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INTRODUCTION: WRITERS AS EVALUATORS: SELF-EVALUATION ENABLES WRITERS' GROWTH

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The impetus for this issue is the general notion that writers who can evaluate themselves fare better than others. They know what they can do well, what their problems are, and what they might do to improve. These abilities are not necessarily self-taught and are also not typically an integral part of writing instruction for students who experience difficulty. In this introductory article, I present three categories of literature related to self-evaluation as experienced by writers who struggle: Affirmation Fosters Self-Evaluation, Self-evaluation Thrives in Cultures of Support, and Self-evaluation Begets Agency. Within these sections I nest the articles of this issue.

AFFIRMATION FOSTERS SELF-EVALUATION

William Wansart's article is a case study of a third-grade boy whose knowledge of what he CAN do fosters his ability to find value in himself. Wansart observed in this boy's classroom and saw him grow from one who felt small about himself and wouldn't write to one who ended the year by writing a note, "I am smart." We see benefits of ongoing self-evaluation that places children in a position to frequently show others what they have just learned, compared to what they could do at an earlier time. Their teacher's decision to help students focus on their abilities, a characteristic of classrooms in which struggling learners stride into literacy (Daniel, 1996), allowed this boy and his classmates to step forward as persons and as writers.

Nieto (2000) writes about teachers who construct classrooms in which all individuals and cultures receive affirmation. Multicultural education, she says, is that in which diversity benefits all; and every student has access to all learning situations. Those who have struggled can rise above their difficulties when others affirm their individual accomplishments.

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In all classrooms, the instructor's actions define whose knowledge counts and what counts as knowledge (Dixon, Frank, & Green, 1999). Whether students possess the nerve to speak out, consider it wise to remain silent, or choose to ride the fence depends on the values established. Whose knowledge counts—that of the students, the teacher, or others—determines what the students contemplate. Given that it is possible to organize classrooms in which students' knowledge can be recognized, it is striking that many students still suffer.

McGann (2000) studied an eighth-grade boy who had struggled for his entire school career. Finally, this reluctant writer started to overcome years of poor writing habits when his teacher devoted her energy to helping him find writing he wanted to do. He focused on issues of importance in his life, and all aspects of his writing improved. When his teacher focused on his internal voice, this reluctant student started to define himself as a writer.

In their book about Kyle Gonzalez's middle-school classroom for students with academic difficulties (Allen & Gonzalez, 1998), Gonzalez writes about Chanelle, a quiet girl whose literacy proficiency was initially minimal but who became literate during her three years with Gonzalez. She created an environment that encouraged Chanelle to connect with stories of literature in which she not only found her self but something bigger than herself. At the end of three years, Chanelle wrote (p. 141):

"**I am**"
I am somebody,
I am smart,
I am sweet but not always neat,
I am somebody trying to
Make a good education in
This crazy world today.
I am a great sports athlete,
I am the fourth child out of eight kids.
I am the future that begins
And ends with me.
I am a beautiful black
African American woman.
So do you get what I mean?
I mean that I am *everything*.

Students who analyze all aspects of their selves, including their selves beyond the classroom, are more likely to feel affirmed. It is within a consideration of their various cultures—classroom, home, and community— that students become enmeshed in issues they find relevant. They move forward when one culture does "not dominate and sacrifice the ideas of another" (Diamond & Moore, 1995, p. 36).

Sandra Belton (see Harris & Barrera, 2001), an African-American woman who authors children's books, talks about her struggles to maintain her unique voice. Having grown up in a middle-class family, the girls in her books are primarily middle class, and sometimes critics wonder about this, as if African Americans are a monolithic, non-middle-class group. As she thinks about the silencing of voices that continues to happen, she says, "This will be a problem within a society that is so dominated by one culture" (p. 13).

For the dominant white culture to not privilege itself remains the challenge of our larger society and our classrooms. Too often, the persons in power do not critique their own positions. Gee (2000) explored this notion when he interviewed teens from working class and professional families. The working class students readily came forth with their opinions, whereas those from professional families hid behind the academic discourse of their social studies class. They had come to believe in the need to not let their selves be heard for fear they might jeopardize their futures. Unfortunately, their teachers did not engage these students in critiques of their privileged status; they did not examine the nature of the unfairness that existed between them and others. Affirmation works when the affirmed are strong enough to critique themselves and support others.

