of the students, like Irina and Alejandro:

Researcher: What kinds of things do you write about in your class?

Irina: I like to write friendly letters to the line leaders and other stuff....With my teacher, we write about books we read [emphasis added].

Carmen: Yeah, we write about books and other stuff we talk about in class.

Alejandro: She does both. She gives us topics and we get to pick them.

Irina: Yeah, when we have free choice time. It's on Friday.

José: I wrote about a fat kid. His name is fatboy....and he has a dog named Skittles.

Ricardo: I like to write, we write about books, different cultures, stuff like that.

Gina: We do lots of writing, on books and we made a book and on different stuff we do in class.

Based on these responses, it appears that 4 of the 6 children did have a “free writing time.” In-class observations would prove fruitful in order to assess what free writing time really is. Based on the research, such an activity can be implemented in many different ways, and therefore, free writing time may actually mean more time spent on literacy development based on discrete skills and not necessarily time spent writing for children’s own communicative purposes (Cazden, 1982; Dyson, 1989; Edelsky, 1986; Shannon, 1995). It is significant that though the interviewees confirmed the positive results expressed about classroom writing activities, 41.4% responding *strongly agree* to the statement “I like to write in school during free time,” there was also a large group (34.5%) who responded *strongly disagree* to the same statement. In order to respond to this finding on the survey data, interviews with the remaining children who participated in the questionnaire were necessary to render a more accurate picture of these opinions expressed.

Given that writing research has looked at the barriers that children face when writing (Cleary, 1993; Corona et al., 1998), the following question was posed to the children:

Researcher: What do you think you need to work on in your writing?

Irina: Spelling and writing neater. I could look up more words in the dictionary.

José: I don’t know, if I wrote more, I’d be better.

Ricardo: Yeah, spelling I could do better.

Alejandro: Listen to the teacher, not talking to other students because I don’t write down what she writes on the board and I write sloppy because I write so fast.

Carmen: Yeah, spelling and writing better. I should look in the dictionary more when I don’t know words and write neater.

Gina: My spelling is good and so is my writing. I don’t know.

The comments above were also elicited in the after-school program context; when asked how to improve their writing, children asked how to spell vocabulary and referred to the dictionary when they were unsure of word spellings and meanings. Such concerns about writing were confirmed even to Mao. Janette, a fifth grader, wrote:

3/3/99
Dear Mao,
Thank you for the nice note you gave me. Today I made a lot of friends my sister too. I played computer I played Math Blaster and this game I don’t know wants it call.
From: Janette Saenz your friend (3rd grade)
Sorry for the messy words [emphasis added]

Statements on the questionnaire did not address mechanics specifically. A similar research survey sent to both teachers and students by Corona et al. (1998) addressed this issue. Findings revealed that teachers (76%) felt that mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation) do inhibit students' writing at times. This finding was further substantiated when the children were observed and queried during their classroom writing time; the "majority felt that words did not come easily as they wrote" (p. 15). In the present study, this specific question was not asked. Given both the present study and current research on children's attitudes about writing, further investigation on this question could give a more accurate picture of how children look at writing: as an exercise in skills or as the ability to compose a written text that communicates their ideas and opinions (Cummins, 1989; Dyson, 1989; Edelsky, 1991; Flower et al., 1990). In its correspondence with the children, the cyber entity Mao did intervene in the areas of spelling, modeling correct spelling, and usage where and when necessary. In one case, Mao sent a child a dictionary to help her with spelling:

2/8/99
Dear mao I played in the kputrs weth Aurora is new mewber. museum
weth Aurora we did not now haw to playet serle Erika (3rd grade)

Earth Date 22 February, 1999
Hey Erika!!
I am soso glad you and Aurora are having such a great time together!!
I know Aurora is new at LGN, so I am counting on you you you to help
her out and show her the ropes.... ALSO, for your efforts, I am including
for you a little dictionary so you can have it always and look up words
that are new for you!! Remember, don't forget about our friend at the
museum, we dont want him to go mad all alone....get it? Museum MAD-
ness.... hahahahahaha!!
Byebye love!
Mao

The second set of interview questions addressed writing in the context of the after-school program. All the students interviewed, with the exception of one, Ricardo, had been participating in the LGN since its inception in the fall of 1997. When asked if they enjoyed writing to Mao, the response was unanimous:

Researcher: Do you like writing to Mao?

