

Journal of Multicultural Affairs

Volume 7

Issue 2 *Voices Amplifying Research, Rhetoric,
Rhythm & Rhyme: Teaching for Global
Citizenship While Fighting for the Soul of
American Democracy Part I*

Article 2

December 2022

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Recommended Citation

Whitaker, Adam; Davis, Trina J.; and Neshyba, Mónica V. (2022) "Unlocking Passion and Setting Students Free: The Impact of Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction in a Middle School English I Classroom," *Journal of Multicultural Affairs*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jma/vol7/iss2/2>

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Unlocking Passion and Setting Students Free: The Impact of Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction in a Middle School English I Classroom

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The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) has documented disparities in writing proficiency for students in grades fourth, eighth, and 12th across multiple years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; White et al., 2015). Illustratively, Graham and Perin (2007) maintained that students in the United States who graduated from high school could not write at basic levels needed to be successful in college and the workforce. According to Gilbert and Graham (2010), across the country in the elementary grades, little time is devoted to writing assignments that involve analysis. In general, in grades 3-5 there is an emphasis on learning to write (Graham et al., 2013) and in middle and high school, students are composing short pieces of texts that do not challenge them to think through, make connections with issues, or show breadth or depth of knowledge (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Concerning achievement levels with writing indicate a pressing need to employ more effective instructional approaches to improve students' writing capacity.

Scholars have used the terms *meaningful* (Graham, 2008), *authentic* (Khan, 2009), *real-world* (Cox et al., 2009), and *culturally relevant writing pedagogy* (Winn & Johnson, 2011) to describe effective approaches for teaching writing in the classroom. These descriptions of writing instruction are connected because they require that students use “experiential knowledge and apply it to writing activities

in the classroom” (Winn & Johnson, 2011, pp. 21-22). Researchers have also reported that effective writing instruction involves connecting writing to personal experiences (Gardner, 2013; Knight, 2009; Tatum & Gue, 2012), using texts as a catalyst for writing (Au & Gourd, 2013; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015; Newman & Fink, 2012; Murphy & Murphy, 2016; Rozansky, 2010), and connecting writing to real-world contexts (Cox et al., 2009; Khan, 2009; Sweeny, 2010; Curwood et al., 2013). Research implies that these strategies are more effective methods for teaching writing because they have the potential to be more culturally relevant to the lives of students and employing these strategies has the potential to increase students' learning outcomes.

Winn and Johnson (2011) emphasize the importance of implementing more culturally relevant approaches to facilitate writing instruction in their book *Writing Instruction in a Culturally Relevant Classroom*. The study described in this article leveraged the culturally relevant writing framework of Winn and Johnson to build the writing capacity of eighth grade students enrolled in an English I course. These steps include:

- *Creating a playlist* involves connecting writing activities to the national, state, and local standards that students are expected to master and connect writing activities to the lives and experiences of students.
- *Managing content* involves using literature, media, and examples to inform student writing.
- *Sync* involves providing feedback about student writing and employing writing strategies that meet students where they are by drawing on students' funds of knowledge and building curriculum around student expertise.

- *Share your music* involves modeling writing for students and providing spaces for students to share their writing (Winn & Johnson, 2011).

This research study employed these steps to plan and facilitate a culturally relevant writing unit. The study explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How do middle school English I students describe their previous middle school writing experiences?

RQ 2: What are the reading and writing preferences of middle school English I students?

RQ 3: What impact does culturally relevant writing instruction have on middle school English I students?

RQ 4: What impact does culturally relevant writing instruction have on the writing self-efficacy of middle school students in an English I classroom?

These questions helped to explore students' writing experiences, the impact of culturally relevant writing instruction, and the ways, if any, culturally relevant writing instruction impacted students writing self-efficacy.

Review of Literature

Connecting Writing Instruction to Students' Lives and Experiences

Winn and Johnson (2011) posited that culturally relevant writing instruction challenges students to write for authentic audiences, leverages the ideas, voices, and perspectives of students, and challenges students to engage critically with the world. Research scholars have found that engaging students in writing about personal experiences increases student engagement

and motivation (Gardner, 2013; Knight, 2009) and situating writing instruction within the context of student experiences provides students with an opportunity to share stories relevant to their lives and experiences. To illustrate this point, Gardner (2013) found that primary school students preferred home literacy events such as writing stories, letters, and diaries over engaging in literacy events at school. Gardner's work suggests that providing students with writing tasks that value and acknowledge their home life and experiences has the potential to increase student writing motivation.

