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## MAKING SENSE OF “THE BOY WHO DIED”: TALES OF A STRUGGLING SUCCESSFUL WRITER

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*This article presents a case study of a fourth grade boy's experiences in writing, preceding and following a story he wrote about a boy whose struggles in writing led directly to his death. We explore how Max's writing experiences related to his identity, specifically his sense of himself as a writer, his struggle to communicate his ideas, and his discomfort with expressing private thoughts and emotions in print. Drawing on a range of qualitative data, we examine Max's experiences with writing workshop, journal writing, responding to literature, and a state writing assessment. Max's story argues for the importance of considering issues of identity in the writing classroom to help students build on the successes that often hide behind the surface struggles of their writing.*

“Did you see what Max wrote?” Ruth asked, as the three of us stood together during recess chatting about the stories her children had recently written. We pulled his story out of his desk and we quietly began to read. Classrooms, particularly those in which children are given opportunity to express themselves, are ripe with significant moments. This was one of them.

This research was supported by the Royalty Research Fund at the University of Washington. The findings and opinions expressed in this article are solely the authors'.

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What do you do with “The Boy Who Died”? The children were to write a story for Young Authors Day. They drafted, revised, edited, and published. This is what Max (a pseudonym) wrote (see Figure 1):

*The Boy Who Died*

by Max Tran

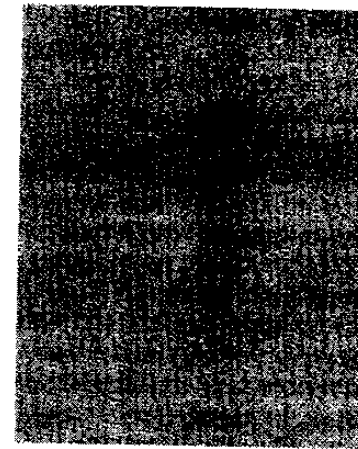
Once at a school a boy had stresses about writing. He tried to watch TV, video games and computers to get ideas. Nothing worked. He'd rather be in a war or get a trip to Russia or even Antarctica. He had the flu for two days! He had one day to finish it, from rough draft to the end. He was depressed, really depressed. He made two fictional stories. Both had five whole filled pages. They both didn't make any sense. He was so miserable. He died by not breathing.

Ruth told the story behind Max's story. He had struggled for days to draft a coherent story. He would write, pencil scratching across pages of brown newsprint. Ruth would read, and more than once, Ruth had to tell him that she could not follow his story. It did not make sense. He tried again. Finally, when the tears that had been threatening all morning began to spill down his cheeks, Ruth suggested that he write about something else, that he write about a boy who was having a hard time writing. Soon Max was writing, dry-eyed, and shortly thereafter published “The Boy Who Died.” It made sense.

“The Boy Who Died” represents one stop on Max's journey as a writer. Our goal is to present several points along that journey, both preceding and following that “young authors” story. Our inquiry into Max's experiences began with the query that titles this manuscript, which then led us to the following questions:

- What are the various ways that Max both succeeded and struggled with the writing experiences that he encountered, from the “official” requirements of writing assessments to the “best practices” of writing workshop, journal writing, and responding to literature?
- What is the relationship between identity and those experiences of success and failure?
- What did it require to see the success that hid in the shadows of Max's struggles with writing?

The research literature has increasingly engaged the construct of ‘identity’ to explore students' relationships to literacy (e.g., Blackburn, 2003;



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He was so miserable. He died by not breathing.



Figure 1. Max's young authors story: “The Boy Who Died.”

Leander, 2002; Mahiri & Godley, 1998; McCarthey, 2001) and to writing specifically (e.g., Bourne, 2002; Van Sluys, 2003). If this construct is to have a significant and positive impact on educators' understandings of students' literacy learning and experiences in the classroom, it is crucial that we explore specific examples of how children's ways of being and interacting in classrooms affect their

ability to be seen as competent and to perform successfully in school. Further, researchers have argued that students are constructed as struggling based on pre-conceived or prejudiced notions of what constitutes success and failure (e.g., Collins, 2003; McDermott & Varenne, 1995); this speaks to the need to closely examine individual student's work and experiences in order to challenge initial and/or superficial assumptions about ability.

Max's experiences with writing speak to both of these issues. He struggles to negotiate several things as he writes his way through fourth grade, including his sense of himself as a writer, his feelings about what is comfortable or appropriate to share in print, and how others respond to his writing. In the midst of these struggles, however, is evidence of just how much Max understands about writing.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our own struggles to make sense of Max's experiences in writing are aided by theories that view literacy practices as inextricably linked to the social identities of those who perform them and the social contexts in which they occur. In addition to sociocultural theories that argue that language and literacy are socially, culturally, and historically situated tools used for particular purposes in particular contexts (e.g., Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1998), we also draw on critical theories of literacy that emphasize that the social tools that literacy practices represent are always political and ideological, serving the needs of some more than others, and shaping contexts in which individuals respond and resist in ways that may or may not serve their best interests (e.g., Freire, 1974; Street, 1995). For instance, Moje (2000) writes of the powerful and sophisticated literacy practices in which gang-connected youths engage outside of school; yet, these practices, unsanctioned by school, further marginalize youths from success in mainstream school literacies. The youths' literacies are "deviant" in relation to school literacies, thereby positioning them as resistant and "at risk." Although less dramatic, Max's positioning in relation to school writing practices is also difficult and consequential. Rather than thriving in response to progressive writing instruction, he struggled and used those struggles to reinforce his sense of himself as a failing writer.

As Gee (1992) has pointed out, being literate involves more than the ability to read or write; to be literate is to successfully negotiate the sometimes conflicting ways of interacting and of being in spaces, like school, where contexts converge. When we looked closely at Max's experiences in writing, we could see some of his complex

negotiations between individual and collective ideas about the practice of writing and what it means to be a "good" writer. He was, as Dyson (1993, 1997) writes, "figuring out—and gaining entry into—the range of social dialogues enacted through literacy, including the assumed relationships among writers and their audiences" (p. 6). Indeed, it was discomfort around the public aspect of writing that seemed at the heart of some of his struggles.