Irina: Yeah, 'cause he writes back to you and because he writes funny stuff.

José: Yeah, 'cause I like to write.

Ricardo: Yeah, because I get to write more and share things with her and he writes back to me.

- Carmen: Yeah, because I like to write about the games I play, about how he is and the College Cats I play with.
- Alejandro: Yeah, because he is my friend.
- Gina: Yeah, it's fun. Because you've never seen Mao. It's like when you write to somebody on the computer and you don't know them, like a penpal.

When one student, Irina, was asked about the "funny stuff" Mao wrote to her, she responded by taking out of her backpack a letter Mao had written to her some before the interview:²

- Researcher: Like what kind of funny stuff?
- Irina: Like, see, at the end of the letter he writes funny stuff. It says, 'okay bella, I'm looking forward to your China facts. Bye Bella, Mao'.
- Researcher: Why do you still carry the letter around?
- Irina: I don't know, 'cause maybe I'm gonna write to him again.
- Researcher: Even if there isn't LGN until September?
- Irina: Well, if the mailbox is here, maybe he'll get it anyway.

When others were asked what they wrote to Mao, responses included the following:

- José: I tell him what I did in Looking Glass. I tell him if I got expert and if I can be a Mao Assistant.
- Ricardo: How was my day, what I did at school and stuff. Like what game I played and what we did at LGN.
- Carmen: I tell him lots of things, about the games and other stuff.
- Gina: I tell him what I did on the games and if it said so on the task card.
- Alejandro: I sometimes tell him my secrets, like my favorite things and my favorite cartoons and stuff I don't want anyone to know.

As exemplified in interview responses and letters written in the after-school program, the children and Mao do "talk" to each other about many things, including their in-class writing activities:

Dear Mao I played outnumbered agian Thank you for writing me. I just can't find a book on the Mission San Fransico di Asisi. Ricardo (4th grade) (Letter dated February 22, 1999)

23 February, 1999 Earthdate

Ricardo!!

How goes it buddy??? How did you like Outnumbered?? [...]

You need to find a book on the Mission San Francisco d'Assisi?? How come? Did I miss something? Well, anyhow, the easiest way to go about it to find a book on California and look up "missions" and go from there.

If not, I would check the encyclopedia under "San Francisco" or "San Francisco d'Assisi".... Go to the library with a College Cat to do this....and don't forget to let me know why you are doing this and let me know what you find out....maybe we can put what you write about the Mission in our LGN KNOWLEDGE BOOK!??

Okay bud, off you go!

Mao

Dear Mao,

Thank you for the tips. I need a book because Im doing a report on the San Francisco di Assis. Thanks for writing me back were going SDState

Ricardo

(Letter dated February 24, 1999)

The letter exchange above was one that site coordinators were not aware of until Ricardo asked if he could go to the library with a "College Cat" (an undergraduate member of the staff) to find information on San Francisco d'Assisi on the day he received Mao's letter. One of the cyber entity's goals is to encourage and motivate academics. The literacy activities Mao and the children undertake—the games and letters they write to each other—encourage both writing and reading.

A true friendship developed between Alejandro and Mao. Alejandro had been in the LGN since it opened in the fall of 1997. From that time until the end of the study, Alejandro's writing progressed, not only quantitatively, but qualitatively; he expanded his writing beyond activities at the LGN to richer and more personally relevant topics. The following is a small sample of letters that Alejandro wrote over the course of the two years:

12/2/97

Daer Mao,

I didn't lik to see Zora Rio Alejandro

9/29/98

Dear, Mao today I played Math Blaster and it was fun.

Alejandro

11/9/98
Dear, Mao,
I play Battleship I have a lot of fun
Alejandro

3/8/99
in Aruba it is hot Today and cold to go to Venesvela. I play hopscotch and Rito won. I don't care because I didn't know how to play. I would tell you what happen in Dragon ball Z that 2 good guys are training and monsters want to kill the good guys. Next time I would give you a stiker bye, your pal Alejandro.

