

# **Case Studies of the Writing and Thinking of Three African American Second Graders in a Whole Language Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

This investigation contributes to research on urban, at-risk, low-income children in the U.S. It accounted for several factors that influence children's literacy learning, including grade level, socio-economic status, cultural/racial group, individual differences, and instructional context. The case study focused on three African American children who varied in writing proficiency and were students in a constructivist-based second grade. The individual processes of each child's writing and ways of thinking about writing, within the context of a specific kind of instruction identified as whole language were investigated. Multiple data sources and a qualitative design provided findings on: (a) the children's fall and spring writing, (b) their fall and spring writing interviews, and (c) parents' views of the child's writing proficiencies and interest in writing independently. Based on a synthesis of the data, inferences were made regarding the children's literate thinking, writing as a source of their intellectual stimulation, and their development of a disposition for learning. Findings indicated that all three children became better writers, and that they held positive and accurate views regarding the nature of writing and themselves as writers.

Written communication is a powerful instrument in the development of the human intellect (Goody, 1977). Throughout recent history and in current research, students' ability to act as both author and audience is seen as a strong indicator of their intellectual development in literate responses (Calhoun, 1970). In the case of young children, this kind of ability is not likely to be tapped by norm-referenced testing or by typical informal assessments. Because

of the complexities in young children's learning, research using qualitative, case-study designs can be useful to explore their development in this area.

The construction of knowledge about writing is a major aim of education, and learning theorists and researchers such as Britton (1970, 1975, 1982), Emig (1981), Fulwiler (1987), Luria (1971), and Vygotsky (1962) have shown that writing is critical to learning. Indeed, Heath (1983, 1986) described children's affective and cognitive responses to classroom reading and writing as key in the development of literate thinking. Such thinking is expressed through written artifacts, in what children say about writing and about themselves as writers, and in doing writing in the classroom and outside of it. The design and production of written language requires an intellectual force, especially when writing is sustained. A study of young children's writing, their thinking about writing and themselves as writers, and their classroom and home behaviors can serve to document both literate thinking and the essence of what it may be like for young children to have intellectual lives.

In addition, literacy researchers, teachers, and policy makers have long been concerned with student populations who do not succeed commensurate with their potential. With the increasing political pressure on the research and school communities for performance and accountability, information on diverse children's academic success and initiative, situated in daily instruction, is essential (Daiute, 1993; Langer & Applebee, 1986). This study, which focuses on three, low-income African American children's writing in an urban classroom, contributes insightful information to the body of literature on this subject. The participating children were part of a larger study that compared children in a constructivist-based classroom to children in a skills-based classroom (Freppon, 1995). Although the children in both groups were similar in reading proficiency, age, educational background, and socio-economic status, one of the interesting findings from the larger, comparative study was that the second graders participating in constructivist-based instruction wrote in higher volume and produced more complex text structures in their written products.

Such a finding prompted further exploration toward a better understanding of early literacy development and concomitant characteristics of learners and instructional settings; the current case study aims to do so through the interpretations of three culturally diverse child writers in a specific instructional setting, a whole language classroom. Since the previous, larger study had shown that the children became productive writers during second grade, the purpose of this study was to explore how their writing changed during the school year and the kinds of writing they produced, and to describe in some

detail their attitudes toward writing and their thinking about themselves as writers. To study the children's interpretations as they were evidenced in writing and thinking about writing, I used the artifacts they produced and their individual interviews, which I checked against their parents' perceptions regarding writing done at home.

Based on a synthesis of the data collected by these means, I explored the topic of literate thinking and the experiencing of an intellectual life from the perspective of young, diverse learners who were also low income and thus "at risk" in our society.

Since this research was conducted in a constructivist classroom with a teacher who identified herself as espousing a whole language philosophy, I was able to describe some essential aspects of becoming a writer in such an instructional context. In light of the interest and debate on whole language and diverse populations, data on the research questions stated above provided needed information to contribute to the research on various kinds of learning in such classrooms (Edelsky, 1991; Lyon & Alexander, 1996; Routman, 1996; Strickland, 1998).

The study did not include a focus on word identification, spelling, and related skills. Although these attributes are critical in early literacy development, research should also address other aspects of written language learning. For example, attributes such as children's disposition to engage in writing and the willingness to struggle and produce it are required to learn to write. In addition, writing calls for diverse knowledge such as a familiarity with the language of books, and a sense of audience.

Finally, this study addresses the issue of children's successful experiences in classroom contexts. It has been said that young children of diverse backgrounds can be successful when they find personal meaning and purpose in their school literacy activities (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1998). Diverse, low-income children are successful when their teachers "...allow them to be who they are ..." (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 62) and are focused on their academic achievement. Children's learning is influenced by many complex factors (e.g., grade level, social-economic background, individual development, and instruction). A particular strength of this study is that it accounted for these factors. A synthesis of the multiple data sources, the length of the study, and a case study approach provided grounding for the conclusions drawn.

