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Making Space for Student Agency: A Multilayered Exploration of Agency and Writing in a First-Grade Classroom

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MAKING SPACE FOR STUDENT AGENCY: A MULTILAYERED EXPLORATION

OF AGENCY AND WRITING IN A FIRST-GRADE CLASSROOM

by

Kara DeCoursey

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ABSTRACT

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Writing in a First-Grade Classroom

by

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Learning to write is a critical aspect of early literacy learning, however, there is a need to better understand the complexities of writing instruction and growth in the early grades. Generative or compositional writing in particular has been studied less frequently in early-grade research. Existing research shows that writing instruction in the early grades is regularly focused on basic skills (i.e., handwriting, spelling, punctuation, grammar) and highly teacher-directed writing practices including copying and structured prompts. Yet, writing underachievement persists and motivation wanes progressively through the elementary grades. The purpose of this mixed-methods instrumental case study was to explore the possibilities for student agency (i.e., intentionality, self-perception, choice-making, persistence, and interactiveness) during generative writing in a first-grade classroom using a sociocultural lens.

Data was collected across three months early in the school year. Pre-, mid-, and

post-study interviews were conducted with the participating teacher and 10 writing sessions were observed and audio recorded. Students were given the Student Agency Profile (StAP) survey before and after the 10 writing sessions. The calculation of students' StAP scores and qualitative analysis of observational data provided a descriptive profile of the class and a scrutiny of student agency in relation to the teacher's instruction and students' writing opportunities. Discourse analysis procedures yielded insights into (a) how the teacher communicated with the students during writing time and (b) how the teacher's discourse related to students' opportunities to enact agency.

Analyses of data showed that the first-grade students were willing and able to write generatively and that their opportunities to do so may have supported the development of their individual writer identities. In addition, open-ended and flexible teacher discourse prompted students to make individual decisions and allowed them to engage in generative writing and enact agency. This study adds to the research on generative writing opportunities for students in the early grades, student agency, and teacher-student dynamics in the classroom.

(168 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Making Space for Student Agency: A Multilayered Examination of Agency and

Writing in a First-Grade Classroom

Kara DeCoursey

Early literacy learning is crucial for later success in reading and writing. We have a limited understanding of generative writing (i.e., expressing ideas in writing) in first grade and further research is warranted. The socially situated nature of writing justifies a study of student agency during writing.

In this study, data were collected before, during, and after 10 writing sessions in a first-grade classroom. Students took a pre- and post-survey that revealed their self-perceptions of their agency and confidence as literacy learners. The participating teacher was interviewed three times and the teacher's talk was recorded during all 45- to 60-minute writing sessions. Pictures and observational notes of students' writing and actions were taken during the writing sessions. Data were analyzed through the calculation of students' survey scores and frequency counts of teacher discourse. In addition, multiple read-throughs of the data sources led to the development of several descriptive categories and the identification of key themes.

Results showed that opportunities for students to choose and exercise agency arose when the teacher asked open-ended questions and gave encouragement to students that prompted them to act. When students' made choices about what and how they wrote, they seemed empowered and to grow as individual writers.

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Kara DeCoursey

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex set of skills crucial for effective linguistic communication and for students' success in school and their personal lives (Graham, 2019). Writing is an especially important aspect of early-grade literacy learning (Coker et al., 2018; Gerde et al., 2012), and early writing skills are correlated with later reading and writing success (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). However, learning to write is a complex, cognitively demanding process (Flower & Hayes, 1981) that depends on time, genre, audience, and the environment (Dean, 2021). Many students do not receive the writing instruction they need nor acquire sufficient writing skills in school (Graham, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Writing—generative writing in particular—is commonly overlooked in early-grade instruction (Connor et al., 2011) and seldom examined in early-grade research (Coker et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2012). Thus, the corpus of research on early writing is minimal, especially in comparison to research on early reading (Gerde et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012; Korth et al., 2017). However, there is a considerable amount of research on transcriptional components of writing (i.e., handwriting, spelling, punctuation, or grammar) and a smaller set of studies focused on compositional/generative writing (i.e., autonomous production of informative or narrative text [Coker et al., 2018] and the expression of ideas [Gerde et al., 2012]) in the early grades. This research has shown that students as young as 6 years old can write generatively (Coker et al., 2018; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007) and make meaningful choices about their writing (Ghiso, 2011; Kuby & Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2013).

Student Agency and Writing

In a time of increasingly rigorous early literacy content standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), rigid, prescriptive curricula (Dyson, 2020), and high expectations for literacy achievement (Hussar et al., 2020), concepts such as student agency may seem irrelevant or impractical., Given the prevalence of early literacy underachievement (NCES, 2012; NELP, 2008), a growing collection of quantitative research informing the Science of Reading (Shanahan, 2020), and widely used core reading programs (Reutzel et al., 2014), there is an understandable emphasis on explicit, systematic instruction in early-grade literacy practices and research. However, many school settings and curricular programs have become *overly* delimited and scripted, littered with "mandated benchmarks, textbooks, and quizzes [that have] to do with scurrying up a linear ladder of skills" (Dyson, 2020, p. 124). These conditions can minimize teacher autonomy and dampen child agency (Vaughn, 2021), which is important for the development of students' individual literacy identities (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Kuby & Vaughn, 2015) and their potential as independent, innovative thinkers (Vaughn, 2020; Wan & Gut, 2011). Teachers have a significant influence on the classroom environment and their students' learning opportunities (Cazden, 2001; Johnston, 2004). Small shifts in practice have afforded students opportunities to act as agentic, generative writers and allowed them to develop their writer identities (Dyson, 2020; Kennedy & Shiel, 2022) even within important, well-evidenced early literacy curricular structures and content.

Conditions of the Field

While much is known about effective, foundational reading instruction, we have less knowledge of which early conditions and skills support students' development of writing proficiency (Gerde et al., 2015; Korth et al., 2017). Historically, reading and writing have often been viewed separately because society has placed more value on reading than writing (Kaestle, 1985). Consequently, there has been a heavy emphasis on teaching children to read in the early grades (Brandt, 2001). Because of inadequate preparation and time constraints, even when primary-grade teachers have sufficient supplies to teach writing, they often struggle to incorporate early writing experiences and to implement age-appropriate, effective writing instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2006; Gerde et al., 2015). Writing has been described as the neglected "R" in early childhood education (Mo et al., 2014) and unlike reading and mathematics, writing instruction is often relegated little time during the school day and largely consists of decontextualized basic skills (Cutler & Graham, 2008).

Writing and Reading Connection

A century ago, developmental readiness theories held writing as dependent on reading ability and schools frequently delayed the teaching of writing until students had mastered foundational reading skills (Gesell, 1925). Premature teaching of writing was thought to be "ineffective, inefficient, or even harmful" because reading and writing were viewed as sequential skills (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000, p. 39). In the late 1980s, there was still a tendency for educators to consider writing as secondary to initial reading

skills, but Durkin (1989) pointed out that in fact, writing may be the road to reading for some young children. Throughout the last 20 years or so, arguments for early writing experiences have shifted somewhat and research has repeatedly focused on the integration of writing and reading, emphasizing the influence of writing skills on reading achievement and vice versa. Writing has been shown to facilitate crucial reading skills such as letter knowledge (Clay, 2001; Diamond et al., 2008), phonological awareness (Blair & Savage, 2006), understanding of print and sound (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), and word recognition (Bloodgood, 1999). An analysis of a theoretical writing-to-read model showed that writing promoted young students' basic reading skills (Shanahan & Lomax, 1988). Early studies by Ehri (1980, 1989) showed that while young students' spellings are generally incorrect, they can be logical, language-rule based, and sophisticated. Furthermore, in a year-long experimental study, Jones and Reutzel (2014) examined the relationship between code-related (word-level and decoding skills) features of writing instruction and reading outcomes for students. Both interactive writing and writing workshop instructional methods had a significant effect on the reading outcomes of young students compared to the control group with the most significant instructional feature being students reading and rereading their own writing (Jones & Reutzel, 2014). The findings from such studies provide one important reason for giving writing more time and attention in the school curriculum: implementing writing instruction early on in school may facilitate reading skills. However, despite their strong connection and the frequent integration of reading and writing in early grades research, they are separate constructs and a strong foundation of literacy learning overall requires competence in

both (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2002).

Variability of Writing Practices

Concerns regarding the quality of writing instruction in early grades are widespread. Cutler and Graham (2008) surveyed a random sample of 178 primary-grade teachers across the nation to understand writing practices in their classrooms. There was great variability of practice across participants, with 72% of teachers reporting that they take an eclectic approach, or a mixture of process writing and skills instruction, with the rest reporting using a process approach (20%), traditional approach (6%), or a 6 + 1 trait method (2%). Coker et al. (2018) reported similar variability and concerns about writing practices in first grade after a rigorous observational study in 50 classrooms. Coker et al.'s (2016) observational study investigated the conditions of writing instruction in first-grade classrooms across 13 schools in one state in the U.S. The research team observed the 50 classrooms over a 2-year period and coded grouping, instructional foci, teacher actions, and student activity dimensions of writing instruction. Results showed that teachers taught writing for an average of 25 minutes a day, that the time was focused mainly on skills instruction, and that nearly all instruction was delivered in whole-group settings with little modeling or student discussion (Coker et al., 2016). Similarly, Connor et al.'s (2006) observational study of 156 students in preschool classrooms found that students in certain schools were exposed to up to 90 minutes of daily literacy activities and instruction whereas other children were exposed to as little as four minutes. The great variability in writing instruction and practice revealed in these prominent research studies reflects the limited knowledge we have about writing that occurs in early-grade

classrooms. In addition, it shows the need for future studies that could account for contextual aspects of writing in singular contexts because broad samples and generalized data do little to highlight the intricacies and richness of early-grades writing experiences.

Evidence-Based Writing Recommendations

Despite having limited research on early writing across the field, a panel authorized by the Institute of Education Sciences (Graham et al., 2012) compiled evidence based on 73 studies that was published as a practice guide with the following four main recommendations for teaching writing effectively in the elementary grades:

- students should have daily time to write

- students should write for a variety of purposes

- students should become fluent with handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction

- teachers should establish an engaged community of writers in their classrooms (Graham et al., 2012)

While these recommendations provide a basic framework for the implementation of writing in the elementary grades, they are very broad and do not address details and nuances of contextualized classroom writing instruction and practice. My focus here relates to the first recommendation and last recommendation which are to ensure students have adequate time to write and the importance of establishing a classroom community of writers. The recommended practices have interdependent relationships and without acknowledgment and implementation of the first recommendation, the other recommendations cannot be accomplished. Connor et al. (2011) found that very little time during language arts instructional blocks included writing practice or instruction and

concluded that the research field needs additional insight into which instructional

approaches are most effective in helping students gain literacy skills. In a later study,

Connor et al. (2013) determined that students in first-grade classrooms in the U.S. wrote

for only approximately four minutes each day during the fall semester. Yet, Cutler and

Graham's (2008) survey data and analyses rendered compelling recommendations for

primary-grade teachers to increase the time their students spend writing (especially

expository text) and

- balance their instructional time and writing time
- include strategy instruction
- provide skills-based work
- foster motivation for writing
- make connections between writing at home and school
- include computers in writing
- improve writing instruction in teacher preparation programs

Clearly, there is work to be done to determine how these myriad

recommendations can be accomplished amid current instructional priorities. There is

limited research on how and what types of instruction and activities should constitute

time spent writing in the classroom. With respect to the many curricular demands on

teachers, what *is* clear is that teachers should provide ample time for students to practice

writing skills and strategies appropriate to students' levels in isolation and across content

areas (Graham et al., 2012). Additionally, there is a persisting need for the documentation

and examination of what writing is occurring in classrooms, what writing practices seem

to work well, and "how teachers might vary types of writing to student advantage"

(Miller et al., 2012, p. 3).

Views of Written Language Acquisition

The importance of targeting literacy instruction early on to help students avoid future difficulties (Slavin et al., 1989), as well as the global significance and contextualized, socially situated nature of writing in schools led me to consider early-grades writing in a singular context for research study. Furthermore, the variability of writing instruction, practice, and outcomes across the existing studies in the primary grades sparked my interest in what conditions might contribute to students' early writing engagement and growth. Conditions of writing vary across contexts; writing activities can be short or lengthy, revised over time or singular, high stakes or low stakes, isolated or integrated (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Hebert et al., 2013) and a deeper understanding of writing conditions may be achieved through a close examination of writing within a classroom setting.

There are diverging views of written language acquisition within the field which further complicate the study of writing practice. Arguments for an additive-cumulative view in which writing development progresses linearly from transcription skills to eventual discursive processes are prevalent (Tolchinsky, 2015). There exists a substantial number of empirical research studies targeting these lower-level transcription skills (e.g., the majority of the studies that were compiled for the IES writing guide), however, there remains little consensus and an incomplete understanding about what effective writing instruction entails in the primary grades, especially regarding generative writing processes (Coker et al., 2018). While informative and important, the compilation of transcription-heavy studies in early writing has not adequately informed the complexity

of writing pedagogy. Thus, I focused on the social, contextualized nature of writing to add to the corpus of research that promotes writing-to-grow-writing (Gifford, 1995) and acknowledges early unconventional writing attempts as "real" and meaningful (Rowe, 2018).

Definition of Writing

Given the varying definitions and perspectives of writing throughout the field, in this section I describe how I conceptualize writing in my research. Writing has been defined as "the activity of expressing ideas, opinions, and views in print: writing for communication or composing" (Gerde et al., 2012, p. 351). This interpretation of writing guided my research; I recognize the importance and complexity of handwriting, penmanship, and spelling, but in the context of this study my references to writing are not to be confused with a definition limited only to those lower-level transcription skills. According to Vygotsky (1987), writing is a tool within a complex sociocultural system, a mediational mean that can be used by individuals as they communicate, reason, and act. In young children, these means primarily include the drawings and print messages that they use to represent and communicate meaning (Kress, 1994). Writing in this sense is a creative process through which children produce not simply words but a text, or discourse. Gundlach (1981) stressed that children, "if given the chance, compose whole [written] discourses from the beginning of their development as writers" (p. 139). "Whole" in this case is simply a recognition of the meaning implicit in children's early writing attempts, not a reference to an objective length or quality of produced texts.

This discourse-focused writing perspective is reflected in a more recent conceptualization of writing that Coker et al. (2018) call "generative writing." Generative writing is the process through which students autonomously create content and produce connected text, in narrative or informative text types. It involves participation in nonprescribed, open-ended writing tasks with various media and engages students in multiple cognitive processes that support writing development (Berninger & Winn, 2006). The cognitive processes involve the coordination of individuals' linguistic abilities, orthographic knowledge, fine motor skills, and the generation of ideas and the structuring of text (Berninger et al., 1994; Miller, 2018). Hereafter, I will use the term "generative writing" to refer to writing as described in this section.

Purpose of the Current Study

The goal of the current study was to investigate possibilities for student agency and generative writing in a first-grade classroom. I conducted an instrumental case study framed by sociocultural theories of learning to understand first-grade students' agentic self-perceptions and actions during classroom writing time. I used a mixed-methods approach and a multiple paper format to explore students' perceptions and behaviors and the teacher's discourse and instructional decisions, which allowed me to consider the study's constructs with adequate depth and attention to detail. The study took place in a first-grade classroom at a school in the Mountain West area of the U.S. with one teacher and 23 student participants over the course of three months early in the 2022-2023 school year. The data sources for the study were observation field notes, audio recordings of the

teacher's discourse during the writing sessions, three interview transcripts, and students'

pre- and post-results on the Student Agency Profile instrument (StAP; Vaughn et al.,

2020). Chapter 2 of this document contains a general literature review of critical

constructs while Chapters 3 and 4 report the research data from the study: one report

targets the teacher's discourse in relation to students' agentic opportunities during writing

and the other report is focused on students' actions, writing, and agentic self-perceptions.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Using dialogic teaching and student agency as conceptual frameworks, I sought
and selected research studies that examined early writing in contextualized, social
settings as well as prominent studies of writing that have significantly influenced research
and educational practice. This review is a synthesis of literature that covers existing
research on concepts of agency and writing in the primary grades, including:

- theories and models of writing
- prominent early writing research
- student agency
- teacher talk

These topics emerged through an iterative process over time; I explored and
refined the selection of studies as the purposes of the current study became more focused
and defined. Studies aimed solely at handwriting, mechanics, and other basic writing
skills were largely excluded from the review while those that investigated generative
writing (Coker et al., 2018) and a process approach to writing (Graham & Sandmel,
2011) were included. I assembled relevant scholarship through bibliographic searches on
ERIC, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and APA PsycInfo databases using the keywords
"agency" and "writing" in combination with "early," "primary grades," "teacher talk,"
"teacher discourse," and "development." I reviewed studies and meta-analyses focused
on the research theories, methods, and design features that are applicable to a study of
agentic writing. I did not target intervention studies or special education classes but
focused on studies that occurred in typical elementary classroom settings. The corpus that

informs my investigation emerged naturally as I read studies and pursued pertinent sources referenced in those studies. The compiled literature is informative but affirms the need for additional studies of writing in the early grades in general (Coker et al., 2018; Graham, 2019). Importantly, my review of the literature also revealed a gap in early grades writing studies that are founded on a sociocultural perspective of learning and framed by concepts of agency.

Theories and Models of Writing

Writing is complex; it requires shared understanding with readers about "purposes and forms, knowledge of content, proficiency in language, and a range of skills and strategies, as well as motivation" (MacArthur et al., 2015, p. 1). Theories and models of writing have been developed and revised for decades; each provides insight into the multifaceted subject, yet differing views on how it is learned and how it should be taught persist. Importantly, there is a far-reaching disconnect between insight into effective, evidence-based instruction and everyday classroom practice (Coker et al., 2018). Of interest to me are perspectives and models of the emergence of written language that emphasize the social and contextual factors of writing development and instruction. The models I describe move beyond the "simple view" and "not so simple view" of writing (Berninger et al., 2002; Berninger & Winn, 2006) and acknowledge more complexity in writing development processes, including aspects of motivation and engagement (MacArthur et al., 2015).

A Social-Interactive Model of Writing

The recognition of the important role of social context in education emerged in the 1980s as scholars' and educators' perspectives shifted "from things cognitive to things social" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 67). Researchers started to explicate study contexts (Brandt, 1986; Nystrand, 1982), attend to writers' purposes (Fish, 1980), and explore the relationships of writers to their writing communities (Brodkey, 1987; Bruffee, 1984; Faigley, 1985). Nystrand (1989) created a social model of writing focused on the interaction between the writer, the text, and the reader (i.e., audience) as shown in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1

Social-Interactive Model of Written Communication
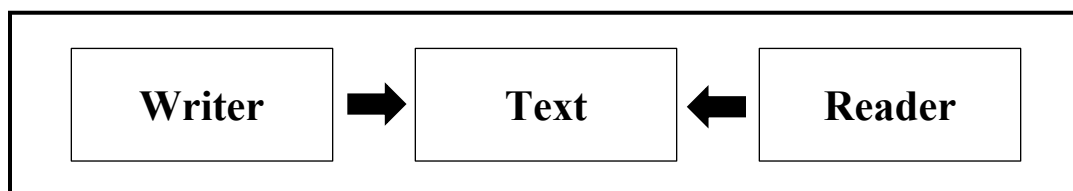
Note. Adapted from Nystrand, M. (1989). A social-interactive model of writing. *Written Communication*, *6*(1), 66–85 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088389006001005).

Nystrand's (1989) social-interactive model of writing claims that skilled writers do three main things: establish a clear topic, elaborate on the topic through recursive processes, and write in text structures appropriate to the audience and purpose. These concepts were an important addition to the writing research field because they focused on the interactive process of writing within a community and the importance of audience. Nystrand maintained that by writing, students would learn to write and gain necessary grammar/transcription skills along the way. Although he did not designate a particular

age group, the broad ideas from the social-interactive model of writing are reflected in later frameworks of writing and informed my early-grade research.

**Mutually Enhancing-Interactive View of
Written Language Acquisition**

Within a mutually enhancing-interactive view, a perspective coined by Liliana Tolchinsky (2015) and explicated in a recent *Handbook of Writing Research*, writing is conceived as a discourse mode and the symbol system as a way to encode and represent meaning through language. From a mutually enhancing-interactive view, the emergence of written language is socioculturally bound considering both transcriptional (e.g., handwriting, spelling, etc.) and discursive aspects (e.g., writing as representing meaning, text structure, etc.) because written-language acquisition is not linear (Harris et al., 2009; Zimmerman & Reisemberg, 1997). Early research shows that young children are aware of many linguistic features of written language even before they show mastery of the alphabetic code (Pontecorvo & Zuchermaglio, 1989). Substantial empirical research shows that oral language, letter knowledge, handwriting, phonemic awareness, and other conventional aspects of literacy predict students' achievement on later writing measures (Foulin, 2005; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). Mutually enhancing-interactive views acknowledge the transcriptional aspects of writing but emphasize the recursive and social nature of the writing process. In sum, Tolchinsky (2015) argued that spelling is far from the starting point for the emergence of written language and that the gap between transcription and composition needs to be bridged in writing instruction and research.

Writer(s)-Within-Community Model

The Writers-Within-Community (WWC) model of writing assumes that writing is a socially situated activity within a particular context (Graham, 2018; Hull & Schultz, 2001). It is based on the idea that writing processes and purposes are simultaneously influenced by the writing community's and individuals' resources, capacities, cognitive capabilities, variability, and changes. Figure 2.2 shows the layers of writing communities and processes in the model.

Figure 2.2

Revised Writer(s)-Within-Community Model of Writing.

FIGURE 1   Basic components of a writing community.

Note. From Graham, S. (2018). A revised writer(s)-within-community model of writing. *Educational Psychologist*, *53*(4), 258–279 (https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2018.1481406).

The WWC model presented broadly is applicable to any community of writers—within and without schools. Its purpose is to provide a structure for "studying writing communities and individual differences in writing" (Graham, 2018, p. 275). Graham noted the lack of insight and evidence surrounding the classroom teacher's role inside writing communities and proposed expansion and exploration of their role.

