

“My grandma is my gold.” Learning from Young Writers in Belize

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the range of ways two teacher educators and preservice teachers engaged with and learned from writers and their families in town and village schools during a faculty led study abroad experience in Belize, Central America. During this experience, the authors drew on three guiding principles: engaging in side-by-side writing communities, strengths-based responsive teaching, and honoring and valuing families. Through intentional and purposeful language, we built relationships and connections around writers’ interests and strengths. We believed instructional practices that empowered writers would also be illuminating for candidates. With clear structures in place to learn from students and a focus on possibilities, writers wrote each day, candidates grew as responsive teachers, and families celebrated their children.

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Together, Joy and Cheryl lead a study abroad course to Belize, Central America.

“My grandma is my gold.”

This ending from Chris’s writing (all names are pseudonyms), a piece clearly written from his heart, speaks to how much Chris treasured his grandmother. As Chris shared his writing, we (two teacher educators and preservice teachers) learned the power of his grandma’s love and devotion. Chris was one of the thirty young writers we engaged with from town and village schools during two faculty led study abroad experiences in Belize, Central America.

The intentional design of the study abroad course, *Literacy in Social Contexts*, included social, historical, and cultural explorations; seminars; and writing practicum experiences in schools. To prepare for the work in schools, participants began with a community walk through the local town. Participants noted community signs including political banners, advertisements, menus, and health care options. To continue to explore literacies in multiple contexts, the group visited Mayan ruins, journeyed through jungles and caves, hiked medicinal trails, and engaged with howler monkeys and green iguanas at conservation sites. During these experiences, guides shared the centrality of storytelling as well as reading and honoring the environment in Mayan culture. Each of these experiences provided a context for working with learners and understanding students’ connections to their community and to their world. Our emerging insights led to seminar conversations about ways to connect with learners through writing engagements in both the village and town schools each day.

Framing the Writing Experiences

For two weeks, Belizean learners wrote about their lives while preservice candidates built relationships and connections around writers’ interests and strengths. Each day candidates, in groups of three, set out to learn from and with young writers in Standards 1 – 6 (equivalent to U.S. grades 3 through 8). In the mornings, tutors wrote with four to six students from the village school. In the afternoons, we moved to the town school to work with small groups of writers.

The practicum concluded with Family Writing Celebrations where learners shared their favorite writing pieces with an audience of family members, friends, teachers, and administrators. As writers read their pieces, their classroom teachers shared their surprise that normally reserved children had the courage to stand up and share their writing in front of a large audience. Administrators heard specific messages students shared for changes in their schools, and families were moved to tears by the power of their children’s language choices.

These moments did not just happen. To create this study abroad practicum experience, we drew on a successful practicum framework from a literacy specialist program in the United States. In both contexts, we began by asking: What writing experiences will engage young writers? At the core, we wanted to start with creating meaningful and relevant learning spaces for writers. We believed what was empowering for young writers would be illuminating for preservice teachers to grow as responsive writing teachers. We then asked: What will we learn from writers through their writing pieces in the short time we are together? How will we engage with families? To answer these questions, we designed writing engagements and processes to celebrate and to gain insights and perspectives into learners’ lives.

Our faculty-led study abroad program, grounded in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Warford, 2011), drew on three guiding principles: engaging in side-by-side writing communities (Cambourne, 1995; Graves, 2004), strengths-based responsive teaching (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Dozier & Smit, 2013), and honoring and valuing families

(Kroeger & Lash, 2011; Kugler, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Threaded through all of the principles was an emphasis on intentional and purposeful language (Johnston, 2004). We drew upon these principles to ensure each learner's success and believed every learner (preservice teachers and young writers) could and would engage. This is not to say the path was always easy. Yet, with clear structures in place to learn from students (both Belizean writers and preservice candidates) and a focus on possibilities, writers wrote each day, candidates grew in their responsive teaching practices, and families celebrated their children.

Engaging in Side-by-Side Writing Communities

We created purposeful writing communities where everyone--young writers, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators--wrote side by side and shared, laughed, listened, collaborated, asked questions, and took risks as writers. In these side-by-side writing communities, all experimented with words and ideas and came to see writing in new and expansive ways through the feedback and responses of writing community members. These communities started with preservice teachers experiencing writing events first as learners and then as teachers (Dozier & Smit, 2013).

Evening seminars provided this space to engage as writers. Teachers wrote about the stories their hands tell (Graves & Kittle, 2005), personal treasures, a photo essay drawing on the mentor text *The Best Part of Me* (Ewald, 2002), visions for their futures based on the mentor text *Someday* (Spinelli, 2007), and wishes for a school or community change. After writing and sharing their own pieces, teachers then worked to collaboratively develop lesson plans based on these writing events.