## Background and Literature Base

The current study draws heavily on the view of literate thinking held by Wells, Chang, and Maher (1990) and Heath (1986, 1991). This view holds that literate capacity and processing (thinking) are evidenced by: (a) the conscious exploitation of written language as an instrument for thinking, and (b) engagement in and persistence with writing. To exploit writing as an instrument for thinking, the writer persists, uses varied forms, and expresses thinking that lends itself to greater communication and personal voice. Adults make use of writing to reveal their voice and make sense of the world (Greene, 1978; 1982). Children may engage with writing in much the same ways. An intellectual life is built as writers develop a "working relationship" between language and their own lived experiences (Britton, 1982, p. 97). Too, Clay (1991) defines "inner-control" in reading as the development of a self-extending, self-improving system whereby children use multiple resources and are rewarded by the process itself. In this study of writing, literate thinking and an intellectual life are characterized by developing voice, a working relationship, and inner-control. These characteristics are evidenced by what children actually do and what they say about writing.

In a personal interview (June, 1997), and in her book (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1998), Katherine Au clarified why the characteristics of literate thinking and an intellectual life are important for children of diverse linguistic backgrounds. Au argues...

I'm convinced that we cannot be successful with these children if they do not first see the reason for becoming literate . . . . They must, as Lucy Calkins puts it, write from the heart.

According to these researchers and my own work (Freppon & McIntyre, 1998), the value children place on their written language, the feelings they have about it, and the level at which they will work on writing are critical in the development of inner control (Clay, 1991) and a *disposition for learning* (Freppon & McIntyre, 1999; Freppon, 1995b). Heath and Mangiola's *Children of Promise* (1991), the work of Luis Moll (Moll & Gonzalez, 1995) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1983) further the argument that low-income, culturally diverse children and their families strongly value academic achievement and personal expression. Recent research by Fitzgerald and Nobilt (1999) documents that high and lower achieving second-language learners' parents become very active in their children's education with a supportive constructivist-based teacher.

This argument is also supported by Ladson-Billings work (1994) and that of Irvine (1990). Irvine's description of the conceptual grounding for interpersonal contexts among teachers and successful African American students includes acceptance of children's communication patterns and other mores such as responsibility (see also King & Mitchell, 1990). Clearly, we need research on aspects of becoming a writer, such as structuring texts and engaging in and thinking deeply about writing.

Newkirk's longitudinal study (1989) of the writing of middle-class children from highly literate homes and progressive classrooms helped demonstrate that environment or context has a strong influence on text structure and quality. Newkirk's work also demonstrated that having opportunities to produce different kinds of text structures is important to children's development. It is through such early writing experiences that children are believed to learn how to write the persuasive and analytical texts needed in the upper grades (Newkirk, 1989). The classroom context in the current study incorporated instructional experiences similar to those described by Newkirk. The complexities and internal organization required by the act of symbolizing thought in writing is fundamental to literate development. This development does not occur in context-free situations. Rather, children learn about written language and write about particular things, in particular ways, in particular instructional settings. In this case of low-income, at-risk children, I studied their learning in the context in which it took place.

The work of Cope and Kalantzis (1993), Delpit (1988, 1991), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Reyes (1992) raised the field's consciousness regarding children from racial and cultural groups and their instruction. This research fostered a move away from the learner-deficit model toward clearer descriptions of successful pedagogy. In this context, Delpit (1991) discussed children's learning in constructivist-based (process writing and whole language) classrooms. While the current study was not designed for the purpose of investigating possible outcomes due to race or cultural factors, it took place in a setting in which a middle-class, white teacher taught low-income, African American children. This teacher identified herself as having a whole language pedagogical philosophy. The population of children and the teacher's race and background were present in a line of research focused on children typically considered "at risk." The current study is one of the few that provides information on issues concerning what children from a diverse background learn and how they respond to constructivist-based instruction.

In the past, writing research contributed much to our understanding of young children's development in relation to orthography (Clay, 1975; Ferriero

& Teberosky, 1983) and phonology and spelling development (Gentry, 1987; Read, 1971). Other research focused on young children's writing (Sulzby, 1992) and aimed at "untangling" the puzzle of what they know about writing. Many factors, including linguistic, social, and psychological, transact as children become writers. Dyson's (1991) work highlights the complexities of learning to write and the influence of social contexts. In a 1995 study, Dyson noted that young children need, among other things, the courage to write. Having the courage to take on the task of writing is supported by a positive view-of-self, by an understanding of what it takes to get writing done, and by a "can do" attitude.

The sociocultural research of Britton (1970), Green (1982), and Heath (1983) demonstrated that writing is a way into an intellectual life. Writing is the creation of meaningful communication; it is clearly value-laden and encompasses more than technical competency. Writing carries social relationships and is a way to construct academic and cultural knowledge. As Bruner (1986) states:

... our stories, by virtue of their range of characters, actions, and settings provide a map of possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought, and self determination are permissible or desirable. (p. 66)

Classroom instruction must play a role in the development of children's self-determination and critical literacy. It is not enough that children learn minimal competency in writing skills (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1983; Katz, 1975). They must learn to use written language as a source of intellectual expression and stimulation.

