

**What Middle Grade Writers Need to Know:  
Writing is Totally Normal, Accessible, and Possible**

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*I never asked for help when I wrote in middle school because I felt that asking for help undermined my writing skills. (Claire, personal interview, November 20, 2014).*

## Introduction

There is little debate that writing is an integral part of the middle grades learning experience. In the last decade, we have seen a significant increase in attention to the nature and quality of middle grade writing and expectations for middle grade writers. Much of this attention is driven by concern from secondary and post-secondary educators and policymakers about our nation's goals for both high school and university-level writing. Initiatives such as Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing to Learn, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), coupled with assessments including various state achievement tests in English Language Arts, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) English language arts/literacy assessment, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) assessments highlight the increased focus on middle grades writing. In states that have committed to either the PARCC or SBAC, performance-based assessments will measure students' ability to write effectively, as defined by PARCC and SBAC, in *every* middle grade.

With a school or district's adoption of any new assessments that tend to privilege certain types of writing and an audience of "test assessor", there is increased pressure on teachers to prepare their students to be successful writers according to the required assessment's definition of success. The combination of high-stakes assessments and recent reform efforts to link teachers' evaluations directly to their students' performance on these assessments, there is increasingly limited time for teachers to have students write for a range of purposes and multiple audiences.

We have long known, however, that for meaningful writing to happen *in* school, young people need to write for authentic purposes and audiences (Britton, 1970). Yet, it is still the case that most of the writing that happens in school is written for the teacher, or an outside assessor as

the primary audience. At all levels of education and across all content areas, most writing assignments are graded by a teacher or an outside evaluator who assumes the role of a teacher (Beers, 2000). If students primarily write for the benefit of a teacher or test assessor, they implicitly learn that writing exists for the benefit of that audience. Furthermore, students will come to learn that the primary purpose for the reader of their writing is to assess the quality of their writing.

Although it is essential for middle grade teachers to support students' to learn the conventions of writing and there is no question that teachers are responsible for assessing the quality of students' writing, they are also responsible for teaching students that writing is purposeful. As illustrated by Dean (2000), Passis (1999), and other middle grades educators, teachers need the space and time in their curriculum to create opportunities in and through which their students can come to learn that we write in an effort to *do* something or to make something happen. Despite many teachers' sincere interest in developing curricula that encourages writing for authentic purposes and diverse audiences, the mounting pressure to have middle grade students prepared for high-stakes assessments and high school writing programs that are focused on developing "college and career ready" writers, the *actual* audiences and purposes for middle grades writing has changed very little.

Much of the existing scholarship on supporting young writers focuses on remediation of writers, especially "struggling" writers and this research often relies on cognitive, positivist approaches (Glasswell & Kamberelis, 2007). This seems to be a natural response in this era of accountability. At this historical moment, many teachers are forced to confront and navigate the adoption of the CCSS and teachers are increasingly accountable to their students' performance on tests that are aligned with the newly adopted standards. I believe that young people's voices

are critical to understanding current approaches to middle grades writing as well as to imagining ways of improving educators' current approaches to the teaching and learning of writing. Today, youth voices are largely absent from much of the research on and analysis of the teaching and learning of writing in the middle grades.

In her educational research, Elizabeth Moje (2002) makes a call to recognize youth as a legitimate resource in the study of adolescents' literacies. In response to Moje's call, along with my belief in the significance of young people's perspectives for improving teaching and learning, this work aims to add students' voices to the discussion around writing in the middle grades. I wanted to understand young people's perspectives on their lived experiences as middle grade students and their perceptions of their various teachers' pedagogical approaches to writing. I designed this inquiry to gather and analyze students' ideas in order to learn from them about their middle grades writing experiences in a time of narrowing definitions of what "counts" as writing in school.

