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Expanding the Box: Characters Lead the Way

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“Have you ever lived in a world where secrets are buzzing like bees yet you can’t hear them?” Eleven-year-old Anika (all student names are pseudonyms) wrote the previous sentence, emulating an author and a character in a text (Henkes, 2008). Anika’s use of simile, onomatopoeia, alliteration, and adoption of another author’s style illustrate her willingness to enter into active learning. Anika was not alone.

In our recent study, upper elementary students engaged in reading and writing outside the box when presented with novels that included character-writers. Students of varying backgrounds and ability levels revealed close connections and wide-ranging responses to authors and characters. These students accomplished three outcomes as they read, wrote, and discussed novels including characters portrayed as writers (character-writers). First, the students imitated the writing styles and genres of the authors and characters. Second, the students continued writing for themselves and others. Third, the students produced work of greater quality than they previously presented in their school journals.

In this article we illustrate *one* method that teachers of adolescents may initiate to engage adolescents in relevant curriculum. It is based on a study to answer with the following research questions:

1. How do character-writers influence students’ interest in writing, the amount of writing, and the quality of writing?
2. What other characteristics of these books do students report as influential or motivating in regard to writing?

Character-writers refer to textual characters engaged in writing. Examples include Elijah’s drafting, revising, and editing in *Elijah of Buxton* (Curtis, 2007), Martha’s attempts at novel writing in *Olive’s Ocean* (Henkes, 2008), and Ana Rosa’s compulsive composing in *The Color of My Words* (Joseph, 2000).

Framework for the Study

Reading and writing workshops (Atwell, 1998; Daniels, 2002; Fletcher, 2006; Graves, 2003) have been promoted as methods for students to engage in authentic literacy tasks during school hours. The workshop method allows flexibility and time

for students to interact with the literature and each other. Identity is impacted by texts read and written (Anderson, 2008; Dressel, 2005; Probst, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1995). In addition, readers' and writers' responses are influenced by identities developed through reading and writing. Probst (2004) identifies four potential points of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1978) that may occur when adolescents read. First, the reader confronts the text in order to find meaning. Second, the reader finds opportunity to gain greater understanding of self by observing one's own thoughts and responses. Third, the reader may recreate ideas about self when responding to the text. Finally, the reader must accept responsibility to act in order to gain a transaction with the text. As a result, the theories of workshops, identity-formation, and reader response contributed to the design of this study.

Other researchers have compiled examples of texts that include character-writers (i.e., D'Angelo, 1982; Parsons & Colabucci, 2008; Radencich, 1987). Researchers have also focused on characters' actions, sometimes including characters actively involved in writing (Parsons & Castleman, 2011). Parsons and Collabucci offered their own adult reactions to character-writers as well as considerations for teachers regarding introducing texts that include character-writers. As far as we know, no other researchers have studied young readers' reactions as they read texts that include character-writers.

Context and Study Approach

To begin our research we introduced the project to six students and their parents. We explained to them that the purpose is to learn how the students' writing is affected by reading books that include character-writers. We did not mention the purpose to the students again throughout the project. The six students were purposefully selected because they were the only pupils in that school during the previous school year who scored a 4, the top range, in their fourth-grade classes on the New York State English Language Arts tests. The two boys and four girls created a mixed-gender group.

The school where we conducted the project

is located in a suburb in western New York State. The school qualifies for Title I status with 48% eligible for free or reduced lunch (New York State School Report Card, 2012). In 2011-12 (the latest statistics available) the racial/ethnic distribution included 18% Black or African American, 10% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 67% White, and 1% Multiracial (New York State School Report Card). The six students represent a variety of ethnicities and socio-economic levels—Mixed Race (1), Black of Jamaican descent (1), Hispanic (1), and White (3).

These figures are important because identity grounds readers' and writers' responses (Anderson, 2008; Dressel, 2005; Probst, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1995). The six students have been assigned to five different fifth-grade classrooms, so before this study, only two participants interacted on a daily basis in school during the 2012-13 school year. The students quickly established themselves within the group as literate individuals respectful of differences and common purposes.

During the fall, in their separate classrooms, the students engaged in reading and writing workshops (Atwell, 1998; Daniels, 2002; Fletcher, 2006; Graves, 2003). The literacy specialist has coached the students' classroom teachers for multiple years. She has served twelve years as literacy specialist in this school, and she interacts regularly with each teacher. As a result, she is familiar with the procedures each teacher follows during the fall workshops: teachers encourage some journaling and free writing, but most of the students' journal entries reflect prompts assigned by the teacher. In this project, we did not assign prompts, but we provided time for students to write during the group writing time. The group began meeting once each week for 30-40 minutes during the school's Flexible Instructional Time (FIT) to discuss the literature they chose. FIT, designed to provide opportunities for targeted skills development and/or enrichment, allowed the students to benefit from the group without missing any direct instruction.