Max's difficult negotiations of the public and private in writing is one example of how his classroom writing experiences both shaped and were shaped by his identity. The idea of the mutually constitutive relationship between social contexts and individual's ways of being in those contexts is becoming an increasingly important analytic lens in literacy theory and research (e.g., Mahiri, 1998; McCarthey, 2001; Moje, 2000). Issues of identity are a central problematic in social and cultural theory (e.g., Hall & Du Gay, 1996). Questions of how subjects are constituted *as subjects*, the origins of that subjectivity, and the relationship between subjectivity and the social constructs of gender, race, class, and sexuality are contested within fields, such as cultural studies, let alone across fields where assumptions about identity can be starkly different (e.g., psychological approaches to identity versus poststructuralist approaches to subjectivity in literary theory) (Gee, 2000–2001). For the purposes in the current study, we turn to Gee's definition of identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (Gee, 2000–2001). In addition, we draw on theories that view identity (or subjectivity) as discursive; that is, individuals' ways of being in particular contexts and how they are viewed in those contexts are constructed through the many storylines, or discourses, in a social space (e.g., Davies & Harré, 1990; Foucault, 1977). As Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (1996) explain, "[This view] accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions" (p. 4). We believe that the various ways that Max used the tools of literacy available in the classroom in relation to the discourses he brought with him provide insights into how he was positioned by others, and positioned himself, as a certain kind of writer in that context.

As Max negotiated his own and others' views of himself as writer, the writing curriculum played a complex role in his experiences with writing across the year. His struggles occurred even as he was encouraged to write in just the ways that "good" writing teachers encourage children to write—from his own experience, about things that matter to him, and with many choices of topic, voice, and genre (e.g., Calkins,

1994; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). As research has emphasized (Delpit, 1995; Lensmire, 1994), progressive methods of teaching writing may work in very complicated ways for some children and need to be examined critically, particularly in classrooms serving racially and ethnically diverse children. In addition to many opportunities to write, Max also received instruction in writing skills and strategies. We suggest that it is not that these instructional methods failed Max as a writer: to the contrary, his writing became stronger over the course of year, most likely due to the instruction he received and the practice he was afforded. However, the identities he brought to the methods made his use of them complicated; in certain instances, problematic; and even painful.

### **ON METHOD: LEARNING FROM MAX**

Max was a fourth grader in Ruth's fourth/fifth grade classroom during the events described here. The data analyzed for this paper were gathered as part of a two-year classroom-based study of children's experiences across literacy and mathematics in a fourth/fifth grade urban classroom (Dutro & Kazemi, 2002, 2003; Dutro et al., 2004). Twenty-three children participated in the project. Their school is located in a large northwestern city and reflects the city's shifting demographics. In addition to Native American, African American, White, and Asian American families who have lived in the United States for two or more generations, Ruth's classroom included children whose families had more recently emigrated from Africa (primarily Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia), Southeast Asia, Pakistan, and Mexico. The school serves primarily working-class and lower middle-class families, as well as some low-income families. Max's family appeared to be middle class. We met Max as part of a larger study of children's experiences across literacy and mathematics. Elizabeth and Elham (the first two authors) visited the classroom two to three days a week from January to June, either individually or together. In addition, we visited every day for a two-week block in March. We took fieldnotes at each visit and audiotaped whole class and small group discussions in mathematics, reading, and writing. We also collected student work.

We noticed Max in our first visits to the classroom. He was one of the quietest students in the classroom, and we were interested in how he was experiencing classroom activities. However, it was after encountering "The Boy Who Died" that we began to construct a case study of his experiences from our data. We observed Max closely during writing activities and collected all available drafts of his written work. We also talked informally with Max about writing and interviewed him at the

end of the year, as we did all of the children, about his classroom experiences. We were intrigued by the complex and multiple factors that appeared to impact his writing and sense of self as a writer. We turned primarily to the tools of grounded theory to arrive at the categories that inform our case studies of Max and other students in Ruth's classroom (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We read our data multiple times, wrote memos, and generated and revised themes and categories that appeared across our sources of data. Using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti (Atlas.ti Scientific Software Development: Berlin, Germany), we sorted fieldnote and transcript data by individual focal students and categories emerging from our analytic memos and conversations (see Table 1). In literacy, these categories included participation in reading and writing, stances toward reading and writing, nature of talk about literacy, social interactions around reading and writing, the role of social relationships in literacy experience, and changes in these areas over time. We also closely examined the written work of focal students for content and process, including the use of conventions and the composition process.

Our analyses are strengthened by the very different ways that we were positioned in the classroom. Ruth's perspective as the classroom teacher pushed us to consider contextual factors that were not available to participant observers. At the same time, the researchers' ability to sit back and closely watch Max's actions and interactions allowed us to see things that a classroom teacher cannot access in the hectic rush of the school day.

### **Writing in Ruth's Classroom**

Writing in Ruth's classroom was often integrated into units, projects, and reading workshop. For instance, in addition to the young authors' story experience, Max and his classmates wrote daily journal entries in the persona of an Iditarod musher as part of a unit on the dog sled race; they published folktales in a writing workshop format as part of a larger unit on that genre; they wrote responses to plays and fieldtrips; they wrote to prompts that addressed issues that arose in class meetings, upcoming events, or topics of interest; they wrote responses to their reading in dialogue journals in reading workshop; they kept a journal of the progress of seeds they had planted in a science unit; and they often wrote about their problem-solving strategies in math. Children shared their writing with one another, either through reading and responding to each others' work or reading their writing aloud to the class, in all of these writing contexts.

In addition, Ruth regularly taught lessons on writing skills and strategies, such as sentence structure, organizing paragraphs, word