Early Writing Research

Meta-Analyses and Research Reviews

Graham, McKeown, et al.'s (2012)) meta-analysis of writing instruction across 115 research reports was limited to experiments with random experiments or quasi-experimental designs. The inclusionary criteria included having a writing quality posttest, students in typical elementary schools, and statistics that could compute a weighted effect size. The corpus reflected the prevalence of writing research in Grades 2 and higher and included only nine first-grade studies. Five of these first-grade studies focused on transcription skills (Graham & Harris, 2005; Graham et al., 2000; Jones, 2004; Jones & Christensen, 1999), one targeted word processing (Lanter et al., 1987), and three focused on comprehensive writing programs (Croes, 1990; Eads, 1989; Klesius et al., 1991). A more recent review (Graham, 2019) of 28 writing studies moved beyond exclusively experimental research and included survey-based, observational, and mixed method studies with a total of 7,000 teacher participants. In this analysis, Graham included five studies involving primary-grade children, two of which were observational and partially open-ended, evaluating all writing-related instruction present in observed classrooms

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(Coker et al., 2016; Cutler & Graham, 2008). The other three studies in first grade were restricted to a specific intervention study for weak writers (Graham et al., 2003), a study of handwriting instruction (Graham, Morphy, et al., 2008), and a study of spelling instruction (Graham, Harris, et al., 2008).

The reviewed studies demonstrate the understudied nature of generative writing in first grade, the frequency of quantitative designs, and the dominance of existing research targeting basic writing skills and relatively few first-grade studies investigating generative writing. These basic component skills are often arduous for young learners, undoubtedly critical for students' early writing development, and inextricably linked to generative writing (Coker et al., 2018). However, despite common beliefs that writing is developed in clear, sequential stages, Puranik and Lonigan (2014) assert that all components of writing likely develop simultaneously and nonlinearly in children. Hence, a more balanced focus between basic writing skills and generative writing in early childhood education could support students' writing skills and the development of their writerly identities (Bingham et al., 2017; Treiman et al., 2016).

Prominent Observational and Survey-Based Research

A recommendation for primary-grade teachers from Cutler and Graham's (2008) national survey report was to find balance between basic skills instruction, writing strategy instruction, and providing sufficient time for students to write. Their survey data revealed that students did not seem to spend adequate time writing generatively and they argued that concerns with writing letters fluently and spelling words correctly should not

shortchange time spent on generative writing in the early grades. Relatedly, Coker et al., (2018) conducted four full-day observations across a school year to investigate student writing practice in 50 classrooms as part of a larger project on writing instruction in first grade. Following a time-sampling procedure, observers coded results every five minutes—they observed for three minutes and entered codes on touch screens for two minutes. They entered dichotomous codes (present or absent) across four categories: writing instruction, reading instruction, student writing practice, and student reading practice (Coker et al., 2018). The relations between student demographics, classroom literacy instruction and practice, and writing achievement measures were analyzed using hierarchal linear modeling estimates. The amount of time spent on different types of writing instruction and practice were compared with students' writing achievement on writing assessments administered in the fall and spring. Generative writing practice alone had a positive, significant relationship with students' writing achievement on the Broad Written Language (BWL) cluster and with Quality/Length and Contextual Spelling factor scores when compared with skills-based writing instruction, composing writing instruction, correct/copy writing practice, and writing about text practice. Even so, Coker et al. acknowledged the limitations of their study and indicated that the potential benefits of generative writing and nuanced conditions of writing instruction and activities are still widely unknown, justifying further exploration.

Intentionality and Invented Spelling

During a time when scholars were heavily focused on a readiness perspective of reading and writing acquisition, Sulzby and Teale (1985) posed a radical idea that

intention rather than *convention* was the defining feature of writing. From this perspective, writing begins when children make marks to represent meaning rather than when they master decoding or transcription skills. Contrastively, in a recent study with PreK-2 teachers and 337 students, Kennedy and Shiel (2022) noted that teachers only engaged in shared writing and teacher-directed writing activities, without expecting children to write independently. They noted that initially, students' imagination and thinking capacities outstrip their transcription skills and that "invented spelling supported their agency in writing, assisting them in capturing their thoughts" (Kennedy & Shiel, 2022, p. 137). This suggests that giving students opportunities to write generatively in the early grades before they have mastered transcription skills may support their idea development and expression. Gifford (1995) studied the relationship between first-grade students' risk-taking behaviors and their growth in writing competency. Gifford argued that if approximation and experimentation are important components of emergent literacy, invented spelling and early attempts at producing generative text should be valued and encouraged. Through analysis of students' daily free-writing journal entries over one school year and a pre/post measure based on a writing assessment checklist, Gifford concluded that the degree to which early writers take risks by attempting to spell unlearned words is predictive of growth in components of writing at word, sentence, and compositional levels. Surely, "if knowing *how* is valued above knowing *about* written expression, then students must be immersed in the writing medium and allowed to develop skills at their own rate in a personally meaningful context" (Gifford, 1995, p. 22).

Writing Choice and Identity Development

  Kissel et al. (2011) conducted a 6-year ethnographic study with a qualitative interpretive approach to investigate how 4- and 5-year-old children's interactions during writing influenced their written products. They attended to how children used purposeful written marks to communicate meaning before conventional writing commenced and investigated how social influences helped students develop literate identities (Kissel et al., 2011). Every day, the teacher modeled writing across genres on an anchor chart, gave students a few minutes to share ideas for writing with their peers at the rug, and sent them to two worktables where all students wrote and talked for 10-15 minutes. Students gathered again and shared their writing from an author's chair. Researchers spent two hours in the classroom each week for 81 visits and 162 hours total. Each week, the researchers wrote reflectively about their observations in a one-page research memo. Transcribed teacher and student interviews, students' written artifacts, and field notes were merged and thematized to understand social interactions and students' text generation. Kissel et al. highlighted students' tendencies to interact with their peers and their teacher to ask questions and push themselves as writers, choose their own purposes and audiences for their writing, and to write on topics based around their own interests. Overall, the study offered deeper understanding of literacy identity development, emerging possibilities of unconventional writing for young students, and peer interaction that led to writing growth for students (Kissel et al., 2011).

  Chapman (1995) argued that students have opportunities to write generatively before they master conventional spelling skills. They can write with invented spelling and

developmental appropriations (e.g., scribbles and marks that show left to right directionality, showing awareness of spacing between words and letter shapes). To further challenge the idea that young students have limited opportunity to engage in the writing process, Jasmine and Weiner (2007) explored first graders' writing processes and capacity in becoming confident, independent writers by observing and measuring students' experiences within a writers' workshop model of instruction. Over the course of the 7-week study, 21 students (aged 5-6) participated in minilessons, conferenced with peers and teachers, and wrote independently on topics of their own choosing. Jasmine and Weiner used quantitative data analysis procedures to measure student attitudes and confidence levels via a survey with 12 close-ended questions and a 4-point Likert-scale format. The researchers conducted systematic observations using checklists with a priori behavioral categories and displayed their results numerically. Students' written artifacts were collected—one piece of independent writing from each child before and after the writing workshop intervention—and analyzed in comparison to a 6 + 1 writing rubric. Jasmine and Weiner then employed qualitative methods to understand the participants' perspectives and experiences from semi-structured interviews with seven students at the conclusion of the study. The mixed methodological approach and triangulated data gathered from observation checklists, rubrics, interviews, portfolios, and pre- and post-Likert surveys revealed important findings about the first-grade writers. Students who initially struggled to choose writing topics became more confident and comfortable with making choices over the 7-week period and students engaged in productive conversations and revision processes with their peers. Students' mean writing scores (using a teacher

rubric focused on sentence revision, topics, grammar, and spelling) showed a significant increase from pre- to post-assessment. Overall, students grew in agency, engaged in revision with peers, and became more enthusiastic about writing and sharing their writing.

Agency and Writing

"Agency...sounds important, but what it actually means for student learning and classroom practice is a mystery" (Vaughn, Premo, Sotirovska, Erickson, 2020, p. 428). While agency has been operationalized in classrooms in decidedly concrete ways, (Vaughn, 2021) as a relatively abstract concept it can be difficult to detect and challenging to study. In a systematic review of student agency in literacy, Vaughn, Jang, et al. (2020) analyzed 51 studies that focused on agency and literacy in education. Of the 51 studies, only three were centered around writing, agency, and young children and focused on better understanding early writing processes in relation to student interests and choices. Thus. the literature on agency in elementary school settings is limited, however, there exists a small but robust set of studies that reflect scholars and practitioners' explorations of student agency and writing in the classroom (Vaughn, Premo, Erickson, & McManus, 2020). I acknowledge the predominant qualitative, contextualized nature of the pertinent studies on agency and writing (which can lack generalizability and standardized measures) but stress that such research is necessary for the investigation of agency—a highly contextual, nuanced concept.

Agency in Pre-Elementary School Contexts

Agency in writing contexts has been explored with students as young as 2 and 3 years of age. With a sociocultural framework of learning in which students' agency is believed to be constrained or enabled by their social environments, Rowe and Neitzel (2010) investigated 2- and 3-year-olds' interests during emergent writing activities. Naturalistic data were collected through observation of 11 students and their behaviors during free-choice playtime and analysis rendered depictions of how students participated in emergent writing activities. Observations were conducted by the second author on one or two mornings a week for 32 total days from September to March. The observer focused on each child for a total of 6.5 hours and followed a structured observation protocol (based on previous findings about children's play interests) to record the children's choices and actions during playtime. Field notes, audio and video recording, still photography, and students' written artifacts were collected as data sources and used to create 10 categories of student action during the play and writing activities: functional, operational, investigative, transformative, compositional, relational, enactment, informational, idea generation, and skill practice. Student personal play profiles were created and 11 students' audio transcripts (those who had sufficient play choice and writing data) were coded through constant comparative analysis. Finalized interest and action categories from the coding processes were presented in frequency tables and excerpts of verbatim transcripts. Two findings from this study stand out. First, students' actions and decisions often transcended the particular classroom context and reflected their personal interests during the open-ended writing times. This suggests that based on

prior experiences and backgrounds, students' agentic behaviors may vary widely, even within the same structured classroom environment and/or learning activity. Secondly, this study contends that even very young children can make decisions and shape writing events based on their personal preferences to "exert agency in service of their own participation and learning" (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010, p. 193).

Agentic Studies in the Elementary Grades

There is a small collection of informative studies on agency and literacy in the elementary grades as well. The recognition of multimodal literacies and the development of students' literacy identities were explored through an agentic perspective in a cross-case qualitative study in one kindergarten and one second grade classroom across one school year (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015). They queried:

1. In what ways do the identities of young children become in the process of creating multimodal artifacts?

2. In what ways do moments of departures or unexpected literacy practices demonstrate agency?

Mediated discourse analysis with a post-structural perspective (i.e., a perspective centered on power relations and discourse across children's broad social relations; Lather, 1992) was used to explore student agency as students participated in multimodal writing workshop activities. The researchers selected two illustrative cases and focused on them throughout the school year—one kindergarten student and one second grader. The researchers' postmodern stance led them to focus on "departures from the expected and notions of becoming" (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015, p. 438) and to avoid structured or predetermined norms and expectations during their data analysis procedures. They

chronicled the two illustrated cases' experiences in narrative form and used concepts of mediated discourse analysis to examine agency and becoming in the observation field notes and reflections, audio and video recordings, unstructured interviews with teachers and students, and students' written artifacts: discourses of place, interaction order, and historical body. A few important insights emerged from the study and contributed to our current understanding of agentic writing and young learners. Trust among students and teachers was deemed essential for the process of co-constructing agentic opportunities in literacy learning. In an illustrative case from the second-grade class, Miley facilitated peer discussions and put her students into groups to create a snow mural with pictures and text almost from the beginning of the study. Students were ready to make choices and take charge of their learning when they were given the opportunity to do so. A focal case from the kindergarten class was initially hesitant to engage in whole-group literacy activities and to talk to the researchers about her work but by the middle of the year, she initiated the process of creating a chapter book about horses with a peer. These examples demonstrate how in flexible classroom spaces, when students had access to materials and time to enact agency during writing, they had productive generative writing experiences. The hesitancy by several other students to share their writing and participate collaboratively with other students during the writing process demonstrates that acting as agents by making choices about their writing and their collaboration with peers may conflict with what students understand about being at school (Christ & Wang, 2008; Pahl, 2003) or their developmental readiness. Relatedly, incorporating student agency in the classroom is not necessarily an instinctive, comfortable process for teachers either.

Through an exploratory study of student agency "openings" in classroom literacy instruction, Vaughn (2014) found that the fourth-grade teacher rarely capitalized on opportunities to promote student agency during literacy lessons. For example, when the fourth graders read an article about the use of exercise balls for classroom seating and one student asked if they could write persuasive letters to their principal about the topic, the teacher dismissed the request and directed the students back to a worksheet (Vaughn, 2014). Based on findings in this study, Vaughn posed several questions calling for attention to "the construct of student agency, and its intersection with classroom instruction" (p. 13).

1. How can teachers take opportunities to plan authentic activities that may promote agency?

2. Can teachers adapt their instruction to promote agentic behavior?

3. What can students learn from this?

These questions target teacher and student roles in agentic teaching and learning processes and remain unanswered. However, relevant studies indicate positive associations between the extent of students' agentic opportunities within literacy contexts and student engagement and learning. Vaughn and Faircloth (2013) conducted an action research project to foster agentic learning in Vaughn's classroom to provide a lens for teachers to explore their literacy practices, as well as to offer insights for educators who may also want to structure their classrooms with more open-ended opportunities. Of the 18 students in the classroom, 13 had parent and student consent and participated in the study. The participants completed the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (Beaver, 2006) at the beginning of the year as a baseline literacy assessment; five

students scored at the pre-primer level and the rest scored at or above the first-grade level. The teacher/researchers recorded reflective thoughts in journals throughout the school year and administered the DRA at the start, middle, and end of the year (Vaughn & Faircloth, 2013). Student participants were also interviewed and asked modified questions from the Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna et al., 1995) about their literacy interests and beliefs. Through a qualitative grounded theory approach, a research team of two professors and the participating teacher coded the journal, transcripts, and memos, looking for themes and patterns. Vaughn and Faircloth found that when given a choice, the first-grade students modified literacy activities to be more relevant to their lives and interests. They were given options such as handwriting practice and independent reading and ended up creating posters, writing plays in small groups, and interviewing friends about their self-created books. In terms of agentic learning, students' creativity in this classroom led to seemingly empowering, meaningful literacy experiences. During another research study (Ghiso, 2011), students chose important events from their lives and related them to influential historical figures in the Civil Rights Movement. Based on observations of the students, Ghiso surmised that students were deeply engaged as they named topics, decided what to share, made connections between their lives and historical events/figures, and wrote about themselves.

In essence, writing experiences that are anchored in students' interests and inquiries can facilitate engagement in generative writing practice (Coker et al., 2018) and increase motivation for writing. As noted earlier, the last recommendation from the IES panel was to create an engaged community of writers (Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012).

They emphasized the importance of giving students choices in topic, allowing for creative expression, and letting students choose their purpose and audience(s). These research-based recommendations are derived from rich classroom contexts and provide applicable, exciting avenues for the exploration and enactment of agency in elementary grades writing.

Student Agency Profile

There have been recent attempts to broaden and systematize our ability to investigate student agency. As shown in Figure 2.3, the Student Agency Profile (StAP) instrument (Vaughn, Jang, et al., 2020) was developed and validated with 1,794 elementary students in first through fifth grades. It was designed to emphasize affective aspects of literacy learning and to provide the field with a broader lens of educational success—one beyond standardized assessment. While there are several literacy-related measurement tools for motivation and engagement (McKenna et al., 1995; Reeve, 2012), the StAP is the first instrument that captures a multidimensional view of agency (Vaughn, Premo, Erickson, & McManus, 2020). The StAP has 29 Likert-type scale questions assigned to five agentic categories: intentionality (IN), self-perception (SP), choice-

Figure 2.3

Student Agency Profile Sample

9	I am a good writer.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Writing is easy for me.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I write better stories than other students in this class.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I want to choose what I am going to learn.	1	2	3	4	5

Note. Adapted from: Vaughn, M., Premo, J., Sotirovska, V. V., & Erickson, D. (2020). Evaluating agency in literacy using the student agency profile. *The Reading Teacher, 73*(4), 427–441. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1853

making (CH), persistence (PS), and interactiveness (IN).

The StAP is a validated, accessible instrument designed to help researchers and educators understand the complexities of student agency in more concrete ways (see Appendix A). It is not exhaustive but can afford greater understanding of agency in classrooms and for individual students from their own perspectives (Vaughn Vaughn, Premo, Erickson, & McManus, 2020).

Teacher Discourse

The power of teacher talk is well-established (Mercer, 2008). Teacher talk, or teacher discourse, refers to the structure and content of talk teachers use in the classroom (Mercer & Dawes, 2014). In a review of research on teacher talk from the 1970s to 2010s, Mercer and Dawes (2014) noted the prevalence of findings that certain types and functions of teacher talk have positively influenced classroom learning. However, many nuances of its influence on student learning and participation, specifically in relation to writing, remain unexamined. Mehan (1979) and Cazden (1988) pioneered research on classroom talk; their findings and development of Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern as ubiquitous in classrooms formed the foundation for the study of dialogic talk. Dialogic talk extends beyond the IRE pattern and includes all teacher-student interactions, open questioning, and reciprocal talk. Subsequently, research on teacher talk and writing pedagogy in the elementary grades has varied widely. Below, I target studies that took place in the elementary grades, ones that highlight writing, and those from a sociocultural perspective.

Teacher Feedback During Writing

Of the relevant studies, several have focused on teachers' oral feedback to students during the writing process (Graham, 2018). The studies reviewed here are helpful because they focused on aspects of generative writing and teachers' patterns of feedback during writing instruction in the elementary grades. Matsumura et al. (2002) collected writing assignments from third-grade students in 29 classrooms and eight schools as part of a larger study investigating urban school reform initiatives. They compared the students' typical written assignments against grading criteria that the participating teachers submitted at the beginning of the study. The teachers' criteria for writing quality were operationalized in a rubric and a 4-point scale was used to rate the writing assignments on six dimensions of writing quality. Each item of teachers' oral feedback was also categorized by type and amount by two researchers until full consensus was reached (Matsumura et al., 2002). Mean comparisons and repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to demonstrate change across students' compositions throughout the study. They found that third-grade teachers provided oral feedback on student's spelling, language use, punctuation, and grammar almost four times as often as feedback on writing purpose, content, and style of writing (Matsumura et al., 2002). The large-scale, quantitative approach of this study lacked contextualized descriptions of the learning environments and classroom communities which are important aspects of teacher discourse from a sociocultural perspective (Gee, 1999). However, findings from the study revealed the heavy focus of teachers' discourse on transcription skills during their writing instruction (Matsumura et al., 2002) and lack

of emphasis on generative writing processes in the early grades (Coker et al., 2018).

A more recent study conducted in four Grade 4 classrooms also examined teachers' oral feedback during a single genre writing unit (Schuldt, 2019). The study took place in a K-8 school district with 20 schools from September to February. Each of the four teachers was observed six times for 33-89 minutes. The lessons were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Then, the codes were categorized based on principles of feedback interaction (Sadler, 1989). Cross-case analyses allowed researchers to identify themes and variations across teachers' feedback patterns. In their conclusions, Schuldt emphasized that rather than giving feedback that caused students to think, "teachers did much of the intellectual work to close the gap for students" (p. 73). Teachers in the study rarely responded in ways that allowed students to try out their ideas in writing, confirming previous findings that teachers often do "all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information" (Applebee & Langer, 2013, p. 27).

Dialogic Teaching Research

Several studies have explored teacher talk in relation to students' talk and learning in writing. Specifically, Boyd et al. (2019) conducted a mixed methods systematic examination of talk within 14 minilessons (ranging from 2 to 21 minutes) of a Writing Workshop unit in a second-grade classroom to understand how teacher talk might support student learning. Working within a larger 2-year ethnographic case study in an urban classroom in the U.S., Boyd et al. coded types of teacher talk across a 2-month period during folk/fairy tale writing minilessons to exemplify observable types of talk and their instructional purposes. The three authors used a model of communicative approaches

(Scott et al., 2006) within a sociocultural analytic framework to guide their coding of teachers' dialogic interactions and types of talk patterns and functions. The communicative model they used included four categories of talk: interactive/dialogic (I/D), noninteractive dialogic (N/D), interactive/authoritative (I/A), and noninteractive/authoritative (N/A). Intercoder reliability was 93% across the three authors on a random 20% of the minilesson transcripts (Boyd et al., 2019). Findings revealed instances of I/D (43.2%), N/D (5.4%), I/A (35.1%), and N/A (16.2%). The most salient finding was that teachers *can* (and frequently did in this study) effectively incorporate dialogic elements into instructional spaces that are often monologic and authoritative (Boyd et al., 2019). This study's findings reflect the possibilities for engaging students during writing instruction through types and functions of teacher talk.

In another mixed methods study targeting one teacher's discourse during early-grades writing, Yedlin (2003) combined qualitative and quantitative methods to explore characteristics of teacher talk in relation to student writing development in an urban first-grade English-as-a-second-language classroom. Yedlin described the writing development of 20 first-grade students and the teacher's talk during writing instruction throughout the school year. The teacher's dialogue was highly adaptive and flexible as she "provided access to meaning in as many ways as she could: reading, writing…, elaboration, simplification, repetition, gestures, tangible, and print referents" (Yedlin, 2003, p. 170). The students' writing development was described as progressively coherent and in line with national standards for first-grade writing. In another study (Dickson, 2005) demonstrating the role of teachers' discourse on student opportunities to

speak and act, theories of collaboration and inquiry were used to explore classroom dialogue during a 6-week study in a Grade 4 elementary classroom. Via qualitative data collection and open-coding processes, Dickson constructed seven categories from the identified teacher talk types: encouraging, reminding, inviting, responding, questioning, sharing, making connections, and thinking out loud. The teacher's high levels of interrogative, encouraging, and responsive discourse during the think alouds led to higher occurrences of exploratory, collaborative talk by students. Dickson points out the importance of the study's context, which seemed to be a classroom environment that "had an emphasis on learning, student choice, independence, and cooperation between teacher and students" (p. 120).

These are encouraging findings for the potential of teacher talk in writing settings because they demonstrate the importance and influence of teacher discourse on student discourse and learning opportunities. Teacher discourse is such a common, influential feature of elementary classrooms that analysis of it can shed light on other aspects within learning and the classroom. The highly dynamic, contextualized nature of teacher discourse demands research of the same; additional studies with teacher discourse analysis will add to the growing collection of research and insights into what teacher discourse means for social and power relations, specific school subjects, and other important aspects of classroom life. Evidently, teacher discourse can influence student agency and achievement, but we need to better understand *how* it can do this, especially with regard to beginning writing.