In January, the literacy specialist presented the six students with a choice from six texts, which were identified through a previous study as

books that provided relatable characters engaged in writing (Pelttari, 2011). The students agreed as a group to read *Olive's Ocean* (Henkes, 2008) first. Prominent reasons given for the choice included tragic circumstances (Olive's death) and romantic possibilities revealed on the back cover of the text. Between January and June, the students also read (in the following order) *Love that Dog: A Novel* (Creech, 2001), *The Color of My Words* (Joseph, 2000), *The Wanderer* (Creech, 2002), and *Feathers* (Woodson, 2009).

We wanted to explore the effect of the books through the students' views, so the reading workshops were student-moderated. The students chose the discussion leader, usually Joe, but as the weeks passed, they settled into a mutual monitoring of conversation. Through the students' initiative, all students were given voice in all sessions. If one student began monopolizing conversation, another student would redirect the conversation. The quietest student often waited for an opening but was sometimes pulled into the conversation by a peer asking for that quiet student's thoughts regarding the conversation. We occasionally interjected a thought or question, but the students managed the workshops at all times. From the beginning, the students were eager to write and present their own writing to peers, so within the first two weeks of meeting, we offered them a second session each week to allow more writing time. Five of the students expressed amazement when they were offered opportunity to write topics of their own choice, interrupting each other in their hurry to speak.

"Anything?" "Can we write anything we want?" "Does it have to be about the book we're reading?" "Really, anything?" "Can I bring my story from home?" "What if I write it on the

computer?"

Yes, total choice of writing topic and method was permitted. As a result, students brought a combination of school- and home-produced writing. Three of the students sometimes referred to digital writings completed outside school, but none of those students provided samples of the digital writings.

Results

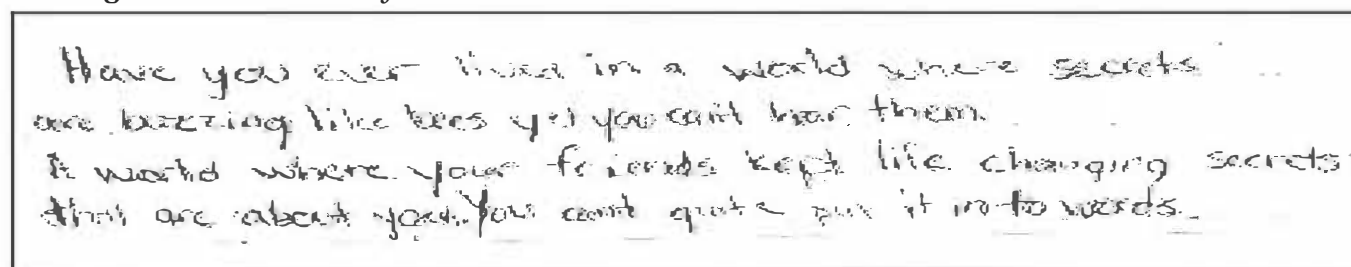
This project yielded four results worthy of note for teachers. The six students emulated both the character-writers' and the authors' styles. They expanded their writing, trying new styles individually and collaboratively. They increased the amount of writing and quality of writing they brought to the workshops. Finally, the students initiated and completed a group writing project, a school newspaper, outside the purview of the researchers.

The students emulated character-writers and authors. All of the following examples show unedited student drafts in order to present the students' work in process. As noted in the opening of this article, in our first in-workshop writing session, one student had begun to imitate the character's voice within the first 50 pages of reading the first book chosen by the students. Figure 1 shows how that student utilized descriptive language like the writing attributed to Martha in *Olive's Ocean* (Henkes, 2003).

Two other times the characters' and authors' styles dramatically influenced the students' writing styles. The second instance of imitating styles occurred during the reading of *Love that Dog* (Creech, 2001). Even though the students misconstrued Jack's conversation, their thinking and writing were deeply influenced by the style

Figure 1

Buzzing Bees: An Imitation of Characters' and Authors' Voices



portrayed. When Jason mentioned surprise that a female author would write a male protagonist, the conversation (Figures 2 & 3) moved from perspective to form and back to perspective:

Anika: Yeah, like you have to step in someone else's shoes, I guess.

Jason: I've seen haiku, rhyming, but I've never seen such good free form before.