Table 1. Categories of analysis and data examples

Categories of analysis	Examples
Participation in reading and writing	<p>Fieldnotes:</p> <p>3/13/01 Max seems very engaged in writing in the persona of his musher. He is writing as a woman musher and writes of making connections with other women mushers (Susan Butcher, etc.). Ruth says that when she stopped by his desk he spoke to her as his musher, using first person to describe what "she" was doing. [note: think about this in relation to his descriptions of being embarrassed about writing from the musher's point of view, worried about what the musher will think]</p> <p>3/7/01 Max loves to read, a closet reader. Ruth says that he used to read surreptitiously while she gave directions. Loves Goosebumps books. He's also an avid video game player.</p>
Stance toward reading and writing	<p>Fieldnotes:</p> <p>3/21/01 Max has revised his journal entry—the one about wanting to be as good as other female mushers. He says that he's embarrassed to send this journal entry to his musher. She might think he's crazy. He thought it was an invasion of privacy. He was pretending to be her and he thought it was weird to send her a letter of him pretending to be her. He said he would add a code to the letter so it wouldn't be returned to him. It would go to another school or a different boy.</p> <p>Transcripts:</p> <p>E: Would you say, Max, that you like to write? Max: (giggles) No! Max: [talking about a book he recently read]... it tells too much feelings and it gets boring... Yeah, I like to hear the action.</p> <p>Max: Like sometimes during read aloud, when Ms. Balf reads, and she ends and it goes through like a really good part, the kids always whine for more minutes.</p> <p>E: Right. Do you find that you want more minutes of that too? Max: Yeah. It was getting to the end. Two more minutes, that's all. (Examples of axial codes for this category are in italics)</p>
Nature of talk about literacy: What kind of talk about literacy do children engage in? What understandings about literacy does their talk suggest?	<p><i>Focused on genre and self-assessment:</i></p> <p>Max: Sometimes I'm good at making up stories.</p> <p>E: You're good at making up stories?</p> <p>Max: I'm good at non-fiction.</p> <p><i>Focused on conventions:</i></p> <p>E: So, how can you tell when you've done a good job writing, whereas when you haven't done a good job writing. How can you tell?</p> <p>Max: Like, organization, print neatly, like, have enough space... <i>Focused on content:</i></p> <p>Max: It has to be en-ter-tain-ing. And you should think about, and think of the subject and what it equals.</p> <p><i>Focused on writing process (revising):</i></p> <p>E: Can you read it to me [a journal entry]?</p> <p>Max: Uh, okay. 'Over the weekend I got lower and lower.'</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Categories of analysis	Examples
Interactions around reading and writing	<p>Well, that's one of the problems, I should have written 'in place.' 'but now I am in 36th place.' Mmm. 'My place is'... Oh, man, see, I gotta work on this. Well, I don't think I wanna read it.</p> <p>Fieldnotes:</p> <p>3/12/01 The volunteer is back at Max's desk. She tells him, 'this doesn't make sense. Erase it.' She takes him to the table of Iditarod books and starts leafing through one with him. They seem to be looking for dates. Max goes back to his desk without a book.</p> <p>Transcripts: E: Okay, so let's go back and read a little bit more of it. [Max's Iditarod journal]</p> <p>Max: Nooo. I don't like reading it. You know, private notes?</p> <p>E: Yeah.</p> <p>Max: Like, for instance, they tell all of your, like, secrets, and when someone knows it, it's not very good. Can we stop doing it?</p> <p>E: Yeah. So, these are your private notes?</p> <p>Max: Um, yeah, kind of.</p>
Role of social relationships	<p>Fieldnotes:</p> <p>1/16/01 Max is working with his small group. He rarely seeks interaction with peers when working, but is participating now when it is required that he work in a group.</p> <p>3/19/01 Max walked around the playground alone. He sat on the edge of the play structure area and watched other kids play. He didn't interact with anyone during recess.</p>
Change over time	<p>Descriptions of analysis process:</p> <p>This analysis involved comparisons of instances of children's participation in fieldnotes taken early and late in the school year. Max does not volunteer to participate during discussions at any point in the year. He was so uncomfortable when called on that Ruth stopped calling on him during class discussions. We also compared children's writing early in the year to their writing late in the year. For instance, see the examples in the body of the article of Max's journal writing at various points of the year. We also analyzed fieldnotes and transcripts for evidence that children's stance toward reading and/or writing or their perceptions of themselves as readers or writers changed across the year. As we discuss in the article, Max's perception of himself as a struggling writer did not change across the year. We did notice significant changes in some children's relationships to reading or writing across time.</p>

Note: These analytic categories were applied in the larger study from which Max's case is drawn. Our examples here are specific to Max.

choice, conventions, developing voice, and how to implement the steps of the writing process. Ruth's goals were to create writing tasks and projects that were meaningful and purposeful, provided practice

writing across subject areas and genres, and allowed students to express their own interests whenever possible and appropriate. The district's writing curriculum emphasized Six Trait writing, and posters depicting Voice, Ideas, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Organization and Conventions were prominently displayed at the front of the classroom. Children were often engaged in some form of writing in Ruth's classroom. As in most classrooms, some children engaged in these tasks enthusiastically and a few approached them grudgingly or anxiously. For much of the year, Max approached them with a deep sigh and worried eyes.

### Max

Max is second-generation Vietnamese American and was in the fourth grade during the events described here. Playing video games was his favorite thing to do outside of school. He is an only child. Max is a quiet and responsible student, and when completing individual work, he worked diligently. He only participated in classroom discussions if Ruth called on him and, when she did ask him to participate, he looked uncomfortable and mumbled his answers. He did not voluntarily speak up in class, but often appeared engaged—smiling at Ruth's jokes, copying notes from the overhead, following along on the right page. He did not always listen, though, and sometimes pulled a book out of his desk and read it surreptitiously during whole group discussions. Although Max had a good rapport with Ruth and seemed to feel secure in her class, he was not socially connected to other children in the class. He generally kept to himself in the classroom, except when directed to work with others in small groups. On the playground, he did not often interact with other children, tending instead to walk alone around the playground or play independently among other children in the play structure.

Max was an average student academically, reading on grade level and able to successfully complete math assignments. However, he was also one of the students around whom adult classroom volunteers hovered during independent work times. We consistently observed adult classroom helpers (both school classified staff and students from a local university) spending much of their time at Max's desk (as well as those of a few other "struggling" students). This was particularly true when the class was writing. The adult would point at something Max had written, and he would dutifully pull out his eraser. Some of this attention was due to Ruth directing helpers to Max as someone who might need support in writing; however, the

sustained adult attention seemed to be influenced by Max's own sense of needing assistance and the nature of his writing.

### *The Role of Race/Ethnicity and Language*

As many studies of children's literacy have emphasized, race and ethnicity can play an important role in how children engage with classroom literacy activities (e.g., Heath, 1983; Michaels and Cook-Gumperz, 1979; Moll, 2002). Given the nature of our data on Max, it is not possible for us to make claims about the relationship between the personal stances he assumes in relation to writing and his racial/ethnic identity. For instance, some studies have suggested that Asian American parents have higher academic expectations for their students than other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Peng & Wright, 1994). High expectations from home could be a factor in Max's motivation to work on his writing despite his views of himself as a struggling writer. However, our study of Max is limited by our lack of access to his parents and home experiences, and we just do not know if any of his attitudes toward writing is attributable to home and family. Also, Max's stances toward writing were not shared by his Asian American—and, more specifically, Vietnamese American—classmates: some of his stances were unique, while others were shared by classmates of all ethnicities who also viewed themselves as "not good at" writing. Given the research on the prevalence of the "model minority" myth, it is likely that Max would be viewed throughout his schooling as having more potential for high achievement than his African American or Latino peers who were similarly constructed as "struggling" writers (e.g., Fugino, 1998; Le, 2004; McGowan & Lindgren, 2003). As we consider the relationship between ethnicity and Max's writing experiences, we are mindful of scholars of Asian American studies who advise caution when attributing individuals' stances and preferences to ethnicity, as this can reinforce stereotypes through which Asian Americans continue to be essentialized in the United States (e.g., Lowe, 1996). Although the focus here is on the identities Max expressed in interviews and writing and performed in the social arena of the classroom, we do so knowing that other stories could be mapped about Max that would more centrally examine the role of race, gender, and class in his experiences.

