Mapping Our Stories: Teachers’ Reflections on Themselves as Writers

A group of linguistically diverse teachers come to identify themselves as writers by drawing neighborhood maps and writing personal narratives about childhood memories.

Marisela, a teacher in my writing instruction course, summed up the feelings of many of her classmates when she wrote about herself as a teacher of writing:

There’s nothing that comes to mind. My mind is a complete blank. Blank Blank Blank Blank. If I were allowed to do so I might even fill this Blank sheet of paper with the word Blank. I wonder how many Blanks it would take to fill this sheet of paper. Blank, Blank, Blank, Blank. Well it took 4 Blanks to fill one line and there are 30 lines so that makes it 120 Blanks.

Because the teachers in my course do not identify themselves as writers, they are confused about how to teach writing to their elementary students and tend to revert to lower-level corrections, such as editing grammar and spelling errors. Although these corrections are important for writers and critical for teachers who teach writing, a writer must first get beyond the anxiety of writing before attending to the elements of mechanics in order to write something worthy of editing. The challenge for me with many of the elementary teachers in my classes is to help them overcome their fear of writing, “writing apprehension” (Daly & Miller, 1975), and help them to see themselves as writers and authors. The purpose of this article is to make visible how a linguistically diverse group of teachers who were themselves fearful of writing and teaching writing became engaged in writing their own stories. By doing so they began to think of themselves as writers, and in the process they became more effective teachers of writing.

Myself as a Writer

My own reflections on writing experiences as an elementary school-teacher in the 1980s validate studies showing that some elementary teachers have poor perceptions of themselves as writers (Frager, 1994). Therefore they do not assign much writing, do not encourage writing in their classrooms, and give students few opportunities to write (Daly, 1985). My major in college was elementary education, and my expertise was in child development, not English education. In school, “writing” was handwriting, grammar, and spelling. I defined writing in narrow terms, believing that authors were gifted human beings. Because I did not see myself as ever being able to write like the authors I was reading, I did not identify myself as
a "writer." An older teacher down the hall told me, "First graders can't write until after Christmas." I believed her, and for many years my first graders never "wrote" until January and then only with prompts that ended in one-line, correctly spelled stories.

My reflections of being a first-grade teacher coupled with my university experiences with elementary teachers and my research into studies discussing writing apprehension forced me to question how I had changed my own identity as a writer. Why did I now, years later, consider myself a writer, although I was fearful of writing as a first-grade teacher? What experiences had changed my identity?

In the summer of 1996, I was the research fellow for the South Coast Writing Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara. During the first day of the summer institute, the co-director of the project, Jack Phreaner, who was a retired high school English teacher, led the group in a prewriting activity called the Annotated Map of the Neighborhood. The purpose of this strategy, used by many writing project fellows and grounded in the work of James Moffett, was to show teachers how important reflection and memory can be for writing. We listened to Jack tell stories of growing up in Hollywood during World War II. As he talked, he drew a map of his neighborhood. We were instructed to draw maps of our own childhood neighborhoods, share the stories in groups, and then write about one of the places on the map that we had drawn.

The memory map was a turning point for me. I remembered my neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley in Southern California when it was still mostly fields of turnips, tomatoes, and corn and drew a map of Shoup Avenue at the north end of Los Angeles County (Figure 1). As I drew the map, my mind was flooded with memories of past experiences. I remembered digging the swimming pool in the dirt with my sister, my brother falling out of the car, and my biting the head off my sister's chocolate Easter egg. As I reflected on what had happened to me as a child, I realized I did have many experiences to write about. My fear of writing had been mixed up with a fear of not knowing what to write about, not having anything to say, and not knowing enough about what I wanted to write. After the map, I realized no one else knew as much as I did about my own personal experiences. I was the only one who could share what had happened to me as a child growing up in the San Fernando Valley in the 1950s and 1960s. I experienced the transformation of myself from non-writer to writer and, more importantly, observed my own awareness and reflection of this phenomenon. As Blau (1988) writes:

For surely, among the chief differences distinguishing basic writers from experienced, competent writers is the fact that competent writers know and trust that their own thoughts are worth writing about. The difference is not that basic writers fail to think; it's that they don't recognize or attend to the thinking they do as suitable raw material for written discourse. (p. 35)