[The group discussed the poems by Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams in the back of the book.]

Anika: I think, I wonder if he (the protagonist, Jack) gets his inspiration from people – he's just shy, and doesn't want to share?

Anna: I like poems better than the other writing.

Anika: I like that the poems have a lot to say but without a lot of words. Like how the book revealed who he is – he doesn't understand a lot. He doesn't let himself go that much because he is afraid he will lose it like he lost his dog.

With their mention of free form, the character's motivation, a student's preference for poetry, and the brevity of poetry, these students voiced influences we observed in their writings.

While reading *Love that Dog*, every student brought to the group at least one poem written between or during workshops. Figure 2 is a

Figure 3

The Wrighting Got Mightyer

the wrighting got mightyer,
 while the page was whiter, the words got brighter
 and so were the things that happened
 The words that he used, really lighted the fuse
 Jack, the wrighter made the words real,
 such a good love that Dog writer

Figure 2

A Poem

Ai Romey!

For this is a poem.

It is where you can roam.

Here and there you can fly.


Oh how time can fly by.

The way that you write
 is told by your sight
 what you see
 and where you can flee

It's up high in a tree
 where you can see,

You see all of the world
 where your imagination can be

For this is a poem....



student's first draft of a poem, and Figure 3 is a student's response to Jack's writing.

In one workshop session, two of the students continued to write, unable to participate in the reading workshop discussion because their fingers were itching to write the poetry occupying their minds. Still, the group discussion, guided by the

students, involved new, experiential knowledge gained about writing poetry. Most students had quickly cast off trying to rhyme because “rhyming gets in the way.” Instead, the students attempted variety of forms. (Figure 4)

Anna stated, “Yeah. I’m trying to say something, but the rhyme doesn’t work.”

Some students were able to rhyme and still communicate their points, but all students learned that poets communicate details through one or more poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, and/or figurative language (Kennedy & Gioia, 2002). In Figure 5 a student experiments with alliteration and assonance in haiku.

When asked in an interview if the books affected the students’ writing, one student replied, the readings “helped push me to be more detailed with my writing... looking at these model poems that they wrote forced me to be more detailed and that’s kind of how it got my poems better, and I improved my writing.” Figure 6 illustrates how a student captures her self- reflection in poems.

A third instance of characters influencing student writing occurred when 66% of the students added journal entries to their writing

Figure 4
Poem or Song

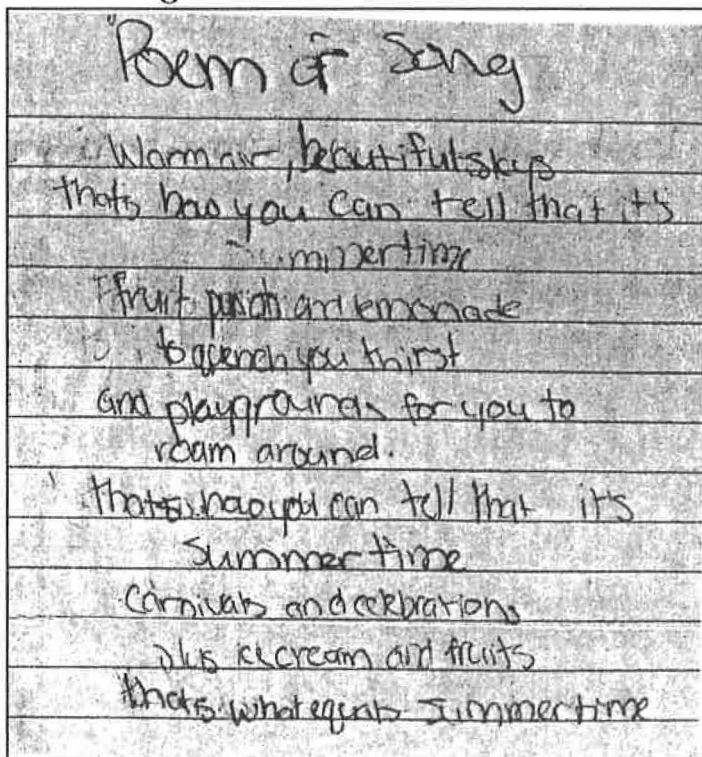
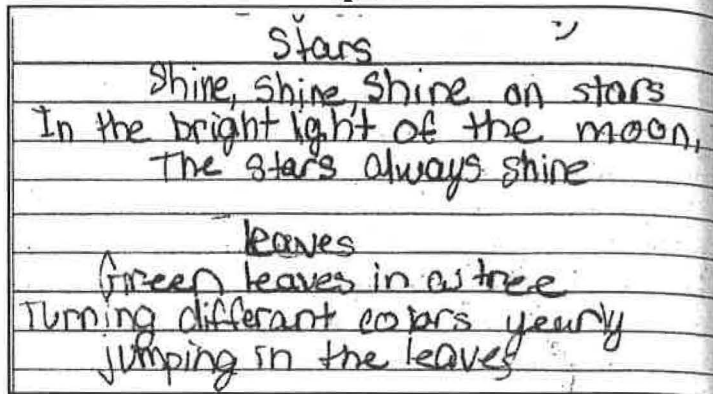