The role of language issues in Max's writing is similarly complex. Max was born in the United States and described his parents as bilingual, but was identified as ESL in early elementary because Vietnamese was spoken in his home. However, he had not been pulled out for instruction with the ESL teacher since second grade and described himself as speaking "a little Vietnamese." As we will

discuss, Max's writing and speech was sometimes convoluted and difficult to understand. As we listened to Max and examined his work, we considered whether second language issues played a role in his struggles to be understood. After getting to know Max and examining his school records, Ruth determined early in the year that his oral language struggles were speech- rather than ESL-related and referred him to the school's speech teacher. The convoluted syntax in some of Max's writing was very similar to his speech patterns, and both his speech and his writing improved across the school year. In addition, many of Max's classmates lived in bilingual households or spoke a second language exclusively at home and did not experience struggles in writing, while others experienced challenges very different from Max's. However, it is possible that Max's experiences in a bilingual household impacted his writing. For instance, studies have suggested that some bilingual children's challenges in mastering school literacies may stem from their lack of exposure to "academic English," even if they are proficient in ordinary or basic English (e.g., Garcia, 1999; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 1999). Max's experiences argue for the consideration of second language issues for children struggling in writing, even if they are not officially identified as ESL learners.

### ***ENCOUNTERING WRITING: SUCCESS, STRUGGLE, AND IDENTITY***

In the sections below, we tell the story of Max's experiences with writing, beginning with a reading of "The Boy Who Died" and then providing examples from his written work and interviews that reveal his struggles, his own beliefs about writing and himself as writer, and the understandings about written language and the writing process that his work reveals. When we share quotations from Max's writing, we have transcribed it exactly as it was written.

#### ***Reading "The Boy Who Died": Success Despite Angst***

Max's young authors story reveals much about both his understandings and feelings about writing. It is, of course, ironic that it is this story of the agonizing experiences that his protagonist has with writing that he is finally able to write fluidly and bring successfully to publication. The first page of the story reveals Max's understanding that writers get ideas from the world around them (see Figure 1). The boy in the story searches for writing ideas in TV shows and video and computer games. Indeed, in Ruth's observations, Max did often turn to these sources for writing ideas, sometimes appropriating themes or

actions from games he played at home (Lensmire & Beals, 1994). Max seemed less able—or, as his interviews suggest, willing—to draw on his own experiences for writing ideas.

The next page of Max's story expresses the depth of the angst in the protagonist's relationship to writing. He seems to be imagining the worst circumstances that he can, and even those—war, a trip far from home—are preferable to writing. His illustration shows a boy sleeping with three images, presumably from dreams, above his head. In one he is shooting a gun and smiling; in another, he seems to be in a particular location (Antarctica, perhaps?) and has a neutral expression; in the third, the boy has an extremely downturned mouth, a tear runs from his eye, and he is surrounded by scribbled blue crayon. It is the third image that depicts his reality—a boy who must face the writing assignment. On this same page, the boy has the "flu for two days!" Max did stay home with stomach aches during the drafting of the young authors' stories. And, just like his protagonist, Max's failed attempts to draft his story resulted in his having one day to complete his story from start to finish. On the final page of the story, Max depicts his experience of writing ten total pages of text and being told that none of it made sense. Finally, in his last lines, it all becomes too much for his protagonist to live through. He dies "by not breathing," from the misery of failed writing. The pain of those last lines is juxtaposed with his final illustration—a picture of a smiling boy. We have thought much about that picture and are not sure what it signifies. Is the weight of the words just too much, and he offers the picture as a sign that he will be all right in the end? Is the smile a sign of hope, or is the boy relieved to know that he is released from the pressure to write?

Although the content of the story is upsetting, the writing itself is quite strong. He builds his narrative well in just a few short pages. He provides enough detail to create a compelling narrative but remains tightly focused on his topic. His final lines are a powerful rhetorical move—succinct, but highly resonant.

#### ***"This is Hard to Understand": Early Struggles with Writing***

In "The Boy Who Died," Max wrote about the frustration of writing pages of stories that "did not make sense," and, indeed, Max's writing was often difficult to understand. For instance, in January, Max was reading the novel *Dragons of Blue Land* and wrote about the book in his dialogue reading journal (see Figure 2). In one of her responses, Ruth wrote, "I like your point that dragons aren't supposed to exist. Do you think dragons exist? Did they ever exist?" Max responded:

1-22-01  
 Dear Ms. Balf, Prabrally because suppose to be harmful  
 eat. Meat people count as what they eat but they don't in the story  
 boris eat skunk cabbages and marsh marigolds.  
 I could not understand your  
 letter. Please write it  
 again, making  
 sure that you have complete sentences  
 that tell everything you're trying to  
 say.  
 Sincerely,  
 Max Balf  
 MAX  
 1-22-06

Figure 2. Max's reading journal entry for *Dragons from Blueland*.

Dear Ms. Balf, Prabrally because suppose to be harmful and want they eat. Meat people count as what they eat but they don't in the story boris eat skunk cabbages and marsh marigolds.

Ruth responded, "Dear Max, I could not understand your letter. Please write it again, making sure that you have complete sentences that tell everything you're trying to say." Only after repeated readings and conversation did we begin to see the "sense" in the above journal entry. We believe Max meant something resembling the following: "Probably because they are supposed to be harmful and because of what they eat—meat. People count as what they eat, but they don't in the story. Boris eats skunk cabbages and marsh marigolds." It is still unclear, however, how that entry follows from the question Ruth posed about the existence of dragons. (Our best guess is that he may be explaining why people killed off the dragons.) Although not all of Max's writing was this convoluted, it was very often difficult to follow his ideas.

The above example is one of two times that Ruth commented in Max's reading journal that his ideas were difficult to understand or "confusing." Given that he wrote in the journal approximately three times a week, this was not regular or excessive feedback; the majority of Ruth's journal comments engage in the ideas that Max is trying to convey. Yet, Max had a strong sense in other writing situations that he did not make sense. His story for Young Authors Day is a good example of that self-assessment, telling the story of a boy who wrote and wrote, but whose stories did not "make any sense." In a February progress report, Ruth characterized Max's writing progress:

Max has really been struggling with writing. He does best when he is writing non-fiction, but even then he has trouble with organization and logical thinking. When Max writes he leaves out a lot of narrative and explanation that is necessary for the story to make sense. His writing seems a lot like the action parts from a computer game or movie. He gets very frustrated with writing.

All of us engaged Max in conversation throughout the year, both informally and in interviews, and he was sometimes hard to understand. He talked in a stream of consciousness that could be difficult to follow. Ideas he expressed did not always follow logically from one another. We observed him get frustrated with our inabilities at times to follow his thoughts, such as in the following exchange with Elham:

- E: Okay. Did you like pretending to be someone else [in your Idditarod journal]?
- Max: Hmmm. I think so. Not very much, because if I was, like, pretending to be someone else, I would spend it differently.
- E: How would you spend it differently?
- Max: Well, I would be wrestling with other guys.
- E: You would be wrestling with other guys?
- Max: Yeah.
- E: In the Idditarod?
- Max: No.
- E: No? But you would pretend like you were a wrestler, like a professional wrestler?
- Max: Um... yeah. Ughh. (sighs)

Max is clearly frustrated with Elham's inability to understand exactly what he means. After repeated listening of the audiotape of the interview, we realized he may have said "racing" rather than "wrestling," but that is how Elham heard it at the time. Max drops the

subject after this exchange and begins to talk explicitly about the Iditarod again. This is just one example of times when Max would give up on a topic because of his sense that we were not able to follow his ideas.