Of interest in this study were the texts written by and the perceptions of at-risk children who had since kindergarten experienced constructivist-based instruction with teachers who espoused a whole language philosophy. Through examination of written artifacts and interviews about writing, I conducted a study of three children's writing and thinking about writing as they participated in their instructional context. Specifically, this study explored how their writing changed during the school year and the kinds of writing they produced. It provided details on their thinking about writing, and reviewed parents' perspectives on the children's writing completed outside of school. Based on a synthesis of the research data, I explored the topic of literate thinking and the experiencing of an intellectual life from the perspectives of three low socio-economic, African American second graders. In the section below I describe the second-grade classroom and the multiple data sources.

## Method

### The Participants and the Context

The classroom observations for this study took place twice monthly from September to June in a second-grade classroom. Observations involved the use of field notes, artifact collection, teacher interviews, and the collection of audio and video tapes.

**The case study children.** Participating in this study were African American second-graders Schemeka, Isaac, and Willie, all who lived in an urban, low-income community. I knew these children well because I had studied their learning in kindergarten and first grade and had personal contact with their parents through home visits (Freppon 1995a, 1995b). Literacy instruction during these first two years of school was consistent with that of the second-grade instruction.

The children were originally selected at random from a pool of children on the federally assisted lunch program. Of the original group of six focal learners, two had moved away before the start of second grade. The original group was randomly selected for the previous comparative study (Freppon, 1995). In the current project, one non-conventional writer was excluded at the beginning of the school year because participation in the study required "conventional" writing, that is, writing that is connected and can be read by an adult (Sulzby, 1992). The three participating children were representative of average and above average readers in their classroom. Information regarding their reading proficiencies was derived from oral reading assessment procedures (Clay, 1979) and the teacher's judgment (documented in field notes). In addition, their oral reading samples were analyzed by an outside expert using Clay's (1979) procedures; the expert was unaware of the purposes of the study and did not know the children.

The following information describes the participating children primarily as they appeared in the final quarter of the school year. Although there had been no significant changes in the children's persona during the school year, they did become more confident and outgoing as their literacy grew.

Schemeka, the only female in the study, was physically a bit shorter than many of the other girls in her class. With an inviting, open face and frequent smile, Schemeka was a serious student who did not hesitate to tell a peer who asked for help, "Wait until I finish writing my story and then I'll help you—I can't do it now." In this particular example incident Schemeka continued to

write and reread her writing on large chart paper for over five minutes before stopping to talk with her peer.

Isaac became a leader among the males in his class. He was physically tall and graceful. Isaac often stopped his own writing to help classmates write or spell, and engaged others in group projects. He seemed to return to his own writing or reading easily after an interruption. Isaac was very proud of his writing and reading. He asked peers and the teacher to listen to him read (often in an excited and sometimes humorous manner). It was clear that he liked literature and liked responding to it. He wrote consistently, and I observed him taking writing from his cubby to look through his collection, or just to read and return a piece to its storage place.

Willie was somewhat smaller than his classmates. He was quick and energetic and seldom still in the classroom. Willie deliberately sat with and worked with Isaac or other selected male children, but sometimes worked with females. Like Schemeka and Isaac, Willie responded ably when his teacher called on him, and he volunteered his thoughts and views. He asked for his teacher's help when he needed it, and waited his turn if she was busy with another child. Willie had several favorite books that he read repeatedly, he tried new books on his own, and read and responded to books his teacher introduced.

Schemeka and Isaac wrote with ease independently as well as with others, while Willie clearly preferred the support of peer or group interactions. All three children were persistent, highly engaged, and showed a keen interest in accuracy. For example, from the beginning of the year they expressed considerable concern about accurate spelling and later on about their writing making sense.

**The teacher and the classroom context.** The teacher who participated in the study had been teaching for over ten years, had completed a Master's Degree and Reading Recovery (Clay, 1979) teacher training, and worked hard for the success of the children in her charge. Mrs. L. was working in a building with a supportive administration and, relevant to the nature of this study, Mrs. L. was a representative of a white, middle class community. She explicitly taught skills and strategies identified through children's needs and her expertise on writing. Evaluation in this classroom was primarily carried out through the use of observations, anecdotal notes, and reading and writing samples.

The participating teacher identified herself as a whole language teacher. I also identified her theoretical perspectives and everyday instruction as constructivist-based /whole language through multiple data sources, including a teacher interview (Burke, 1980) and self-identification, classroom observa-

tions, results of the Theoretical Orientations to Reading Profile (DeFord, 1985), and an administrator's recommendation. Because the study was limited to one teacher, this classroom represented an instantiation of whole language curriculum. The instruction, as evident in the teacher's proclaimed philosophy, the reading materials, the classroom organization, and the teaching techniques, remained consistent throughout the school year. Ms. L. frequently discussed her instruction in terms of "being whole language," and her descriptions and actual practice fit those associated with its principles (Dudley-Marling, 1995).

The classroom environment reflected a view of literacy learning as a social and developmental process. It supported children in legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In their work on the nature of learning Lave and Wenger emphasize its "situatedness." Namely, they hold that "...learning takes place through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice" (p. 29). In such a classroom community, learners' approximations and change over time, and their "being and becoming" are transformed in deeply adaptive ways. The writing process situated in such socially construed events is where learning occurs.