Drawing on the knowledge and experiences of recent middle grade students, this work puts forth ways to create classroom cultures wherein writing matters not only *to* but also *for* middle grade writers. This article considers: What real, purposeful "work" could writing do for middle grade students? To address this question I examined students' reflections, in talk and writing, about the opportunities and challenges they experienced with middle grade writing as well as their observations about middle grade writers' mindsets. I paid particular attention to students' responses to two specific interview questions: 1) What would you tell your middle grade teachers if they asked you to help them think about how to approach the teaching of writing? 2) What would you encourage current middle grade students to do when it comes to writing?

The primary goal of this work is to examine some of the frameworks—explicit and implicit—that shape school-based writing and put forth possibilities for how middle grade educators could expand the range and variation of opportunities for writing that not only matters to young people but also helps them develop as capable writers. The results of this work build on existing research that suggests a need to re-conceptualize some of the most typical approaches to the teaching and learning of writing in the middle grades and recommends a shift in the ways we position young people as writers. This work has implications for teacher educators in how they support and encourage pre-service and in-service teachers in the teaching of writing, particularly in the face of various school, district and state mandates. This work also has implications for middle grades teachers, across disciplines, committed to creating opportunities for purposeful, meaningful writing, yet struggle to find the space or support to design and enact such spaces.

### **Background**

This article draws primarily from two bodies of literature: research on composition pedagogies (Tate, Rupier & Schick, 2001; Tobin, 1991; Tobin & Thomas, 1994) and New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995). Composition pedagogy research advances the ways educators conceptualize and approach the teaching of writing, emphasizing the need to expand the audiences for whom students write and diversifying the ways teachers respond to student writing. This research calls for a more diversified approach to how teachers respond to student writing, particularly moving beyond an emphasis on simply “correcting” student writing and instead focusing on how to respond to the *ideas* students put forth or attempt to put forth in their writing. Composition research does not discount or ignore the significance of supporting writers as they understand and gain confidence with their use of the English language and the

mechanics of writing. Rather, it makes central the idea that teachers of writing should structure and approach writing in a way that promotes the idea that writing and all literacy practices are, most centrally, about communicating some idea or set of ideas to a specific audience or audiences.

Similarly, New Literacy Studies (NLS) supports this work because it promotes the idea that writing is not an isolated set of skills and should not be taught in a vacuum. Writing, like other literacy practices, is context specific and socially situated. Furthermore, writing is seen as an agentive practice. Within NLS, the concept of “situated literacies” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) is particularly helpful in framing this study in that it suggests that literacies are always situated within certain historical, cultural, and social contexts (Gee, 1996; Barton and Hamilton, 2000). The concept of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2010, 1998; Street, 2004) is also useful in framing this paper. Middle grade students and writing are situated within larger social and institutional contexts and discourses. In the case of middle grades writing, I draw on academic literacies to understand that within a school context there tends to be a prevailing definition for what constitutes “good writing.” Students come to internalize a school or a teacher’s dominant definition and, simultaneously, are led to believe that the primary goal of in-school writing is to meet that construction of “good writing.”

Academic literacies see reading and writing as social practices that will vary within and across different cultures, contexts, and genres. This perspective recognizes that literacies are not only tied to specific subjects and disciplines but also the broader institutional discourses in which they are situated. Academic literacies has the potential to expand the work of composition pedagogies, particularly the work on purpose and audience. Although this work makes a case for pushing beyond the boundaries of so-called traditional academic literacies, it also recognizes the

realities of our educational system and the need for students to be capable and sophisticated users of the English language. In approaching this work, I align with Linda Christensen (2003) and Lisa Delpit (2006), among others, who recognize the responsibility we have to ensure all our students are proficient reading, writing, and speaking in Standard English. As Christensen wrote, “I believe writing must begin in students’ lives and be generated for real audiences. However, in recent years I’ve witnessed too many low-income students, students of color, and immigrant students who have not learned how to use Standard English—the language of power” (2003, p. 6).