CHAPTER 3

AFFORDING STUDENT AGENCY DURING WRITING: AN EXAMINATION OF A FIRST-GRADE TEACHER'S DISCOURSE[1]

Abstract

Teachers play a central role in shaping their classroom learning environments and students' opportunities to access literacy practices. The purpose of this study was to examine how one teacher spoke to her students during writing sessions and how her discourse may have afforded her students' agency. Within an instrumental case study approach, data were collected via a pre-, mid-, and post-study interview with one first-grade classroom teacher and audio recordings of her discourse for ten 45- to 60-minute writing sessions. Based on several rounds of coding, the teacher's discourse was organized into four main categories: directing, encouraging, instructing, and managing. Findings revealed that her discourse served a variety of purposes but was patterned and consistent overall. The teacher's mode of encouraging her students often facilitated action on their part. Through questioning, the teacher was able to offer choice and emphasize that the students were responsible for their own ideas and writing. Finally, she gave them physical space to self-manage and taught them to value the variety of their written products. The study adds to our understanding of student agency and writing as well as the teacher's influence on students' opportunities in the classroom.

Keywords: teacher discourse, agency, primary grades, writing

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Introduction

The power of teacher discourse is well established (Cazden, 2001; Mercer, 2008). Cazden (1998) called classroom discourse "the language of learning" and Boyd (2015) asserted that teacher discourse often shapes the type and quality of learning that students experience. In a review of research on classroom talk from the 1970s to 2010, Mercer and Dawes (2014) noted the prevalence of findings that certain types and functions of teacher talk positively influenced classroom learning. Using questions and answers that provoke further thinking as well as balancing open-ended, interactive communication with more direct, authoritative instruction has been shown to deepen students' understanding of tasks and content. Teacher discourse is a common, influential feature of elementary classrooms (Cazden, 2001) and its analysis can shed light on important aspects of teaching and learning (Nystrand, 2006). Additionally, the highly dynamic, contextualized nature of teacher discourse demands studies using discourse analysis that contribute to research and insights into the influence of teacher discourse for social and power relations (Mehan, 1979), specific school subjects (Nystrand, 2006), and promoting student engagement.

Theoretical Framework

Much of the recent research on classroom discourse draws on sociocultural theories of learning (Nystrand, 2006) because they maintain that human action, language, and learning occur amid interaction with others and the environment (Bredo, 1997; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). The research reported here

is based on these sociocultural underpinnings and is framed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptualization of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), a central tenet of situated learning and communities of practice. Situated learning within a community of practice is focused on the relationship between social contexts and learning—"learning" defined as the ability to actually "*do* practices" (p. 20) as well as to acquire the ability to learn within the particular conditions of the given context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). LPP is the process that novice learners go through to gain experience and understanding by participating and interacting with others, especially with more skilled and knowledgeable masters or experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Here, I focus on the role and discourse of a teacher (or expert) during the writing sessions and how it potentially influenced students' opportunities to enact agency in an early-grade context.

Teacher Discourse

Discourse is a social and cultural practice that can provide insight into individuals' participation within specific learning contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Teacher discourse is a dominant feature of LPP (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and is a special aspect of the intellectual life of typical classrooms (Johnston, 2004). Teachers commonly have the right to speak to anyone at any time (Cazden, 2001) and their speech can either promote or hinder students' opportunities to choose and act. Through talk, teachers mediate students' experiences in literacy learning and help them make sense of life and themselves (Johnston, 2004). Vaughn (2021) reported that certain questioning forms could support elementary students' agency (e.g., "What do you know"? and "I wonder why"? and "Can you tell me more"?) (p. 73). Boyd (2016) asserted that teacher talk must

be purposeful and responsive in order to help students develop problem-solving skills. Her short analysis of classroom talk showed how a teacher made explicit connections to the purpose of a literacy activity, articulated how the activity was connected and relevant to students' life experiences, and apologized after making small mistakes. Boyd suggested that through discourse, teachers can use their agency to make in-the-moment pedagogical decisions (Boyd & Galda, 2011) and meaningfully guide their students within situated learning contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Johnston (2004) claimed that "teachers' conversations with children help the children build the bridges between action and consequences that develop their sense of agency" (p. 30).

Agency

Lave and Wenger (1991) pointed out that schools and classrooms can be places where learners are kept from participating in a broader community (in this case, as "real" writers) and may be placed in disempowering positions because of educational systems, curricular programs, school or district mandates, etc. Particularly, teachers in the primary grades typically take on a mentor or expert role as a more knowledgeable participant who designs instructional situations within which students act (or do not act) and co-construct their agency (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vaughn, 2021). Essentially, student agency is inexorably linked to the teacher's agency; students have the power to act on their interests and intentions only to the degree their teachers allow (Ahearn, 2002; Vaughn, 2021). Student agency has been characterized by self-regulation and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), confidence (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b), motivation (Pajares, 2003), and more. Vaughn, Premo, Erickson, and McManus (2020) drew from these concepts and

developed a definition of agency that consists of five central constructs: intentionality, self-perception, choice-making, persistence, and interactiveness). Vaughn (2021) views agency as a social phenomenon where students can make choices, generate ideas, solve problems, and engage in learning among others. I use this definition because it addresses the multifaceted, complex nature of agency and acknowledges the teacher's role in positioning students and affording student agency in their classrooms in ways that can support learning and growth.

Writing

As explicated above, the teacher's role/discourse and student opportunities to enact agency in learning contexts are entwined and interdependent. Per LPP, the long-term goal of learning to write is not for students to complete assignments, but for students to compose through participation with an expert in a social context. From this stance, learning a new skill cannot occur separately from the actual performance of the skill (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and generative writing opportunities give students the chance to actually "perform" writing. Writing is a complex, cognitively demanding task that requires the coordination of individuals' linguistic abilities, orthographic knowledge, fine motor skills, and the generation of ideas and the structuring of text (Berninger et al., 1994; Graham & Harris, 2013; Miller, 2018). Generative writing is focused on the autonomous production of ideas in connected text (at least one sentence in length) (Coker et al., 2018), but inherently involves these other skills. While there are ample studies on the transcriptional aspects of writing (handwriting, spelling, mechanics) in the early grades (Graham, McKeown, et al., 2012), fewer studies address compositional or

generative writing (Coker et al., 2018; Gerde et al., 2012). I considered both transcriptional and generative aspects of writing in my analysis and presentation of data, however, I emphasized generative writing in the examination of agency because autonomous generative writing processes provided a rich context within which to examine students' actions and choices.

Method

To explore student agency during writing time in a first-grade classroom, I conducted an instrumental case study using a mixed-methods approach (Hamilton et al., 2012; Stake, 2005). I conducted the study in a public charter school in the Mountain West area of the U.S. One first-grade teacher (Mrs. Rawlins) and 23 students in her class participated in the study (all names are researcher-selected pseudonyms). I had previous experience working with a university professor as a collaborating researcher in Mrs. Rawlins' classroom during the previous academic year. My interest in early-grade settings, access to the school, and understanding of Mrs. Rawlins as an adaptive, passionate teacher of writing influenced the decision to choose her as the focal case for the study. This report is an examination of a subset of data focused on the teacher's discourse throughout 10 writing sessions taught during the first half of the school year. I employed a sociocultural discourse analysis approach (Mercer, 2004) to answer the following questions: (1) How does one first-grade teacher communicate with students during writing time? (2) In what ways might one teacher's discourse afford students opportunities to enact agency during writing time? Sociocultural discourse analysis

methods allowed me to examine one teacher's discourse through qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to attend to the dynamic and nuanced nature of the teacher's discourse as well as to synthesize large amounts of data (Mercer, 2004). Aligned with the sociocultural theoretical foundations of this study, I studied the *function* of language in a social context, rather than language itself (Gee & Green, 1998; Mercer, 2004).

Data Collection and Analysis

Over the course of three months early in the fall of 2022, I conducted pre-, mid-, and post-study semistructured interviews with Mrs. Rawlins to gain insight into her goals and instructional beliefs about writing. I initially observed eight writing sessions (twice a week) to get an understanding of how she initiated writing tasks and processes during writing time in the first half of the school year. I observed two additional writing sessions several weeks later to corroborate my findings from the eight earlier observations. I audio-recorded the entirety of Mrs. Rawlins' discourse during each of the three interviews and the 10 writing sessions. The resultant data set for this study includes 1.5 hours of audio-recorded teacher interviews and 8.5 hours of audio-recorded teacher discourse, as well as reflective memos and findings from analysis of a different subset of student-centered data not reported here (i.e., Chapter 3).

After each classroom observation, I listened to and transcribed the audio-recorded teacher discourse (236 pages total) and wrote brief reflective memos for each session. At the end of each week, I read and annotated each line of data from the transcripts, describing the form and/or function of the discursive utterances (Gee, 2011). Annotations

included descriptive words and phrases such as "open question," "command," "content instruction," "student management," etc. (see Appendix B). Following all classroom observations and teacher interviews, the 10 teacher discourse transcripts and initial transcript notations were entered into NVivo 12 Plus, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) program. I conducted the next round of analysis by coding each individual line of text into subcategories generated as I reread the data (see Appendix C). Using NVivo 12 Plus, I determined the frequency of the codes and employed microdevelopmental analysis techniques which allowed systematic analysis of the variations of Mrs. Rawlins' discourse (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; Fischer & Granott, 1995; Yan & Fischer, 2002). Yan and Fischer proposed viewing activity from moment to moment in context to show dynamic patterns in what people "do, say, think, and feel" (p. 145). Once I had a firm understanding of what Mrs. Rawlins' discourse consisted of across the writing sessions, I examined the transcripts again and coded lines and sections of text ("stanzas"; Gee, 2011) as a discourse that seemed to afford students opportunities to enact agency. Gee's (2014) Identities Building Tool was employed to select and analyze several stanzas. The tool was used to consider discourse in terms of (a) what the speaker tries to enact and get others to recognize (b) how the speaker positions others (c) what identities the speaker invites them to take up. Finally, I used Mrs. Rawlins' expressed goals and beliefs, a multifaceted definition of agency (Vaughn, 2021), and interpretations of LPP to consider discourse related to agency and isolate several exemplar discourse excerpts.

Trustworthiness

In my data analyses, trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Stahl & King, 2020) was established through repeated readings and evaluations of the transcript data. Initial coding processes were open and involved writing descriptions of the transcribed utterances. I assembled descriptions and examples of the main categories from the coding processes as well as lists of the progression of specific codes. Mrs. Rawlins participated in member checking by reading through the first full draft of the research report. Lastly, the use of CAQDAS (NVivo) enabled the analytical results of a significant amount of complex textual data to be displayed in a methodical, comprehensive way. Furthermore, the use of NVivo as a data analysis tool allowed for the adaptation of the "nonlinearity, the fluidity, and 'moving goalposts' that characterize the qualitative research process" and careful documentation of the process (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012, p. 828).

Context of the Study

Because "there is no activity that is not situated" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the instructional setting of the study is outlined prior to the presentation of the findings and conclusions of the research. Descriptions of the format of the writing sessions and details about Mrs. Rawlins' educational background as well as her current writing goals for her class are shared to show what comprised the context.

General Format of the Writing Sessions

Mrs. Rawlins implemented two 45- to 60-minute afternoon writing sessions per

week. These sessions consisted of teacher-led instruction for 15-30 minutes during which Mrs. Rawlins modeled writing, conducted shared writing, read texts aloud, or explained the purpose of targeted writing tasks. Students sometimes shared their writing from previous sessions with the class during the whole-group instructional time. The students then spent 25-35 minutes writing independently while Mrs. Rawlins moved around the classroom and met with students one-on-one. The writing assignments throughout the sessions came from a lesson in a school-adopted writing curriculum, *Information in Action* (Duke, 2014), and other teacher-selected tasks. Across the 10 writing sessions, students wrote school helper profiles and short autobiographies, composed creative stories about constellations, drafted thank-you notes, reflected on a Mid-Autumn Festival experience and summarized book chapters from *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 2007). During independent writing time, the students were allowed to work anywhere in the classroom, often had the opportunity to choose their writing tools (paper, crayons, markers, etc.), and regularly interacted with and talked to each other and the teacher.

Mrs. Rawlins

Mrs. Rawlins has taught fifth, fourth, and first grade for a total of 12 years. She earned a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on literacy and an elementary school math endorsement. She is a strong proponent of early literacy and passionate about innovation and reflection in her practice. Mrs. Rawlins' articulated goals and beliefs about writing remained consistent throughout the pre-, mid-, and post-study interviews. She expressed, "I want them to like writing and I want them to feel confident in trying things and not just, 'teacher, come here and help me with this'." She highlighted

courage in relation to transcriptional skills saying, "I want you to have courage with the words that you want to spell and figure it out if we can transcribe it or translate it later."

Mrs. Rawlins emphasized purpose by stating, "it's always where I go, with, why are we writing this"? In the post-study interview, she reflected on their progress toward her goals. She explained, "well, we've gone through the writing process, and that was a big goal, making sure that they had the self-efficacy to think that they could be writers as they emerged in reading." She added,

> And where we took them from August, where they again were revisiting the alphabetic principle in letter formation is so much stronger now. Some of them couldn't reread what they wrote and we're beyond that for most of them now. But it's so much fun now that that's not so much of a hurdle and they really can express themselves, which was another goal I had. We have an authentic audience; we have a purpose.

These interview excerpts provide important details about Mrs. Rawlins' perspectives on writing and allowed me to consider her goals for writing and her beliefs about her students as writers.

Findings and Interpretations

The findings are presented in two sections, each answering one of the research questions. First, I present a broad view of Mrs. Rawlins' communication with her students during writing through visual displays of code frequencies across writing sessions. Next, I examine the teacher's discourse through a lens of agency and highlight several related instances of teacher discourse in this regard. My conclusion consists of a discussion of the key findings, recommendations for practice, and suggestions for future research with consideration of legitimate peripheral participation as a related theoretical

perspective and its possible enactment in similar contexts.

The Scope of Teacher Discourse Across 10 Writing Sessions

Mrs. Rawlins' spoke to her students in a varied, flexible manner and for a variety of purposes: giving examples, modeling tasks, describing students' actions, reading text, managing student behavior, offering ideas, etc. Discourse analysis processes and multiple reviews allowed me to consolidate initial codes into four main categories of teacher discourse: directing, encouraging, instructing, and managing (see Appendix D). Definitions and examples for each category are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Definitions and Examples of Main Categories

Category	Definition	Examples
Directing	Direct commands to act; commands to follow instructions and complete tasks	Tell me what you have so far. Get your pencil bags so you can be successful. Come on up and share yours and let's see if we can compare what works on both of them.
Encouraging	Praise and encouragement of students; approval of their work and effort	I like that powerful word. You were being really respectful right there. That's going to be a good sentence. I think you can do it.
Instructing	Explanations of content knowledge and task procedures	So, I'm going to go back and put my period in there, because that tells me I'm going to start a new idea. This person, remember, this person wrote about their own life. Remember that Jane Goodall and the monkeys? We had a word for that. It was called autobiography. "Auto" is a word part that means "myself." So, the person's life story written by themself.
Managing	Management of student behavior and enforcement of classroom expectations	We just have to be respectful first graders because we're still in the classroom. We can agree with him, but we can't shout. I'm looking for bodies that are going to show us what audiences look like. If you're using your paper as a distraction, just lay it in your square. We don't fold it up. We don't crinkle it. We lay it flat.

While additional types of discourse were present, they were less frequent, and I judged that the final four categories adequately characterize Mrs. Rawlins' discursive functions during the writing sessions. Figure 3.1 shows the total number of coding references per type of discourse.

Figure 3.1

Coding Reference Totals for the Final Four Discourse Categories
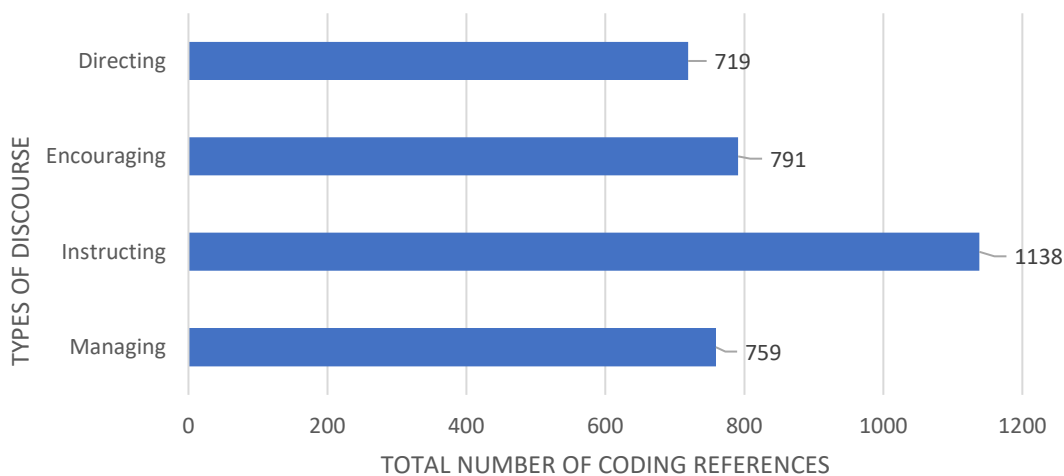
Instructional discourse was this teacher's dominant form of communication (34%). Commands (21%), encouragement (23%), and management (22%) discourse types occurred less often but with similar frequency. The combination of instructional and encouragement discourse comprised 57% of the codes, while the more custodial aspects (i.e., direction and management) totaled 43%. Thus, the majority of the codes noted the instructional coaching role over the custodial role of the teacher. Figure 3.2 shows the frequency of types of discourse compared to the other main types during each writing session.

Figure 3.2

Main Types of Discourse by Frequency Across 10 Writing Sessions
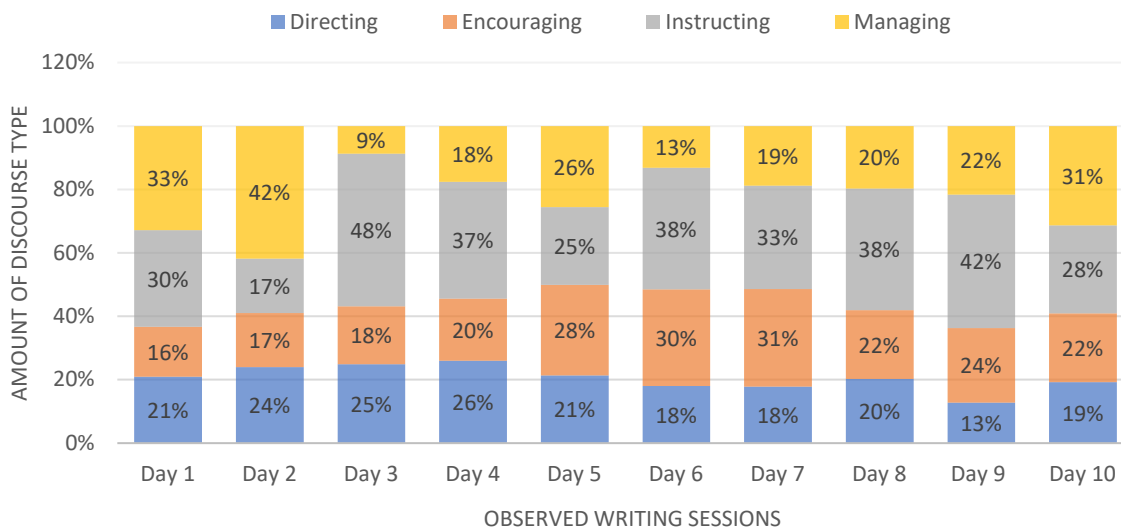
Overall, instructional discourse increased over the span of the writing sessions. This may seem counterintuitive, however, the variety of genres and text types that the students had the opportunity to write may have warranted substantial genre instruction. The fluctuations of instructional discourse might reflect the initiation of new writing tasks and then less instruction during more writing-intensive sessions. Mrs. Rawlins taught the students how to expand interview notes on Day 3 (48%), helped them publish final drafts of the school helper profile posters on Day 4 (37%), and explained a creative writing task on Day 6 (38%). She had the students write thank-you letters on Day 8 (38%) and respond to *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 2007) by choosing a favorite scene from the book and writing about why they liked it on Day 9 (42%). The instructional percentage could also be explained by the first-grade setting—students are relatively new to school and writing processes—or perhaps it is simply characteristic of Mrs. Rawlins'

approach to teaching. Interestingly, encouragement-focused discourse increased slightly but remained mostly stable while directing and management discourse types declined overall.

Examination of the aggregate discourse and knowledge of the writing session structures led me to consider Mrs. Rawlins' discourse during whole-group instruction and independent writing time as shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3

Dispersion of Discourse Types During Whole-Group Instruction and Independent Writing Time
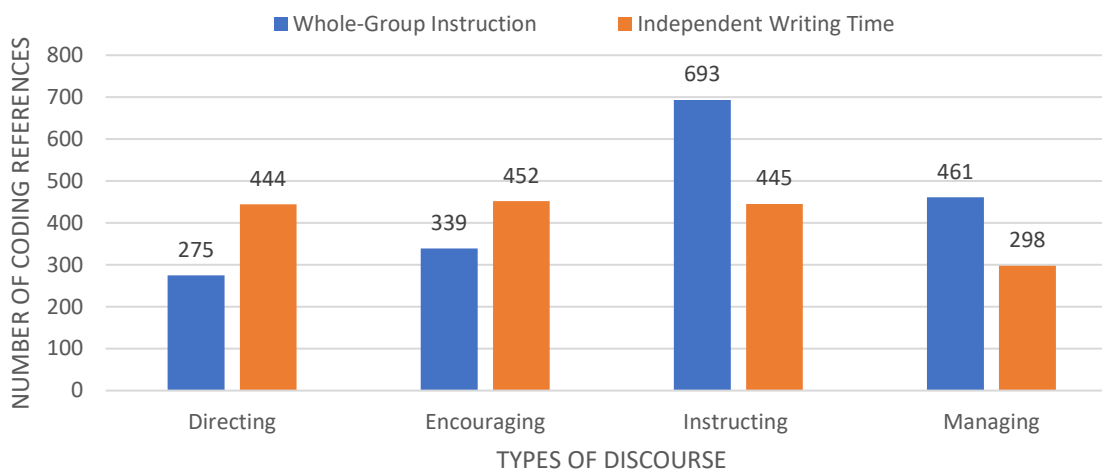
As indicated, Mrs. Rawlins' discursive functions predictably shifted when she spoke to the whole class versus when she spoke to students one-on-one while they wrote independently. Commands and encouragement became more frequent during the independent writing time, corresponding with the time that students were actively engaged in writing tasks. Instructional discourse dominated the whole-group portion of the session and decreased during independent writing time. Management discourse also

decreased, which reflects the space Mrs. Rawlins gave the students to self-manage during independent writing time. The writing session format as well as her discourse patterns align with generative writing processes—students were given genre instruction and task directions and then had time to produce text autonomously among their peers and teacher. Writing time that is completely teacher-directed or whole-group does not align with LPP or effectively facilitate generative writing opportunities. Ultimately, while Mrs. Rawlins' discourse types and functions varied, her discourse was also patterned and consistent. The routine and consistency of her discourse during instruction across 10 writing sessions shaped the culture of learning and writing in the classroom. This predictability allowed students to understand how to "enter" into writing roles in their environment through participation with a reliable expert.