In this classroom, community practice included student self-selection, teacher intervention, planning, explicit teaching, and the support of more experienced peers. Ms. L. accepted the children's communication patterns, made provisions for their rights as learners, required responsible actions, and closely monitored academic achievement. Classroom reading materials consisted of children's literature, trade books, information books, a variety of print sources from the community, and children's writings. The areas of study and ways of learning arose from the needs, interests, expertise of other students, and especially the expertise of the teacher. Curriculum was also influenced by the school district. However, it appeared that this teacher had a great deal of freedom to shape the curriculum in ways she thought best.

**A typical day in the classroom.** The following is a description of classroom interactions in this second-grade room.

The children began by working independently or in small groups for the first hour. Students were expected to read or write. At times, one child or a small group of children worked on a writing task. However, most children chose reading for this time period. A low noise level was maintained as many children read orally or talked as they wrote. The teacher circulated among the children, observed and interacted, and wrote notes on the children's materials. When the teacher observed a child, she nearly always took the opportunity to teach reading or writing strategies and skills. For example, she pointed out the

need to reread, predict, and pay attention to beginning letter sounds if a word was misread. The teacher also taught spelling (discussed correct or incorrect words and word patterns), punctuation, grammar, and use of capital letters. Writing strategies such as how to “think like a writer” were stressed. For example, children were asked about their desire to improve and publish a particular piece, and about whether their writing made sense and had adequate details. They were given support in getting writing started when they needed it. Conversations about why a child was writing and what he or she wanted to say were frequent. The teacher made notes about individual children’s strengths and needs.

As the school year progressed, the children continued to read individually or together. Some small reading groups were begun by the children themselves, and some were initiated by the teacher, who asked specific children to read together so that she could work on needed skills and strategies. Writing was often a group event; however, some children also moved to private places and asked peers not to bother them when they wrote. Learners were expected to use this hour to gain fluency by working on writing or reading; under the teacher’s guidance there was a great deal of self-selection and self-monitoring.

This first hour of instruction was followed by a “whole group time” in which the children gathered on the rug and the teacher read aloud. Readings included songs, chants, stories, and poetry. Discussion was in a conversational mode with clear expectations that children would participate. During this group period, the teacher often focused on what “hooked” readers on stories. That is, children discussed what they liked and considered interesting. Writing was also discussed. For example, children and the teacher critiqued what writers said and what they thought made good sense or was a good story. Specifics such as plot, character, inferences, and good endings and beginnings were frequent topics.

Following the morning whole group time, the teacher often introduced one or more planned activities such as writing a big book, creating a mural, or writing a letter. Throughout the year these activities involved particular themes such as author studies or science projects. Children could choose a teacher-planned activity or any other reading or writing work during this period. Some participated in several activities and some read only one book or worked on a single piece the entire period. Some children chose to participate in self-selected reading or writing and some chose to participate in the teacher-provided activity. They read, wrote, and talked with each other and the teacher about reading and writing content and about how to accomplish reading and writing. Again, the teacher helped individual children and worked

with small groups. In writing conferences, skills were taught and presentations of children’s writings to the class were discussed. For example, the child and the teacher might work on spelling, sentence structure, capital letters, and story details. They also made decisions about options such as publishing, reading the piece aloud to the class, or making a poster.

During this time, teacher-children oral discourse was rich (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991) and nearly always specific skill and strategy teaching matched to the children’s needs. The teacher also held “Book Talks.” In these small groups, she read books of similar themes and writing style and encouraged children to discuss these elements. The modeling, demonstration, and practice of reading and writing were a focus throughout the day. An afternoon whole-group period also included the teaching of skills such as using reading strategies, syntax, and letter/sound cues, spelling with word patterns, editing, and revising. Children’s writing was often shared with the class at this time. Instructional materials usually consisted of children’s actual writing or reading.

### **Study Design, Data Sources, and Analysis**

This case study was conducted using a qualitative research design and data collection method (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Yin, 1984). Data were gathered over time and synthesis of those data supported the findings. The holistic analysis of writing helped capture, in a flexible and economical way, the quality of the three children’s writing. For example, the collection of writing products over time allowed for tracking of text structure (see Appendix A), evidence of sense of audience, written language use, and purpose, as described in Appendix B (Raphael, Englert, & Kirschner, 1989; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

Journal writing from September to December, and all the writing collected in April (over 100 artifacts in all) were selected for analysis. (These two data sources are hereafter referred to as fall and spring writing.) The teacher helped collect the writing. Thus, the data represented writing as it occurred in the classroom on a daily basis with some completed by the children alone, some in collaboration with peers, and some with teacher support. The artifacts included in the current study were exclusively in Willie’s, Schemeka’s, or Isaac’s handwriting and were complete in form (i.e., no writing that was begun and then abandoned was included).

I repeatedly reviewed the children’s writing and decided on tentative ways to analyze the written products (Glaser, 1978). Newkirk’s work (1989) on the range, forms, and complexities of children’s writing, Purcell-Gates’ (1988)

study of children's knowledge of written register, and previous writing research (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) contributed to development of the rubrics I generated (see Appendices A and B). Since some of the writing elements overlapped, conservative judgment was utilized in a conscious effort to do justice to the writing. I took care to code for the characteristic and the text structure that was *most evident*. An example of written language coding follows: A piece about bike riding with friends that had (a) a title and ending, and (b) written words or phrases, was given a rating of two points. I also identified the writing topic and wrote memos about literary features such as conflict, sense of audience, evidence of character, personal meaning, and use of detail (Lukens, 1976). I consolidated information by writing global hypotheses substantiated with raw data. For each child I constructed grids (Miles & Huberman, 1984) to compare fall and spring writing.