Ruth, concerned about his oral language abilities, referred him to the speech pathologist early in the year. His struggles with being understood in oral language mirror his experiences in writing. The criticism Max heard most often about his writing was that it was hard to understand.

### *"It's, Like, Kinda Embarrassing Telling Your Stories": Writing and Identity*

In addition to his struggles to "make sense," Max expressed a sense of privacy that seemed to directly affect his writing. In an interview, Elham tried to talk with him about his Young Authors Story. She asked if he could tell her about writing "The Boy Who Died," and Max replied, "Ahhh . . . no. I don't want to talk about it . . . Yeah. It's kinda embarrassing telling your stories, they're like private." His comments could easily be attributed to the nature of that particular story—it was very personal, and it was written only after much anguish over previous drafts. However, Max also brought up his discomfort with expressing feelings and anything that could be construed as personal in a discussion about a book he had read. Below is an excerpt from an interview in which Elham asked him about the book he read as part of the Iditarod unit.

E: Did I ask you about the book that you were reading for the Iditarod. Which dog book did you pick?

Max: *Three Dog Winter*. But, like, I started reading *Jason's Gold*, but like too much thinking of the brain. Like, hello, I know what happy is. And like a great feeling. I felt it once when I won the Iditakid. And like, it tells too much feelings and it gets boring.

E: *Jason's Gold* did that?

Max: Like, telling me like, I'm like cold, or something like that.

E: So, it talked too much about what the person was thinking and you didn't like that.

Max: Yeah, I like to hear the action. Like in, like in *Stone Fox*, they don't tell you any brain stuff. They only tell like once . . . in a brain thinking.

Max was consistently critical of books that he felt talked too much about people's feelings. As we share these excerpts from conversations

with Max, we realize that they can be difficult to decipher. They serve as examples of his struggles to be understood, even as we use them to illustrate other points. We came to understand that for him "thinking of the brain" and "brain stuff" meant the people's or characters' thoughts, the feelings or private thoughts that writing gives access to, but that a person might not express out loud. Feelings and thoughts, he felt, were private and should not be expressed on the page.

Just as he did not like to read about these "private" things, he also did not feel comfortable writing about them. When asked about his experiences writing in his Iditarod journal, he again talks of his "embarrassment" at having to express someone's thoughts.

E: So, tell me what it was like to write in your journal.

Max: It was really hard to, like, think something good sometimes.

E: Um hmm.

Max: And the most important embarrassing part, is that we didn't know that the letters would be sent to our mushers.

E: Yeah, you told me that was embarrassing. Why was that embarrassing?

Max: You know! Like, that didn't really happen, and, well, this is what I think. I think I'm being nervous. (sighs)

E: Do you hope she writes you back?

Max: No!

E: No?

Max: The bad news about getting a reply is that, that I'll be, like, I think I made some mistakes and . . . sighs

Max was "embarrassed" at the thought of getting a reply from his musher because he was sure that he made mistakes. In their journals, the children were required to write from the musher's point of view. For the duration of the Iditarod unit, they *were* that musher—they went by that name, they wrote from the person's perspective every day. Given Max's discomfort with writing that expresses thoughts and feelings, he seemed distressed at the idea that the musher would read an entry from his journal in which he had to write about just those things. He emphasized that these are *his* thoughts, and it is embarrassing that the musher will know that he made "mistakes" or errors in how she really felt and what she actually thought as she completed the dog race. In a conversation recounted in our fieldnotes from the day he was writing the letter to his musher, he also talked about being "embarrassed" and worried that she might think he was "crazy." He said that he would give a fake return address so that it would not be returned to him, but would go instead to some other boy at another school.

Interestingly, however, in the letter to his musher, Max writes, "By the way, can I have your autograph? Please send a reply as a pen pal would." Also, in a homework assignment asking students to imagine living in Nicolai, Alaska, and having the mushers come through your town, he wrote of his excitement about getting Aily Zirkle's (his musher) autograph. We see a tension between Max's expressions of discomfort with the personal and his seemingly genuine engagement with his Iditarod journal and his musher.

### *"I'm Not Good at It": Max's Assessment of Himself as Writer*

In his interview at the end of the school year, Max talked about his own sense of himself as a writer.

E: Would you say, Max, that you like to write?

Max: (giggles) No!

E: No. How come?

Max: Because I'm not good at it, and I need go to summer school because I need to focus on writing more.

E: Uh huh. Tell me about that. How do you feel about that?

Max: I think it's good to help me.

E: Yeah?

Max: Yeah.

Max thought of himself as someone who was not good at writing and needed to spend more time focusing on writing. His self-assessment was closely tied to his impressions of how others judged him as a writer. He supported his comment, "I'm not good at it" with the evidence that he had been told that he needed to go to summer school to improve his writing. He did not seem to begrudge his summer school attendance, believing that it was good for him to get extra help. He had internalized the message he had received—that writing was difficult for him, that he needed to improve. For a boy who had put immense energies into his writing, it is interesting that he used the phrase "need to focus on writing more." Given his experiences with the Young Authors story and other writing throughout the year, it is also intriguing that he still seemed motivated to work toward improving his writing. He got frustrated at times, but he had not given up.

Max's written self-assessment at the end of the year was also revealing of his sense of his own writing abilities. He wrote: "I think I only improved a little bit. I think using paragraphs is the one thing I most improved on. I think writing neatly is the one thing I most have to improve on and work on." He was willing to give himself only a

little credit for improving in writing, even though it was an area in which he had worked very hard. He also focused on using paragraphs as his strength and handwriting as his weakness, statements that do not express the more sophisticated understandings of writing that were reflected in some of his work and of which he spoke in an interview (to be recounted later in this section).

As we described earlier, Max was often "helped" by adult volunteers who regularly visited the classroom. Over time, we all came to see this as a negative for Max and a few other children in the class, to the point that Ruth declined volunteer help during certain projects or times of the day. However, when we asked Max about the adult help, he described it positively.

E: What's it like when adults come over to your desk and try to help you with something. What's that like for you?

Max: Good!

E: Yeah?

Max: Yeah. And when they're no hands, they start to look at everybody's sheets even though they don't raise their hands. They just help!

E: Yeah. Do you like it when they do that?