In keeping with this stance and approach, one way to introduce and structure writing, regardless of students’ actual or perceived strengths and weaknesses as a writer, is to focus attention on the students’ written work as a piece of communication that can be made stronger and more communicative (Praxis, 2006). Mina Shaughnessy posits in “Errors and Expectations” (1977) that student errors should be considered through a broader exploration of writer’s choices. Drawing on Shaughnessy’s work, teachers’ responses to error should be guided by an underlying belief that there are many sources, causes and definitions of error. Error, then, as Shaughnessy argued, is where education begins. In response to Shaughnessy’s work, Mike Rose writes, “She reminded us that to properly teach writing to such students is to understand “the intelligence of their mistakes”. She told us to interpret errors rather than circle them, and to guide these students, gradually and with wisdom, to be more capable participants within the world of these conventions” (Rose, 2006, p. 199).

### **Mode of Inquiry**

The participants of this study are current high school students whom I met through their participation in a school-sponsored writers’ festival in Fall of 2013. Although all of the students attended the same high school during this study, the focus of this article is on their experiences as

students in different middle schools. Five focal students were selected using a combination of criterion-based and purposeful maximal sampling (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002) in order to attain a diversity of schools and a range of school type and geographical location.

All student participants identify as female, but they are diverse in regards to other factors. Three of the focal students are enrolled in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and two students are enrolled in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In regards to students' academic identities, two students identify as "Math/Science" people, one identifies as a "writing person," and one an "English kid." One of the participants did not identify with a specific subject-area identity. The middle grade schools the participants attended are diverse in regards to school type, including private, public, parochial, co-educational, and single sex. The schools are also diverse in regards to geographical location, including urban, suburban, and rural. The diversity of middle schools is due to the fact the participants now attend a private high school that attracts students from a wide range of surrounding communities.

The primary data sources were transcripts of interviews and emails with the five focal students. I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews that lasted in duration from twenty-five to forty-five minutes. In addition to interviews, I engaged in ongoing conversations, via e-mail, with participants in order for students to elaborate on something they shared during the interview or to respond to new questions that surfaced during the analysis. Data analysis was ongoing and recursive, inductively generating codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and using new information to deepen my emergent understandings. I also examined how middle school instruction might be revised to design more meaningful opportunities for writing in school and/or to support students as writers.

Based on the selected methods and mode of inquiry there were limitations to this study. First, this study was designed to examine a small group of students' perspectives on their experiences of middle grades writing. Although this design created an opportunity to gain a nuanced understanding of these focal students' perspectives, this limited the number of participants in the study. Additional information could be gleaned by expanding the total number of participants in the study. Second, this inquiry selected current high school students as the focal participants who would reflect on their middle grades experience as writers. High school students would have the advantage of reflecting on middle grade writing with some experience as high school writers. In addition, the distance that these participants had from their middle grades experience was seen as an affordance for gathering students' ideas. In addition to the relative distance, high school students were less likely to worry that their academic performance, grades, and/or reputation could be at stake based on what they shared in response to the interview questions.

Finally, this inquiry was limited by the decision to examine participants' ideas, as represented in talk and writing, about their perspectives on and experiences of middle grade writing. Additional insight could be gained by inquiring into students' perspectives in talk and writing in conjunction with an analysis of what students compose as part of their academic work in their middle grades classrooms.

### **Findings**

The young writers shared a variety of ideas about the ways in which they thought writing instruction could take place in the middle grades and put forth compelling advice for current middle grades' writers. Analysis of students' responses surfaced a range and variation of writing spaces, environments, and opportunities that confirm and extend existing research that argues for

a revision of current instructional approaches. Specifically, results suggest a need to look closely at the extent to which students are offered meaningful opportunities to write for purposes and audiences that are authentic to and for the young writers. Building on this, the findings call for an important shift in *how* we position writing and, simultaneously, writers. Results are organized around two central themes that surfaced in the data analysis: (1) Writing comes from somewhere and (2) Writing that breaks the mold.