Writing interviews conducted in the fall and spring provided information on the children's knowledge of writing and perceptions of themselves as writers. The same questions were used each time, and prompts were limited (see Appendix C for focus questions in this study). The interview design drew upon previous research (Freppon, 1991, 1995; van Kraayenoord, Elkins, & Ashman, 1989). I used repeated readings and organized data into units, for example, a view of the nature of writing, knowledge of good-writer characteristics, and the problems and strategies of good writers. I coded responses (e.g., "I like writing." was labeled PR for positive response), wrote memos, and organized fall and spring data into grids for each child (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Finally, I used direct quotes to summarize and illustrate interview findings. A few words were added parenthetically to make the oral responses more accessible in this article (Cleary, 1991).

Home visits were conducted at the end of the school year. Parents were asked how they thought the children were doing in school and what kinds of writing behaviors they witnessed at home; we also discussed reading. The same questions specific to these inquires were asked of each parent, and all visits included conversations about anything else the parents wanted to discuss. On parent interviews, I jotted down notes during the home visits and elaborated on these notes immediately after leaving. Parent interviews were recorded in writing as close to verbatim as possible, and I used repeated review and descriptive quotes and summaries to illustrate the findings.

Finally, I reread field notes and wrote memos on how the child interacted with writing in the classroom. I wrote up instances that showed patterns of persistent engagement with writing, it's conscious use to make sense of the

world, and comments reflective of "self-as-writer." These data also served to document literate thinking and a "working relationship" with written language. Further they provided a systematic check on the artifact and interview findings, kept individual differences in view, and helped in the search for disconfirming evidence.

## Results

### Analysis of Writing Artifacts

The analysis of written data documented writing growth in all three children as well as illustrated some individual differences. All the children evidenced increased voice and audience awareness. They produced more writing and longer pieces, and demonstrated an expanding knowledge of genre. Individual differences were found in a variety of areas (e.g., writing growth in a child who began the year with less sophisticated text structures). A discussion of each child and representative samples of his or her writing follow. (In all of the children's writing presented below, examples are presented in conventional form and names of peers have been changed.)

**Willie.** Willie grew as a writer in several ways. He engaged with writing more, producing nearly as many pieces in his spring writing (a one-month period) as in his fall writing (a three-month period). In both fall and spring, Willie's text structures consisted primarily of initial paragraphs. However, he wrote more complex texts in the spring, producing actual stories and fewer story fragments than in the fall. Examples of Willie's writing follow.

#### *Fall Writing*

##### *My Bike*

My bike is so fast. My friends is too. My friends got a bike too. My friend is David his bike is named SR1. Jim (word illegible) bike and mine is blue. THE END.

#### *Spring Writing*

##### *To Washington*

One day I went to Washington. And I went to the president and said, What is going on? The policemen beat up black people and you got to stop this. OK. I got an airplane to take us there and everywhere something is on the news. See some police man beating up a

black person. We are there and they meet the president. Let's stop them before they hit him. His is poor he can't afford to go to a hospital.

Willie's most frequently used written-language feature was a format that included a title and formalized beginning and ending in both sets of writing. Although, as shown in the example above, his fall writing showed little if any use of literary words and phrases or lively and engaging language, Willie's spring writing included these characteristics. Moreover, topic, theme, and content differed in the spring writing. For example, Willie incorporated literary elements such as conflict and character representation, and his spring writing evoked an emotional response.

**Schemeka.** Schemeka's writing developed over the year in similar ways. For example, she wrote more, producing over half again as many pieces in the spring (one month) collection than she did in the fall (three month) collection. In addition, she produced more stories and generated fewer initial-paragraph products and story fragments. Analyses of both fall and spring writing indicated that Schemeka wrote about topics that held personal meaning, and her writing contained literary elements such as conflict. However, Schemeka increased the number and quality of these elements and began writing true fiction later in the year. Her writing became more and more decontextualized as the second example below demonstrates.

**Fall Writing**  
My Family

I love my family. We go everywhere together. We play games together. We love each other. Just because sometimes we fight doesn't mean that we don't love each other any more. We will still love each other no matter how big we get, or how little we get. We will still love each other. THE END

**Spring Writing**  
Jump Roping

One day I was jump roping with my friends. I jumped so high that I touched the clouds. Then I tried to get down but I couldn't. I was stuck. Then I began to cry. Then I look to the right and I saw a woman. She said "Who are you?" I am Schemeka Who are you?" "I am Mailpa. I live here." "You do?" "Yes." "Do you eat?" "Yes I eat

apples from the apple tree." "How do you sleep?" "I sleep on the clouds." "Do you have ...?" "Don't bother me kid!" "All I want to say is can you help me?" "Help you what?" "Go back jump roping with my friends at school?" "Sure tap your feet three times and say there's no place like school, there's no place like school. Then I was still jump roping and I never went that jump—that high again. THE END.