Max: Not really. . . yeah. Because sometimes I'm really close to thinking of it, and then when like they come and then I know the way I was thinking was wrong. I could have wasted tons of time.

E: So sometimes they come and help you with something that you did wrong, and if they hadn't helped you, you think you would have wasted tons of time?

Max: Yeah, because when you know, like, during math, like, over class before lunch, someone wrote an answer and they started explaining, and then they changed the answer. That is very embarrassing.

E: If you get the wrong answer, it's very embarrassing?

Max: Yeah, you make an answer, and then it's wrong, and you have to change the other answer because you didn't explain it in your mind too well.

Max's positive response to the adult help seemed tied to his belief that "the way I was thinking was wrong." He did not say that they sometimes tell him that he is wrong, but that "they come and then I know the way I was thinking was wrong." In his mind, they played a positive role because, one, they save him "tons of time" by pointing out his errors; and, two, because, by catching his errors, they saved

him the embarrassment of sharing a “wrong” answer. Max’s thoughts about the adult helpers illustrate well how his experience was constructed through a classroom routine (he had consistently been found “wrong” in his writing) and his own sense of what counted as “embarrassing” (he strongly wished to avoid being “wrong” in public).

In the same interview, Elham asked,

E: Do you think you did a good job writing in your journal?

Max: Hmmm. I think so.

E: Yeah. So, how can you tell when you’ve done a good job writing, whereas when you haven’t done a good job writing? How can you tell?

Max: Like, organization, print neatly, like, have enough space so like people think, like, when you put, like some kind of swerve together, they think, just like some kind of, I don’t know... and and there are many things, punctuation, paragraphs, and it has to be two pages.

Max: Well, it has to be, like, en-ter-tain-ing. And you should think of what, think of what you write about, and think of the subject and what it equals.

Max’s response addressed two understandings of what good writing is: the first focuses on mechanics—organization, neatness, punctuation, and length; the second focuses on content—it must be entertaining, and the subject, or plot, should be considered carefully. Max seemed to have very clear ideas of what good writing entails. What we discovered was that, self-assessment aside, Max’s writing demonstrated all of these traits. Further, he had a strong sense of what he needed to do to improve his writing. Even more, his writing often made perfect sense.

#### *Max’s Iditarod Journal: Learning to Revise, Struggling to Share*

Although Max talked about some of the aspects of the Iditarod journal writing that made him uncomfortable, his journal entries were almost always comprehensible and often engaging. He did write in the musher’s voice and he showed a strong sense of plot. For instance, one of his first entries said, “I am excited about the race. I have spent a lot of time preparing. I don’t care about the money, but I hope I come in in the top 20.” The entries follow his musher’s experiences *and* her thoughts and feelings about the race. They do not focus exclusively

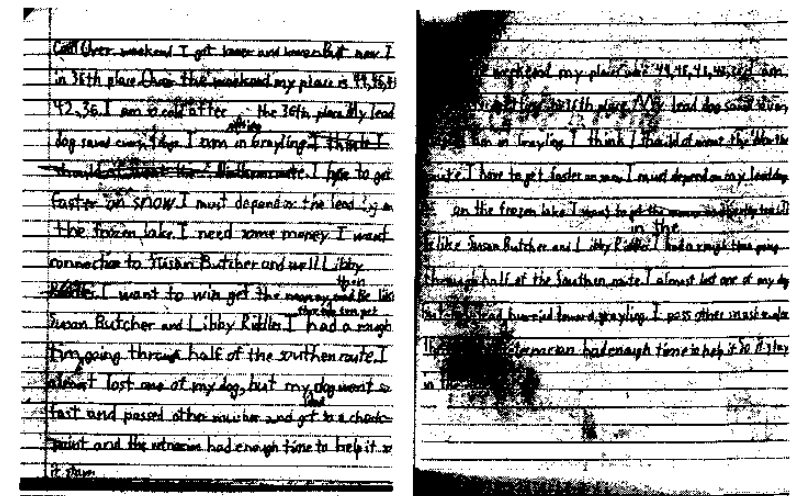


Figure 3. First and final drafts of Max’s Iditarod journal entry.

on action, as Max’s comments about writing suggest might be his preference. Because he knew from class discussions that writing that expressed thoughts and emotions were required by this genre, he enacted it successfully in his journal.

His Iditarod journal also provides an example of Max’s accomplished sense of revision and what changes make writing stronger. As we described earlier, one of the culminating experiences of the Iditarod unit required the children to write letters to their mushers along with a revised journal entry of their choice. Max chose his entry, made some revisions, and sent it off with his letter. It was not until later, when we began to take a close look at copies of Max’s writing assignments, that we noticed the strength of his revisions (see Figure 3). Below, we show the changes he made to his original draft (the phrases in ALL CAPS were present in final copy but not in his draft).

3-9-01

DEAR JOURNAL

Over THE weekend my placeS WERE 44, 46, 41, 42, 36. I am so cold after getting to 36th place. My lead dog TOOK CARE OF MY OTHER 9 DOGS. I am in Grayling. I WANT TO GET IN THE TOP 20. I have to get faster on snow. I must depend on MY lead dog on the frozen lake. I WANT TO GET IN THE TOP TEN. THEN BE LIKE Susan Butcher and Libby Riddles. I had a rough time going

through half of the southern route. I almost lost A dog, but my lead dog HURRIED TOWARD GRAYLING. And I passed the other musherS ALONG THE WAY The veterinarian had enough time to help it. So it stays in the race.

Max's revisions show attention to grammar, word choice, flow, and plot. He took out some sentences and phrases that are grammatically unclear—for instance, "But now I in 36th place." He also took out rambling references to winning money and replaced it with a much tighter, comprehensible sentence about wanting to have a good finish and be like Susan Butcher and Libby Riddles (two other successful female mushers). He changed some of his words so that they were more vivid ("hurried" instead of "went"), and he took out redundant phrasing ("over the weekend"). He also removed references to the northern route because he remembered that it was not an option that year. In its original form, this entry can be deciphered, though it certainly contains some of the grammar issues and extraneous information that leads to criticisms of "not making sense." In his revisions, Max addressed many of these issues and ended up with a very coherent piece of writing.

Max's understandings of the revision process, combined with his sense (as expressed in his interview) that being wrong in public was embarrassing, made it difficult for him to share his writing publicly. For instance, one day when Ruth asked him to read his writing aloud, Max began to read and then paused and began to revise his writing as he read. He stopped reading at certain points in sentences, changed words or phrasing, and took a pencil and scratched words out and wrote new words as he spoke the piece aloud. He responded the same way when Elham asked him if he would be willing to read a journal entry aloud during his interview (see transcript excerpt in Table 1, "nature of talk about literacy"). He definitely understood writing to be something that is in process that can always be improved upon; however, because he was also extremely anxious about making public mistakes, this understanding made the sharing process tortuous. For this reason, Ruth did not often ask Max to read his writing publicly.