Teacher Discourse and Legitimate
Peripheral Participation

Through an LPP lens, Mrs. Rawlins' discursive moves during writing ostensibly influenced the students' opportunities to engage in and therefore to "learn" writing. *How* she spoke (e.g., questioning, instructing) informed students about their roles and positions as learners and writers in their classroom and, possibly, in general., These forms of discourse shaped the "peripherality" in the context, or the way students could gain access to practice. For example, her questions invited students to participate in particular writing tasks in her class and in a broader sense, to enter the writing community at large. As a common form of her discourse, questioning stood out as a method of inviting students to participate as writers. Of the 1,138 instances of "instructing" code references, 558 (48%)

were coded as questions. There were 337 questions coded as "open" and 221 questions coded as "closed." Open, authentic questions, which invite a wide range of student responses (Boyd, 2015), have been linked with increased student contributions and student talk consisting of how they think and feel (Boyd, 2015; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Nystrand, 2006). Mrs. Rawlins' open questioning may show her intent to elicit individualized student responses and facilitate their thinking rather than regularly expecting them to respond with expected answers.

What was talked about (i.e., generative writing and transcription skills) during writing time communicated what was valued in writing. I coded 1,093 references to lines of discourse related to generative writing processes and 471 related to transcription skills, which reflects a considerable emphasis on ideas and autonomous text production. Mrs. Rawlins' emphasis on generative writing allowed students to individually engage in the "performance" (in this case, writing) congruently rather than to replicate the performance of the expert (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 21). In LPP, the discourse of the expert serves as a way to engage learners in participation rather than a way to mimic production. Mrs. Rawlins' prominent discourse type (instruction) showed her intent to teach her students, but coupled with her encouragement and management discourse, it appears that she instructed with the purpose of including students in participating more fully in writing—she had them compose several genres and text types and focused on the expression of ideas.

The next section further explores questioning and how her other forms of language may have functioned to give her students opportunities to enact agency during

writing, even as they learned in a structured school environment alongside a teacher/ expert.

Teacher Discourse and Student Agency

Theoretically, agency is made up of several important constructs (Vaughn, 2021) which together characterize the internal and external aspects of students' experiences as learners.

1. *Intentionality* captures students' ideas and goals as learners within broader social contexts.

2. *Self-perception* refers to students' confidence and views of their abilities and positions.

3. *Choice-making* means students are situated to make decisions that influence their participation or environment.

4. *Persistence* characterizes how learners persevere through difficulties.

5. *Interactiveness* describes how students are able to take up opportunities to act among others.

Lines of discourse related to these five agentic constructs were initially coded under an "agency" category. Cross-tabulation analysis showed where discourse coded for agency and the discourse within the four main codes (i.e., directing, encouraging, instructing, and managing) overlapped. The areas of overlap reveal what types of discourse were most conducive to affording agentic opportunities to students. In particular, certain types of encouragement and questioning stood out as forms of discourse that afforded students agency.

Encouragement

Within the ascribed multidimensional view of agency, the second-most common

discourse type coded as "encouragement" (which included praise and positive feedback) at times appeared to give students opportunities to enact agency. Subsequent rounds of analysis of the encouraging discourse resulted in a couple of important distinctions. Some of Mrs. Rawlins' praise served to reinforce expectations or instruction (e.g., "Great digraph," "Good job capitalizing it," "Perfect," "Great work," "That's a good sentence," and "Excellent") and may have emphasized her appraisal of their output more than the students' ownership of the work and self-perceptions of themselves as capable writers. This closed-ended praise also placed a judgment on the students' efforts and may have communicated that the students had done enough or halted students' continued action and effort. In addition, global (i.e., nonspecific), affirmative praise is not often related to the actual quality of student work (Brophy, 1981) and could reinforce students' poor writing performance as well as fail to address elements Mrs. Rawlins' deemed important (self-efficacy, self-expression, and taking risks).

Contrastively, the encouraging discourse that focused on students' efforts and capabilities seemed to situate students as agents in the learning process. For example, phrases such as "You know how to work this paper," "I know you know all the letters," "I think you're on to something," "You can solve the problem," "I think you can do it," "I can't wait to hear your story," "You know what to do," "You can spell it," seemed to place the responsibility for writing on the students and give credit to the students for their writing efforts and decisions. They were positive comments that propelled students to try more and to do more. Schuldt (2019) found that rather than giving feedback that caused students to think or act, elementary teachers tended to do the intellectual work for their

students during writing. The teachers rarely responded in ways that allowed students to experiment with their ideas in writing. The kinds of praise and encouragement that ask something of students are favorable for generative writing instruction (Coker et al., 2018) because students are invited to do the thinking and the composing autonomously to some extent. Boyd (2016) explained that in discursive exchanges, student volition cannot be required, but that it can be cultivated as teachers validate and expect more through their talk rather than definitively evaluate. Mrs. Rawlins' encouraging statements of this type likely promoted students to action and engagement in writing processes (e.g., spelling, writing a story, generating ideas) in ways that still allowed for students' deliberation and choice-making. Basically, discourse that reflects a teacher's belief in students' capabilities could be a way to foster the development of students' intentionality and persistence as young writers.

Questioning

Questioning is arguably the most common communication behavior used by teachers and has been described as the single most influential teaching act (Taba, 1966). Teacher questioning has been predominantly investigated in relation to student learning through the examination of students' responsiveness and/or achievement (Boyd, 2015; Nystrand et al., 2003; Peterson & Taylor, 2012) but has been recognized as a classroom feature that greatly influences classroom community norms (Boyd, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Mrs. Rawlins' questioning patterns are reflective of her instructional stance (Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Gutierrez, 1993) and appeared to create opportunities for students to act as writers—which is crucial given the highly structured nature of most

early-elementary classrooms. The example questions shown in Table 3.2 were coded

under both "questioning" and "agency."

Table 3.2

Agentic Question Classifications

Question Type	Questions
Opinions and Preferences	• Do you want to put any more? • You want to write that? • Where do you want your illustrated Maestra Garcia? • What do you want people to know about you as a first grader? • Do you want to staple them now?
Facilitation of Student Thought and Action	• Alright, what are you going to say? • What are you going to talk about next? • So, tell me, what's your best idea? • What are you most proud of? • What's your next sentence going to be? • Should we start another idea? • What do you mean by that?
Bounded Choices	• Are you going to write the words that are on the sentence that we wrote together or are you going to come up with your own idea? • Are you going to add more details to that sentence or is that your first sentence? • But let's see, do you want it to go sideways? Do you want it to go up and down? • Are you going to put a punctuation [sic] at the end of that or are you going to keep going?

These questions centered around students' opinions and preferences, which actions the

students might take next, and bounded choices. Because Mrs. Rawlins asked such

questions with the intention to support student responses (through activity or speech),

they seemed to be a meaningful way to guide students to specific instructional

content/learning objectives *and* afford them agency as writers. In short, she offered

choice and honored choice. It was evident that the first-graders trusted her to let them

choose; I noticed that students did not always answer her questions verbally, but

sometimes responded to her questions by starting to write or going to get the stapler or gluing an illustration on where they wanted it. In these moments, students did not seem to need to have Mrs. Rawlins confirm their choice but appeared to have confidence in their decisions after being prompted by these kinds of questions.

Teachers' questioning patterns create different opportunities for students' learning (Herbel-Eisenmann & Breyfogle, 2005). Similar to the encouragement discourse type, these kinds of questions appeared to transfer the responsibility of writing and making decisions to the students. That responsibility gave students the space to actually enact persistence, choice-making, and intentionality. Not all of Mrs. Rawlins questioning facilitated action or thinking from the students, yet the identified agentic question classifications may provide a kind of framework for educators and researchers to understand the teacher's role in student access to generative writing through agency.

Teacher Discourse Excerpts

Vaughn (2014) called for attention to the intersection between classroom instruction and student agency. Per LPP, discourse is a "powerful source of evidence for other ongoing modes of participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 22). Several sections of Mrs. Rawlins' discourse were identified after multiple rounds of coding (Gee, 2014). The following three excerpts feature discursive moves that evidence the intersection between teacher discourse and agency during writing time. They show how Mrs. Rawlins invited students in different ways to take up writer identities (Gee, 2014). The excerpts show more closely how Mrs. Rawlins' discourse patterns influenced student opportunities during writing.

Excerpt 1. This first dialogue excerpt occurred while students were writing summaries of a chapter from *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 2007). The class had co-written a summary together on the whiteboard; Mrs. Rawlins wrote the first two sentences and asked a student to write the last two sentences while the class shared ideas aloud. During the independent writing segment, Mrs. Rawlins moved around the room as she checked in with students as they wrote their summaries.

> Mrs. Rawlins: Okay, what choice are you going to make? Are you going to write the words that are in the sentence we wrote together, or will you come up with your own idea?
>
> Student: My own idea.
>
> Mrs. Rawlins: Okay. Let's talk about it out loud while we write it. What's your first sentence going to be?
>
> Student: I can do it by myself.
>
> Mrs. Rawlins: Okay. Well, I'll come back and check on you. Thanks for letting me know that you want to be independent. Great work.

As evident in this exchange, Mrs. Rawlins began to guide the student through the task (LPP) when the student informed her that they wanted to write by themselves. Her response showed that she would not remove her support completely (i.e., she would come back to check on the student) but she respected the students' assertion to write ideas on their own and gave the student space to do so. Mrs. Rawlins showed her instructional flexibility by trusting in her student's intentions to write independently rather than by reiterating her request that the student talk out loud and plan their first sentence. Concordant with this episode, early-grade teachers can effectively engage students during writing by incorporating flexible, inviting discourse in spaces where teacher talk is often monologic and authoritative (Boyd et al., 2019). In this case, Mrs. Rawlins trusted the

student to act on their own and demonstrated her flexibility as she gave the student space (Vaughn, 2021) yet explained her intention to continue supporting the student in a less direct way.

   Excerpt 2. This next exchange happened just after Mrs. Rawlins had sent the students to write independently during one writing session. She had encouraged them to choose a spot and begin writing when a student approached her.

Student: Can we sit at other people's tables?

Mrs. Rawlins: If they're not there, yeah. If you can handle it. If you're distracted though, it'll be a no.

Student: I can handle it!

Mrs. Rawlins: Yeah, I know.

This excerpt illustrates how Mrs. Rawlins' discourse functioned to loosely manage her students' behavior. Mrs. Rawlins answered affirmatively and then explained her expectations. The excerpt was coded as "agency" because Mrs. Rawlins gave the student the freedom to choose where to work and then showed support for the student's expressed ability to self-manage. Importantly, there seemed to be a shared understanding of what "handling it" means in the context of the classroom. Mrs. Rawlins had previously taught behavioral expectations for work time in the classroom and at this point could refer to her expectations as "handling it" without providing a detailed explanation in the moment. It seems that establishing expectations for learning and behavior in the classroom allowed the teacher to confidently give the student space to act because specific parameters were previously set.

   Excerpt 3. The third excerpt occurred after two students read their school helper

profiles aloud to the rest of the class. The students had interviewed the same school secretary, wrote biographical profiles about her, and created posters using their writing and supplementary illustrations and photographs. After each student showed their poster and read their school helper profiles, Mrs. Rawlins asked several questions and multiple students responded aloud.

Mrs. Rawlins: Were those facts the very same facts?

Students: One of them!

Mrs. Rawlins: One of the facts was the same, but guess what? They were listening to the very same answer. Isn't that interesting that they picked different sentences to talk about what they think is important in a biography? Are their illustrations exactly the same?

Students: Yeah.

Mrs. Rawlins: Are the photographs the same?

Students: No.

Mrs. Rawlins: She chose to put both, is that okay?

Students: Yeah.

In this exchange, Mrs. Rawlins seemed to intentionally move students' thinking toward a particular understanding (Wells, 1993). Through questioning, she pointed out that (a) students who participated in the same interview (i.e., received the same information) wrote the profiles in different ways and (b) it was okay that they wrote their facts and designed their posters differently. This moment demonstrates the teacher's role in shaping classroom experiences and student opportunities (Dyson, 2020) because she drew attention to a particular situation and took the time to teach a concept that she felt was important when it could have easily been disregarded. In addition, Mrs. Rawlins' decision to highlight this situation shows her desire to communicate to students that

individuals can make different choices as writers in both the content of the text and the design of a "published" product. In a whole group setting, Mrs. Rawlins indicated that she trusted her students to make decisions as individual writers.

Discussion

Teacher discourse mediates and shapes students' relationships with new knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mercer, 2008). In the current study, I sought to understand how Mrs. Rawlins spoke to her students during writing and how her discourse may have influenced their opportunities to enact agency. Mrs. Rawlins was able to instruct several writing genres, manage the class in whole-group and independent writing configurations, and provide positive feedback for students. Her discourse showed that she consistently provided students with opportunities to write generatively and still addressed to some degree (as evidenced by coding outcomes) age-appropriate transcriptional skills. Particularly, through questioning and encouragement, she was able to take a flexible approach to teaching and capitalize on opportunities to offer choice and promote self-regulation. This study confirms assertions that teacher discourse can cultivate student agency (Johnston, 2004; Vaughn, 2021) by facilitating student thinking and problem-solving (Boyd, 2016) and providing space for students to make choices (Cazden, 2001). According to LPP, students learn through participation in their environment and via interactions with a more knowledgeable expert (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The characteristics of the expert and parameters of a classroom setting will therefore inform the sense of agency that students develop (Brown, 2020)—agency meaning the sense

students have of themselves as agents capable of acting confidently and intentionally, individually and amid others (Massey & Wall, 2020). Mrs. Rawlins' discourse patterns seemed to afford agency not so students could do *anything*, but so that they could engage in and have some influence over their experiences with "real" (Rowe, 2018) or generative writing (Coker et al., 2018).

The Affordance of Student Agency for
Generative Writing

There seemed to be a bidirectional relationship between the affordance of agency and generative writing. While Mrs. Rawlins offered choices and facilitated student action with transcriptional aspects of writing (e.g., spelling, copying off of the board, adding punctuation, etc.); in general, it appeared that generative writing opportunities (i.e., autonomous production of narrative or informational text) were particularly conducive to the enactment of student agency. Writing requires students to make nuanced decisions related to "language, purpose, audience, and medium" (Ryan et al., 2021, p. 417) and the school helper profiles, creative constellation stories, thank-you notes, and autobiographies that the students' wrote allowed them to participate—at least to some extent—in those decisions. Mrs. Rawlins assigned and modeled writing within several genres and then expected and trusted her students to produce text independently, rather than replicate her performance. Her emphasis on audience and purpose in general and her discourse during one-on-one check-ins with individual students positioned them as young writers still in need of direction (444 statements coded as "directing" and 445 utterances coded as "instructing" occurred during independent writing time) *and* as writers capable

of taking on purposeful writing tasks. In addition to discourse that afforded student choice and ownership in writing, Mrs. Rawlins allowed students to choose where to work in the room (e.g., the area rug, desk spots, back table, couch, etc.) and whom to work beside. She checked in with approximately 7 to 10 students during independent writing time each day, leaving most students to self-manage and write on their own. Under these conditions, students' individual agentic characteristics (i.e., intentionality, self-perception, choice-making, persistence, and interactiveness) were able to develop. Overall, the students' perceived that they had ownership and choice during writing in their classrooms, likely due to the autonomous nature of generative writing (Coker et al., 2018), and Mrs. Rawlins' discourse patterns.

Teachers' Role and Instructional Stance

As illustrated here, teacher discourse during writing conveys what is valued about writing and the sanctioned learning process in a classroom (Matsumura et al., 2002). Mrs. Rawlins brought together her personal beliefs, priorities, and emotions with her particular school structure and curricular requirements (Ryan et al., 2021) to decide how to verbally instruct and respond to students during writing. Just as discourse is highly differentiated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), there is no one specified path or outcome when pursuing agentic opportunities for students during writing. A teacher's instructional stance (Blackledge & Creese, 2009), goals for their students as writers, and even their comfort level with writing or giving students space to act agentically (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007) will affect how teachers afford opportunities to students during writing. Unfamiliarity or discomfort with generative writing processes and/or student agency may hinder teachers' willingness

or ability to support agentic learning (Vaughn, 2014). Nonetheless, it appears that teachers can afford students opportunities to enact agency during writing through simple discursive approaches. For example, Mrs. Rawlins had a considerable number of instances where her feedback was specific, student-centered, and focused on the process of learning (rather than the product). Her expressions of encouragement and praise in those instances were perceived to have engendered future action from students.

Instructional Flexibility and Risk-Taking

While agency in schools is a "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2004, p. 305) and far from a free-for-all, it also entails a willingness to not know the result and to seize unanticipated opportunities for rich learning and growth over time. Moments for capitalizing on student agency often happen in the midst of classroom instruction—either through students' questions, ideas, decisions, and choices or moments when things go contrary to plan (Vaughn et al., 2020). For Mrs. Rawlins, these opportunities often occurred by answering a question with a question, giving responsibility for decisions, and writing back to the student. Because flexibility is a primary way for a teacher to cultivate agency in literacy teaching and learning (Ryan et al., 2021) it allowed for idiosyncratic student decisions and in-the-moment pedagogical shifts (Vaughn, 2014) from Mrs. Rawlins. Her open questioning and responses to student assertions demonstrated her flexibility with students' approaches to writing tasks and choices about where to work.

However, along with being flexible and taking risks, teachers should think about what choices are *meaningful* and *reasonable* when allowing to students make decisions

(Barber & Klauda, 2020). Along with moments of open-ended discourse that afforded students agency, Mrs. Rawlins gave commands, provided direct instruction, and managed students during the writing sessions. It is important to think critically about the benefits of choice in each situation; affording unbounded choice too frequently could lead to stagnancy or chaos. Essentially, the idea is not to allow unrestrained action for students; it is for the teacher to provide thoughtfully constructed spaces, curriculum, and materials intended to enhance students' literacy identity development and learning through agentic participation in practice.

Conclusion

There is inherent uncertainty that comes with a discursive approach that promotes student choice and action. It is impossible to know exactly what will happen when teachers offer students the space to choose, create, speak, write, and act without definite bounds. Yet, in this case, affording agency to young students facilitated their engagement in generative writing processes and supported their individual identity development. This study illustrates the critical role of the teacher in agentic writing development and adds to our understanding of the possibilities for generative writing in the early grades.

Limitations

While extended observation and in-depth analysis of a teacher's discourse over 10 writing sessions proved valuable, this study was limited to a single case. The study of only one teacher and her first-grade class naturally limited the scope of the study's data and its applicability to other settings. Additionally, the teacher's background in writing

influenced her desire and ability to provide writing opportunities the way she did in her classroom. Although she was relatively new (second year) to first grade and had trepidation about teaching young writers, she is a confident writer herself. The discursive patterns and their consequences would likely differ for less experienced or writing-confident teachers. Last, a major theme that emerged during data analysis procedures was the way the teacher's discursive moves prompted students to action. It may have been useful to record what students actually did in response to Mrs. Rawlins' discourse. Noting their specific actions could have revealed informative patterns in students' choices in response to her discourse.

Future Research

Important future research would entail the observation of agentic writing development over time, across a school year or grade levels. Research conducted in schools and classrooms with different curricular constraints and teachers could deepen our understanding of teacher discourse patterns and student agency. Adding a measure of student writing achievement (volume and quality) could also enhance the findings related to generative writing practice in the early grades.

Recommendations for Practice

Purposeful, consistent teacher discourse may be necessary for creating an environment where students can truly enact agency and develop as individual writers. The goal-oriented style of a teacher's communication could provide conditions for young students to grow in confidence and self-efficacy. Encouragement focused on inviting

students to act and think appears to facilitate agency whereas more final, closed-ended feedback may halt student engagement in writing. Using consistent instructional, directing, and management discourse might serve to support students' academic needs while allowing them to self-manage during independent writing time—demonstrating trust in students' capacities to develop as self-regulated writers.

Teachers must be cognizant of the purposes and patterns of their discourse in order to make meaningful adjustments that would lead to students' enactment of agency. Teachers seeking to promote agentic generative writing should consider monitoring their discourse for patterns that promote or constrain agency for their students as well as provide students' opportunities to write generatively. This research provides a framework for discourse types that allow students to act agentically during writing and a promising perspective on participation in generative writing in an early-grade classroom.

CHAPTER IV

UNDERSTANDING FIRST GRADERS' AGENCY DURING WRITING

THROUGH STUDENT SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND ACTIONS[2]

Abstract

The purpose in this study was to better understand agency during writing in a primary-grade context and to gain insight into possibilities for young writers' development through a sociocultural perspective. Utilizing a mixed methods instrumental case study approach, I collected pre- and post-survey data and conducted 10 observations in one first-grade classroom to examine students' agentic perceptions as well as their manifested agentic dispositions during writing. Findings from the Student Agency Profile survey and coding/categorization processes suggest that these first graders began the year with positive self-perceptions as writers. The teacher played a significant role in the agentic and generative writing (i.e., autonomous production of text) opportunities of their students. The first graders were able to write generatively early on in the school year. Descriptive scenarios alongside students' self-perception scores demonstrate the students' enactment of agency and the highly nuanced, idiosyncratic nature of agency. I conclude with a discussion of the study's findings within three dimensions of agency: positional, motivational, and dispositional., I contend that the teacher's allowance for students to make decisions about the physical environment, writing materials, and interactions with others during writing facilitated the development of individual agentic dispositions and

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[2] Intended for the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* with Kathleen A. J. Mohr as a second author.

writer identities.