This experience with the Annotated Map of the Neighborhood led me to wonder whether this strategy would be useful for the elementary teachers at California State University, Los Angeles. I began a teacher research project in an attempt to answer that question and to see if elementary teachers in my classes would become less fearful of writing if they found topics to write about in memories of personal experiences. All the participants were teaching in Los Angeles County schools as credentialed teachers studying for their master's degrees in reading or as precredential. Emergency permit teachers studying for their elementary teaching credential. I found other studies that looked at how personal narratives and autobiographical writing and discussions can enhance elementary teachers' understanding of literacy instruction (Blake, 1995; Brinkley, 1993; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Meyer, 1993; Wimett & Blachowicz, 1997). Kathryn Au, a teacher educator at the University of
Hawaii, asked her elementary teachers to write their own personal narratives as they engaged in writing workshop. Au (1998) states that “Teachers’ exploration of their own cultural identities must be the starting point in the quest to prepare them to teach effectively in classrooms with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (p. 14). In helping her students write about their own cultural and personal identities, Au hoped they would form a foundation for understanding the cultural identities of their own elementary students and help to “open windows into other cultures” (p. 20).

A similar strategy can be found in the work of Moffett (1999), who proposes that one way for students to begin learning about writing is through reflection and memory of personal experiences. He states:

The memory is a tremendous storehouse of materials that all professional writers use. It’s not narcissistic or solipsistic or just about oneself; it’s about all sorts of things. If you think of your own memories, you will recognize that they are about everything, everything you ever had a chance to observe, experience, or participate in. The memory has all sorts of potentialities for the transpersonal writing that goes into essay. (p. 5)

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN DIVERSE CULTURES

When I began this project, I wanted teachers to overcome their writing apprehension by remembering childhood experiences and writing about those memories. What I discovered was that not only did these teachers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds have many experiences to write about, but their memories were very different from those of more privileged Anglo students. The population of students at Cal State LA reflects a diverse society, and the distribution among the teachers in my project was 28 percent Hispanic American, 26 percent Asian American, 7 percent African American, and 39 percent Anglo American. Their memory maps were sometimes sad stories of rejection and humiliation because of differences in language and culture. I was hoping to broaden their definition of writing and help them identify themselves as writers. I did not realize that their reflections were about to change my own understandings of multicultural and bilingual education.

I began the memory map activity with stories of my own childhood in the San Fernando Valley in the 1950s since Kathryn Au and Jack Phraener both began their teaching with their own personal reflections. Au (1998) writes “the preservice teachers were told something about the author’s background and cultural identity as a Chinese American who grew up in a large, extended family in Honolulu” (p. 16). Jack told four stories of growing up in Hollywood. By sharing personal stories first, they made an important statement: “I am willing to share part of myself with you as I reflect on my past.” This sharing of childhood memories while modeling the lesson is a vital part of this activity.

During the school year of 1998/1999, all the elementary teachers (103 participants) who were students in my classes (Principles and Practices of Writing Instruction: Writing and Language Arts Methods) drew and shared memory maps. We used other writing process ideas such as sharing the writing, responding to writing in groups, talking about experiences before and after writing, engaging in writing conferences, and making the stages of the writing process explicit. My project drew on the theories of writing process researchers (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994; Frank, 2001; Graves, 1983; Short & Harste, 1996) and in addition on principles and practices from the National Writing Project (Blau, 1988; Gray & Sterling, 1995; Olson, 1996; Smith, 1996). A central principle for the NWP is “that writing teachers must write; that their authority as teachers of writing must be grounded on their own personal experience as writers—as persons who know firsthand the struggles and satisfactions of the writer’s task” (Blau, 1988, p. 31).

In order to understand how this memory map influenced the teachers’ apprehension about writing, I looked at the process that they had gone through to construct their neighborhood stories. The process began with small-group discussions about their maps in their writing groups. I collected these maps and audiotaped descriptions of different neighborhoods. Then stories generated from the map were read in their groups, and each writer was given written and oral feedback by other teachers. I made a point of sitting in on one writing group during each class meeting and writing field notes of the process. My aim as participant observer was to allow the group as much autonomy as possible, thereby letting teachers be in charge of the process.
As I read and reread the final drafts, I realized that these stories differed in unique ways from my own map memories as an Anglo, English-only, middle-class teacher. I compared and categorized the stories and found particular similarities among the map stories of these linguistically diverse teachers that I classified into themes. I compared these themes with the themes suggested during the discussions in class. The themes were arranged into three general categories: cultural differences, facing the dilemma of fitting in, and unexplored cultures.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The neighborhood map stories written by the elementary teachers revealed a wealth of diverse experiences about living in Mexico, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and East Los Angeles. The stories described different neighborhoods but similar human experiences of childhood. (The student writings excerpted below are used with their permission, and all names have been changed.) For example, the following piece illustrates that many students were immigrants and came to the United States from all over the world:

I grew up in a small city called Hsinchu which is located in the northern part of Taiwan. My family still lives there and owns a building in which their light bulb business occupies the first floor, while they reside on the second, third, and fourth floors. Unlike the United States where most of the time I have to drive in order to get to the places I want to go, the neighborhood where I grew up is a very convenient place. There is a hair salon next to my house and a skin care studio just across the street. We also have a 7-11, a bank, a motorcycle and car dealership, a chiropractor, a middle school, a pharmacy, and an office supply store which are all within easy walking distance.

The teachers wrote and talked about the physical differences in these various locations. However, because many of these teachers were born in other countries, the social and cultural belief systems were different from those in Los Angeles. Controversial topics were explored as teachers reflected on their childhood. For instance, in one story, traditional Chinese attitudes about gender came into conflict with beliefs in the United States. At the same time, they illustrated similarities between two cultures, as one teacher wrote:

I have six siblings, and whenever I tell people that I have four older sisters and two younger brothers, their faces always fill with surprise. The reason is that in our Chinese tradition, which is still practiced now in most of the family, we need to have boys to carry on the family name and business. This is especially true in the case of my father who was the first son of his family and carries on even greater responsibility. When I was born, my grandfather was very disappointed because I was a girl. He gave me a very boyish name, hoping that I would in turn bring the luck of boys with my mother’s next baby. Fortunately, my parents did have two boys after me.

This essay points to different cultural ideas about “luck” and “gender” and could be developed into an essay on the similarities and differences between Chinese beliefs in the “luck of boy” and how luck is viewed from many different perspectives in the United States. As a starting point for a discussion of feminism or a springboard for writing a comparison piece about luck in China and luck in the United States, these essays reflect Moffett’s ideas (1989) of having personal reflections be bridges to essay writing.

Many of the narratives began with differences, both physical and cultural, and ended with common vignettes of the human experience. These stories described childhood adventures that many of us have experienced. In this next example, the writer began with her description of a neighborhood map that was far from Los Angeles and ended with a story of what she and her brother had done one day while playing:

I remember the time when I was eight years old and my brother was 6 years old. We were playing and I put a bunch of cotton balls up my brother’s nose because I wanted him to be Santa Claus. I just kept sticking cotton balls up his nose. By the time we finished playing, the cotton balls were hopelessly stuck in my brother’s nose. I was in big trouble, as my parents had to take him to the doctor. From that time on, my brother would never listen to me anymore, and to this day, we still remember and laugh about this childhood incident.

Although the different locations emphasized our differences, the common experiences of childhood made us realize how similar we were as human beings. For example, Patricia shared her childhood memories of growing up in El Valle de La Trinidad in Baja California in a remote village with treacherous dirt roads, no electricity, and no running water. One day a relief agency helicopter from the United States landed, and English-speaking Amer-
icans handed out new blankets, canned food, clothes, and toys. Patricia was given "the most wonderful, shiny new toy that I ever saw, a brand new red Radio Flyer Scooter" (Figure 2):

I can still remember when my sister and I used to go racing down on my shiny red scooter. We would inevitably bump into a rock and fall off the scooter with a loud thump and of course a wail or two from my sister. Instead of helping her I would run after the scooter to make sure it wasn't scratched. The hill was so steep that we would pick up enough speed to raise the dirt off the road.

Our long hair would flow in the wind as we raced down the hill. If it was right before sunset, when the mosquitoes were at their worst we would hit them head on at such a speed that it was mosquito suicide. Too bad for them, we thought. We would eventually hit the bottom of the hill after many attempts and make our way up carrying the scooter back up so as not to over use it or damage it.

By asking this diverse group of elementary teachers to write from personal experience, and by valuing the variation that occurred within the framework of the annotated map, teachers were able to take ownership of their writing since they were the ones who knew about and could talk and write about their memories. Often other students in their writing groups would ask a question that would prompt the writer to remember other interrelated childhood stories. Or, as one person told a childhood story, another person would remember something similar and jot down another memory on his or her map.