Figure 5
Stars and Leaves: A Haiku Experiment



samples as they read *The Wanderer* (Creech, 2002). For instance, Frieda’s next story included segments labeled September 1st, September 4th, and September 7th. Frieda’s first paragraph, under the heading of September 1st, was narrative, beginning with dialogue until she segued into journal style writing. (Figure 7)

“Her life was ruined but I will let her tell it to you!...”

“Hey, my name is Jamie and my mom got me this notebook to write in for 6th grade.”

Frieda’s writing remained in journal-style through the subsequent entries. Further, the following animated conversation reveals the newfound importance of journals to some of the students as well as ways students learned to question and support each other during the workshops.

Anika: I got a new journal!

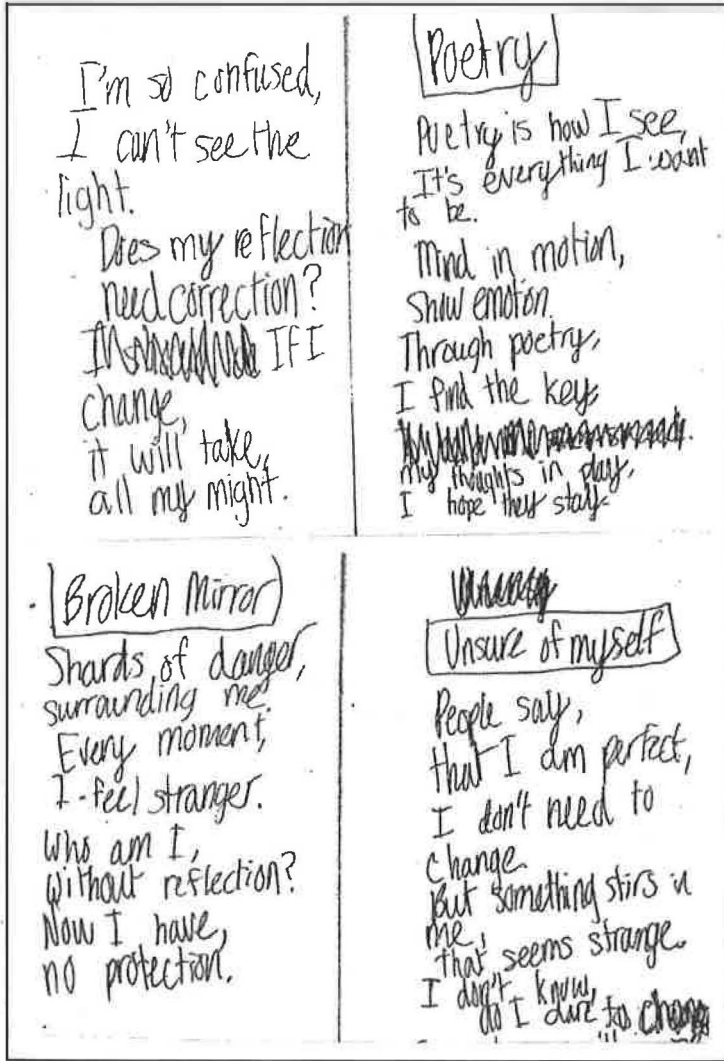
Jason: Why?

Emma: [She’s been immersed in writing during the discussion.] Because writing is awesome! The books helped me open up more. I used to be shy and not a talker, but writing is the way I can express myself. I stink at art.

Anika: To pick up on what Emma is saying, writing IS your art. It helps you show yourself – what you are good at and what you are. You don’t need to talk.

Anika was not alone in purchasing or receiving a journal during this portion of the project. Four other students brought new, personal journals to the workshops.

Figure 6
4 poems



The students expanded their writing, trying new styles individually and collaboratively. These proficient readers continued to read widely beyond the research group texts; as noted earlier, the students cited additional texts in conversations. The students were clearly influenced by the workshop texts and other texts. In addition to poetry and journals, individuals experimented with nonfiction, vampire narratives, and cartoons. Collaboratively the group produced a script and a newspaper.