### *The State Writing Assessment: Later Success with Writing*

Max's understandings of writing and the writing process, as well as some of his struggles, were also apparent in his experience with state writing assessments. The students took both the fourth grade state assessment of student learning (SASL), which includes reading, writing, and math, and a state direct writing assessment (DWA), which

only addresses writing. Although fourth grade is not an officially tested grade level for the writing assessment, Ruth had her fourth graders take an assessment similar to the state assessment required for her fifth graders. Below, we discuss Max's writing for the DWA.

In the DWA, students were asked to write to a persuasive writing prompt: *Should pets be allowed in school?* They were required to engage in pre-writing, drafting, revising, and then writing a polished final version. Below is Max's response, showing the changes he made from first draft to final version (again, ALL CAPS do not appear in rough draft but do appear in final).

Pet TRANFROM a school to a zoo. If you bring a pet to school. Where are you going to put it. Pets are distracting at school and make a mess. A cat would mess and scratch worksheets. A dog would be wild and that leads to a mess. Besides pets need food and they get sick eating food like pizza. PETS WOULD NEED TO GO TO THE VET EVERDAY. WHICH TAKES LOT OF MONEY.

Pets cost lots of money. If PETS were stolen YOU BE SAD EVEN IF YOU HAD A NEW PET. The person who stole somebody pet will sell to Reseach, Chemical, Medicine and more department for money. I THINK THEY SHOULD GO TO A CASINO. The scientist will do test as in experiment to pets. Besides all this pet can run away. THE PET MIGHT NOT COME BACK SO YOU HAVE TO PUT A PICTURE OF THE PET AND MAKE SURE YOU WRITE ON IT: LOST (PET KIND) BOUTY: (SHOULD BE CLOSE TO THE PET PRICE) PHONE: (YOUR PHONE NUNBER. SOME PEOPLE MIGHT LOOK FOR THE PET.

Pets need caring but you can't care for it when you are in school. Pets should stay home. When you come home AFTER SCHOOL SPEND SOME TIME WITH YOUR PET.

As with the revised journal entry, Max's changes to his draft here show attention to grammar, word choice, flow, and coherence. His revisions to his introductory paragraph, for example, resulted in a much more engaging and coherent opening to his argument. He moved from rambling thoughts about summer school that are seemingly unrelated to his general argument, to a very strong opening sentence, "Pets transform a school to a zoo," and tightly focused paragraph outlining his arguments for why pets should not be allowed in school (see Figure 4).

His second paragraph, in contrast, showcased some of the issues that had marked Max as a struggling writer. He made some good

Pets tran from a school to zoo. If you bring a pet to school, where are you going to put it. Pet are distracting at school and make a mess a ca would mess and scratch work sheets. A dog would be wild and that leads to a mess. Besides pets need food and they get sick eating food like pizza. Pets would need to go to the vet ever day. Which take lot of money.

Pets cost lots of money. If pets were stolen. You be sad even if you had a new pet. The person who stole somebody pet will sell to Reseach, Chemical, Medicine and more department for money. I think they should go to a casino. The scientist will do best as in expermint to pets. Besides all this Pet can run away. The pet might not come back so you have to put a picture of the pet and make sure you write on it. Lost (Pet kind) bouty (Should be close to the pet price) Phone: (Your phone number. Some people might look for the pet.

Pets need caring but you can't care for it

Figure 4. First page of Max's state writing assessment.

choices in his revisions in this paragraph, but, overall, it is easy to lose the coherence of his argument. On close examination, the points he makes are in fact closely related to the topic. He is concerned that pets will be stolen if they are allowed in school. He then imagines that those who steal pets might try to profit by selling them for scientific research. He argues that a better way for these people to get money would be going to a casino. In addition to the risk of being stolen, pets brought to school might run away. This would lead their owners to have to put up lost pet posters with all of the necessary details. Although the paragraph lacks a topic sentence, it is all about the risks of bringing pets to school. The stream-of-consciousness style that so

often characterized his writing is apparent here, but, as in other instances, he was not as off-topic or incomprehensible as it can first appear. Max's final paragraph in this essay echoes his introduction as a more conventionally successful and well-organized closing to his argument. His revisions to that paragraph again result in a tighter and grammatically cleaner version. He makes good choices.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Max was in a classroom that included many of the writing opportunities that research supports. This was a classroom in which children engaged in progressive writing practices: they were encouraged to be creative; they got to write from their own experiences; they engaged in regular dialogues with Ruth about their writing; they worked through each step of the writing process and received instruction in skills and strategies. Yet, the convergence of these practices and Max's identity as a writer—both internally and externally constructed—was not always compatible. Further, a close examination of his writing reveals his understanding of and success in writing that is belied by both superficial examinations of his work and his own sense of himself as a writer.

Max's story has two important implications for classroom practice. First, it illustrates the importance of thinking about classrooms as spaces where identities are constructed and reconstructed through discourse. Specifically, Max's experiences reveal the dichotomous identities of achievement—successful versus struggling—in which children are often located, and locate themselves, in classrooms. In addition, Max's writing speaks to the complex relationship between motivation and intellectual identities, and how very personal “ways of being” potentially impact student work and academic performance. Second, Max's story reveals the crucial importance of attending closely to student experiences in writing classrooms, both through one-on-one conversations and analysis of student work. Specifically, the sophistication of the revisions in which Max engaged between drafts was not apparent until the drafts were examined closely. Also, Max's concerns about revealing personal feelings and thoughts in writing were only encountered through conversation. These ideas are addressed further below.

### *Identity and Children's Struggles and Successes*

Children learn early to locate themselves within the dichotomies of schooling. They narrate themselves and are narrated by others into

storylines of success and failure, competence and incompetence, participant and non-participant, included and excluded. In addition, children bring other storylines from home, the media, and from their own particular, perhaps quirky ("too much thinking of the brain") ways of negotiating the world. As Dyson's work has revealed well, a true understanding of children's school writing is dependent on understanding the ideas that they bring from their lives outside of school (e.g., 1997). In Max's case, he seemed to combine storylines into a narrative of himself as a struggling writer, one who didn't make sense and was not competent without help from well-meaning adults.