Introduction

Proficient writing is a complex set of fundamental skills crucial for effective linguistic communication and for students' success in school and their personal lives. However, many students do not receive the writing instruction they need nor acquire sufficient writing skills in school (Graham, 2019). Recent reports reflect the inadequacy of writing and writing instruction worldwide (De Smedt et al., 2016; Håland et al., 2019; Hsiang & Graham, 2016; Parr & Jesson, 2016; Rietdijk et al., 2018). While much is known about effective, foundational reading instruction, we have less knowledge of which early conditions and practices support students' development of writing proficiency (Gerde et al., 2015; Korth et al., 2017). Writing has been described as the neglected "R" in early childhood education (Mo et al., 2014), and, unlike reading and mathematics, writing is often relegated little time during the school day, and its instruction typically consists of decontextualized basic skills (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Dockrell et al., 2016).

Context for the Study

Writing is a critical yet understudied aspect of early-grades literacy learning (Coker, 2018; Gerde et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2012). However, a few large-scale, prominent research studies have provided insights into certain aspects of writing

instruction and practice in the early grades. Cutler and Graham (2008) surveyed a random sample of 178 primary-grade teachers across the US to understand writing practices in their classrooms. A majority (72%) of teachers reported that they take an eclectic approach, or a mixture of process writing and skills instruction, with the rest reporting using a process approach (20%), traditional approach (i.e., explicit and systematic instruction of basic writing skills) (6%), or a 6 + 1 trait method (2%). Connor et al. (2006) and Coker et al. (2018) reported similar findings based on rigorous observational studies in preschool and first-grade classrooms. However, a need persists to document and examine what writing occurs in classrooms and "how teachers might vary types of writing to student advantage" (Miller et al., 2012, p. 3). In addition, prior research has demonstrated the minimal time and opportunities that teachers give students for writing (Connor et al., 2013; Graham, 2019). Coker et al. (2016) observed 50 first-grade classrooms over a 2-year period and found that teachers taught writing for an average of 25 minutes a day, that the time was focused mainly on skills instruction, and that nearly all instruction was delivered in teacher-directed, whole-group settings with little modeling or student discussion (Coker et al., 2016). Connor et al. determined that students in first-grade classrooms in the U.S. wrote for approximately 4 minutes a day during the fall semester and 6 minutes daily in the spring. Collectively, these studies show the need for additional studies to account for contextual aspects of writing in singular contexts because broad samples and generalized data do little to highlight the intricacies and richness of young students' writing experiences that could help support other teachers' writing instruction. A better understanding of what promotes students'

early writing and positive writing dispositions may increase the time spent on writing in classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

For decades, scholars have grappled with the complexities of writing development and instruction by constructing and adapting various models, methods, and theories. In this study, I draw on sociocultural theories of literacy learning and agency. I ascribe to sociocultural views of writing that recognize the social and affective components of writing (Perry, 2012; Prior, 2006). Contemporary sociocultural theories of writing are founded on prior explanations of writing as a tool for communication and a mediational mean within a complex sociocultural system (Vygotsky, 1987), a mode of social action (Applebee, 2000; Bazerman & Prior, 2005), a creative process through which children produce a discourse (Bloome & Clark, 2012), and the expression of ideas and opinions through composition (Gerde et al., 2012). A sociocultural perspective attends to both the social experience of students and individual cognition (Cazden, 1996; Scrimsher & Tudge, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987). Thus, writing is viewed as a dynamic process embedded within broad social forces and ideological agendas of schools and classrooms (Beach et al., 2015). Students and teachers construct distinctive writing contexts in their classrooms and learn and adhere to expectations for participation (Bloome & Katz, 1997).

Generative Writing

These socially situated writing perspectives are reflected in a more recent conceptualization of writing that Coker et al. (2018) call "generative writing"—the

process through which students autonomously create content and produce connected text of at least a sentence. Coker et al. found that generative writing practice alone had a positive, significant relationship with first graders' writing achievement on the Broad Written Language (BWL) cluster from the WJ-III Spelling, Fluency, and Spelling subtests (Woodcock, 2001, 2007) and with Quality/Length and Contextual Spelling factor scores. when compared with skills-based writing instruction, correct/copy writing practice, and writing-about-text practice. The writing was deemed generative when students wrote a text with "some autonomy to determine the content of the text" (Coker et al., 2018, p. 238). Generative writing practice occurred in narrative, informational, and open-ended writing activities, offering "young writers a contextualized task (or activity system) that could strengthen writers' knowledge and skills" (p. 244). Even so, Coker et al. acknowledged the limitations of their study and indicated that the potential benefits of generative writing and nuanced conditions of writing instruction and activities are still widely unknown, justifying further exploration. Hereafter, I use the term "generative writing" to refer to writing as described above because I focused on the students' opportunities to generate writing, although within selected genres.

Divergent views of written language acquisition within the field further complicate the study of writing practice. Arguments for an additive-cumulative view in which writing development progresses linearly from transcription skills to eventual discursive processes are prevalent (Tolchinsky, 2015). A substantial number of empirical studies target lower-level transcription skills; however, there remains little consensus and an incomplete understanding about what effective writing instruction entails in the

primary grades, especially regarding generative writing processes (Coker et al., 2018). While pertinent, transcription studies in early writing have not adequately informed the complexity of writing pedagogy. Cutler and Graham's (2008) survey data revealed that students did not seem to spend adequate time writing generatively, and they argued that concerns with writing letters fluently and spelling words correctly should not shortchange time spent on generative writing in the early grades. I emphasize the social, contextualized nature of writing to add to the corpus of research that acknowledges early unconventional writing attempts as "real" and meaningful (Rowe, 2018). In this study, I attended to young students' opportunities to write independently, enact agency, and participate in generative writing while conventional writing skills are in development.

Agency

Typical elementary classrooms are fundamentally social and potentially conducive to agentic practices. Student agency has been regarded as an important aspect of effective literacy instruction (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Pressley et al., 2001; Vaughn, 2018) but has been defined and examined in numerous ways (Vaughn, Jang, et al., 2020). In educational contexts, agency has been associated with self-regulation and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), choice and deliberation (Dewey, 1922), self-determination, confidence (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b), a growth mindset (Ferguson et al., 2015), and motivation (Pajares, 2003; Vaughn, Jang, et al., 2020). From a Vygotskian perspective, Wertsch et al. (1993) described agency as socially mediated even when individuals act in isolation because action is fundamentally connected to sociocultural contexts. While a consensual definition of agency remains elusive, I use a definition of agency tied to these

sociocultural ideas and recently posed by Vaughn (2021). As shown in Figure 4.1,

Vaughn's (2021) framework outlines a holistic definition of agency and accounts for

students' individual characteristics (e.g., motivation, disposition, persistence) as well as

the constraints and opportunities they encounter in a given context (i.e., how students are

positioned). Guided by these ideas, I conceptualize agency in the classroom as a social

phenomenon where students can act and persist by making choices, generating ideas, and

solving problems, to the extent that organizational and instructional structures (i.e.,

teacher, school, curriculum, etc.) allow. I attend how students enact agency in socially

situated learning contexts alongside their teachers and peers. The goal of this study is that

these perspectives and related findings might expand our understanding of student agency

within early writing contexts because more agentic writing is likely to support writing

identity resulting in a positive cycle of writing development.

Figure 4.1

Broad Dimensions of Agency
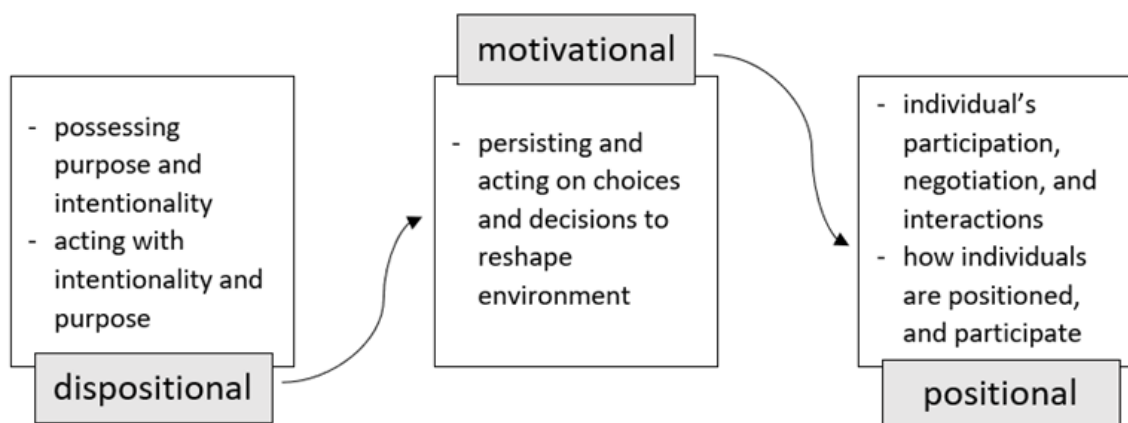
Note. Adapted from: Vaughn, M. (2021)*. Student agency in the classroom: Honoring student voice in the curriculum.* Teachers College Press.

Method

To gain insight into the associations among teacher decision-making and discourse, student actions during writing, and dimensions of agency during classroom writing activity, I conducted an instrumental case study in one first-grade classroom using a mixed-methods approach (Hamilton et al., 2012; Stake, 2005). In this report I summarize the analysis a subset of data centered on students' writing experiences and agency during 10 observed writing sessions guided by the following questions: (1) How do these first graders perceive themselves as agentic writers? (2) How do the students enact agency during writing in a first-grade classroom?

Research Design

Using an instrumental case study, I explored the complexity of everyday teaching and learning in the classroom (Hamilton et al., 2012; Stake, 2005) with one first-grade teacher and her class of 23 students. The case afforded me an in-depth exploration and scrutiny of writing and an abstract social phenomenon: writing agency. To examine the contextualized nature of writing and agency in a classroom setting, I combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to offset the inherent weaknesses of each (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). I integrated quantitative data collection and analysis techniques to learn about the students' agentic self-perceptions via a standardized measure, the Student Agency Profile survey (Vaughn, Premo, SotirovskaI, Erickson, 2020) to help answer Question 1. However, I prioritized qualitative methods to explore social and contextual aspects of students' actions during writing, to consider dimensions

of the agency of several focal students' experiences, and to analyze those students'

written artifacts holistically to help answer Question 2.

Context and Participants

I conducted the study in an elementary laboratory school in the Mountain West

area of the U.S. in the fall of 2022. All the participants' names used here are pseudonyms.

I had familiarity with the school and classroom having spent the 2021-2022 academic

year building rapport with the teacher, Mrs. Rawlins, through collaborative early literacy

research projects conducted with her class. Thus, the participants in this study were

selected both by convenience (I had access to the school, teacher, and class) and with a

purpose (young student writers at the beginning of their elementary school experience;

Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011).

Data Collection Procedures

I began by administering the Student Agency Profile (StAP) survey (Vaughn,

Premo, Erickson, & McManus, 2020) for the first-grade students in groups of two or

three. The StAP instrument (Vaughn, Jang, et al., 2020) was developed and validated

with 1,794 elementary students in first through fifth grades. The survey emphasizes

affective aspects of literacy learning to provide the field with a broader lens of

educational success. The StAP has 29 Likert-type scale questions assigned to five agentic

categories: intentionality, self-perception, choice-making, persistence, and

interactiveness. Students are asked to respond to each item on a scale of 1 to 5 from

Strongly Disagree to *Strongly Agree.*

Following the survey completion, I conducted eight classroom observations (two

per week) and two follow-up observations during the month and a half following. During each 45- to 60-minute observation, I marked a researcher-developed observation protocol checklist, wrote descriptive field notes, took pictures of students' written artifacts, and video recorded select moments of student learning and interactions. Every five to seven minutes I scanned the classroom and marked the observation protocol form (see Appendix E) with numerical data and brief descriptions of students' participation (or lack of) to track students' actions around materials, locations in the classroom space, interactions with others, and written products. My stance as a classroom researcher was to become a "regular, nonjudgmental, attentive classroom participant" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 52) by mostly staying on the sidelines and focusing on my observer role. I did not actively engage with students or participate in a teacher role but instead played a mostly reactive role (speak when spoken to; Corsaro, 2003) over the course of the study. The dynamic nature of the classroom and complexity of agency made it necessary for me to adjust and learn as I observed and collected data. To discipline my attention during classroom observations and to afford thick description, I selected five representative focal students to follow more closely because "discrete bits of data about individuals" (Dyson & Genishi, 2004, p. 84) provided a closer examination of agency and writing in the study's context. I then administered the StAP survey as a post-measure of all students following all classroom observations.

Data Analysis

"Experience is messy" (Wolf, 1992, p. 129), and finding coherence among data sources to capture writing experiences and agency holistically in this first-grade

classroom was complex and challenging. I began by calculating students' StAP scores

which influenced my choices of the five focal students and my subsequent classroom

observations. I then inductively analyzed classroom observational data (e.g., transcripts

of audio recordings, checklist records, pictures, videos, field notes, and written artifacts)

(Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2012; Yin, 2009). I annotated my field notes,

wrote one-page reflective memos, and transcribed the teacher's discourse (whose analysis

is not reported here) after each of the classroom observations (Gee, 2004; Mercer, 2004).

At the end of each week, I organized the pictures and videos via technology alongside my

field notes and observation checklist data. I open-coded the visual/audiovisual data as

well as my field notes and observation checklist data by labeling relevant and recurrent

instances of student action and talk (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2012; Yin,

2009). Through these processes, I stayed close to the data to grasp the organic

"wholeness" of the context and attend to specific moments that occurred among students.

Once all classroom observations were complete, I used gerund data descriptors

(participles that denote actions and end in "ing") to summarize the previously labeled

data points from my observational notes and audiovisual data (Saldaña, 2021). As shown

in Table 4.1, I collapsed the data descriptors into more focused codes and identified

several themes to capture all the codes and represent the data (Dyson & Genishi, 2005;

Hamilton et al., 2012; Yin, 2009). A predominant theme, Developmental Considerations,

apply to codes that seemed to represent important aspects of the first-grade context and

characteristics of young writers. Writing Purpose, another theme, follows because its

elements relate to the teacher's central role in providing students' opportunities to write,

Table 4.1

Data Descriptors, Codes, and Themes

Data Descriptors	Codes	Themes	Rationale
• Referring to the word wall for spelling help • Waiting for the teacher's help • Asking questions about the writing tasks • Raising hands to get help for spelling • Using invented spelling • Using finger spacing	Writing supports Transcription skills Invented spelling	Developmental considerations	There were regular instances (behavioral and scholastic) associated with the young ages of the students and the early first-grade context of the study.
• Writing without prompting from the teacher • Getting on task quickly • Struggling to work independently • Being off-task and distracting others	Behavior and management during writing		
• Summarizing book chapters • Writing creative constellation stories • Drafting school helper profiles • Recording observations in science journals • Writing short autobiographies • Composing thank-you notes for school helpers • Forming interview questions Having a common goal for writing projects	Several writing genres/formats Teacher-directed purpose and topics Audience	Writing purpose	Across the writing sessions, the students wrote a variety of genres and text types for clear purposes and relevant audiences.
• Differing from the teacher's suggestions • Saying "no" to a teacher's request	Opposition to direction/suggestions	Ownership of writing	The students shared writing, articulated their writing decisions, and received feedback at the author's chair.
• Publishing final drafts • Sharing final products with the class • Articulating writing processes • Giving feedback about each other's writing • Repeating compliments and suggestions	Sharing writing Peer feedback		
• Sitting at the rug during teacher-led minilesson • Moving around the room • Working at desks, the rug, couch, etc. • Choosing paper and writing tools • Using staples to create booklets for writing • Adding pages to keep writing	Classroom space and materials	Variations in writing processes and products	Each day, students wrote in different spaces around the room, worked in partners, groups, or alone, and had access to variety of writing tools. They made decisions about the processes and content of their writing.
• Copying off the board • Writing summaries in their own words • Choosing writing topics during creative writing • Designing school helper posters • Producing different final products • Engaging in writing at different rates	Choices during the writing process Bounded choice		
• Working independently within group setting • Working with a partner or small group • Talking with the teacher or peers • Arguing about sitting on the couch/chair	Social/interactive aspects of writing		

which relates to developmental considerations—young students in an early grade classroom. The last two themes (i.e., Ownership and Variations of Writing) are discussed below in no particular order, but center on the students and their actions during writing.

To ensure credibility of the study and findings, I used data triangulation which allowed me to present related, coherent findings based on multiple data sources (StAP scores, audiovisual recordings, and observational notes; Stahl & King, 2020). Additionally, using theoretical triangulation including both sociocultural theory and an agentic lens allowed me to document and interpret findings through distinct yet reciprocal perspectives. Each data source and theoretical stance influenced the designation of the final codes and themes presented below. The presentation of the themes through thick description offers enough detail for others to expand their understanding of agency and writing and to potentially apply the suggestions in this report to a new context (Stahl & King, 2020). I also involved the teacher in member checking by having her review and respond to the written research report. Trustworthiness in the study was established by my consistent reflective writing and coding processes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2012; Yin, 2009) and through my two follow-up sessions in the months after the eight initial classroom observations, which confirmed my analyses and interpretations.

Key Findings

My findings and interpretations are highlighted in the following sections quantitatively via students' agentic self-perception scores, and qualitatively via thick description of the context and case overall and particular examples of student agency that

feature the five focal students' experiences during writing. The focal students' actions

and profiles are representative of the students' collective experiences.

Students' Agentic Self-Perceptions

The StAP is a validated, accessible instrument that allowed me to understand the

components of student agency systematically from the perceptions of the student

participants. I administered the StAP survey prior to any other data collection to get to

know the students. The pre- and post-administration of the StAP survey occurred only

seven weeks apart but allowed me to analyze results at two junctures and changes in

student responses over the span of the study. Tables 4.2 shows the overall class averages

and ranges for each category of agency (for 20 students; three were not available for the

pretest and thus, were not included) and the individual results for each focal student.

Table 4.2

Student Agency Profile Results for Consenting Students by Category ($N = 20$)

	Class averages (out of 5)		Ranges (1-5)	
Agency Category	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Intentionality	4.1	4.8	3-5	3.8-5
Self-Perception (Reading)	2.8	3.3	1-4	1-5
Self-Perception (Writing)	4.0	3.9	2.6-5	2.7-5
Choice-Making	3.8	3.7	1.2-5	2.3-5
Persistence	4.3	4.2	2.8-5	2-5
Interactiveness	3.8	4.2	2.5-5	1.3-5

The pre-survey averages for the whole class reflected an overall high student

perception of agentic opportunities at the start of first grade. Students' perceptions of

their persistence (e.g., I don't give up when writing is hard; I figure out the answers to problems in class by myself) were especially high, as were their views about their intentionality (e.g., It is okay to have my own ideas when I write; Having different ideas from my teacher is okay). Other than the Self-Perception in Reading section, the pre-survey results show that the students had a strong sense of agency within the first several weeks of the school year. These responses could be the result of the natural optimism of young learners, a naïve understanding of the items on the agency instrument, or they may stem from the classroom environment established by the Mrs. Rawlins in the first few weeks of the school year. Their scores could also reflect their impressions of themselves as students in kindergarten the year before. However, interestingly, after seven weeks of participation in school and gaining experience in reading and writing, the class scores increased or remained stable despite being immediately invited to produce generative writing for an audience.

Another compelling finding was that the students' self-perception scores on writing items were markedly higher than their self-perception scores on the reading items—on both the pre- and post-surveys. Several explanations are possible. Students had been pulled out for initial reading testing during the two weeks before the beginning of the study and may have either been informed of their reading levels or viewed their reading performances negatively. Also, it is likely that these students had more experience and familiarity with reading than writing and had developed more distinct and, apparently, less optimistic opinions of their reading competencies. The class average for the three Self-Perception in Reading items were similar: "I am a good reader." (Mean

score of 3.3), "Reading is easy for me." (2.8), and "I read better than other students in this class." (2.8). While beyond the scope of this study, it is intriguing to consider the implications of students' poor perceptions of reading versus writing so early in their school experience and how such perceptions might change over time.

The five focal students represent relatively low, medium, and high (2.9-4.6) pre-survey scores and (2.8-4.6) post-survey scores on the StAP (as shown in Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

Student Agency Profile Results by Category for Each of the Five Focal Students

| | Focal student averages (out of 5) | | | | | | | | | |
| | Macy | | Randy | | Greg | | Chloe | | Simon | |
Agency category	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Intentionality	3.6	4.2	4.2	4.4	5	5	4.2	4.6	4.6	4.8
Self-Perception (Reading)	3.3	3.7	4	5	4	4	4.3	3.7	1.3	1.7
Self-Perception (Writing)	3.6	4.7	3.6	4.7	4.3	4	4.6	3.3	3	2.7
Choice-Making	2.2	4	4.2	3.7	4.2	3	5	3.7	1.2	2
Persistence	4.2	5	4.8	4.7	4.6	3.3	4.5	4.8	4.5	4.2
Interactiveness	3.3	5	4	4.8	4.3	4.3	4.6	4.7	3.2	1.3
Overall score	3.4	4.4	4.1	4.6	4.4	3.9	4.6	4.1	2.9	2.8

In 7 weeks, these students' self-reported agentic perceptions about literacy changed substantially. Macy increased by a full point overall and reported a higher agentic disposition in all categories. Randy's overall mean increased from 4.1 to 4.6 and only decreased in Choice-Making and slightly in Persistence. Greg's scores also decreased in Choice-Making and Persistence. While taking the post-survey, when I read the statement "I want to choose what I am going to learn" he said, "the teacher does that."

Chloe's score in both Self-Perception sections and Choice-Making dropped considerably compared to the other domains. To account for both the substantial changes in student scores (both increases and decreases), it is possible that students had a better grasp of the meaning of the survey items during the post-administration and a greater ability to sit, listen, and attend to each of the survey items read aloud a few months into the school year than during the first administration. This could have resulted in more perceptive, mindful scores on the part of the students. It is also conceivable that 6-year-olds' confidence and perceptions of themselves are flexible and ebb and flow based on various factors. They may have also been able to draw on more concrete knowledge of reading and writing experiences in their classroom and presumably able to better represent their subsequent dispositions.