Non-fiction. Students whose fall journals included nonfiction samples tended to write nonfiction in winter and spring writings as well. Jason's fall journal contained a report on the 2012 Olympic games and pledges to fulfill if he became President of the United States. In the spring, Jason favored sports headlines, pithy yet detailed, colorful, and meaningful: "Heat still on their 20-game winning streak...Tyson Chandler expected to return but we are still trying to figure out Carmelo." In Figure 8 Jason's passion for nonfiction writing is evident in his list of potential writing topics.

In fall Emma's writings, though mainly fiction, incorporated nonfiction features. For instance, a factual-based discussion of a recent football game dominated one story. In the spring, Emma was often quiet, often engaged in writing during workshops. At the end of one workshop

Figure 7
Journal Entries Emulating Characters' Writing in *The Wanderer*

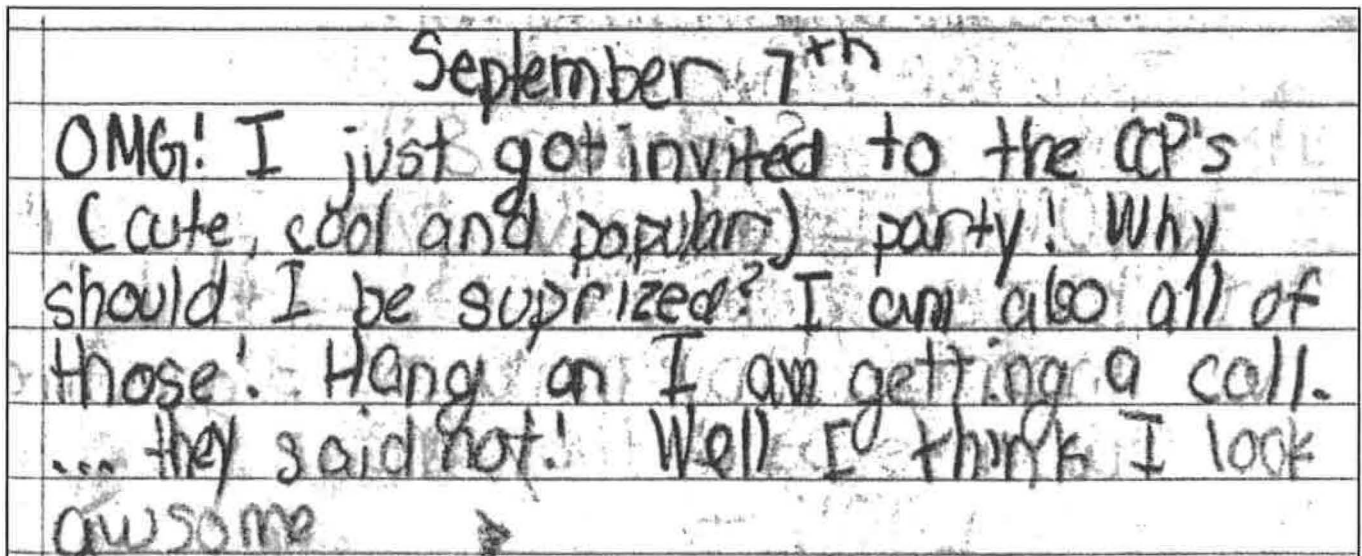
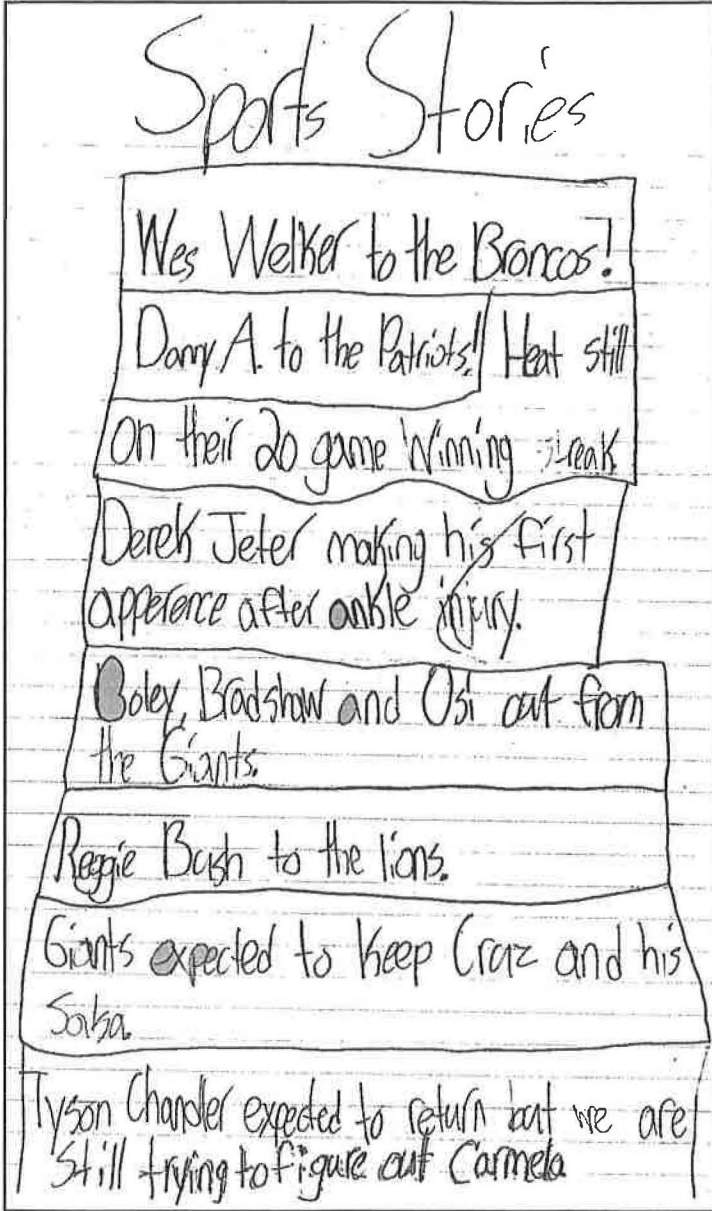