**Facing the Dilemma of Fitting In**

Although many of the stories of childhood included universal themes of growing up, another theme described their struggles of fitting into a society that does not automatically associate Asian, African, or Latino/Latina with being "American." "Fitting in" stories were about the dilemma of being treated differently as young children because of ethnicity or language differences.

Samantha, who was born in Vietnam to a Chinese father and a Vietnamese mother, described how she became acculturated into United States society but lost her own unique identity when her family finally settled in Los Angeles and she entered fourth grade:

Being a quiet and somewhat shy person, it took me a while to make friends. One day, two of my male classmates came to visit. I wasn't expecting any visitors and was in my "at home" clothes which were light blue Chinese pajamas. I didn't see anything wrong with it, seeing as how this was what all the kids wore in my homeland; so I thought it was normal here too.

One of the guys (who was also Chinese) gave me a look and said that I shouldn't be wearing that kind of outfit out in public. I asked why. He replied that we were in America now and that we should dress like other
Americans. My form of dress was an embarrassment that didn’t belong in American society. Wearing Chinese pajamas out on the street would make me stick out like a sore thumb and would label me as different.

From then on, I became overly sensitive and self-conscious about myself, even my culture. I stopped wearing pajamas out on the street and even went so far as to not speak my native language out on the streets or at school. What I learned from my classmate’s comment was that if I wanted to fit in and not be an embarrassment, I had to be like everyone else in dress as well as in speech. That incident taught me a lot about what I had to do to fit in, but on the other hand, I also lost a lot.

Although the narrative points to how one childhood incident changed the direction of her life, Samantha does not seem to take issue with or write about how she lost her own unique identity. She writes quickly at the end, “on the other hand, I also lost a lot.” This personal narrative might eventually lead to an essay on what immigrants lose when they come to the United States. Nieto (2000)

Some of the memory map reflections told stories of rejection inside elementary classrooms. Mariana, a Latina elementary teacher, wrote a story on “Amnesia”—a description of her life in school as an “invisible” student. Mariana gives a glimpse into the lives of students who come into our classrooms not speaking English:

Up until fourth grade I had attended a school where they taught only in English. I only spoke Spanish. Neither my teachers nor my peers were able to communicate with me. I don’t remember my teachers ever reading to me. I don’t remember them showing me how to add or subtract. I can’t even remember the teacher speaking to me. I was invisible. No one knew my language, my culture or me. I guess they didn’t care to know... It has been almost 22 years and this experience still haunts me as each new day passes and I still can’t remember. It brings tremendous sadness to my heart as I recall the shame and worthlessness I felt.

Lourdes, a Latina sixth-grade teacher, was the only one in her extended family to go to college. Her

borhood meant speaking without an accent. The beginning of her narrative describes her own perspective on being Mexican:

All my life, as far back as I can remember, I have tried not to be the typical Mexican. What I thought to be a typical Mexican was the following: a drop-out from school, a gang member, a girl who got pregnant very young, a boy who went to jail or got killed, a person who was dependent on federal assistance or did not work very hard, or a person who did not have many successes in life. Finally, a Mexican was not very well educated and spoke little or no English.

UNEXPLORRED CULTURES

One teacher wrote about her experiences as a nine-year-old farm worker in the 1970s in central California. Her narrative considers perspectives from migrant children who are rarely heard in our mainstream culture and “whose voices have traditionally been silenced” (Blake, 2001, p. 435). She explained what it was like to have to wake at 3:30 a.m. on cold summer mornings, wanting to stay in bed but having to help the family in the grape fields. She described sitting in the back of an old blue Ford truck with her two brothers reaching the fields in the dark, and smelling rotten grapes in wet dirt. Even though she is young, she must, like everyone else, take her own row (Figure 3):

As I walk on the side of my row I am careful to not walk down the middle part because it needs to stay smooth to lay out the grapes. Next, I position my bandeja in the dirt directly under the grapevines. I stand there with goose bumps all over my body staring at the grapevines that look almost black in the darkness. “I hate this. I hate this. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to do this my whole life.”

“Fitting in” stories were about the dilemma of being treated differently as young children because of ethnicity or language differences.