Because of my interest in agency while writing in this study, I paid close attention to the items related to writing on the StAP survey. Tables 4.4 and 4.5 show the results of the whole class and the focal students on the writing-related items.

Table 4.4

Results for the Whole Class of all Items Related to Writing on the Student Agency Profile

	Class averages (out of 5)		Ranges (1-5)	
Writing-focused items	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
It is okay to have my own ideas when I write.	4.4	4.6	3-5	3-5
I am a good writer.	4.4	4.4	3-5	2-5
Writing is easy for me.	4.2	4.3	2-5	3-5
I write better stories than other students in this class.	3	4.1	1-5	1-5
I want to choose what I write in class.	3.9	4.1	1-5	1-5
During writing I want to decide what I write about.	4.1	3.9	1-5	1-5
I don't give up when writing is hard.	4.4	4.5	1-5	1-5
I solve problems when I write by working at it.	4.4	4.4	3-5	3-5

Table 4.5

Results for the Focal Students of all Items Related to Writing on the Student Agency Profile

| | Focal student averages (out of 5) | | | | | | | | | |
| | Macy | | Randy | | Greg | | Chloe | | Simon | |
Agency category	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
It is okay to have my own ideas when I write.	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	4	5	5
I am a good writer.	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	2	2
Writing is easy for me.	4	5	3	4	5	4	5	4	5	4
I write better stories than other students in this class.	3	4	4	5	3	3	4	3	1	2
I want to choose what I write in class.	1	4	4	4	5	3	5	5	1	3
During writing I want to decide what I write about.	2	5	4	5	3	4	5	1	2	3
I don't give up when writing is hard.	5	5	5	5	5	3	4	5	5	5
I solve problems when I write by working at it.	3	5	5	5	5	3	4	5	4	4
Overall score	3.3	4.6	4.1	4.6	4.5	4.5	4.5	4	3.1	3.5

The scores from pre- to post-survey on the writing items changed slightly, but one major gain in these StAP scores merits some consideration. Mean scores for "I write better stories than other students in this class" increased from 3.0 to 4.1. The 10 writing sessions throughout the study included time for students to read their writing to each other. It may be that the students decided that their writing was better in comparison to their peers after having the chance to hear each other's compositions for several weeks. Or perhaps they sensed some personal accomplishment in their writing to assume that their writing was getting better but were unable to apply that developmental gain to

others. Still, this positive self-assessment characterizes these students' writing estimation as positive.

With the exception of a few students, these first graders started the year and essentially their elementary school careers perceiving themselves as capable writers. Most students expressed high or moderately high perceptions that they could write successfully (4.4/4.4) that they had a desire to make choices about their writing (3.9/4.1) and believed they could persist when faced with challenges in writing (4.4/4.5). Overall, the positive view of themselves as writers was reflected in the students' behaviors during writing time as most students were observed to be actively engaged in writing during each session.

Isolating the writing items by individual students (Table 4.5) provided an important picture of the results and indicated that agency for writing merits closer scrutiny. Noting the shifts on particular items related to writing among focal students' agentic perceptions *and* their actions during writing confirmed that efficacy is not a general construct but consists of important, subtle nuances. For instance, Macy's writing scores increased markedly for "I want to choose what I write in class" and "During writing I want to decide what I write about" (gain 1.3 overall). Apparently, she grew in her confidence and desire to make writing choices during the weeks of observation. However, Macy seemed to approach writing tasks as checklist items and to write just enough to get done. When she finished her writing each day, she put her paper directly into the turn-in bin and asked Mrs. Rawlins what to do next. Several times, she walked around and asked others if they needed help when she had finished. Perhaps she

appreciated the freedom she had to complete writing tasks at her pace and prerogative—on the two items related to "Choice," her response increased by three points (1 to 4 and 2 to 5).

Randy's scores increased slightly or remained stable across all categories. As a writer, Randy tended to work alone, often switching between using a clipboard at the rug and staying at his table spot. He exemplified a competent, confident writer who works independently and efficiently. One day, immediately after hearing Mrs. Rawlin's instructions for a creative writing task, he said quietly, "I know what I want to do." On the other hand, Greg frequently spoke to other students as he worked and shared his ideas and sentences as he wrote. He also raised his hand when he had questions about the writing task or his spelling. He wrote slowly but followed Mrs. Rawlin's instructions closely and focused on finger spaces and neat handwriting. It is interesting that his scores decreased from 5 to 3 on the statements about persistence during writing (i.e., solving problems and not giving up when writing is hard). Maybe his perceptions of his persistence shifted from having more experience with writing.

Chloe's scores remained stable except for "During writing, I want to decide what I write about" which decreased from 5 to 1. She put a "5" on a related item: "I want to choose what I write in class." Her lower answer could be an anomaly or misinterpretation of the scale. Behaviorally, Chloe was often distracted by other students during Mrs. Rawlin's writing instruction at the rug but acted excited once the independent working portion of the session began.

Interestingly, Simon's scores on the writing items are higher than his overall

agency score, indicating that writing disposition may function differently than agency in general., His desire to make choices during writing increased especially, and he increased from 1 to 2 in his perception of his writing performance compared to other students in the class. Simon worked exclusively at his assigned table spot and seemed to lack confidence in himself as a writer. His demeanor was not necessarily reluctant, but he did appear unsure and did not engage with any writing task without considerable prompting and support from the teacher. During my eighth observation, he said "I need help" several times out loud without addressing anyone in particular. Mrs. Rawlins soon passed close by him and invited him to start writing. He said, "I don't know how."

Of the five focal students, Randy and Simon seemed to embody their reported (and disparate) self-perceptions most precisely. Randy grew in his confidence and engagement in writing while Simon expressed that he did not know how to write during the final observation. Interestingly, they represent both students who seemed to thrive and some who seemed uncomfortable within the writing context. Nonetheless, it is clear that for these first graders, saying and doing are not always consistently aligned and that asking students their perception of agency is not the same as observing their enactment of it. Observations of students' actions provided insights the survey alone did not, corroborating previous recommendations that observational work should accompany investigations of student agency with the StAP survey (Vaughn, Premo, Sotirovska, Erickson, 2020).

Classroom Observations

Mrs. Rawlins' writing instruction included teacher-directed instruction,

independent writing time for students, and time for the students to share their writing to each other. During independent work time, students drafted, revised, and published their own work (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). Independent writing time has been purported to afford student agency by centering students (Boyd et al., 2019) and facilitating flexibility and student choice (Rylak et al., 2022). Independent writing time can provide students with opportunities to gain independence and self-efficacy (Pajares & Valiante, 2006; Snyders, 2014).

Each day, I sat myself towards the back of the classroom and watched as the first graders gathered at a large area rug in the center of the classroom. The teacher spent the first 15-20 minutes preparing the students with descriptions of a writing purpose, modeled writing, reading texts aloud, and/or shared writing. Students often posed ideas and helped write collaborative sentences on the whiteboard. After rug time, Mrs. Rawlins directed students to gather materials and begin writing. While students wrote, I moved around the room so I could pay attention to what students were saying, doing, and writing. Students were free to write at their regular tables or at a horseshoe table at the back of the room. They could also use clipboards to write in a red armchair, on a small couch, or on the area rug. They were given at least 30 minutes to write independently during every writing session. Mrs. Rawlins checked with students one-on-one about their writing and managed any behavioral concerns that arose. The students' revision and editing processes were encouraged by the teacher but not particularly systematic. When the goal was to publish a piece of writing (e.g., school helper profiles and thank-you notes), she gave students time to revise and edit their work based on their knowledge of

punctuation and spelling patterns, feedback from Mrs. Rawlins during individual conferences, and comments from peers after students shared their writing.

Being a part of the life of the classroom during these sessions and regularly reflecting on my observations allowed me to experience and think within the data rather than simply providing descriptions (Leander & Boldt, 2013). In the following sections, I present the four identified themes, derived from coding and categorization processes, through select vignettes and descriptions that demonstrate how the students seemingly enacted agency during writing.

Theme One: Developmental Considerations

While my focus was on generative writing (i.e., autonomous production of connected text), it felt impossible to entirely separate transcriptional skills and student behavior from student's writing experiences given the first-grade setting and the age of the students (6-7 years old). Therefore, before delving into the other three themes, I situate and explicate the research context by describing data that seem characteristic of a first-grade classroom setting and young writers.

Transcriptional skills. One day, I heard a student call out, "We gotta add a period too!" as Mrs. Rawlins had modeled writing a sentence being dictated by a handful of students at the beginning of the writing session. Attention to punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, and handwriting was a part of the observed writing sessions. During the whole-group minilessons, Mrs. Rawlins quickly reminded the students to use finger spaces and their best handwriting. Twice, she modeled the formation of certain letters that students had worked on in their handwriting lessons that week. She also quickly

reviewed the use of punctuation (e.g., periods, question marks, and exclamation points) and modeled the use of capital letters at the beginning of sentences. Mrs. Rawlins also pointed out phonics elements (e.g., sh, th, ch) the students had been learning in reading, and repeatedly asked the students to use them in their spelling. However, she also encouraged students to try their best with spelling and accepted all of their efforts to spell in their writing. A few children raised their hands to ask for help with spelling during the approximately 30 minutes of independent writing. Several students used the word wall (featuring previously taught sight words), but many wrote without using outside resources for spelling. As Mrs. Rawlins conferred with students individually, she frequently encouraged using the best handwriting and finger spacing. These aspects of writing (i.e., handwriting, spelling, mechanics, etc.) are foundational., It is important to acknowledge the presence of basic skills instruction amid meaningful opportunities to write because transcription challenges likely influenced their competence and motivation to write generatively and their agentic self-perceptions. Mrs. Rawlins managed to weave together transcriptional skills and basic mechanics of writing in support of students' writing generatively and prioritized production over form. She consistently emphasized that invented spelling was expected and acceptable. She expected that the students' current spelling proficiency would reflect their knowledge as novice readers. Mrs. Rawlins' incidental instruction of transcriptional skills as well as her acceptance of the students' developmental approximations during writing gave students the freedom to engage in generative writing each day and not be overly concerned by the technicalities of composition. Clearly, students were able to write for compelling purposes while also

attending to the skills and mechanics of writing. One need not be sacrificed for the other.

Importantly, while text length or productivity for the writing tasks varied, all 23 students produced writing during all eight writing sessions. The students had access to the writing center which was filled with writing paper and other supplies and Mrs. Rawlins made it clear that they were welcome to use multiple pages for their writing pieces. This flexibility seemed to encourage students to write beyond a single page. In addition, students' willingness to write regardless of "correctness" may reflect their obedience and conformity in a classroom setting but could also demonstrate students' enactment of agency within the dimensions of the framework (Vaughn, 2021). Figure 4.2 demonstrates the variations across several students' transcriptional skills.

Figure 4.2

Examples of Variations in Students' Transcriptional Skills
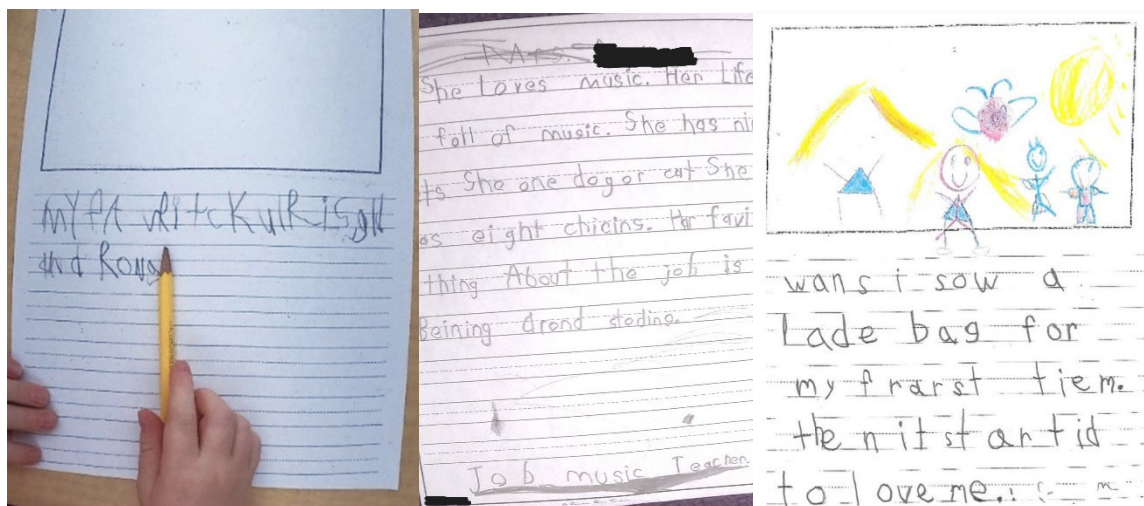
Note. Selected written artifacts from Simon, Randy, and Macy.

Student behavior. Allowing students to have space to move and choose during writing sessions meant accepting some student-directed activity and misbehavior. Mrs.

Rawlins set the expectation for students to write during writing time, but there was minimal direct management of student behavior. Circulating the room, she addressed any significant behavioral issues and four times over the span of eight sessions she used a verbal attention signal to gain the students' attention to restate directions, announce the remaining time for the session, or ask the students to quiet down and focus on their writing. The flexible structure of the independent writing time seemed to give students space to weave in and out of conversations and focused writing. I noticed that some students wrote consistently while others talked and moved around the room. The active environment could be considered chaotic and aimless by some, but from the sociocultural perspective that frames this study, these chances to communicate and write amid others who are a part of the environment are theoretically vital for individual development (Scrimsher & Tudge, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987) and the enactment of agency. Within this social setting, when students had room (even within structured time/space) to self-direct their learning, most seemed to act intentionally, persist, and participate as they desired rather than simply conform or comply—even as first graders. Although first-grade writing instruction is often focused on transcription skills and includes little student discussion, the students' actions in this case suggest that first graders may benefit from opportunities to write independently among their peers.

Theme Two: Writing Purpose: "What are we Going to do with our Writing?"

Before the classroom observations began, Mrs. Rawlins explained that the required morning literacy block would not include designated time for writing. Instead,

she allotted part of the afternoon several times a week for writing, often overlapping with other subjects and experiences. Ostensibly, these circumstances facilitated purposeful, integrated writing tasks (in contrast to more contrived ones). During whole-group minilessons, Mrs. Rawlins explained how the writing tasks were connected to other areas of the curriculum and talked about the audience or "readers" who might benefit from the students' written pieces. Many genres and purposes were addressed over just eight writing sessions. Over the course of the study, the students summarized chapters from a novel she read aloud, reflected through writing on a science excursion, and wrote creative stories about constellations. For a single project that took a couple of weeks, they wrote school helper profiles based on a biographical writing lesson from *Information in Action* curriculum (Duke, 2014). The students also composed thank-you notes for the school helpers and wrote short autobiographies to accompany the profiles as "about the author" sections on their final school helper posters. The various genres the students wrote within a relatively short time reflected the ability and willingness of Mrs. Rawlins to embed writing across the curriculum. She amplified and adapted lessons from the *Information in Action* writing curriculum and capitalized on opportunities to let the students' experiences in science and reading drive their purposes and tasks in writing.

Once, Mrs. Rawlins sat in a red armchair at the front of the room facing her students gathered at the rug. She had just finished explaining the writing task—drafting school helper profiles—when she gave the students a chance to ask questions. One student asked, "What are we going to do with our writing?" Mrs. Rawlins explained how the school helper profiles were meant to help visitors to the school learn about all the

people who contribute to it. She explained that the final drafts would be posted on the wall outside of their classroom. A different student said, "I just realized something. The person that we wrote about, the picture and what we wrote about them we could put in their rooms." All of the students got excited and decided they would ask the school helpers if they could eventually post the profiles in their offices or classrooms throughout the school. After the posters hung in the main hallway entrance of the school for a couple of weeks, they were hung in the school helpers' designated workplaces.

Interactions like this were not uncommon, but in terms of early writing and student agency, I think they are worth further examination. These young writers expected to see a reason for what they were doing beyond "because the teacher said so." Early in the school year, these first-grade students understood that there were purposes driving their writing tasks and one student on that day wanted to understand what that purpose was. It stood out to me that another student felt confident enough to share an idea about what to do with the writing and that the idea was acknowledged and acted on even though it altered the writing project's intent and audience. Possible takeaways include: (a) young writers can understand and benefit from the explicit purposes behind writing tasks, (b) active, open responses to students' ideas can build their agentic disposition and encourage their willingness to share ideas for writing outcomes in the future, and (c) focusing on audience and purpose might be a pathway to generative writing opportunities for young students (as opposed to purely transcriptional skills practice or completion tasks).

Theme Three: Ownership of Writing:
"I Like that you did it Your Way"

Evidence of ownership emerged repeatedly during my observations and data analyses. The students appeared to truly *own* their writing processes and products. It was most evident during the sharing segment of the writing sessions. Per Mrs. Rawlin's expectations, each day several students read their writing to the class and chose several students to give feedback. As expressed in an interview, Mrs. Rawlins conducted the sharing time because she wanted the students to be an audience for each other, to celebrate their writing, and to see writing as an ongoing process. She frequently encouraged the students to make changes or additions to their writing after having the chance to share at the chair. The student at the chair was positioned as a joint teacher and leader with opportunities to speak and to guide questions and comments from other students. Students listening at the rug were able to share what they thought about a peer's writing and ask questions about their experiences during writing.

In one session, Randy sat in front of the class and read his writing about a school helper while the other students listened at the rug. As shown in Figure 4.3, Mrs. Rawlins sat close by, holding another student's poster for comparison and giving cues and support as Randy read his project aloud. Subsequently, students asked open-ended questions about his writing such as "how did you find out about her pets?" and "why did you put your writing on the side"? Randy explained that another student in his group had asked a question about pets (so he did) and that he decided to place his writing on the final poster so that people would see the facts about the school helper first. Mrs. Rawlins then encouraged the students to share compliments, and a student said, "I really like how you

drew her and her board with the notes on it. And I like how you said the other question, even though it wasn't yours. It's really cool that you did that. I like that you did it your way."

Figure 4.3

The Author's Chair and Randy's School Helper Profile Compared to Another Student's Profile About the Same Helper
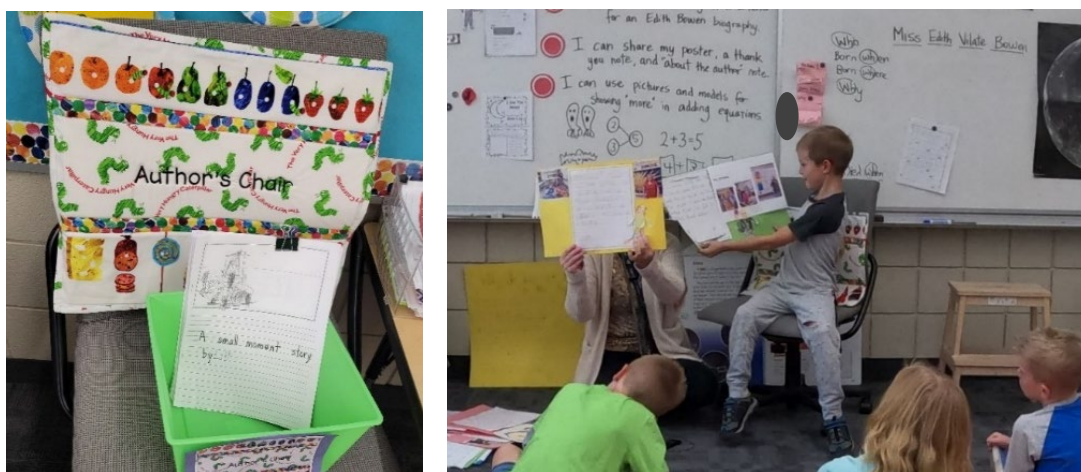
The ownership of writing I witnessed demonstrated that students typically knew what they wrote on their papers and why. Their ownership means that, at times, their writing processes were self-motivated and self-directed, within the bounds of the classroom culture and task. On numerous occasions students engaged in writing without excessive teacher support or highly prescribed tasks, which allowed them to consciously plan and choose what and how they wrote. Several times, I noticed that students asserted their wills contrary to the teacher's suggestions. I overheard a student tell Mrs. Rawlins a sentence she wanted to write. Mrs. Rawlins suggested using "students" instead of "us." The student repeated the sentence and wrote it with "us" as she originally intended.

Another student said "no" when a student teacher asked her if she would like to read a paragraph she wrote out loud. This response could evidence reluctance or defiance, but the student made a decision about how she wanted to participate with her writing. At another time, a student persisted in crafting a fantasy story when asked to write a chapter summary. Mrs. Rawlins was kneeling by the student who was working at his table. He said, "I need to make an escape pod." She responded, "Escape pod? Is that in the book?" Without looking up from his paper, he stated, "He's building one and I think it's actually true." Enacting agency among these young students included instances when students pushed the boundaries of the genre and text structure expectations and asserted their opinions or choices in ways that were discordant with the given tasks and majority.

Theme Four: Variations in Writing Process and Product: "I'm Starting with the Picture"

During one of the earliest writing sessions of the school year, students drafted summaries for a chapter of the book *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 2007). With the students gathered at the rug, Mrs. Rawlins asked the students to write about the chapter she had read aloud earlier that day. She asked for ideas and the students eagerly made suggestions: "He lived in a dungeon." "Rhinoceroses!" "Mean aunts!" "James' parents died." Using their ideas, Mrs. Rawlins dictated three sentences while a couple of students wrote them on the whiteboard. After reading the sentences aloud as a class, Mrs. Rawlins gave each student a sheet of paper with a blank space at the top for pictures and manuscript lines on the lower two-thirds of the page. They retrieved their pencil bags and found places around the room to write. Eight students directly copied the sentences from

the whiteboard (choosing a less generative form of writing), while 12 students wrote

more personalized summaries. As they wrote, several students raised their hands when

they did not know how to spell a word, while others simply wrote out their ideas. Sitting

at her desk, Macy said, "I'm starting with the picture" and she drew with her crayons.

Greg held a clipboard and carefully copied the summary sentences from the whiteboard.

Chloe sat quietly with her paper in front of her and an inquisitive look on her face for a

full five minutes before she began to write. In contrast, Randy talked with two other peers

at his table about what to include in his summary before he began to write. Figure 4.4

shows three of the focal students' writing from that day.