To construct their plans, preservice teachers reflected on and examined their language choices to create successful writing spaces for writers. Teachers used both mentor texts and excerpts from their own writing in their planning. Preservice teachers tried on language with one another to use as they conferred with writers (Anderson, 2000). When teachers became stuck while preparing lessons, we asked them to consider the language we used to support them, or language they wished we had used to nurture them as writers. In these ways, preservice teachers benefitted from the parallel processes as they engaged as both writers and writing teachers (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). These writer to writer moments facilitated a deeper understanding of both the craft of writing as well as the vulnerability of the young writers they engaged with each day (Graves, 2004).

As preservice candidates and writers wrote together, we learned about personal treasures, the importance of families, responsibilities learners carry in their homes, cross generational relationships, wishes and dreams for futures, and hopes for a change in schools. Writers wrote about cherished necklaces, beloved blankets, favorite bicycles, much loved family pets, and treasured family members. Many writing moments took our breath away. Kieran wrote about missing his beloved uncle who recently died. Kieran ended his writing piece with his uncle's words to him, "*I miss you, too.*" Juliana wrote about personal treasures in the form of a prayer and concluded her writing, "*I want everyone to have every material in their bag, not only me. Amen.*" When Elvin shared his description of his mom, "*She hugs me with all her love,*" we stood in awe. In this co-learner experience (Cambourne, 1995), engaging first as writers and then as writing teachers, preservice teachers came to understand how writers navigated both moments of success as well as challenging moments.

When preservice teachers became frustrated or moved to more tentative spaces, we coached and modeled to return to relationship building to re-engage writers (Jones, Clark, &

Enriquez, 2010). When progress seemed to stall or writers were reluctant to engage, we turned the lens on teaching: How can we come to better understand our learners? In what new ways can we support writers? On the third day with writers, we noticed Giana withdraw from conversations and the writing process. One candidate commented, "I just don't know how to move her into writing." We modeled questioning and coming to learn what was on Giana's mind at that particular moment. As we worked to re-engage Giana, we learned Giana was interested in Belizean history and the flag. Drawing on this connection, Giana then wrote about her love for the flag of Belize, a piece she shared to conclude the Family Writing Celebration. Likewise, when Eduardo was reluctant to participate while writing about a personal treasure, he revealed his grandfather, a father figure in his life, had died four days earlier. Upon learning this, we asked Eduardo if he wished to write about his grandfather. Eduardo wrote with great intensity, asking his grandmother and his teacher to verify details in his piece including the exact number of grandchildren and great grandchildren in his family. We learned Eduardo's grandfather was a working man on a farm who liked to tell stories, a loving family man who read the Bible. When Eduardo read, "*His prayer life has loveliness,*" we cried, too. Eduardo's classroom teacher said this writing piece would become a family treasure. As we continued to learn about writers, the writing followed. We observed, we noticed, we asked, we engaged in side-by-side conversations, and writers wrote.

Strengths-Based Responsive Teaching

With each writing engagement, we expected preservice candidates to focus on the strengths of each writer and come to imagine the logic of each learner (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). This emphasis on strengths and what writers could do created spaces for young writers to explore their worlds through words on the page. We focused, first, on the content and voices of their writing pieces. Later, we attended to conventions and navigated approximations (Cambourne, 1995). By changing the discourse to strengths first, children learned their strengths were their anchors. Teachers' careful and strategic noticing and naming helped writers see the beauty of their words and images (Bomer, 2010). After Martin's tutor noticed Martin's beautiful images of his love for his mother, Martin then built on this identified strength and continued to weave powerful imagery throughout the rest of his pieces.

Each writing session began with preservice teachers naming students as writers from the outset, "*As writers, today we will...*" The intentional language chosen helped nurture writers' identities. As preservice teachers conferred with writers, they first focused on each writer's beautiful language, articulated details, and how writers engaged their readers. As students shared drafts of their writing pieces, teachers specifically named how writers' words impacted them as readers: "When you write so passionately about your bicycle, I understand why it means so much to you." "Your words help me visualize the river and how important the river is to you and your friends." "The way you explained the need for new windows in your classroom will help your principal understand why this matters to you." Writers realized their word choices mattered.

Focusing on strengths was often new for preservice teachers and was not always easy, especially when writers resisted. Cole, an energetic, attention-seeking learner, challenged his teachers daily. Every day, we coached candidates to use language that centered on Cole's writing strengths as they worked to re-imagine Cole first as a writer, not as a child needing discipline. Together, we focused on the beauty and brilliance in Cole's writing (Bomer, 2010). At the Family Writing Celebration, Cole's tutors spent time with his mother celebrating his language from a letter to children in America, "*When it rains, it rains like a river.*" As Cole's

mom left the celebration, she shared, “Thank you for liking my son. I’m excited to read his writing. He loves words.” Through focusing on Cole’s powerful imagery, Cole’s teachers came to see his strengths as a writer.

Honoring and Valuing Families

We designed the Family Writing Celebration to come to know and understand writers and their families in new ways. To open each celebration, the principal shared a short welcome message followed by a video presentation of candid photos of writers and preservice teachers writing together. Next, preservice candidates introduced and recognized each learner. During the introductions, teachers identified specific interests and strengths of the writers with whom they worked. The specificity and language choices of the carefully constructed introductions showed families each writer was a valued member of a writing community.