Researchers “the choice of having no choice” and wrote that if students in our schools choose to identify with their culture and language, they may face alienation from their peers. If, on the other hand, they identify with the mainstream culture, they may become alienated from their family and risk losing their own language and cultural identity. The choices are difficult ones and are really no choices at all. Efforts to help her sisters break away from a neighborhood social system of gangs, violence, and early pregnancy were not successful. Her story, “How To Become An American,” focused on prejudices within her own community. She wrote of being criticized and insulted with racial slurs by other Mexican children because she was not born in the United States and explains how being an “American” in her neighbor-

Language Arts, Vol. 80 No. 3, January 2003
I think to myself as I muster up the strength to move my cold arm into the grapevine. I stick my hand and arm into the grapevines and flip all the vines up and over to expose the green grapes underneath. Several times as I stick my hand into the vines to lift them up, I smash a worm or a snail and I feel the cold, sticky remains of it on my hand. Every time this happens, I yank my hand out quickly and think with all my heart and mind, "I hate this. I hate this." While I hold the vines with the top part of my left arm and elbow, I grasp the grape bushel with my left hand and cut it off with the knife that is tied around my right wrist. I gently let the bushel drop into the bandeja that is right underneath the vine and go onto the next grape bushel.

IDENTIFYING THEMSELVES AS TEACHERS OF WRITING

The writing process practices, beginning with drawing and talking about neighborhoods, enabled teachers to develop topics for writing from their personal experiences. They used the writing process with their writing groups, learning the differences between revision and editing, and across a 10-week period wrote final drafts. With more time, many of the stories would become essays, important enough to seek publication in some form (Khalsa, 2000; Vos, 2002). I still did not know if the memory maps had significantly changed their fears about writing. My question now was whether or not the teachers had overcome their writing apprehension. To answer this question, I examined an essay titled "Myself as a Writer; Myself as a Teacher of Writing" that my students wrote at the beginning and end of each of the five courses I taught during 1998/1999. By comparing these essays with other data collected about their writing identities (student evaluations of the course, quickwrites, double-entry journals, personal communications, e-mails, interviews, and taped conversations), I was able to determine if these teachers were less fearful of writing.

Prior to this class, teachers were so concerned with correctness that many feared writing, did not identify themselves as writers, and did not teach composing in their classrooms. After this class, because of their experiences with the writing process, they stopped thinking of writing as a finished product that had to be correct and realized that some writing never made it to the final draft. Since I did not automatically collect most of the writing in class, they took more risks and became more fluent in their composing and in their first drafts. Ricardo, a sixth-grade teacher who was typical of many teachers, wrote in his first essay about his fear of writing. At the end of the course, his essay represents many of the others that I received:

Also, myself, I am not afraid to write anymore. At the beginning it was hard for me to write focusing too much on topic sentence. Now, I begin to write
without ever paying any attention to topic sentence and I am concentrating on content. Most important, I am not afraid to write anymore.

During the year, the course evaluations consistently showed that these elementary teachers felt more confident in their writing abilities and therefore in their abilities as writing instructors. For example, one elementary teacher wrote:

Thank you for bringing the love of writing back to me. Ever since 1st grade, I’ve always hated to write—for any reason. You and this course have enlightened me and given me so many strategies and ideas to implement into my own classroom.

To judge whether or not teachers understood underlying concepts of writing and therefore increased their effectiveness as writing instructors, I used Blau’s Theory of Revision (1996) as a framework to gauge their awareness of writing strategies. Blau sees one difference between experienced and inexperienced writers to be that of understanding the difference between revision and editing. Even though competent writers do some editing as they write, they do not focus on it so much that their thinking is blocked. Instead, they are interested in discovering their ideas and figuring out what it is they are trying to say. They think of revision mostly as a matter of gaining greater clarity and coherence in their ideas or amending their ideas substantively. On the other hand, inexperienced writers give most of their attention to form rather than content from the moment they begin writing. Typically, these writers pause so frequently to amend their language or correct mechanical errors that they are unable to develop or follow any continuous line of thought long enough to see what it is they are trying to say.

This theory was reflected in the essays of these elementary teachers, many of whom were English language learners. One teacher came to her knowledge about writing through her own experiences as a writer, and as she reflected on how she worked, she learned about how a writer writes:

I still procrastinate but not as much as I used to because I kind of want to see what I’ll turn out. I now know that I can always correct, redo, switch sentences around etc. in other words revise what I’ve written. Before I’d try and write it perfect the first time.