Aspects of his identity that Max brought into the classroom—his conviction that feelings and thoughts were private and should not be shared in writing, his intense worry about public mistakes or errors—made it difficult for him to comfortably engage in writing that required that he put his own or a character's emotions on the page. The convergence of the public and private resulted in "clashes" rather than "blends" for Max, to borrow terms used by both McCarthy (2001) and Sarup (1996) in studies of the relationship between children's literacy practices and identities. Ideally, Max would not be required to write about those "private" areas that caused him discomfort; however, the realities of writing classrooms and state testing are such that he *will* have to engage in personal and fictional narrative writing in school. In addition, Max had begun to construct an identity as a struggling writer based on his experiences in writing throughout his school career. He readily accepted the idea that he was in need of remediation based on the kind of help he received from classroom volunteers, the feedback he received that his writing did not make sense, and the school's recommendation that he attend summer school. We are not arguing that Max needed no support in writing: he definitely did need support in crafting writing that clearly expressed his ideas. However, provided with that support from Ruth, his writing improved dramatically across the year, and he scored quite well on two state writing assessments in the spring; yet he *continued* to describe himself as a struggling writer. It was not necessary that Max learn to love writing—certainly many competent writers, children and adults, merely tolerate writing. However, we do believe that it is important for children such as Max to recognize their competence. Max's perceptions of himself did not reflect the successes and improved understanding that became apparent to us through the close examination of his writing.

Another example of the complexity of Max's experience relates to the relationship between his identity as a writer and his motivation. Although his interviews and end of year self-assessment indicate that

he viewed himself as unsuccessful, he seemed to be motivated to work to improve his writing. Max was not one of the children who actively resisted writing. When it was time to write, Max wrote. It was important to Max to have assignments completed, even if they caused him anxiety (yet another of the identities that he lived in the classroom). This willingness to engage in the process is certainly one of the reasons for his improvement across the year: he was able to practice. This makes his case much different than that of children whose lack of success and internalized identities as struggling writers causes them to shut down and cease to actively engage in the process. We cannot know if Max would have shut down if his experiences had continued to be negative. We do know that the following year, as a fifth grader in Ruth's classroom, he seemed to feel more confident about his writing. His experience supports arguments for the importance of self-efficacy in children's learning (Pajares, 1996) and for attempting to intervene as early as possible in children's constructions of themselves as struggling writers. That kind of intervention depends on the ability to see the successes that lie in the shadows of what, on the surface, seem glaring failures.

#### *What is Required? The Importance of Looking Closely*

Our own appreciation of Max as a writer who had sophisticated understandings and "made sense" required a close examination of his work. In our conversations about Max's classroom experiences, we often used the expression "more than meets the eye." A quick read of Max's written work would reveal obvious struggles with some conventions and struggles to craft coherent narratives and arguments. A much deeper reading revealed the sophistication of his revisions and the coherence that often lay behind the apparent incoherence. As others have argued, a close analysis of student work is a powerful tool for assessment and for teacher learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lampert & Ball, 1998; Little, 1999). Max's experience shows that this task will be harder with some student work than others; some of Max's work could appear opaquely incoherent. However, his story also reveals that the payoff for vigilance can be great. Once Ruth understood the logic beneath the chaos of his writing, she was better able to help him make that logic visible.

Aspects of Max's struggles with writing would also be impossible to understand in the absence of private conversations with him about his own sense of what constitutes good writing and his perceptions of himself as a writer. His experiences illustrate the importance of individual conferences with students that explore not just what lies on the

student's page, but also the experiences, interests, values, and attitudes that informs what ends up on the page (e.g., Calkins, 1994). For instance, it was not at all apparent until the interview with Max that he was embarrassed by expressing emotions in writing. As his Iditarod journal illustrates, Max did a fine job of engaging in writing from the musher's point of view. Because he was a student who quietly did his work, it would be quite possible to never have encountered his thoughts on writing and emotions, even as it is clear from his comments that his feelings in that area created conflict for him as he wrote. However, Max's story suggests that gleaning personal information from students will not always be comfortable (it was not easy for Max to talk in his interviews, even with someone whom he liked and had known for several months) and, further, will not provide simple answers to improving a child's relationship to writing (let alone provide straightforward suggestions for improving the content of the writing). In our reading, some of the writing on workshop methods imply a straightforward connection between delving into children's personal, and often very moving, experiences and improvements in children's motivation to write and the quality of their writing. Max's story suggests that this path can be much more winding for some students.

To summarize, Max's experiences suggest two crucial pedagogical moves in the writing classroom: individual conferencing with students and close analysis of student work. Creating time for conversations with students is crucial, beginning early in the year and as a regular part of the writing program. These conversations are particularly important for those students who appear to struggle with writing. If Max's discomfort with writing and reading personal narrative had been discovered early, he could have been offered alternatives; for instance, he could have written his Iditarod journal as a reporter following his musher's progress, rather than writing from the musher's point of view. When teaching genre, Ruth could have made it very clear to Max that although he needed to understand a range of genres, it was okay to dislike personal narrative, and his affinity for expository writing could have been more consciously nurtured.

In addition to ongoing conversation, delving into children's thinking requires close analysis of student work as a regular and systematic part of assessment. This can seem an overwhelming task for teachers already strapped for time; however, we recommend that teachers commit to closely analyzing one child's writing each day at the beginning of the school year, and then two to three children a week thereafter. This systematic approach ensures that the teacher is engaging closely with each child's work on a regular basis. A close analysis of Max's writing

revealed the areas of instruction that he was effectively applying in his writing (e.g., editing for word choice) and areas in which he would benefit from further instruction (e.g., the organization of ideas in paragraphs and essays). The implications for teaching discussed here were certainly not foreign concepts to an accomplished teacher such as Ruth. As Ruth emphasizes, she was engaging in conversations with students and she was examining student work prior to this research; however, because these activities were not a scheduled, systematic part of her practice, it was "hit or miss" in ways she had not previously recognized.

### CONCLUSION

Our goals as writing teachers certainly often and rightly include helping students become competent in the Six Traits, paragraph construction, and myriad other skills and strategies. However, this will be best accomplished if we also pursue the goals of understanding the identities that children enact in the writing classroom and using that understanding to actively support children in constructing an intellectual identity, one that includes viewing themselves as successful writers or, at the very least, writers with potential for success. As Greeno (2002) argues, thinking about classrooms as spaces of identity construction has implications both for how educators might better understand children's experiences in classrooms and how we conceptualize the fundamental aims of education. Attention to identity leads to different kinds of goals, such as the creation of spaces where children do more than achieve curricular objectives in measurable ways but also develop views of themselves as able and successful learners. This can only happen if teachers attend closely to both children's work and their relationship to writing. It would have been easy to make quick and negative judgments about Max's abilities in writing; however, on closer examination, his relationship to writing was much more complex. What looked like an unambiguous struggle masked much success upon which Ruth could help him build.

We would argue that this attention to student experience is particularly important, and challenging, in the current context of standards-based reforms and increased accountability. As test scores increasingly define the educational bottom-line, it is tempting to search for quick-fixes and focus our hopes on those children whose potential is most obvious. It is other children, like Max, who are struggling and whose successes quietly hide within those struggles, who can so easily be overlooked. "The Boy Who Died" is a powerful reminder of the necessity of finding ways to support those children in order to, at the very least, keep them breathing.

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