SELF-EVALUATION THRIVES IN CULTURES OF SUPPORT

In this issue, Margaret Voss studies a struggling writer in his fifth-grade classroom. His teacher focuses on developing a supportive, appreciative role with this boy, and it is their relationship that allows him to overcome some of his serious difficulties, both personally and as a writer. His long history of failure had fostered extreme behaviors that isolated him from the other children, but his teacher taught them to respond positively to him. By the end of the year, he not only was willing and able to write, but he spoke positively of fifth grade.

Kaufman (2000) writes about Linda Rief, a middle-school teacher who centers her instruction on the relationships she establishes with her students. She confers with various students in different ways: sometimes the focus is on academics, and other times the emphasis is on a student's social concerns. When Rief places her relationship with each student at the center of her instruction, they see her differential treatment as the way for them to honor each other.

Ninth-grade teacher Jerry Kelly, who authors one of the articles in this issue, sees writing class as the place in which to create supportive relationships among his students. This is their first year in high school, and Kelly shows what he does to capitalize on the importance these adolescents

place on each other. Within the entire class, he brings into view two boys who historically view writing with disdain but slip into involvement during technical writing assignments. Overall, Kelly shows the effectiveness of teaching his students to find value in each other and their work as requisites toward becoming more effective writers.

Barnes (1999) and three colleagues found success with their elementary students when they focused on the learning processes their writers used. When they began to dwell on each child's strengths as learners, achievement differences receded in importance as the children respected each other's actions as writers. Rather than subscribe to a linear view of children where some were considered to be good writers and others to be poor writers, these teachers looked for what each student did as a writer and publicized these identifiers. As a result, the children learned to value everyone, including themselves, for their novelties, similar to what our profession has learned about professional writers. Their differences are a necessary part of their identity. Classrooms in which children can grow as writers are places in which everyone listens for each writer's voice and supports everyone's search for ways to strengthen a sense of self—the foundation for their strong voices.

When Dyson (1997) studied young children in their classrooms, she observed them use writing to promote and strengthen their social relationships. They knew how print could secure the attention of others, gain favors, and support classmates. These relationships in turn served the students' growth as writers.

Gallas (1998) studied the young writers in her primary classroom and wrote about the plays the children created at the end of every year. They each had a part in the play, the part they played in their daily classroom life. Each day as they rehearsed, the children rewrote their lines as they rethought their lives together. One child who was unable all year to communicate effectively with the other children created a character for himself who went onstage at different intervals in the play to tell bad jokes, at which times the others threw him off the stage. He didn't know how to end his part, so the other children created the resolution for him. They helped him find a good joke, and when he came on stage with it, they *really* laughed. These students worked diligently to recognize each other's struggles and create ways to support each other.

Shannon (1999) worries about a profession that often discounts the very issues that are critical to Gallas' students. He writes about Justin, a kindergarten child who invited his class to his birthday party. No one came. Academically, Justin was at the bottom of his class. The culture in his classroom did not provide the acceptance and sense of belonging he needed. In addition, the referral system used in his school did not foster supportive relationships between Justin and his classmates. Shannon calls

for educators to care, to teach caring in their classrooms, and to step back, take stock of the shocking place at which we have arrived, and draw ourselves a new map.

West (2000) writes, "One of the fundamental functions of literature is to allow us to situate ourselves in stories that are bigger than we are individually" (p. 43). He envisions teachers and students engaging in discussions of their visions, arguments, and perspectives so they can grow and be strengthened by each other. The stories students live, write, read, and talk about enable them to see their place in their personal history and in that of their nation and world. This sense of the roles they can play engenders empathy and a desire on the part of some to fight for a better world.

Of the six American women Key (1998) interviewed, all regretted the silencing they experienced as children and, in some cases, continued to experience. These women awakened in Key an awareness of the arrogance with which many teachers view students from economic classes below their own. Often teachers are not aware of their own perceptions, and their students suffer. When teachers do not want to know their students' stories, cross out their words, or permit other students to laugh at them, students shut down.