This writer realized that in first drafts, writers attempt to express what they do not yet know and revise what it is they are trying to come to know, discovering and constructing the emerging meaning for themselves. The editing stage that brings conventionality to the piece and final essays on herself as a writer, I saw how these writers were understanding this theory of revision. Shelly wrote in her first essay:

Writing is something I dislike. It is something that at times is stress provoking and leaves me feeling paralyzed and overwhelmed. I’m not sure what has caused me to feel this way.

After the course, Shelly wrote in her post essay:

My outlook on writing has changed considerably in the past nine weeks. I won’t go so far as to say that it has become easier because it hasn’t. I think I secretly hoped that my writing would somehow magically improve on its own. I have seen how much work it takes and experienced how valuable sharing ideas and collaboration are. I know now that I will have to commit myself to writing daily in order for the words to come and in order to become better acquainted with my voice.

In Shelly’s second essay, she realizes that writing is hard work and difficult for all writers. She knows that she must commit to it. Blau (1996) calls this the affective dimension of writing or commitment to writing and considers two acts of will in this dimension. The first is that if writers attribute enough value to what they have to say, then they will likely make the effort to get the ideas straight. The second act of will is that if writers have faith that they have the capacity to complete the act of writing, then they will meet the challenge of commitment. The Annotated Map of the Neighborhood fulfilled both acts and provided a framework for commitment to writing. It gave teachers a way to find value in what they were writing, and their revision of that piece in their writing groups gave them faith that they had the capacity to complete the act. With an under-
Children's Literature about Mapping


Cuyler, Margery. *From Here to There.* Illus. Y. C. Pak. (Holt, 1999). Marie Mendoza describes her place in her town, county, state, country, continent, hemisphere, planet, solar system, galaxy, and universe.

Fanelli, Sara. *My Map Book.* (Harper, 2001). A young girl constructs maps of her surroundings and interests. The book includes childlike maps with aerial views as well as a family tree, a flow chart, and other diagrams.

Hartman, Gail. *As the Crow Flies.* Illus. H. Stevenson. (Bradbury, 1991). Various animals travel through their own areas. Each route is mapped, and a big map at the end shows all the routes combined.

Hartman, Gail. *As the Roadrunner Runs.* Illus. C. Bobak. (Bradbury, 1994). Simple maps show how animals of the Southwest travel through their territories.


Leedy, Loreen. * Blast Off to Earth! A Look at Geography.* (Holiday, 1998). Aliens take a trip to Earth to learn about its basic geography and maps.

Leedy, Loreen. *Mapping Penny's World.* (Holt, 2000). Lisa decides to map all her dog's favorite places after learning about maps in school.

Rylant, Cynthia. *Tulip Sees America.* Illus. L. Desimini. (Scholastic, 1998). A young man and his dog, Tulip, take a motor tour across the United States. The story lends itself to geographic concepts as readers trace the route on a map.

Sis, Peter. *Madlenka.* (Farrar, 2000). A young girl's walk around her city block visiting neighbors who come from all over the world can inspire mapmaking about a child's neighborhood.

Sweeney, Joan. *Me on the Map.* Illus. A. Cable. (Dragonfly, 1998). A young girl describes her surroundings, starting with a map of her own bedroom and then moving on to maps of her house, street, town, state, country, and Earth.

—Marilyn Carpenter

Understanding the differences between revision and editing, the teachers acquired more identity as writers. As Janet wrote:

I feel more confident now as a writer. I don't feel that it has to be "right/perfect/final" the first time that I write. Through the Memory Map Activity I see that 1) I have interesting events to write about and 2) Revising my piece showed so much more detail and information about my subject.

These teacher-writers discovered that their memories from childhood were resources to draw upon when writing, as all became experts about their particular story. In writing groups they joined a discourse of other authors, using the techniques of writers, talking and acting like writers, realizing the hard work of revision. Consuela wrote in her essay that she was "behaving like an author" and explained how she was modeling the writing with her first graders:

Whenever I write stories with my first graders it makes me feel like I'm a true writer. I've noticed myself behaving like an author and this has had a definite impact on my children. I try to model as much as possible what a writer goes through when writing so they can see that becoming a writer takes a lot of hard work (practice) but with enthusiasm they can become authors.