Figure 4.4

Macy's, Greg's, and Chloe's Chapter Summaries
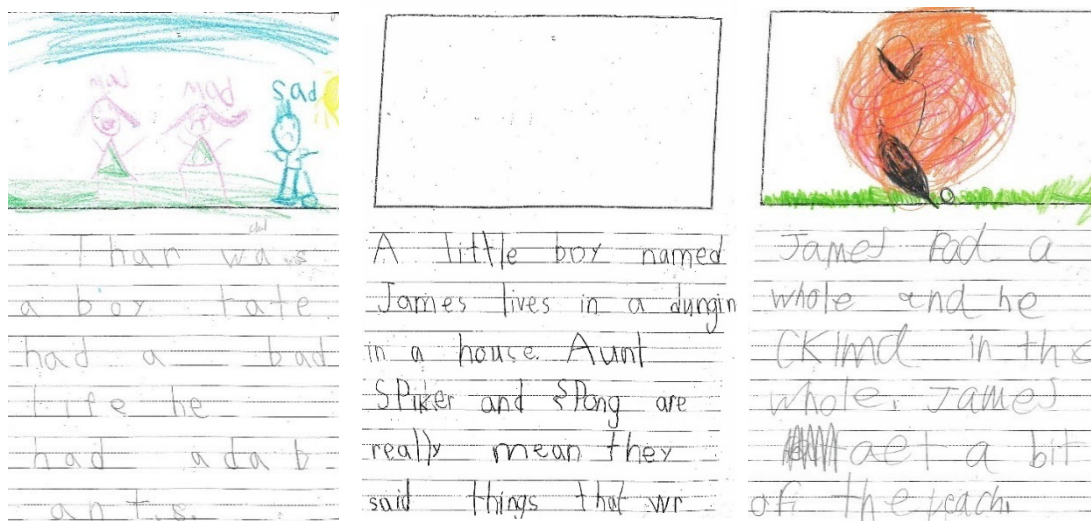
Macy, Chloe, and Greg appeared to intuitively undertake the writing task in ways

that suited them. Each student produced a written summary within the first month of the

school year and given a specific, teacher-directed writing topic and purpose. However,

these three focal students and nine other students veered away from the prepared sentences on the board and wrote the summary in their own words, choosing to be generative.

Classroom Space and Materials

Along with variations in written content and process, students differed in where they wrote and how they interacted with others as they wrote. Other than a few constraints given by Mrs. Rawlins (e.g., using walking feet, indoor voices, no red or blue revision and editing pens during initial drafts) students could move around the space and use classroom materials independently. For one 45-minute writing session, all but five students in the class moved from their original spots to other places. Another time, when modeling how to write facts about various school helpers, Mrs. Rawlins showed an example and reminded the students to refer to notes they took during the previous week when they interviewed various teachers and workers at the school. She dismissed the class to begin writing profiles. I watched as students moved about the room, gathered their supplies, and found places to work. A few students argued over the red armchair, some traded dull pencils for sharp ones from the class pencil cup, and a few of them asked Mrs. Rawlins what they should work on because they had been absent from the interviews. As shown below in Figure 4.5, students picked up their green writing folders and chose paper from the small writing center in the corner of the room. After two to three lively, loud minutes, the students settled into spots around the room and quieted down, demonstrating intentionality and self-regulation.

Figure 4.5

Students Writing Around the Room and Gathering Supplies for the Writing Session

Greg, Simon, and Macy chose to work at their desk spots. As shown in Figure 4.6, Randy sat on the rug with a clipboard and Chloe walked straight to the horseshoe table in the back of the room. Randy went from the rug to his desk spot and Simon went from working alone to talking with another student about his school helper's hobbies and pets. At one point, I walked past Chloe and she said, "I like writing alone back here." The students seemed comfortable in the classroom space as they moved fluidly within it.

Figure 4.6

Randy and Chloe Writing School Helper Profiles in Their Chosen Spots
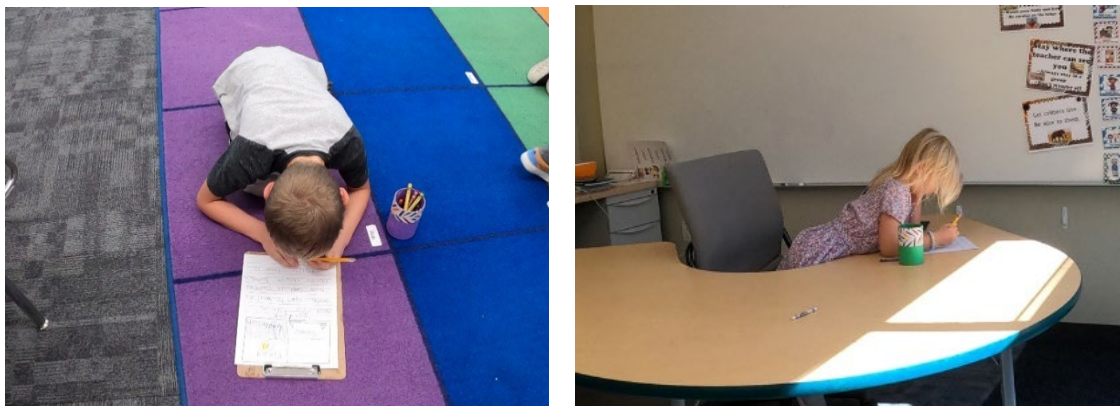
Flexible classroom space, movement, and interactions among students seemed to be at the heart of enacted agency during these writing sessions.

Discussion and Interpretations

This study examined the conditions of writing and students' enactment of agency in one first-grade classroom. Findings reveal that (1) participating students began first grade with markedly high self-perceptions as writers; (2) instruction of transcription skills and generative writing occurred together; and (3) audience and purpose played central roles in the generative writing opportunities for the young students. Additionally, findings confirm that while agency and writing were socially situated (Cazden, 1996; Dyson, 2020), these constructs, as evidenced by personal choices, are manifested by individuals as members of a group. Agency is inherently idiosyncratic. Students' enactment of agency appeared to facilitate the development of their identities as individual writers.

Dimensions of Agency

Many of the salient data points from the study exemplify the positional, motivational, and dispositional dimensions of agency posed by Vaughn (2021) and add to our understanding of what agency can look like among beginning writers in an early childhood classroom. The positional dimension was integral to this investigation into classroom agency because of the young age of the students and the school classroom context in which the teacher was very involved. I first discuss positional agency because it underlies any opportunities the students had to enact agency in its other dimensions.

The dimensions are interconnected and cannot be fully analyzed as isolated characteristics of agentic learners; however, certain aspects of the data illustrate the agentic dimensions in the study's context and are considered separately below.

Positional Dimension of Agency

Agency in a classroom has inherent parameters. In reality, "none of us have [sic] unencumbered agency; we are all constrained and empowered by the institutional structures within which we live" (Dyson, 2020, p. 123). The teacher played a significant role in the positioning of the students during writing time by (1) structuring writing sessions, (2) communicating expectations for their behavior, (3) designing opportunities for the students to write different genres and text structures, and (4) facilitating the sharing of their writing. Working within the structures of the school and educational system, she was required to teach a formal handwriting program, *Handwriting Without Tears* (Olsen et al., 20032005; implemented outside of the observed writing sessions) and meet the state curricular standards for first grade. These ideas are more fully explored in a separate report (i.e., Chapter 3), but it is important to acknowledge that the teacher's role was fundamental to facilitating agency in this classroom. Students were given opportunities by their teacher to position themselves physically in the classroom space, to take initiative in their writing productivity and use of materials, and to choose how and when they interacted (talked with and worked beside) with their peers.

It was amid these opportunities to position themselves that individual differences between students as learners and writers emerged. Aligning with prior research, young students produced generative writing, made choices, and regulated themselves in flexible

writing spaces (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). There were some exceptions, however. Kuby and Vaughn (2015) similarly highlighted several students who were hesitant to share their writing, make choices, and participate collaboratively with others during writing. They suggested that collaborative writing exercises and flexibility may conflict with what students understand about being at school (Christ & Wang, 2008). While a majority of students enacted such agency over the 7-week period in this study, two students remained consistently disengaged and distracted during the writing sessions. These students seemed to flounder and falter to participate in writing and did not appear to thrive as writers in the "free" space they were given in the classroom. One student seemed consistently unsure of the expectations and frustrated by the demands of transcription skills and the mechanics of writing. At times, he held his head in his hands and complained aloud that he did not know how to spell words or write letters correctly. In later observations, he wandered the room and talked to other students, only writing in the last few minutes of the session to get something done before the transition to recess. This observation raised the question as to whether all first-grade students are ready and able to "position" themselves as agentic writers, even in a flexible classroom setting.

Instead of ascribing to either a whole-group, highly teacher-prescribed format or a total free-for-all writing configuration in the classroom, teachers may do well to facilitate students' ability to enact agency (i.e., purposefully act as individuals) during writing by designating time and space for them to position themselves *and* monitor those individuals who may need more positioning and assistance from the teacher to develop important dispositions related to agency and writing. Positioning students as active agents in early

elementary settings means tolerating nonconformity in their writing behaviors and products, a risk that could yield rich experiences and outcomes for both the students who thrive and those who seem to flounder. Because these students were able to decide how they would participate and engage in writing, their distinct agentic dispositions and needs were exposed. Based on the anecdotal evidence of two students, one seemed to need additional instruction in basic writing skills while the other may have lacked the motivation to write or simply have taken advantage of the freedom available in the loosely structured environment. Teachers can respond by offering targeted support and instruction. The student described above may have benefitted from conferences or small-group instruction focused on transcription skills because better transcription skills may naturally promote writing generation. The teacher could have reviewed the students' writing, asked the student what they felt they needed help with, and designed lessons to address apparent and self-expressed needs. It may be that individualized instruction can give students the tools to be more confident and successful as increasingly agentic writers. In these ways, primary-grade teachers can support undeveloped or unproductive writers *as well as* give students who are self-motivated and productive room to act and grow within a classroom writing environment.

Motivational Dimension of Agency

The motivational dimension of agency focuses on how students engage, self-regulate, and persist in learning (Vaughn, Premo, Sotirovska, Erickson, 2020). Generally, throughout the 7-week period, students began to transition into independent writing time more quickly (less than one minute compared to 3-4 minutes), they chose and organized

their supplies more efficiently, and they were more attentive when other students shared aloud their writing. As Mrs. Rawlins pulled back her support, students consequently seemed to improve in their decision making and self-regulation. For instance, in the last two sessions, I noticed that several students moved from their original writing spots to other places in the room (e.g., secluded seat at a table) where they said they could focus better or receive support from the teacher (i.e., horseshoe table or teacher desk). Prior research has shown that students' behaviors and choices during writing varied widely, even within the same structured classroom environment and/or learning activity and that even very young children can make decisions and shape writing events based on their personal preferences and "exert agency in service of their own participation and learning" (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010, p. 193). These first graders were able to write in apparently meaningful ways among others in a relatively unstructured physical environment. Their physical moves and choices regarding materials and working with others (or not) during the writing sessions seemed to be increasingly in support of their writing production and agentic dispositions.

Enacting motivational aspects of student agency seems to entail a release of responsibility and control on the part of the teacher (Vaughn, 2014). By reducing her direct assistance, Mrs. Rawlins displayed trust in her students. Trust among students and teachers has been deemed essential for fostering agency in literacy learning (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015). The findings here show that students can engage in and produce writing without methodical, highly structured writing sessions. Personal responsibility and space allowed many students to engage, self-regulate, and persist in writing idiosyncratically.

However, the flexible, unstructured aspects of the writing sessions did not appear motivating to a few students. One student, who did not seem to thrive, actively avoided writing and moved around the room, talked to peers, and told the teacher she did not want or need help. She spent time at the writing center and stapled pages together and picked out pencils but struggled to consistently engage in writing. However, the writing she produced fulfilled the writing task (usually several sentences). She seemed to lack interest in writing, may have benefitted from setting intermediate writing goals that could increase motivation (Schunk, 2003). Prior research has revealed that writing motivation and self-efficacy for writing tends to decrease among students through the elementary grades (Camacho et al., 2021) and understanding that first-grade students may start out in the early grades with high perceptions of their writing capabilities and opportunities (as they did in this class) warrants consideration of why any breakdown occurs thereafter. Perhaps opportunities to write generatively can sustain students' positive perceptions and motivation as writers over time, though students may need varied amounts and support from the teacher to write (e.g., goal setting; clear, bounded choices; frequent check-ins; verbal praise and encouragement, etc.).

Dispositional Dimension of Agency

Another weighty finding was the intersection of students' agentic dispositions with writing purpose and audience. The students seemed able to "possess intentions, confidence, and interest" (Vaughn, Premo, Sotirovska, Erickson, 2020, p. 428) when given opportunities to write for meaningful purposes and audiences. To prepare students for the rising demands in curricular standards for early elementary grades (Graham et al.,

2015; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and contexts beyond school, students should write for varied purposes and audiences (Graham et al., 2012; Land, 2022). Mrs. Rawlin's cross-curricular integration of writing and the placement of peers and school workers as audience decentered the teacher (Boyd et al., 2019) and positioned the students in agentic roles. Some students brought "books" and stories they had written at home, offered ideas for publishing their writing, and extended the length or style of their writing beyond the minimum expectations of the task (e.g., added extra pages, folded paper into booklets, including fantasy elements in narrative compositions).

Key to giving her students opportunities to demonstrate their agentic dispositions was how Mrs. Rawlins found ways to encourage writing in different genres and text types. Primary-grade teachers have often struggled to incorporate early writing experiences (Gerde et al., 2015) and to implement effective writing instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2006). Moreover, encouraging student agency in the classroom is not necessarily an instinctive, comfortable process for teachers (Vaughn, 2014). Focusing on the integration of writing within other subjects (science, reading, math, etc.) is one way to overcome common time constraints in writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham, 2010) and give young students purposeful, generative writing opportunities that focus on communication rather than compliance. Mrs. Rawlins provided students with opportunities to engage in authentic, relevant writing activities (Duke et al., 2006) but it is important to note that she explicitly provided students with the genre, purpose, and audience for their writing. The students were able to create the content of the text within

those bounds but less able to choose between genres or to do fully open-ended writing. These teacher-led aspects of the writing sessions exposed the students to a variety of genres and text types but surely constrained their ability to enact more open agency. Such constraints could have even stifled students' creativity and willingness to write. Relatedly, Greg, Randy, and Chloe's scores decreased on the Choice-making StAP item from the pre- to post-survey. It may be that these students' desires to make choices during literacy tasks decreased because the teacher chose the topics and genres. Essentially, it would be difficult to enact agency (i.e., possess purpose and act intentionally) on writing assignments that did not feel purposeful; however, a greater affordance of choice in genre and text types could influence students' motivation, desire to choose, and persistence during writing. Open-ended writing tasks that allow students to determine aspects, such as the text structure, purpose, or audience may foster students' agentic dispositions and the development of their initial writer identities.

Agency and Identity

Identity development in literacy has been studied frequently among adolescents (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Wright, 2020), but many have argued that its formation begins much sooner (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Dyson, 1996; Wagner, 2016). Via a sociocultural lens, students' literacy identities begin to develop as they enter preschool learning contexts (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Johnston & Rogers, 2001) or earlier (Rowe, 2008). Identity work within a sociocultural view maintains that children will come to see themselves as readers and writers when they enter into social learning contexts (Ellsworth, 1997; Gee et al., 2002; Rowe, 2008). *What kind* of literacy identity

students develop is dependent on the conditions of the social context in which they exist. Developing a literacy identity in school involves conforming to specific cultural and social norms (Wagner, 2016). Students are typically expected to learn and match school and teacher expectations and values. However, students enter schools with distinct personal histories and interests, varied language competencies, and different cultures (Compton-Lilly, 2006). Standards for student outcomes (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and behavior can vary across educational contexts, but highly controlled settings can limit students' ability to develop personal literacy identities.

Students' identities are constantly becoming; they are fluid (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015). Rigidity in instruction and management may stifle or halt agentic identity development. In highly controlled settings, identities are in danger of conforming to the mainstream if they are constrained too much by expectations for performance. Students in any context will develop identities as writers—it is the kind of writer identity that students develop that may matter in the long run (e.g., confident versus apprehensive, proactive versus passive). What emerged in this investigation is that the first-grade students began to develop distinct, individual (and generally positive) writer identities as they were given opportunities to enact agency. Although their manifest actions and writing differed during the writing sessions, many students viewed themselves as writers capable of getting their ideas and words down on paper. The students in this study wrote generatively despite having faced (to varying degrees) difficulties with spelling and handwriting. Each student wrote independently with writing output that rarely looked the

same. In a recent study with PreK-2 teachers, Kennedy and Shiel (2022) noted that initially, students' imagination and thinking capacities outstrip their transcription skills and that "invented spelling supported their agency in writing, assisting them in capturing their thoughts" (p. 137). In this study, there were opportunities for writers of varied dispositions to express their ideas and thoughts in writing. They acted as agentic, generative writers and began to develop writer identities because of their experiences with "real" writing (Dyson, 2020).

Conclusion

This study adds to the minimal but robust collection of studies on agency and literacy in the elementary grades. It builds on previous research and provides additional insight into the complexity of student agency and the intricacies of early writing. The findings demonstrate that even young students are willing and able to write generatively. The StAP survey data and observational accounts of the focal students revealed the importance of individual differences among students as learners and their enactment of agency. Students' distinct characteristics may have greater potential to develop and consequently to influence their writer identity development if they have opportunities to enact agency.

There remains a need for longer-term research using the StAP survey and observational corroboration with young students. Investigating students' self-perceptions on the StAP and their evaluated writing performance could offer important insights into the relationship between the two. Also, an investigation into which students may need

more support to become agentic writers and in what aspects they need help would be valuable. Additional studies of agency and writing in schools with different curricular constraints and instructional methods could yield insights into how students can be positioned as agentic writers in alternate contexts. For a better understanding of how students perceive themselves and their opportunities to enact writing agency, future research could include in-depth interviews with students coupled with investigations into their actions and writing output. The focal teacher in this case was a passionate and experienced writer; exploring how teachers who are less confident in writing can foster agency in writing may result in ideas and implications that are more generally applicable. The experiences and perceptions of students in the current study indicate that school classrooms retain abundant social contexts that can support the development of individual agentic dispositions and writer identities.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The complex nature of learning to write (Dean, 2021; Flower & Hayes, 1981) and the importance of early writing skills for later literacy achievement (NELP, 2008) warrant investigation of classroom writing practices. The current study involved the observation of 10 writing sessions in one first-grade classroom and the analysis of two subsets of data. In the singular study, I sought to investigate student agency during writing by providing insight into the experiences and perspectives of both the teacher and her students (see Appendix F for my positionality statement). Data are reported in two separate manuscripts: the first targets teacher discourse in relation to student agency and generative writing, the second explores students' agentic self-perceptions and actions during writing. Data were apportioned to comprise the two research manuscripts. Isolating the teacher discourse data from the student self-perception and action data could appear to disregard the context as a whole and an oversimplification of the teacher-student dynamics and other constructs (e.g., generative writing and agency). However, I made the decision to analyze sets of data separately in order to give more attention to all of the important aspects of the case and context. My active participation as the sole researcher allowed me to be a part of every aspect of the context and study procedures. I conducted interviews and observations, administered the StAP survey to all students, regularly wrote reflective memos, and personally transcribed the teacher discourse data. My intensive involvement allowed me to bridge the understanding of the phenomenon between data sets and interpret findings in each report more thoroughly and holistically.

Alterations to the Proposed Research

I conducted the research study during the fall of 2022. The implementation of the proposed research went generally according to plan; however, I made several adjustments throughout the process. First, after the first observation, I altered the observation protocol form I had created to include several checklist items to make note-taking more efficient. I noticed aspects of the environment and Mrs. Rawlins' instruction that related to the students' participation in writing and added them to the observation form (e.g., writing genres, materials, places around the room, etc.). The inclusion of the specific categories allowed me to record routine, relevant details efficiently and spend more time attending to students' individual actions and writing. Second, student absences delayed the collection of several StAP scores. I administered the StAP survey to three students after the first two observed writing sessions. During those first two sessions, I began to designate five focal students to follow more closely and the three students who were absent were not focused on as much as the other students or considered fully. Third, while the first eight writing session observations occurred consecutively (twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays) as planned, the follow-up observations were scheduled approximately two weeks and five weeks after the last observation rather than one month apart each due to school and grade-level events and the winter break schedule. In a discussion with Mrs. Rawlins after the first eight observations ended, we scheduled the dates for the two follow-up sessions on days she knew she would be teaching writing that fit around Thanksgiving break, a puppet-show production, a field trip, and the winter break schedule. Fourth, instead of using a Swivl camera, I used a GoPro Hero 8 to take

pictures and videos and a Sony digital voice recorder to document the teacher's discourse from the writing sessions. This is a small change in the use of researcher tools; however, it did mean that I spent more time and energy during the observations taking videos, pictures, and recording audio manually than I had anticipated. A Swivl device would have automatically recorded video and audio of the teacher and students depending on where the recording markers were placed, presumably leaving more time for me to observe and take notes. However, I was able to make discerning decisions about what I wanted to attend to and record which resulted in audiovisual data sources that were possibly more targeted and salient. Finally, I altered the research questions pertaining to each research report to align more closely with my purposes. The original questions were as follows.

1. How does one first-grade teacher communicate with students during writing time?

2. In what ways does one teacher's discourse promote or constrain students' opportunities to enact agency during writing?

3. How do students engage in generative writing in a first-grade classroom?

4. How do first graders perceive themselves as agentic writers?

The revised questions are as follows.

1. How does one first-grade teacher communicate with students during writing time?

2. In what ways might one teacher's discourse constrain or afford students opportunities to enact agency during writing time?

3. How do these first graders perceive themselves as agentic writers?

4. How do the students enact agency during writing in a first-grade classroom?

The change in the second question was to use less definitive language (e.g., "in what

ways *might*" versus "in what ways *does*") in order to match the exploratory approach of the study. The research methods I employed were not intended to provide conclusive evidence that the teacher's discourse afforded or constrained students' agency but were meant to consider and explore the possibilities of agency in a classroom environment by viewing the teacher's discourse patterns and highlighting students' actions during writing. As for the third and fourth questions, I switched their order because the Student Agency Profile survey was administered before any classroom observations took place and the results of the survey had an influence on who I observed. It made more sense to consider the students' self-perceptions before focusing on their enactments of agency. I changed the question from "engage in generative writing" to "enact agency during writing" because it aligned more closely with my purpose for the research and an instrumental case study—to investigate a phenomenon in a particular context.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this research extends the literature on the relationship between teacher discourse and the classroom writing environment by providing an in-depth analysis of the teacher's discursive role in the students' enactment of agency during writing, there are several noteworthy limitations.