Writers then shared a favorite writing piece. As the writers began to share, family members took out their devices to capture and record these moments. Cole’s mom sat in the front row to make sure she had an optimal videotaping opportunity. Carl wrote about his grandmother, describing not only her appearance but her love for service and family. After hearing Carl read his piece, his grandmother proclaimed, “That IS who I am.” Before reading his piece, Martin said, “When my mom hears this she will cry.” And she did.

After all students shared, tutors connected with families over food and conversation. Conversations initially focused on student writing pieces, and later expanded to family stories. Martin’s final line “*And she will cry*” took on a whole new meaning when his mom shared that Martin stayed by her bedside and refused to take her off life support for six months. In other conversations, we learned Leonora’s grandmother was a teacher, Omar’s aunt told us his mom had recently died and he adored his baby cousin, Chris’s aunt attended while his family worked at their jewelry shop. Each of these stories helped us re-imagine learners through the eyes of their families. As families came to see their children in new and more expansive ways so did we. Honoring and valuing families extended to planning for the Family Writing Celebration. During the first year, we learned to notify families in advance of the celebration. Therefore, prior to our second trip, we confirmed dates and times with school administration. We also learned the importance of formality so we printed invitations to send to families on the first day we worked with the children. When preservice teachers read these formal invitations with their writers, Martin looked up and exclaimed, “Special envelopes? You gave us an envelope!” Ceremony mattered to Raould, too. Through his writing, Raould shared he wanted to become a builder, just like his dad. We learned how much his dad’s presence mattered when Raould held up the entire family celebration until his dad arrived. As Kugler (2010) reminds us, we have much to learn from families, “We do have hopes and dreams for our children, but no one ever asked us before” (p. 32). We asked.

Learning from Administrators and Classroom Teachers

Both principals read the letters students wrote about possible changes for their schools. In addition to highlighting changes, children also offered solutions to the issues they addressed. Both principals told students they planned to share the letters with faculty and community members at an upcoming school community forum. We learned the work with writers moved beyond the boundaries of a two week time frame when the principals said they appreciated hearing about issues from the students’ perspectives. One commented, “I never knew they saw things this way.” In both schools, children learned their voices mattered.

In one school, the assistant principal took detailed notes of introductions during the Family Writing Celebration. In conversation after the celebration, she shared her plans to read her notes to the faculty, emphasizing the specificity with which candidates recognized each writer. By sharing the introductions, she hoped classroom teachers would come to re-imagine writers.

Throughout the practicum, administrators visited the small groups of writers and witnessed shifts in learners who were often reluctant to write and share in a classroom setting. “How did you get them to write like that?” they asked. This question led to a request to present our work with the entire faculty during an afternoon professional development session. During this professional development, we discussed our guiding principles, engaged teachers in two of the writing events we used with learners, and modeled and explored the power of language. During the session, we also shared the video presentation of the young writers engaged in side by side writing. After watching the video, we asked teachers what they noticed. Teachers commented on “learners’ engagement, intense listening, creativity, and focused interest.” We learned of possible transfer spaces when several teachers asked specific questions about writing events and borrowed the mentor texts we used during the writing sessions.

Future Considerations

From both years, we learned just how challenging strengths-based responsive teaching was for preservice candidates. Candidates shared how much easier it was to focus on children’s errors than to notice and highlight student strengths. In the second year, we were more mindful of *our* language choices as we described learners’, schools’, and community strengths. Realizing how entrenched deficit narratives can be, we will continue to immerse candidates in strengths-based teaching through seminar discussions and new course readings emphasizing strengths.

In the past two years, we have begun to build relationships and will continue to reflect on ways to engage with families in more expansive ways. During future trips, we plan to engage with families from the first days, just as we do during our practicum experiences in the United States. Since we eat lunch at the schools, we have the opportunity to talk with families each day when they pick up their children at lunch. As we ate more lunches at the school during the second year, we learned how valuable this time could be when former families stopped by to chat when they saw us at the school.

Responding to questions during professional development sessions, we have realized the need to explicitly address how the writing the children engage in over the two weeks connects to Belize National Standards. We continue to review the Standards to show possibilities for engaged writers and alignment with standards. Questions such as *How did you get students to write like this?* guide us and inspire for continued collaboration in the schools.

As facilitators, we reconnected daily and asked: Are we staying true to our commitment to learn from learners - both Belizean writers and preservice candidates? In what ways do our language choices support both teachers and young writers? How can we continue to connect with and learn from families in more expansive ways? We will remain mindful of these questions, and like Kugler (2010), we will continue to ask.

Conclusion

When writing is engaging and originates from what students know, possibilities are endless. Side-by-side writing, strengths-based responsive teaching, and honoring families mattered each and every moment we worked with young writers. Preservice candidates came to recognize the power of naming students as writers, building identities (Johnston, 2004), and

positioning students as active participants in their learning. Preservice candidates left Belize recognizing how challenging, yet rewarding, responsive teaching can be and realizing how much we can learn from the stories of writers entrusted in our care.

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