Figure 8
Sports & Stories



session, after patiently waiting her turn, Emma read an anti-bullying manifesto. She informed her workshop peers and both researchers she had presented similar information in a college class and was compiling the current information for the principal and other school officials. When peers began adding their comments, Emma took notes, asked clarifying questions, and stated her determination to make a difference in the school culture.

Vampire narratives. Several students revealed anxieties about moving from fifth- to sixth-grade, elementary to middle school in this

district. In Figure 9 Emma expresses her anxiety about moving as she experiments with her poetry. The six students anticipated attending four different schools in the fall, so they could not promise to stand next to each other the following year. They could conquer fears through writing, directly and indirectly naming the fears. Three students, reflecting literature, TV, and movies, regaled their peers with vampire stories. Frieda's narratives moved from girlfriend stories to first-person vampire sagas as she hints at her anxieties about middle-school relationships. (Figure 10)

Cartoons. Cartoons were not included in fall journals, but during the spring, Joe turned chapters from his humorous, action-packed narrative into a cartoon. After peers' approval, Joe developed additional stand-alone cartoons. The subsequent cartoons (Figure 11) all contained action, a catastrophe, and a joke.

Script. Students initiated the development of a script. The script, detailing the most dramatic scene in Creech's (2002) *The Wanderer*, was practiced in one workshop and presented for both researchers in a subsequent workshop. The written script was not completed at the beginning of this group session, but the students were eager to share the material with us. As a result, the students worked together to add to the

Figure 9
Emma's "Classes"