Student Agency and Writing Measures

I did not specifically evaluate the students' writing quality or volume. I focused on understanding agency in a writing context; however, in the education field in general, there is a persistent need to understand "how teachers might vary types of writing to

student advantage" (Miller et al., 2012, p. 3). Including a measure of students' writing output along with an analysis of their agentic actions in future studies could provide important insights into how generative writing in first grade might influence students' writing productivity and growth. The current study suggests that generative writing and student agency are mutually enhancing; however, there is limited evidence of how generative writing opportunities support students' writing development (Coker et al., 2018; Graham, McKeown, et al., 2012). Studies that measure the relationship between writing growth and generative writing opportunities could elucidate how important it is for early-grade teachers to afford agency and allocate time for their students to write generatively.

Prior Early Writing Research

The majority of research on early writing has targeted the effectiveness of explicit writing instruction and transcriptional aspects of writing (Graham, 2019; Zumbrunn & Bruning, 2013). The implementation of those components of early writing instruction are moderately to strongly well-founded in research (Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012) whereas generative writing has a very limited research base (Coker et al., 2018). I chose to focus on an understudied type of writing practice and a somewhat abstract concept, student agency. My decision to target these dimensions of writing and learning may have resulted in less tangible suggestions for practice and appear to be an oversight amid established, effective practices. Also, because of the lack of attention to transcriptional skills and other proven practices such as SRSD in first grade (Harris et al., 2009) in my study, what is known in the field already and my new insights may not have a clear

connection. However, I was cognizant of the dominance of existing research surrounding basic skills such as handwriting, spelling, and transcription in the primary grades as well as the persisting failure of students in later grades to write proficiently (NCES, 2012). I decided to explore less prominent aspects of early-grade writing with the intention to consider other ways to facilitate identity-building writing experiences for young students that could influence students' writing proficiency in later grades.

Student Agency and Writing Over Time

This research was conducted over a relatively short period of time which limited the scope of data and understanding of students' agentic actions and teacher discourse. While there is promising work about the longitudinal development of student agency (Ferguson et al., 2015), continued long-term and large-scale research should be conducted with students at all levels. Such investigations could shed light on how students' perceptions change over time. The current research used the survey as a pre- and post-assessment over a short period of time and students' self-perceptions remained generally positive and stable. Following first graders throughout the entire school year or into second and third grade could reveal patterns in how students view themselves as writers as they gain more experience with writing and awareness of its demands. Understanding students' agentic self-perceptions and opportunities during writing throughout the elementary grades could help researchers and educators understand potential connections between student age, teacher discourse, increasingly rigorous curricular standards, and student agency.

Sociocultural Theories and Agency

Using a sociocultural lens of learning provided a realistic way for me to view agency and writing experiences for young students. Classroom settings are inherently social and individuals' experiences and learning in classrooms are mediated by others' actions and participation. While I highlighted the experience of five students in the second research manuscript, my theoretical lens led me to contextualize their actions and self-perceptions in the learning environment (e.g., other students, the teacher's instruction, genres, and the parameters of writing tasks). The theoretical framework emphasizes the influence of these outside factors and the teacher's role in students' agentic writing experiences which may give other researchers and educators insight into how agency and/or generative writing may be facilitated by the manipulation of the various factor in their particular contexts. An understanding of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) enabled me to view the critical role of the teacher in shaping her students' agentic opportunities through discourse. LPP gave me a way to consider how students can act as agents within the participation framework of a classroom. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning does not mean that novice learners reproduce the expert's exact performance, but that they are offered increasing access to engage in new learning processes. From this perspective, I explored how students' individual writer identities developed within the bounds of the classroom context and teacher expectations. The focus of LPP is to participate in a practice in order to learn to become full practitioners. I was able to evaluate generative writing and Mrs. Rawlins' instructional approach in terms of students gaining access to a community of literate students in a

larger community. Her focus on purpose, various genres, and audience were ways that invited students to participate as individuals in "real" writing.

My theoretical lens constrained my perspective so I could focus on designated aspects of the phenomenon and context. Thus, I did not attend to all aspects of writing and learning in a classroom. Individual student factors (beyond self-perception scores and classroom observable actions) were not considered. I did not measure or account for students' prior knowledge or achievement in literacy or other personal characteristics that could influence participation in writing and enactment of agency. My theoretical lens led me to focus on elements of the phenomenon and context that could be analyzed and explained through sociocultural and situated learning theories: students' agentic perceptions and actions and the teacher's expert role through discourse.

Final Reflection

This research provides an in-depth look at student agency in an early-grade writing context. It highlights the role of a teacher's discourse in her students' agentic opportunities and provides insight into generative writing, a highly marginalized aspect of early literacy learning. The findings from the study contribute to the conversation about what matters in first-grade writing instruction. The research adds a layer of evidence that first-grade students can engage in generative writing processes and enact agency during writing. It provides an example of a teacher providing both generative writing and transcriptional skills instruction and emphasizes the significance of the teacher's discourse in students' opportunities to enact agency.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Scoring Guide for the Student Agency Profile

Scoring Guide for the Student Agency Profile (StAP)

The StAP measures 6 aspects of student agency in the classroom Each of these aspects correspond with a specific subscale of the instrument and are presented sequentially. Student response options are consistent throughout to maintain continuity in student responses particularly for students in earlier grades. Students may respond to each item from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5) with more agreement from students corresponding to higher scores on the item. Once a student has responded to all of the items, their average response is used for evaluation purposes. The table below can be used to guide you in the process of transforming raw student responses to averages that can be used for evaluation.

Item #	Student #1 Response	Item #	Student #1 Response
1		24	
2		25	
3		26	
4		27	
5		28	
Ave. Intent. = _____ (Sum 1-5) /5 =		29	
6		Ave. Inter. = _____ (Sum 24-29) /6 =	
7			
8		[Total] = Ave. Intent + Ave. SPR + Ave. SPW + Ave. Choice + Ave. Persist + Ave. Inter.	
Ave. SPR. = _____ (Sum 6-8) /3 =			
9			
10		[_____] = _____ + _____	
11		+ _____ + _____ + _____	
Ave. SPW. = _____ (Sum 9-11) /3 =		+ _____	
12			
13		Take the bracketed total above and divide by 6 to get the overall student agency score.	
14			
15			
16			
17			
Ave. Choice = _____ (Sum 12-17) /6 =		[Total] / 6 = Agency	
18			
19			
20		[ ] / 6 = _____	
21			
22			
23			
Ave. Persist = _____ (Sum 18-23) /6 =			

Appendix B

Initial Codes for Teacher Discourse Data

Initial Codes for Teacher Discourse Data

Code	Days	References
Closed question	10	435
Commands	10	423
Content instruction	10	477
Descriptions of current and future actions	10	235
Descriptions of student actions	10	127
Encouragement and praise	10	331
Examples to instruct	10	52
Expressions of feelings and opinions	10	141
General instructions	10	285
Greeting	8	19
Management	10	218
Modeling to instruct	10	142
Open question	10	305
Reading text	8	87
Reminders of previous instruction	9	43
Repeating student response	10	83
Requisition question	9	50
Response to student question or comment	10	208
Rhetorical question	10	66
Skills instruction	10	154

Appendix C

Second Round Codes for Teacher Discourse Data

Second Round Codes for Teacher Discourse Data

Code	Days	References
Closed question	10	435
Cl Question - Bounded Choice	7	18
Cl Question - Instruction	6	27
Cl Question - Management	9	22
Cl Question - Materials	4	17
Cl Question - Physical Movement or Space	1	1
Cl Question - Reading	5	17
Cl Question - Transcription Skills	7	28
Commands	10	423
Commands - Expand on that	7	19
Commands - Help Out	2	2
Commands - Management	9	86
Commands - Materials	8	44
Commands - Physical Movement or Space	10	45
Commands - Reading Together	6	19
Commands - Transcription Skills	8	25
Content instruction	10	477
Content - Other	3	12
Content - Reading	5	34
Content - Transcription Skills	5	15
Descriptions of current and future actions	10	235
Actions - Directions to students	10	32
Actions - Management	8	19
Actions - Physical Movement or Space	3	5
Actions - SR actions	10	146
Actions - SR and Students together	10	81
Actions - Students acting	7	16
Actions - Transcription	4	13
Descriptions of student actions	10	127
Student Actions - Management	7	15
Student Actions - Materials	5	10
Student Actions - Physical Movement or Space	7	22
Encouragement and praise	10	331
Encouragement - Affirmation	7	31
Encouragement - Management	9	27
Encouragement - Physical Movement or Space	6	6
Encouragement - Thank You	9	74
Encouragement - Transcription Skills	5	14
Encouragement - Trying	2	4
Examples to instruct	10	52
Examples - Other content	4	7
Examples - Transcriptional skills	1	1
Expressions of feelings and opinions	10	141
Emotions - Praise	7	25
Emotions - Teacher Action	5	10
Emotions - Teacher Knowledge	7	16
General instructions	10	285

Code	Days	References
Gen. Instr. - Materials	9	62
Gen. Instr. - Physical Movement and Space	4	5
Gen. Instr. - Toward others	3	4
Gen. Instr. - Transcription	4	11
Greeting	8	19
Management	10	218
Management - Be Kind	4	5
Management - Examples	9	32
Management - Expectations for Behavior	9	62
Management - Gaining Attention	9	33
Management - Materials	2	9
Management - Organization	0	0
Management - Physical Movement and Space	9	64
Management - SR Actions and Perspective	8	33
Management - Thank you for successes	9	42
Management - Threat of Consequence	8	14
Management - Voice Volume	8	63
Modeling to instruct	10	142
Modeling - Constellations Writing	1	22
Modeling - Illustrations	2	8
Modeling - Reading	4	22
Modeling - Transcription	5	23
Open question	10	305
Op Question - Choice	6	21
Op Question - Management	9	26
Op Question - Physical Movement or Space	1	1
Op Question - Reading	3	32
Op Question - Transcription	7	34
Op Question - Writing	10	265
Reading text	8	87
Reading - Constellations	1	1
Reading - James	2	8
Reading - Written	4	69
Reminders of previous instruction	9	43
Previous Instruction - Reading	3	17
Previous Instruction - Transcription	4	6
Repeating student response	10	83
Requisition question	9	50
Request - Action	7	19
Request - Content answer	1	1
Request - Management	4	6
Request - Materials	4	8
Request - Physical Movement and Space	4	4
Request - Transcription	2	3
Response to student question or comment	10	208
Response - Besides Y or N	10	38
Response - Management	4	6
Response - Question	9	21
Response - SR Personal Connection	3	5

Code	Days	References
Response - Thank You	4	5
Response - Transcription	1	1
Rhetorical question	10	66
Rh Question - Asking for Affirmative Response	9	19
Rh Question - Draw Attention	10	31
Rh Question - Management	1	1
Rh Question - Offering Ideas	1	1
Rh Question - Transcription	1	1
Rh Questions - Expressing Emotion	2	4
Skills instruction	10	154
Skills - Capitalization	6	34
Skills - Grammar	1	4
Skills - Handwriting and Finger Spaces	8	43
Skills - Punctuation	6	23
Skills - Spelling	10	117

Appendix D

Main Categories from Final Round of Coding

Main Categories from Final Round of Coding

Code	Files	References
Directing – Direct commands to act; commands to follow instructions and complete tasks	**10**	**719**
Commands	10	719
Commands - Expand on that	7	19
Commands - Help Out	2	2
Commands - Materials	8	44
Commands - Physical Movement or Space	10	45
Commands - Reading Together	6	19
Commands - Transcription Skills	8	25
Commands - Writing	10	142
Encouraging - Praise and encouragement of students; approval of their work and effort	**10**	**791**
Encouragement and praise	10	564
Encouragement - Affirmation	7	31
Encouragement - Physical Movement or Space	6	6
Encouragement - Thank You	9	74
Encouragement - Transcription Skills	5	14
Encouragement - Trying	2	4
Encouragement - Writing	10	104
Expressions of feelings and opinions	10	227
Emotions - Praise	7	25
Emotions - Writing	10	61
Instructing – Explanations of content knowledge and task procedures	**10**	**1138**
Cl Question - Instruction	6	27
Cl Question - Reading	5	17
Cl Question - Transcription Skills	7	28
Cl Question - Writing	10	143
Content - Other	3	12
Content - Reading	5	34
Content - Writing	10	175
Examples to instruct	10	51
Examples - Other content	4	7
Examples - Transcription skills	1	1
Examples - Writing	9	47
Modeling to instruct	10	142
Modeling - Constellations Writing	1	22
Modeling - Illustrations	2	8
Modeling - Reading	4	22
Modeling - Transcription	5	23
Modeling - Writing	10	90
Op Question - Reading	3	32
Op Question - Transcription	7	34
Op Question - Writing	10	265
Reminders of previous instruction	9	43
Previous Instruction - Reading	3	17
Previous Instruction - Transcription	4	6
Previous Instruction - Writing	9	36

Code	Files	References
Directing – Direct commands to act; commands to follow instructions and complete tasks	**10**	**719**
Request - Content answer	1	1
Request - Transcription	2	3
Request - Writing	8	21
Rh Question - Offering Ideas	1	1
Rh Question - Transcription	1	1
Rh Question - Writing Instruct	5	9
Skills instruction	10	154
Skills - Capitalization	6	34
Skills - Grammar	1	4
Skills - Handwriting and Finger Spaces	8	43
Skills - Punctuation	6	23
Skills - Spelling	10	117
Managing – Management of student behavior and enforcement of classroom expectations	**10**	**759**
Actions - Management	8	19
Cl Question - Management	9	22
Cl Question - Materials	4	11
Cl Question - Physical Movement or Space	1	1
Commands - Management	9	86
Constraint - Management	1	1
Encouragement - Management	9	27
Management	10	574
Management - Be Kind	4	5
Management - Examples	9	32
Management - Expectations for Behavior	9	62
Management - Gaining Attention	9	33
Management - Materials	2	9
Management - Organization	0	0
Management - Physical Movement and Space	9	63
Management - SR Actions and Perspective	8	33
Management - Thank you for successes	9	42
Management - Threat of Consequence	8	14
Management - Voice Volume	8	63
Op Question - Management	2	2
Op Question - Physical Movement or Space	1	1
Request - Management	4	6
Request - Materials	4	8
Request - Physical Movement and Space	4	4
Response - Management	4	6
Rh Question - Draw Attention	10	31
Rh Question - Management	1	1
Student Actions - Management	7	15

Appendix E

Observation Protocol Form

Observation Protocol Form

Date:				
Time	**Materials**	**Space**	**Interactions**	**Written Products**
	Booklets ____ Single page ____ Pencils ____ Crayons ____	Rainbow rug ____ Desks ____ Couch ____ Chair ____ Floor ____ Back table ____	Alone ____ Partners ____ Groups ____ Talking ____ Quiet ____	Narrative ____ Opinion ____ Informational ____
	Booklets ____ Single page ____ Pencils ____ Crayons ____	Rainbow rug ____ Desks ____ Couch ____ Chair ____ Floor ____ Back table ____	Alone ____ Partners ____ Groups ____ Talking ____ Quiet ____	Narrative ____ Opinion ____ Informational ____
	Booklets ____ Single page ____ Pencils ____ Crayons ____	Rainbow rug ____ Desks ____ Couch ____ Chair ____ Floor ____ Back table ____	Alone ____ Partners ____ Groups ____ Talking ____ Quiet ____	Narrative ____ Opinion ____ Informational ____
	Booklets ____ Single page ____ Pencils ____ Crayons ____	Rainbow rug ____ Desks ____ Couch ____ Chair ____ Floor ____ Back table ____	Alone ____ Partners ____ Groups ____ Talking ____ Quiet ____	Narrative ____ Opinion ____ Informational ____

Appendix F

Positionality Statement

Positionality Statement

My personal interest in the topic of writing and the early-grades stems from my experiences with writing as an elementary teacher, my passion for literacy learning, and my concerns regarding choice and autonomy in lower-elementary classrooms. I view writing as a way to express and communicate ideas and believe that even the youngest students are capable of writing, regardless of their proficiency with the transcriptional aspects of written composition. My perspective is that of Teale and Sulzby (1986) in that young children's reading and writing experiences are not "*pre* anything…at whatever point we look, we see children *in the process of becoming* literate" (p. 230). I taught second grade for five years and integrated writing tasks into reading and other subjects and gave my students time to write independently. During those years, I developed a desire to better understand young students' writing processes and experiences. As I read and studied literacy education during my PhD program, I learned about the current conditions of writing achievement and realized the importance of writing development and noticed the limited research on writing in the field. I met with Margaret Vaughn to discuss agency in education research and decided that a study of student agency and the teacher's role in an early writing context would address my inquiries and, I hope, add an important perspective and layer of understanding of writing in the early grades.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

Ph.D.	Utah State University, Logan, UT. Emphasis: Literacy and Instructional Leadership	2020-2023
M.Ed.	Western Governors University, Salt Lake City, UT. Major: Curriculum and Instruction	2018-2019
B.S.	Brigham Young University – Idaho, Rexburg, ID. November 2013. Major: Elementary Education	2010-2013

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY

Kelly Education | Logan, UT
PreK-12th Grade Substitute Teacher CCSD, LCSD, USU Edith Bowen   2022-

Utah State University | Logan, UT
Instructor, School of Teacher Education and Leadership

2020-

Taught the Reading Assessment and Intervention course and assisted in directing
the USU Literacy Clinic practicum experience for undergraduate education majors
for two years (ongoing).

Research Assistant, School of Teacher Education and Leadership   2020-2021
Assisted Dr. Kortney Sherbine on various teacher education and elementary
grades-focused projects for one year.

Hawthorn Academy | South Jordan, UT
2nd Grade Teacher, Hawthorn Academy South Jordan   2018-2020

Mesa School District | Mesa, AZ
2nd Grade Teacher, Zaharis Elementary School   2014-2016
2nd Grade Teacher, Sirrine Elementary School   2013-2014

PRESENTATIONS

DeCoursey, K. (2023, March). Play Like Your Future Depends On It: Literacy Play Activities for Early Childhood Education. Utah Association for the Education of Young Children. 2023 Annual Conference. Salt Lake City, UT.

DeCoursey, K. (2022, October). Exploring Teacher Talk and Student Opportunities During Agency-Oriented Writing Experiences. Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association. 39th Annual Conference. Billings, MT.

DeCoursey, K. (2022, August). Writing by Choice: A Mixed Methods Case Study of Agentic Writing in the Primary Grades. Mixed Methods International Research Association. 2022 MMIRA Global Conference.

DeCoursey, K. & DeCoursey, Jennie. (2022, March). At a Loss for Words? Fostering Word Consciousness in Early Childhood. Utah Association for the Education of Young Children. 2022 Annual Conference. Ogden, UT.

DeCoursey, K. & Bunnell, Georgia. (2021, July). How Am I Doing? Intensive Feedback for Preservice Teachers in a Literacy Practicum Setting. Association of Teacher Educators 2021 Online Summer Conference. Columbus, OH.

Sherbine, K. & **DeCoursey, K.** (2021, February). Becoming Teachers in Uncertain Times: A Longitudinal Case Study of Three Novice Teachers' Beliefs. Presentation at Association of Teacher Educators Annual Conference. Anaheim, CA.

Sherbine, K. & **DeCoursey, K.** (2020, December). Our Journey in Comics: Preservice Teachers' Reflective Composing. Presentation at the Literacy Research Association Annual   Conference. Houston, TX.

Bunnell, G., Jones, C. D., Watson, N. M., **DeCoursey, K.** (2020, August). Words, Words, Words! Ideas for Effective Vocabulary Instruction. Presentation at the annual meeting of the Jordan School District Special Educators, South Jordan, UT.

Oliver, M., Gaynor, C., Orem, S., Florence, K., & **DeCoursey, K.** (2015, November). Presentation at the National Conference of Teachers of English. Minneapolis, MN.

Christensen, D. & **DeCoursey, K.** (2014, February). Dialogue Journals in Elementary
    School Classrooms. Presentation at the Arizona State University Language and
    Literacy Conference. Tempe, AZ.

PUBLICATIONS

JOURNAL ARTICLES

DeCoursey, K. (In preparation). An Exploration of Writing and Agency in a First-Grade
    Classroom. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy.*

Mohr, K., Jones, C., Robertson, M., Chamberlain, K., **DeCoursey, K.,** Bagley, M.,
    Summers, C. (Under review). Using Evidence-based Practices to Enliven Writing
    Instruction and Support Reading.

Sherbine, K. & **DeCoursey, K.** (Under Review). A Narrative Inquiry of Three Novice
    Teachers' Experiences During the Coronavirus Pandemic. *Teaching Education.*

BOOK CHAPTERS

DeCoursey, K. (2022). Attending to the Expressed Needs of Preservice and Novice
    Teachers Post-COVID. In *Reconstructing Care in Teacher Education after
    COVID-19* (pp. 169-178). Routledge.

INSTITUTIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- International Literacy Association   2022-present
- Literacy Research Association   2022-present
- Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education   2021-present
- Association of Teacher Educators   2021-present
- National Council of Teachers of English   2013-2016

HONORS AND REWARDS

Graduate Student Research Funding Award, Graduate School, Utah State University
2022 $700/award

Graduate Student Travel Assistance Award, Graduate School, Utah State University,
2022 $400/award

Graduate Student Travel Assistance Award, Graduate School, Utah State University,
2020 $250/award

SERVICE

Discussant, Annual Conference, Literacy Research Association	November 2022
Reviewer, Research Manuscript, Teaching and Teacher Education	November 2022
Reviewer, Annual Conference Proposals, Literacy Research Association	May 2022
Expert Reviewer, Student Capstone Projects, Utah State University	April 2022
Reviewer, Research Manuscript, Teaching and Teacher Education	March 2021
Reviewer, Research Manuscript, Teaching and Teacher Education	December 2021
Judge, Student Research Symposium, Utah State University	April 2021
Reviewer, Annual Meeting Proposals, Association of Teacher Educators	October 2020