In the spring Schemeka engaged in expository writing (about dinosaurs) and persuasive writing (about the environment), and her use of lively, engaging language, voice, and literary and text-like words and phrases increased. Similar to Willie and Isaac, she incorporated dialogue with increased skill.

**Isaac.** Isaac produced more writing in his fall and spring collections than Willie or Schemeka. Although he wrote a number of stories in the fall, Isaac produced more in the one-month spring collection than he had in the previous three-month fall collection.

**Fall Writing**  
Halloween Hunt

I had a hunt on Halloween. It was about pumpkins. I wanted a pumpkin so bad I could see one. So I got a hunt to get me a pumpkin When they came back with no pumpkins, "Were is my pumpkin?" "We did not find a pumpkin." "Go get me a pumpkin now or I am going to make you (words illegible). OK." Soon they came back with my pumpkin and I ate my pie.

**Spring Writing**  
The 3 Boys

Once there was a boy and he work in a factory. He had a wife and 3 kids and a nice house and car. He works till 9:00 in the morning. He sleeps in the daytime. But there was a problem. The boss was out of town and who was going to run the factory? So he decided he was going to run the factory. It will be his first time. So the next day he got the plans done and went to work. "Let's get to work cleaning this place up." So everybody went to work. And when they was done that place was the cleanest work shop in town. It went good at first, but then it was lunch time. Then (words illegible) a food fight. Food was everywhere and they had to clean every last piece of food. Then the



boss came in and showed what they were doing. They got fired.  
THE END

Isaac's spring writing demonstrated increased written-language characteristics. He also wrote some persuasive genre pieces (on recycling, the rain forest, and littering) in this period.

**A summary.** A summary of the children's writing development follows.

- **Willie:** In the category of text structures, Willie progressed from writing primarily initial paragraphs to story writing and he produced more written pieces. His use of written language characteristics increased in the spring to include dialogue, emotional center, and more text words and phrases.
- **Schemeka:** Demonstrating growth in the text structures category, Schemeka's spring writing included the new genre of fiction. Change in written language characteristics was illustrated by more lively language, and text words and phrases, and she wrote in increased volume.
- **Isaac:** With respect to text structures, Isaac utilized story form in fall and spring; however, he increased the complexity of his stories, wrote more, and began using new genre. Written language characteristics showed development in emotional center, engaging language, and text words and phrases.

### Analysis of Writing Interviews

The findings from the analyses of the writing interviews indicated that the children began the school year with positive views about writing, and they maintained them. Their discussions revealed breadth in thinking about writing and an ability to consider themselves critically as writers. Importantly, after experiencing their second-grade year and (presumably) the two previous years' constructivist-based classrooms, these low-income, African American children demonstrated that they thought about writing in sophisticated and motivated ways. The following excerpts are representative of the interview results.

#### *Willie (Fall Interview)*

It's (writing) not hard because the teacher says go to work, and I do. Like me and my friends we all write together. That's why I write a lot. I just want to keep writing and writing until it is time to stop. Make it different, fix it, change it a little. When you are tired sometimes you mess up. It's fun and you can draw pictures if you want to. If you can't read, you ain't gonna write no better.

#### *Willie (Spring Interview)*

I like any kind of writing except long words. You can write about things you did, like going to Chucky Cheese or your birthday, or getting a bike and riding to your grandma's. With friends, like with friends you get to do more pages and draw more. I don't like it by myself, it's harder, but sometimes you concentrate better by yourself. I can write and spell. I try to do my best. I make it long so I can publish it. That first story be still in my mind. I am still thinking about it.

Willie's interviews helped confirm his classroom preferences for writing with others. He seemed to be self-aware and comfortable in understanding that he worked better this way. Willie's peripheral participation was supported in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Ongoing collaboration helped him "write a lot... make it long ... so (he could) publish." Willie verbalized the confidence that was demonstrated in classroom action. For example, he consistently asked others to write with him or joined a peer in writing events. His organization of peer support nearly always supported his writing and seemed mutually enjoyable. Willie's topic choices also illustrated his knowledge of writing as a personally meaningful, communicative act.

Schemeka's and Isaac's interview examples demonstrated similar literate thinking (i.e., ownership and a working relationship with writing).

#### *Schemeka (Fall Interview)*

I like to write because I be writing at home. I be reading some books and then I get some paper and write. People get writing ideas from reading stories, or from their mother or father telling them things they want to know about. Then they get to be another good writer. Well, if I don't know what to write about, I just write and write until I can find something to write about. I like to write stories, I feel happy. Because I like to do things that I like to do and read things different. I read things that I never heard of and I want to write about it. Then I write.

#### *Schemeka (Spring Interview)*

Writing helps me read better, it helps me understand what I'm writing. I can write mostly everything in this room. Writing is fun. I like it a lot. I have to write until it is time to clean up. But sometimes I don't feel like writing. I been writing some bad stories lately. Some words are hard for me to spell. It's a good thing we have dictionaries!

I like both (writing with others or alone). With myself I don't get into trouble. With my friend, she writes, I just draw, and I get myself into trouble. Sometimes my friend helps me draw. We both have to do something (writing) or we get into trouble. You write better when you read books and you read better when you write.