Key (1998) advocates changes in teacher education programs so that future teachers reflect upon their life experiences and perceptions toward people different from themselves. She hopes to see new teachers whose self-perceptions have changed. They have been in teacher education classrooms where their professors created non-traditional power relationships among students and between students and teacher. The students, confronted with new roles, look at themselves, their future students, and their work with a larger sense of responsibility (Giroux, 1999).

SELF-EVALUATION BEGETS AGENCY

The final article in this issue is by Andrea Luna, who coordinates freshman composition at her college. She shows us the value of a placement system that includes the students' perspectives, including those of writers who struggle. Not only are students placed into appropriate freshman classes more accurately than they were with a system that did not consider their input, but the instructors also learn from the students' evaluations. Although many of their assessments of themselves as writers coincide with the skills they display in their self-evaluation essays, many others appear to not know how to look at their work for its strengths—or what they need in order to improve as writers. During the ensuing semesters, their professors teach them to study their drafts for strengths and possibilities for improvement. The students' improved metacognitive skills allow them to

construct (Johnston, 1997) more accurate representations of themselves. In so doing, these writers develop a sense of agency toward their own growth.

Lysaker (2000) wrote about Paul, a young student who started off on the wrong foot. As his tutor, she studied his relationship with her as they righted his learning-to-read course. Before long, Paul sat so his body physically touched hers, organized their worktable, and wrote in her notebook with her pen. With a relationship established and organization in place, Paul appeared to be ready to move forward. Lysaker taught him to intentionally create meaning when he wrote and read. He monitored himself, and when he got lost in his struggle to figure out words, he asked, "Now, what was I saying?" (p. 482). She knew, and he soon was back on track.

Swartzendruber-Putnam (2000) wrote about her high school writers and the benefits to them of writing reflections about final drafts of individual pieces of writing, the writing they did in a week, and their portfolios. By looking carefully at what they were doing as writers, these writers thought about what they might work on. One student wrote, "I plan on in the future working harder on my conclusion. I found that it was the most difficult part in my editorial. . . . I will do two things: incorporate not only the introduction but what I talked about in the paper . . . " (p. 90).

Carroll and Christenson (1995) studied fifth-grade students who saved their writing, shared it with classmates, and talked about what it showed that they were learning as writers. They selected samples to document their growth, wrote reflections about what each exemplar showed, and gathered ideas from classmates, their teacher, and professional literature to consider when they created plans for their own growth. It was the students' investment in what they wanted to work on that kept them on track so they weren't just going through the motions of writing each day.

Thomas (2000) wrote of her worries when her middle-school students started to write personal narratives. Their drafts sounded dull. Looking for a way to help them bring life into their renditions of their lives, she introduced the notion of a gem, a particularly well-crafted phrase or choice of words in a piece of literature. Thus began a semester-long search for gems in which Thomas and her students found bits of their own identity in the messages of others and borrowed gems that were truthful to their own selves. Thomas wrote, "I found myself reading and writing along with my students with a new intensity. . . . I had an eager audience with whom to share my personal joys and frustrations as a reader and writer" (p. 31). Her students, in turn, shared their joys, frustrations, and plans, led by her example and instruction.

The teachers in the above research took it upon themselves to increase their knowledge about writing and to set up their classrooms so their

students did likewise. They rely less on test scores and more on students to inform them about what they need to teach. This is somewhat new territory for our profession, and whether the implications of metacognitive theory can retain the strength it has started to accrue is unknown. Rogers, Purcell-Gates, Mahiri, and Bloome (2000) considered that concern in an essay about the possibilities for the new millennium. They acknowledged the threat political leaders feel when educators challenge the current focus on standardization by encouraging students to monitor their own growth.

But, this new direction need not be threatening. If standards are grounded in reality, then the characteristics of good writing that students identify in the current literature, their teachers' drafts, their classmates' writing, and their own efforts will mesh with statewide goals. The students' values and their selves, when mirrored in standards, can provide them with the agency they need to narrow the sociocultural achievement gap that exists.

In this issue of *Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*, the educators show us what they do to engage their students in evaluations of themselves. All challenge the status quo, and all show us the importance of writers' ability to evaluate their work for possibilities (Serafini, 2000/2001) that can lead to their growth as writers. In order for this to happen, students need to realize their own value and that of their classmates, a task that is often difficult for students with learning difficulties. However, the growth we see in some of these students shows us the possibilities for change.

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