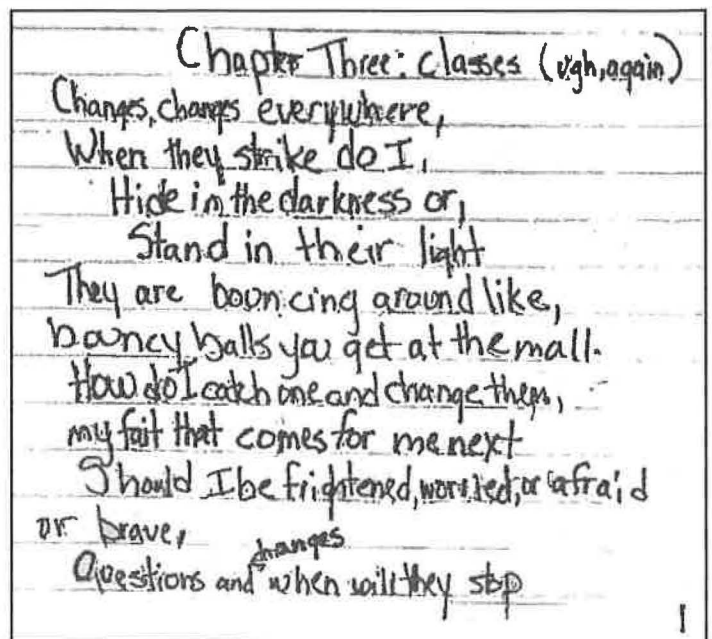
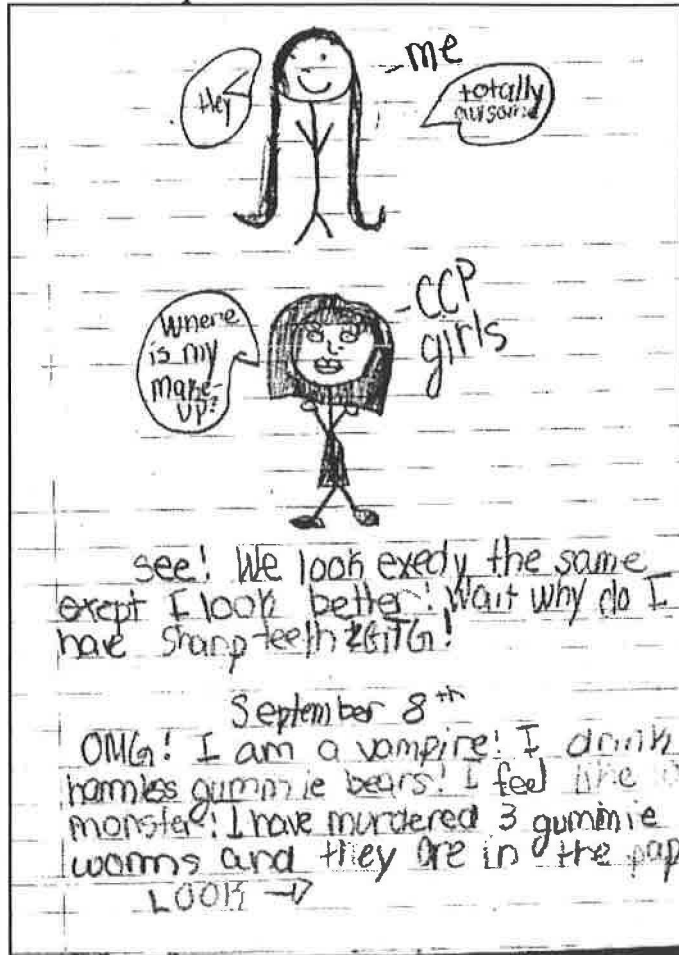


Figure 10
Frieda's "Vampires"



script, verbally creating additional scenes. The actions depicted in the book and the sources of the actions were clearly communicated in the students' presentation.

Students increased the amount and quality of writing they brought to the workshops. All of six students' samples showed improved writing quality. The time given during the workshops and the repeated opportunity to share their work influenced the quantity of work present during workshops. The quality of writing produced in and for workshops also rose to a new level.

In an uncharacteristic run-on sentence, Emma noted, "I improved my writing and these books helped me to be more open about what I write, because before I felt like, narrowed down to what I could write based on what we learned in school, but after reading these books on random poems that they wrote, that's how I got inspired to write all those poems I did in my notebook

and it forced me to be more open." Emma was not forced or coerced by peers or researchers. Her own high standards compelled her to try to attain the types of writing the characters and authors produced.

Anika added, "It's kind of like Emma said, like in school in writing they give you a topic to write about, and they say 'start from this,' and then like, they give you a paragraph and they say add more stuff and change it, and keep writing from there, and we'll share out in a half hour or something, but after reading the books..." In the midst of the workshop discussion, Anika's sentence trailed off, yet her meaning was clear. She was crediting the books with influencing the quality and quantity of her writing.

Two other students alluded to the influence of the workshop texts in the following conversation.

Jason: There's a lot of connections between these two books (*Olive's Ocean*, Henkes, 2003; *The Color of My Words*, Joseph, 2000).

Figure 11
Joe's Stand-alone Cartoons



Frieda: [to the literacy specialist]: Did you pick all these books because of the connections?

Jason: Like someone dies, the ocean, writers who quit writing, but then are inspired to write more.

Yes, we chose those books purposefully. And we were gratified that the students noticed our purposes and spurred each other onto a final project of their own choosing.

The six students initiated and completed a group writing project. This group of diverse students melded into a productive team over the course of five months in which they met twice a week for 30-40 minutes. Each group member entered the workshops, confident in the knowledge he or she was chosen due to high academic scores. From the beginning, the students accorded each other respect, and mutual respect and collaboration grew throughout the sessions. The collaboration and mutual respect were obvious as they included all members in every discussion. They preferred group leadership instead of requiring one person to lead. The group leadership worked because all group members took seriously the responsibility to contribute to discussions and to be respectful of all group members. For instance, one time during the anti-bullying discussion, one student ignored another's statement suggesting, "Nobody thinks that." Other students pointed out the differences in opinion, and the first student recognized the differing viewpoints, verbally acknowledging that both students held valid opinions.