### **Writing Comes from Somewhere**

This first key finding is illustrated by the student’s statement, “Writing isn’t just about the writing itself.” Recent middle grade writers shared their deep-rooted belief that writing, at any level and in every grade must, according to Claire, “come from somewhere” (Personal communication, October 20, 2014). Although students had different ideas about how to develop writing curricula, all of the responses underscored the relationship between writing and thinking. Claire shared:

Writing isn’t just about the writing itself; a lot of it is just thinking in different ways and being observant. So it would be best if the class didn’t focus on endless writing assignments (that would become boring and stressful), but rather on a combination of creative writing, practical writing skills, and activities that got the “creative juices” flowing, like conversation about controversial (but appropriate) topics...It sounds a little cheesy, but the fuel for the writing has to come from somewhere. (Personal interview, Claire, October 20, 2014).

Other students echoed Claire’s observations. Table 1.1 illustrates the various writing spaces and instructional approaches that surfaced in the analysis of the ideas and examples that students shared during the interviews.

Writing space or instructional approach	Example
Interest-driven writing	<b>Jie:</b> It wouldn't hurt to have opportunities to write about things kids are interested in. Rather than forcing them to follow certain guidelines-- let them free-write and explore to see what their interests are. (Personal interview, November 20, 2014)
Free-writing, daily writing	<b>Maggie:</b> It is important to write every day. (Personal interview, November 24, 2014).
Support writing, not simply skill development	<b>Alice:</b> I wish I had a writing class that was separate from grammar and vocab. (Personal interview, November 20, 2014)
Time	<b>Claire:</b> Setting aside time for middle schoolers to just sit down and write without pressure would be beneficial. (Personal interview, October 20, 2014).
Incorporate reading	<b>Maggie:</b> Reading helps your writing a lot. I wish I had read a more wide range of books. The books I did read all fell in the same genre or type of writing. Read something you don't think you'll like. (Personal interview, November 24, 2014).
Encourage experimenting with writing	<b>Anna:</b> I would ask that teachers taught writing as more of a free exercise, where a paragraph did not have to have five sentences and an essay needed five paragraphs to be considered "real" writing. I wish I had been pushed to experiment with more types of writing by exposure to prose, poetry, novels, plays and short stories. Taking risk in my own writing through trying new forms of writing and new tones of writing have been the most influential/transformational moments in my own writing. (Personal interview, November 24, 2014).

Table 1.1 Spaces and Instructional Approaches

Students' responses highlighted the significance of writing curricula that positions writing as inquiry. Alice shared, "I think it's really important to understand that writing is something you want to do and something that is inspired, rather than something that is forced." (Personal interview, November 20, 2014).

Closely tied to this framework for writing was not only the amount of time but also the nature of the time that was available for writing. Students wanted more time to write in low-stakes, exploratory environments. Claire discussed a connection between writing and reflection. “One of the main opportunities that writing has given me was the time to reflect. When I set aside time for myself to write and reflect I produce better writings than I would have if I just sat down and busted out an essay on a book.” (Personal interview, October 20, 2014).

### **Writing that Breaks the Mold**

The second key finding is best illustrated by the student’s statement, “I felt like writing was this strict format, mold, template that I had to follow in order to make a sound argument or persuasive paper.” This finding, which builds on the first, is that students urged teachers and students to move away from strict templates and the idea that there is one “right” way to write a paper. To be clear, this finding does not suggest that teachers are exempt from helping students learn the conventions of writing or increasing students’ proficiency with the mechanics of writing. Middle grade teachers have a clear responsibility to support young people as they come to understand the expectations of formal and informal writing and to help them recognize how to tailor and craft their writing in connection with a given audience. This finding does suggest that we re-think how we approach the teaching of writing to ensure that students are able to work on the mechanics of writing, but simultaneously understand that the mechanics are important because they work in the service of communicating a student writers’ purpose or message.