3/16/99
Dear Mao,
me and Ramiro tried to trik nick but we couldn't. The nick trik us byt then I guess. Finally like in 15 minutes we trik nick then like paper fell and he guess. Dragon Ball Z is in channel 12. I am going now On Thursday I am going to tell you okay. Your friend Alejandro.

This kind of cognitive and affective development is of particular importance in the case of English Language Learners (ELLs) (Cleary, 1993; Dooley, 1987; Cummins, 1989; Edelsky, 1986, 1991; Ulanoff, 1993, 1995). Alejandro's home language is Spanish. In the course of observing at the LGN, through occasional conversations with his mother, we found that Alejandro did not speak much English outside of school because he did not have friends who spoke only English. Alejandro also confirmed this and when asked what language he used to write to Mao, his answer was as follows:

Alejandro: English.

Researcher: Do you ever write to Mao in Spanish?

Alejandro: Only one time and he wrote back in Spanish.

Researcher: Did you write him back again in Spanish?

Alejandro: No

Researcher: Why not?

Alejandro: Because maybe he was tired.

Further research could help us comprehend what ELLs are experiencing in terms of language "loyalty," even in those contexts in which they have the space for their own voice, in whatever language, to come through (Cleary, 1993; Cummins, 1989; Wilkinson, 1990).

The final interview question we asked was, "Why is it important to write to Mao?" This question was asked with the questionnaire item, "Writing helps me in school" in mind. Results of the questionnaire show that 72.4%

(21) marked *strongly agree*, 17.2% (5) *agree*, and 10.3% (3), *disagree* with this statement. When asked, the children responded:

- Irina: Because it's nice, and he writes me back.
José: 'Cause I like writing to him.
Ricardo: Because he writes me back about stuff.
Carmen: Because he writes me back and I think he likes it when I write.
Gina: I tell him what I did and ask him questions and I answer his questions so I can be a Mao Assistant
Alejandro: Because he is my friend.

These comments are reflected in the quantity, quality and consistency with which the children wrote to Mao and participated in writing activities that were linked to the games and task cards in the LGN. It is apparent that an environment in which children have genuine motives and opportunities to write facilitates the development of writing as a skill and as a viable and valuable means of communication.

Conclusion

Before beginning their educational careers, children are learning new things, meeting new people, and in many respects, finding a voice to express who they are and what they can do. They do so, often with willful abandon, happy at the opportunity to begin their role as communicators and writers. Upon starting their journey in school, writing rules and roles change. Writing becomes a skill children must learn, not one they already possess and simply need to fine-tune and develop. Despite the tremendous interest in providing opportunities for writing, much in-school writing continues to be done in response to specific topics, mandated by standardized curricula, abstract of an intended genuine audience, and done with no clear purpose other than to produce a product to be evaluated. What results is often formulaic, awkward writing, with a voice that strives but fails to exemplify what is characteristic of good writing. Based on the results of this study, through the questionnaire and interviews, it is clear that children are aware of the communicative aspects of writing, the freedom writing can permit them, and the voices it can allow them to express. They are also very much aware of what it means to be a good writer in the classroom, the consequences of not being a good writer, and they are aware that these notions about writing do not always coincide.

Because this research did not include observations of writing in the classroom context, the conclusion cannot be made that the children's attitudes are exclusively attributed to in-class writing activities and instruction. What it does indicate is that more research based on these in-class activities needs to be done in order to understand better what is happening in the classroom and in the hearts and minds of children when they write. This will lead to activities that motivate and generate good writing, and it may lead to the

restructuring of the classroom environment to provide a more fertile ground for children to use writing to express their ideas, creativity, and imagination.

Author

Antonella Cortese is a Ph.D. graduate of the joint doctoral program in Education at San Diego State University and Claremont Graduate University. She is currently affiliated with the Fifth Dimension at Mission Elementary Collaborative through the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at UC San Diego and MiraCosta College in Oceanside, CA. Her research interests include the impact of computer technology on children's literacy learning and overall cultural and cognitive developmental processes, and critical pedagogy and teacher practice.

Endnotes

¹ All personal and place names are pseudonyms.

² The winter session of the LGN program ended March 30, 1999; the interview was done on May 3, 1999.