Schemeka's interviews also provided evidence of concepts we want all children to acquire in school. "Because I like to do things that I like to do and read things different. I read things that I never heard of and I want to write about it. Then I write." Schemeka provided an almost painful critique of her work, but did not dwell on the negative. She gained satisfaction from sustained writing and had an understanding of the reading /writing relationship. Also shown was that Schemeka consistently participated in the classroom on her own and with others. She voiced the teacher's expectations and understood her role as learner.

Isaac's interpretations were similar.

#### ***Isaac (Fall Interview)***

It (writing) helps you. When you go to college and you have to go to the board and you can spell cause you used to write all the time. I been writing since I was in Head Start. Cause I got all these stories done and took them home. I got a big stack. If I'm in a bad mood, I don't want to write long stories. Like the first day of school it was a disaster; everybody was just playing with their (lunch) money. I get good ideas when the teacher reads books. I think it's a good idea and I write about that stuff. I really feel good! I think about a story, like what I said when I go to bed. When authors go to sleep they wake up in the morning and then they write about it.

#### ***Isaac (Spring Interview)***

Writing is real fun. It has adventures in it. I do it all the time. I'm a very good writer, because every day people come up to me and say, how do you spell this and that. If it's a real good story and the teacher is proud of me, I want to write it all over again! Keep trying, don't be a quitter. Authors do have problems and I do, too. It takes them one year to make one story. Like what to think of. Decide where the story is going to take place. Like learn about the animal they are going to write about. Sound the word out, or get a book to find it. Sometimes I write by myself and sometimes with friends.

Isaac's talk was consistent with his action. He understood his role as writer and was productive both individually and with peers. His interviews served to substantiate classroom observations (e.g., that he understood the importance of setting and purpose, that writing is hard work, and that he valued writing skills). Isaac's interviews reveal his passion, "I get good ideas when the teacher reads books. I think it's a good idea and I write about that stuff. I really feel good!"

In sum, from the interviews, it is clear these three children were similar in their literate thinking as evidenced by the conscious exploitation of written language as a thinking instrument, by their sense of ownership, and by engagement and persistence in writing (Heath, 1991; Wells, Chang, & Maher 1990). These average to above average readers became writers who had a "working relationship" with their craft (Britton, 1982). Schemeka, Willie, and Isaac demonstrated courage (Dyson, 1995). They knew *what it takes to write*, and they strategically undertook the challenge.

#### **Analyses of Home Visits with Parents**

Information from the home visits with Schemeka's, Willie's, and Isaac's parents illustrated that they held positive views about their children and learning at school. Schemeka's father and Isaac's father especially emphasized how pleased they were. For example, Isaac's father said that his son was "always writing," and he laughed (noting that he had a "good frustration") in discussing how repeatedly Isaac asked family members to listen to his writing. Schemeka's father said that his daughter ... "couldn't write enough!" (parent's emphasis). This father asked me how he could help her sustain her positive attitude toward school; he said his only wish was to "...see it continue." Willie's mother was also very positive. She discussed her son's writing about things the family had done together (e.g., a time when Willie's family came home from a restaurant and he sat down wrote about it).

#### **Limitations and Trustworthiness**

The results of this study are not generalizable in the traditional sense. The findings are limited to the population studied in one particular classroom via a case study design. Because this particular study was limited to average and above average learners, it cannot demonstrate what may or may not have occurred with diverse learners who struggle. However, the use of multiple data sources and triangulation procedures, as well as the analysis of artifact, interview, and observation data contributed to the soundness of the research. A

degree of intuitive information was involved in gaining insights into the literate thinking of these children. Although there is a general difficulty in uncovering these aspects of literacy, the method and analysis were appropriate.

### **Discussion**

This investigation of writing provides information on the success of children from a racial/cultural group that historically does not adequately succeed in public education (Smith-Burke, 1989; Strickland, 1994). The children in this study exhibited (a) a relationship between their own experiences and written language, and (b) development toward achieving "inner-control" (Britton, 1982, p. 97; Clay, 1991). Based on this investigation's analysis of the children's writing, the quality of their demonstrated writing growth, and their interpretations about writing and themselves as writers, the findings clearly suggest that writing was a source of intellectual stimulation for Schemeka, Isaac, and Willie.

These conclusions contribute to and are supported by findings from previous research (Fulwiler, 1987; Green, 1982; Heath, 1983; Wells, Chang, & Maher, 1990). I argue that children's literate thinking is not unlike that of mature, adult writers. Personal conflict, longing, engagement in family and community experiences, and experimentation with genre become part of the process of producing written language and using writing as a way of making sense for oneself, the world, and others.

Delpit (1988, 1991), Cope and Kalantzis, (1993), and Reyes, (1992) have raised concerns about the success of various racial and cultural groups in constructivist-based/whole language classrooms. This is a critical issue that must be addressed in studies that not only show the need for more and better support, but also for research that documents the children's success and individual differences. The current study contributes to this goal.