Identifying themselves as writers was not sufficient for becoming effective writing instructors. It was not until these teachers reflected on their own writing practices, making them explicit as they learned about personal expression, choice, time, response, revision, and modeling, that they took advantage of their writing identities and took this knowledge to their own classrooms. Learning about writing pedagogy and identifying themselves as writers who could reflect on the difficulties of the writing process enabled them to change instructional strategies within their own classrooms with their own elementary students.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
FINAL REFLECTIONS

As these writers move back and forth between childhood and adulthood, memory becomes a form of travel (Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2002), a way of moving through open windows into other cultures (Au, 1998). As teachers explore the inscape of their own cultural and personal stories, they travel the landscapes of the world, listening to the stories of others. Memory not only bridges personal expression to essay but also connects teachers’ experiences to each other. Over and over I see how these writers build bridges to each other by sharing differences organized against the background of similarities (Agar, 1994). The Annotated Map of the Neighborhood is a vehicle for writers to begin conversations as they become animated storytellers, sharing memories of long ago life experiences, and through this sharing develop connections with each other.

The Annotated Map of the Neighborhood is one way teachers can learn how to use their own cultural backgrounds as resources for learning. Nieto (2000) calls for teachers to have students talk about their cultures to make them more visible. Using their culture as a “point of reference,” they will explore other cultures, learning how to value and respect others and learning how to use these cultures as a “solid basis for their education” (p. 298). By engaging in the process of writing themselves, these teachers begin to regard themselves as active knowledge generators, learning how to create a more culturally relevant curriculum in their own classrooms (Craviotto, Heras, & Espindola, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The need for writing workshop, where writers engage in freedom of choice and write with more time and response from peers, is more evident to these teacher-writers. They value writing groups for revision and support, experience writing for authentic audiences, and reflect on the difficulties involved in taking a piece of writing through the writing process. This awareness and reflection of their own processes also brings with it the ability to model their writing explicitly to students and point to important writing strategies. As they expand their experiences with writing, thinking, and reflecting about their own processes, they begin to consider themselves as writers. With this new identification and with new understandings of the writing process, they prepare themselves to teach children how to write.

Author’s Note

This paper is dedicated to the teachers at Cal State LA who participated in the research project. I would like to thank Sheridan Blau, Carol Dixon, Jack Phrener, Robert Lord, K. and K. Frank, Junko Yokota, and the Language Arts reviewers for responding to earlier drafts of this manuscript.

References


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the meeting of the National Reading Conference, Charleston, SC.


Author Biography

Carolyn R. Frank is assistant professor in the Charter College of Education at California State University, Los Angeles, and Director of the Central Los Angeles Writing Project. She can be reached at cfrank@calstatela.edu.

Research on Schools and Teachers That Value Local Languages and Literacies

The following research studies present examples of teachers and schools that value the language and cultural diversity of their students as a resource important for enhancing students’ learning.


- This teacher researcher documents the literacy experiences of Haitian American preschool children in a northeastern city. From her observations and study of the Haitian American cultural context of the children, she makes sense of her students’ concepts and uses of literacy and notes the ways in which classrooms can provide the apprenticeship necessary for all kids to succeed academically and in the larger world.


- This study looks at four high-performing Spanish reading programs in Texas to identify and explain possible reasons for the academic successes of their English language learners. The four schools shared certain features including explicit support for Spanish literacy and biliteracy and the view that bilingualism and biliteracy are a resource and are part of the learner’s identity.


- This ethnographic study documents the ways in which community language resources contribute to the success of a highly regarded Spanish-English dual language program in Tucson, Arizona. Students visit an important minority-language neighborhood, participate in projects at school with fluent Spanish speakers, and have many opportunities for meaningful input and output in the minority language.

—Karen Smith

ASSOCIATION FOR CHILDMHOOD EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION

The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) announces its annual conference and exhibition April 13–16, 2003, in Phoenix, Arizona. The theme is “Bridging the Gap: Educating the Hearts and Minds of Our Future.” The conference will feature 200+ workshops and seminars on topics of interest to teachers, teacher educators, college students, child care personnel, and other caregivers, as well as symposia on Standards and Standardized Testing, Teaching the Whole Child, and Family and Community Involvement in Education.

For more information, contact ACEI at 800/423-3563 or visit our Web site at: www.ACEI.org.

E-mail: ACEImc@aol.com.