All participants mentioned that they felt pressure to figure out what teachers “wanted” and, subsequently, wrote to meet those expectations. “I focused so much on certain phrases or words I knew the teacher liked or approved of. Haha,” explained Jie. (Personal interview, November 20, 2014). Jie’s “haha” reflects her awareness of writing to meet her teacher’s

expectations, but also how this practice is ingrained in the ways students learn to “do school.”

Elaborating on this idea, Jie continued:

I hope teachers allow students to write what they themselves want to write-- it's their work and it's their idea and their argument-- it all comes from them. Even if there is an assignment, students shouldn't feel obligated to follow "rules" (like I need to have a sentence that starts with 'However'.) (Personal interview, November 20, 2014).

It was clear that students felt that there was one way to be a “good” writer, which was to follow the teacher-distributed templates for a given style. Although students recognized that it was not necessarily teachers’ intention to position writing in this way, all students shared an underlying belief that one was either a “good” or “bad” writer. In this way, teachers continue to have a tremendous amount of power and control in determining what their students see as “high quality” or “effective” writing. Students reported that much of their work in a class is figuring out what the teacher likes or wants and then writing to meet his/her definition of “good writing”.

In my analysis, I also found that students wished that they had learned that writing is a practice and that writing is, primarily, about one’s *ideas*. Claire offered the following advice to middle grade students:

I would tell them to meet with their teachers and ask for help. I never asked for help in middle school because personally I felt that asking for help undermined my writing skills. Once I started high school, I realized that many of the English teachers were very approachable and were able to really guide me to become a good writer. (Personal communication, October 20, 2014).

Claire’s comment illustrates that writing pedagogies that are built around a narrow definition of what counts as effective writing or what is deemed “high quality” writing reinforce

the idea that there is only one way to write and only certain types of writing will be valued in school. The ideas shared by the young people in this inquiry highlight that if middle grades writing instruction falls heavily or exclusively on the technical aspects of writing, we set students up to see writing more as a skill to master and less as a means of communicating important ideas.

The pressures on teachers and students to excel according to state and national standards create a culture wherein there is one “right” kind of writing, but the students I spoke with suggest that to build life-long writers and position writing as something all students can accomplish, we need to shift the prevailing discourse around what counts as success in middle school classrooms. Alice suggested, “I think the most important thing that middle school writing programs/English classes lack is the idea that writing is a totally normal, accessible, possible thing. I wasn’t exposed enough to it, I didn’t see it as an activity that builds character and exercises an important muscle and releases stress the same way something like team sports do.” (Personal interview, November 20, 2014).

### **Discussion**

I teach and supervise undergraduate and graduate level pre-service teachers who are earning their licensure to teach English Language Arts. One of the most pressing and persistent questions that my students raise is about the range of writing opportunities that are available (or not available) to young people in schools. This question stems from my pre-service teachers observations and experiences in their various field placements. My students express deep concern about some of the ways that writing is taught in many of the field sites across the urban, suburban, and rural sites surrounding our university. There are exceptions, but every semester a vast majority of my students expresses concern about the writing pedagogies they observe in schools. Based on our in-class discussions and pre-service teachers written reflections, my pre-

service teachers are worried about how many writing pedagogies—intentionally or unintentionally—position students as writers.

Although the reasons are as varied as the instructional approaches from teacher to teacher and school to school, what remains constant is that my pre-service teachers feel that young people are not positioned as “real” writers and that writing is rarely presented in a way that is motivating, engaging, or relevant to young writers. Most of the time, students write only for a grade. To address my pre-service teachers’ observations and questions, we conduct a collaborative inquiry across students’ field sites to examine how frameworks for writing are tied to various local, state, and national standards and pressures, whether real or perceived. Increased pressures to prepare students who are “high-school ready” writers have inadvertently decreased the time available for students to delve into a piece of their writing and even less time for sharing their writing with peers and other authentic audiences.

The young people’s voices in this inquiry confirm what my pre-service teachers are observing in many classrooms. The young people’s observations also support growing concern from teachers and teacher educators in this era of accountability and high-stakes achievement tests. In particular, the central concern that the current educational landscape is increasingly constraining teachers’ abilities to offer a range and variation of writing opportunities and audiences.