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Appendix A
Elementary Writing Attitude Survey

Name _____ Grade _____
Date _____

1. I am a good writer.
2. I like to write stories.
3. I like to write stories now more than last year.
4. I am a good reader.
5. Writing to friends is fun.
6. Writing helps me in school.
7. I like to share my writing with others.
8. I write at home.
9. I like to write in school during free time.
10. I like to write instead of play.
11. I like it when my teacher asks me to write.

Note: Students answered each survey question by circling one of four cartoon pictures that were meant to symbolize "True," "Mostly true," "Sometimes true," or "Not true."

Appendix B
Interview Questions

Questions referring to the classroom context

1. What kinds of things do you like to write about?
2. How do you think you have improved as a writer in the last year, compared to last year?
3. Do you think you still have things you could work on in your writing?
4. What else would you like to improve in your writing?

Questions referring to the after-school activity context

5. Do you remember when you first started writing to Mao at LGN?
6. Did you/do you like writing to Mao? Why, why not?
7. Did you/do you write to Mao every day that you come to site?
8. What do you write to Mao about?
9. In what language do you write to Mao?

Appendix C
Looking Glass Neighborhood Task Card

OREGON TRAIL: You are about to embark on a long and difficult journey from Missouri to Oregon! Before you take off, you get to go to Matt's Store to purchase some items you will need on your long haul!!! How much money you have to spend depends on who you decide you want to be; the banker, the carpenter or the farmer? Listen to Matt's friendly suggestions and you will be prepared to go! In deciding who to take with you, keep in mind that Mao LOVES long journeys! You must also plan on when you want to leave. Keep things like weather in mind! Take a peek at the HINTS BOOK before you begin, to see what other travelers suggest for the game! **BON VOYAGE!**

BEGINNER: Hi ho hi ho and off to Oregon we go! Time to get started on your journey! To complete this level you need to get to Fort Kearney... **ALIVE...** with all the members of your wagon party with you! When you reach Fort Kearney, stop. Find a **College Cat** and tell him/her what happened so far. Also, tell the **College Cat** what state you were in when you started and what state Fort Kearney is in. What did you encounter along the way? Illness? Water shortage? Bandits? Wagon troubles? Did you hunt? What is the best part of the game so far?

GOOD: Now you need to make it to Fort Hall with **ALL** of your wagon party! **HINT:** If someone is sick, it may pay to rest a day or two **AND...**if your food level is getting low, you might try changing your food rations. What does eating less food do to the level of your health? Watch out for these things!



Write a hint about your trip and put it in the HINTS BOOK. Tell the best way to cross the rivers and the best way to hunt. What state is Fort Hall in? Who lived there before the wagon trains started to travel through? Give some suggestions on how to find food along the way!

EXPERT: Your task is to make it all the way to Oregon, with **ALL** members of your group alive and well. It's a long trek, and you will run into many difficulties. When you finally make it to Oregon, find a map of the United States and make a list of all the states you crossed on the way. Then write to **Mao** about your own family history...where did your family come from? Did they travel across the country in a covered wagon or did they come from across the seas from another country?

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**Appendix D
Questionnaire Results**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i> % (n)	<i>Agree</i> % (n)	<i>Disagree</i> % (n)	<i>Strongly Disagree</i> % (n)
I am a good writer.	65.5 (19)	27.6 (8)	3.4 (1)	3.4 (1)
I like to write stories.	51.7 (15)	24.1 (7)	17.2 (5)	6.9 (2)
I like to write stories now more than last year.	48.3 (14)	17.2 (5)	10.3 (3)	24.1 (7)
I am a good reader.	65.5(19)	20.7 (6)	6.9(2)	6.9(2)
Writing to friends is fun.	82.8(24)	3.4(1)	3.4(1)	10.3(3)
Writing helps me in school.	72.4(21)	17.2(5)	0 (0)	10.3(3)
I like to share my writing with others.	51.7(15)	17.2(5)	10.3(3)	20.7(6)
I write at home.	58.6(17)	24.1(7)	0(0)	17.2(5)
I like to write in school during free time.	41.4(12)	10.3(3)	13.8(4)	34.5(10)
I like to write instead of play.	44.8(13)	13.8(4)	3.4(1)	37.9(11)
I like it when my teacher asks me to write.	48.3(14)	13.8(4)	10.3(3)	27.6(8)

Note: The actual number of children who responded is listed in parentheses.