The final act of collaboration resulted in all six students contributing to a student-initiated school newspaper. In the final weeks of school, two newspapers were published. The students collaborated during the planning, writing, editing, and publishing stages of this student-initiated project. For the purpose of confidentiality, the staff page in Figure 12 was reproduced to avoid use of students' names.

The students initiated the idea for the paper; they also gained the approval and support of another teacher to make copies to distribute throughout the school. The two researchers were

not consulted prior to development of the content, but with the approval of teachers and the literacy specialist, students gathered more than two days a week for a few weeks. These student-initiated workshop times were devoted to some planning and writing of the papers. Still, neither paper would have been produced if the students had not participated in this research-based reading/writing workshop. First, the six students would not have had the opportunity to work together as writers. Second, the workshop provided the students time to learn each other's strengths. Third, as a result of interactions for an extended period of time, the students earned the right to critique each other's work.

Figure 12

B. Times: Staff Page

B. Times - Staff Page

Editor in Chief: E.

Co Editor: A.

Sports Editors: J. and E.

Comic Artist: J.

Advice Columnists: ? and ? (Writers Anonymous)

Weather Reporter: A.

Front Page Authors: A. and A.

School Event Announcer: J.

Fashion Trends Writers: A. and A.

Student Athlete of the Week Girls' Award Presenter: E.

Student Athlete of the Week Boys' Award Presenter: J.

Book Reviewer: F.

Conclusion

The research project was conducted with a small group for one semester. Generalizability is not possible, but implications and recommendations are offered to encourage further research and classroom trials. The students purposefully selected for this project were already proficient readers and writers. Future research might include larger numbers as well as children representing a wider range of ability levels.

We suggest three implications for literacy teaching and learning in classrooms that conceptualize the arts as necessary and vital components of a 21st century education.

- Connections to characters and authors can lead students to experiment with

multiple types of writing. The students in this project responded to both characters and authors, mimicking styles and genres.

- Freewriting, writing produced in short segments of time, and reading/writing workshops support students' experimentation. Meeting twice a week, these students learned to encourage peers' creativity. At least once each week, the students engaged in 15-minute segments of writing time followed by reading their work aloud. Also, at least once each week, the students discussed the book they were reading. The reading workshop discussions, time to write, and time to present writing nurtured the students' willingness to experiment with multiple styles and genres of writing.
- Literacy is certainly a social activity. Social interactions offer promising possibilities for uniting and educating diverse populations (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Group members for this project included boys and girls from four ethnic groups and a range of familial economic situations. In addition, group members varied in self-perceived popularity ratings among the wider body of fifth-grade peers. Arranging and rearranging classroom groups so students can interact with a variety of peers may lead to greater understanding of texts and more understanding of differing perspectives.

Given the implications suggested in this project, we offer two recommendations:

- Reading and writing workshops can benefit students in content courses as well as English or literacy classes. Novels or nonfiction may be used in a variety of content courses to offer opportunities for adolescents to make connections to characters or people engaged in content-related activities. Texts depicting historical figures, scientists, mathematicians, and other content-related individuals can be used to motivate student engagement

(Moss, 2012).

- Because students need time for reading, writing, discussion, and direct instruction, reading and writing workshops are critical components of a balanced literacy framework that we recommend for every middle school student. Academic and social benefits accrued in this project and in our ongoing work with children convince us that, especially in a time of high accountability and high-stakes tests, workshops are valuable venues for teachers to employ. Through the workshops, students can be taught to hold each other accountable for reading, writing, and discussing. And teachers can work within and outside the workshops, giving group or individual direct instruction as needed.

Through our research we recognized that character-writers supported these diverse students' interests in writing. Previous to the study, these proficient readers wrote copious amounts volitionally; we were unable to quantify an increase but the pages written did not decrease. With the short length of the study and many confounding factors, we cannot say the workshops caused an improvement in quality of writing; we can say the authors' and characters' styles and genres were imitated, producing quality writing. We can also say narratives moved from less reporting of events to more interaction between characters and fuller descriptions of settings. Discussion in a safe atmosphere influenced the writing, reading, and speaking of students engaged in this research project. We found some evidence suggesting that social practices were also positively influenced as students encouraged each other to think positively about themselves and their writing; one student initiated an anti-bullying campaign, and all students benefitted from free exchange of ideas monitored by the students themselves.

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