With the heavy emphasis on the technical aspects of writing, as reported in student participants’ talk and writing in this study, there is inevitably less focus on the actual writer at the center of a given piece of writing. As documented in the collection of responses I put forth in the discussion of the first finding, “Writing comes from somewhere,” students called for writing curricula that positioned writing as inquiry and writing as a practice that helps writers come to

know something, distinct from writing to simply demonstrate learning. Students' specific responses and examples, looking back on their middle grades experiences, made a strong case for curricula in which writing was not simply about the technicalities of writing but also about developing a writing practice and writing for more than a grade.

On one account, this reveals that students are critical readers of their teachers and recognize that to be successful in a given class they need to adhere to the rules and expectations of that class, but since the audience is a singular audience of a teacher, this does not necessarily support students' as they develop their ability to write for diverse audiences and purposes. Furthermore, it leads students to position the teacher and his/her perceived priorities at the center of students' writing experiences and what it means to write. This construction of writing elides the possibility of students putting their ideas at the center of his/her writing.

Although educators are faced with the realities of the educational system and constrained by various institutional factors, including the need to give students grades, these findings urge us to draw on Rose's and Shaughnessy's work. We must find ways to frame the technical aspects or, in Shaughnessy's terms, "errors," as working in the service of communication. In other words, what technical or mechanical aspects of a student's written work might help communicate the ideas in a clearer or more compelling fashion? How do we help students identify their errors and, furthermore, consider how their "errors" interfere with what the student is trying to say? If we approach the work from this stance, we make progress in positioning the student as a writer with important ideas to communicate. The focus is on what the student writer wants to say and ensuring that it is written as effectively and clearly as possible.

Based on the reported results, particularly those shared in the second theme, "Writing that breaks the mold," a critical element of the instructional approaches that surfaced as desirable and

necessary to the middle grade students in this inquiry is that writing must be positioned as a *practice*. As we know all too well, many of the most common instructional approaches and assessments privilege expediency in the classroom. It is often the case that those students who complete assessments accurately and quickly and students who write with clarity and speed are rewarded more readily than students who need or take more time with their writing. Analysis of the participants' responses in this study pushed back against expediency. This finding resonates with Cynthia Ballenger's (2009) argument for what she calls "stopping time" in that students benefit from having more time and room than classrooms typically allow to explain themselves and to draft and redraft their ideas.

Students' interview responses and their interest in having more time to work on a piece reveal that speed is not always desirable or possible when trying to compose a thoughtful piece of writing. It is clear that for the kind of deeply reflective and thoughtful writing that Claire and other students refer to in their interviews as the most valuable type of writing, students need the freedom and flexibility to work slowly. This suggests to teachers and teacher educators alike that we need to do a better job finding ways to include assessments that do not always privilege or reward speed. These assignments need to be positioned as legitimate and valuable parts of the curriculum, and not simply accomplished for "fun" or when students have completed all other work.

ELA teachers should be encouraged and supported to design and enact composition pedagogies that include room for thinking, reflecting, and re-writing as an explicit part of any composition pedagogy. One idea to support this kind of thinking, over time, is to include long-term projects. Instead of short, week-long projects, middle grades teachers should think of projects that might be sustained over time and would benefit from students having time to reread,

re-think, and rewrite. Analysis revealed that these writers and their writing needed room to develop and evolve in supportive, low-stakes environments.

Although many of these findings are not new or necessarily surprising, they illuminate how, in spite of all that we know to be true about the power of audience, most classrooms continue to privilege the teacher as the singular audience. This study, like others, illustrates students' tendencies, understandably, to adopt their teacher's construction of "good writing" as the "right" way to write. The results of this inquiry increase the urgency for teacher educators and teachers to re-examine how we teach writing and *why* we continue to teach writing in these ways. Furthermore, this urges teachers to consider if students' experiences of their writing pedagogy align with or bump up against their pedagogical intentions and goals.