While there is no doubt that racial, cultural, and linguistic differences between children and their teachers are of critical concern, this study indicates that these differences can be successfully negotiated. Delpit (1988), Ladson-Billings (1998), and others point out the importance of teachers' knowing children well. This "knowing" can occur in classrooms with teachers and children of different cultural backgrounds, and it can occur in constructivist-based classrooms. While it is true that no one kind of instruction will ensure success for every child, it is also true that writing-process and whole language teachers are successful with many children. In this particular case, Ms. L.'s pedagogy provided the acceptance and high expectations that led to academic success.

Complete with their individual differences intact, Willie, Schemeka, and Isaac were children who not only wrote productively by the end of the school year, but who also acquired voice and confidence in themselves as writers. And they had parents who were pleased with and supportive of their progress and attitudes.

### **Instructional Implications and Suggestions for Research**

As explained earlier, the teacher in this study had completed a Master's Degree and Reading Recovery teacher (Clay, 1979) training, and she read professional journals to contribute to her ongoing learning. She explicitly taught skills and strategies, had over a decade of experience, and worked in a building with a supportive administration. Mrs. L. was a representative of a white, middle class community. These variables may not exist nor interact in the same ways in similar classrooms. This teacher modeled how writers think by writing and talking about her thinking with the whole class and small groups. She engaged the children in several conversations daily in which their own writing was shared and discussed. These exchanges were exemplars of "instructional conversations" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991) that support cognitive and affective growth and help children acquire a disposition for learning (Dahl & Freppon, 1995). The teacher provided the children with consistent, concrete examples of quality writing (e.g., "I like the way Willie put details in his story; he told us how he felt and what the picnic was like."). During whole class, small group, and one-on-one teaching, Ms. L. worked at teaching spelling, using letter/sound relationships to sound out words, punctuation, and grammar and word usage (making it sound like good writing). Importantly, Ms. L. showed respect for each child and an awareness of individual strengths and needs. She valued their preferences, provided for self-selection, and gave them expert direction. The children had responsibilities and support as they participated in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Cultural mismatches between children's background and instructional contexts are real. However, a successful learning community can be achieved when cultural differences are bridged with well-informed, hard working, and caring teachers (Noddings, 1984). It is critical for teachers to learn all they can about the children in their charge and to build on this knowledge. The teacher in this study provided for universal human needs (e.g., a feeling of emotional safety in the classroom, challenging work in which they had a voice, and a bit of pushing when they needed it). Importantly, the children's

interpretations of their instruction, as evidenced in their writing and interviews, demonstrated the early literacy knowledge needed for school success. We need research that focuses on diverse populations, their successes and the instruction that supports them. In today's multi-cultural society the classroom milieu and teacher-student discourse should be studied and well-documented. Further, we need to explore the support needed within schools, the home, and in the community. Although the current study's home information was limited, the data were telling. Further research is needed on the relationship between school and a literate life outside the classroom.

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## Biography

**Penny Freppon** teaches courses in literacy education at the University of Cincinnati. She has supervised a clinical practicum and taught a three-quarter graduate sequence there on reading diagnosis and remediation for the past eight years in the Literacy Program. Her research interests include early and beginning reading and writing and teachers' professional development.

Dr. Freppon has published articles dealing with research on whole language and literature-based classrooms. Her publications appear in a range of journals including *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Language Arts*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, and the *Journal of Literacy Research*.

## Appendix A

### Text Structures

Early Exposition	Writing is focused on a category or topic such as family and consists of an assertion and related sentence or clause (e.g., "My brother is fun. He always plays with me.").
Initial Paragraphs	There are clusters of sentences or clauses including at least three that are closely associated or thematic (e.g., "If I was a witch, I might be ugly ...I wouldn't like it at all.").
Story Fragment	Writing is organized in story form, has episodic characteristics, but is "transitional" (i.e., combines story characteristics with elaborated narrative-like lists, lacks all story features).
Story	Writing is structured in story form, is episodic and includes other story characteristics such as problem/solution or theme. The piece contains an initiating event and closure.
Genre	Writing is organized in story, persuasive form, has non-fiction qualities.

## Appendix B

### Written Language Characteristics

#### Language uses devices associated with written language

Titles and Formalized Beginnings and Endings	“Jumping Rope” “The End” “Once upon a time...”
Dialogue	“She said, Who are you?”
Emotional Center or Voice Sense of Audience/Purpose	The individual writer’s voice comes through “ ...he is poor and can’t afford to go to the hospital.” Shows awareness of audience, and has a purpose.
Lively, Engaging or Poetic Language (writing evidence: building excitement or suspense)	“It just grew, and grew, and grew.” “He was so, so, so scary.”
Literary or Text Words and Phrases and Word Order	“I have the key that opens the door to the future.” “I’m going, just for fun, to play Arcade Games.”

## Appendix C

### Writing interview: Questions were asked in both the fall and spring interview; some questions tapped similar information.

1. Are there some things you like about writing?
2. Is writing like reading?
3. Do you like to write with friends or by yourself?
4. Can writing help someone learn to read better?
5. Is writing a hard thing for you to do?
6. How can someone get to be a good writer?
7. Do good writers ever have problems?
8. Do you ever go back and write more on a story or make it different the next time you write?
9. When a writer is stuck, what can she/he do about it?
10. Are you a good writer?
11. What do you do if you don’t know what to write?
12. After you write, do you ever think about it later in the day?
13. What makes someone a really good writer?