This inquiry leaves us with questions for further study. Whereas this study considered the experiences of recent middle grades students, an important question for further study is: What perspectives do current middle grades students have on their experiences as writers and the pedagogical approaches of their teachers. In addition to inquiring into current middle grade students' experiences and perspectives, it is important to inquire into the actual written works that students compose in the middle grades. Additional insight could be gained by analyzing students' writings in tandem with their written and spoken reflections on their writing.

### **Conclusions**

The results of this work intend to encourage and support teacher educators, current teachers, and pre-service teachers to reconsider many of the taken-for-granted approaches to middle grade writing and middle grade writers. In an effort to initiate this examination, this work offers three simple, actionable steps.

First, teachers should examine the kinds of writing projects or assessments that are assigned to students across an academic year. Consider the extent to which students and/or the teacher benefit from the assessment. In order to develop a classroom culture in which middle school students are positioned as writers with valid and valuable ideas to communicate, it is essential that students, in addition to the teacher, should benefit from most, if not all assessments. The benefit for a student must go well beyond receiving a grade or being awarded a certain level of proficiency.

A second step for teacher educators and middle grades teachers is to simply look across the writing projects and assessments and take note of who reads and who evaluates the various writing assessments. Are there instances where students publish their work to their peers? Do students ever serve as authentic evaluators of their peers' writings? Do students have opportunities to publish their work to audiences outside the classroom and school? Although every teacher will and should play a central role in assessing students' work, students should be consistently writing for, read by, and evaluated by a range of readers. It is in the process of actively writing for and being read by various audiences that students will gain a deeper understanding of purpose and audience.

A third and final recommendation is to look closely at the ways in which middle grade writers are supported in the process of writing. When you look across a learning segment or unit,

how much time is allocated to drafting? Do students have time to write in low-stakes environments that, although not tied to a grade, are positioned as a valuable and important part of becoming a writer? Are there writing conferences that take place between a teacher and student as well as between students? Finally, to what extent are writing conferences focused strictly on students' acquisition of formal conventions and/or the extent to which conventions are used in the service of communicating students' ideas?

We have much to learn from young people about the various ways we could enact writing spaces and opportunities in the middle grades that support the idea of writing to learn. As an ELA teacher educator, I know that most middle grades teachers I interact with want to design and enact such writing pedagogies, but that a lack of institutional support or encouragement for such pedagogies prevents many of them from taking the steps to implement such pedagogies. It is critical to acknowledge and draw on the kinds of writing environments that surfaced during this study in order to foster the belief that writing is a practice that supports inquiry, reflection, knowledge-building, and self-discovery. This work confirms and builds on prior research that urges teachers to be attentive to designing and enacting the conditions that the young people in this study identified as necessary to their development as writers. Although pedagogies will vary from one classroom and one teacher to the next, it is critical for us (teacher educators and teachers) to review when and how we carve out time for students to write and what kinds of opportunities we create for students to share what they write with peers and other audiences.

The recent middle grade students who participated in this project also offered insights into how some of the most typical mindsets of middle grade writers are closely intertwined with how writing is often constructed in school. As these adolescents reflected on their middle grade writing experiences, I was struck by the power of the concept of “right” writing. In an

educational landscape that is increasingly tied to high-stakes assessments in the middle grades, it is critical that we heed these students' ideas and remind ourselves that, as Anna reminded me, "Writing is never right or wrong. It is an art. And like art, it takes time to perfect. For some, it will never be perfect. But writing is a representation of where you are, skill-wise, learning-wise, life-wise, at the given moment." (Personal communication, November 26, 2014). It is our responsibility as educators to re-conceptualize some of the most habitual writing pedagogies to be sure that before completing middle grades, young people understand that writing is a way of thinking and, most important, about developing and communicating ideas. Then, when it becomes habitual, students will view writing as a normal, accessible and possible.

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