In a similar vein, Tatum and Gue (2012) reported on the sociocultural benefits of writing with 12 African American male adolescents at a Summer Leadership Institute. The authors challenged students to construct poetry, short stories, plays, and novels rooted in four platforms which included: self-identity, being resilient, engaging others, and building capacity. In each of the writing products, the authors encouraged the students to find their voice and to write about subjects and topics meaningful to the students. By prioritizing the voices and meaningful experiences of students, the authors equipped students with the skills to use their writings "to tap into a [writing] power lying latent within them" (p. 141).

Connecting Writing Instruction and Literature

In addition to connecting writing tasks to student experiences, scholars (Au & Gourd, 2013; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015; Murphy & Murphy, 2016; Newman & Fink, 2012; Rozansky, 2010) have maintained that culturally relevant texts that are connected to students' lives and experiences can be a catalyst for writing instruction. The research that we describe in this article draws from

scholarship situated within national and global contexts. The notion of students *engaging critically with the world* is a powerful juxtaposition. When students use culturally relevant texts from both nationally and abroad to inform their writing it deepens their self-awareness and helps students engage in cultural empathy. Cultural empathy supports students in valuing and exploring their cultural identity, while experiencing the unfamiliar cultures of others, thereby making them global citizens (Green, 2012).

Illustratively, Newman and Fink (2012) described how students examined René Saldaña's *The Jumping Tree* (2001). In exploring this text, students engaged with the main character (Rey Castaneda), a middle school student from Nuevo Penitas, Texas. Saldaña's lively stories portrayed Rey's journey from his hometown in Texas to engaging with family in nearby Mexico. The authors used *The Jumping Tree* (2001) as a model to encourage students to delve deep into their own lives to create stories. They postulated that students have funds of knowledge they bring to the classroom, and it is essential for students to understand that "authentic writing comes from within, from experience, from wanting to make their experiences relevant to others, from wanting to express themselves in their very own words" (Newman & Fink, p. 28). Similarly, Gorecki (2014) described how Aboriginal literature was used as a bridge to support student writing. He found that Aboriginal literature focused on identity, culture, and struggle can be a bridge to support students in writing their own poems and narratives about how these themes connect to their own lives.

Murphy and Murphy (2016) also agreed with the notion of using culturally relevant texts as a conduit for building student writing proficiency. The authors conducted a mixed methods study to explore

the impact of culturally relevant approaches to writing instruction with Latino students in a pre-collegiate English program. The authors used culturally relevant texts written by Latino authors to build students' writing capacity in descriptive, narration, exemplification, and persuasive writing. Texts were chosen based on the author being of Latino heritage, relevance to the lives of the students, and the length of the text (i.e., between 1,000 and 1,800 words). Students read the text associated with each genre of writing and created an original piece of writing using the text they read as a model. The authors discovered that student enthusiasm increased; the texts served as a model to support students in writing, and students felt the texts were relevant to their lives and experiences.

Connecting Writing to Real-World Contexts

Khan (2009) discussed how she used a controversial law about a school mandated moment of silence and current events from the local news to create authentic writing experiences resulting in "engagement and investment in student writing" (p. 17). Cox et al. (2009) explained the importance of teaching workplace and community writing in the classroom to provide a real-world context and to help students connect academic learning with the expectations of work in the real-world. Additionally, other scholars have explored using internet workshops (Sweeny, 2010) and fan-based writing activities (Curwood et al., 2013) as real-world contexts for building students' writing capacity.

Illustrating this point, Sweeny (2010) discussed using an internet workshop, which consists of using online writing resources to build students' writing capacity based on a teacher-defined task or writing focus. The internet workshop also involved the use of

instant messages and text messages to facilitate instruction and the creation of multi-modal texts, involving the use of video, media, animation, or pictures to convey messages. Curwood et al. (2013) conducted an ethnographic study about how fan-based writing activities (e.g., writing fan fiction, creating videos, and engaging in forum posts within online affinity spaces such as *The Hunger Games*, *Neopets*, and *The Sims*) have the potential to improve young adults' writing capacity.

Methodology

This research study received IRB exemption because the study involved the examination of pre-existing data, documents, and records. More importantly, the information was coded, so that the participants cannot be identified directly or through identifiers. This research study aligned with two primary paradigms: interpretive research and qualitative dominant crossover mixed research. Morehouse (2012) defined interpretive inquiry as “quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research that sees humans as agents who act with others in a social and cultural context” (p. 22). The primary research paradigm used was qualitative, but quantitative data were used to complement the qualitative data. The agents in this study were eighth grade participants enrolled in an English I course, and they acted socially as participants in the writing unit, using their cultural lens to explore their own backgrounds to create culturally relevant texts. This study relied on the following philosophical stances connected to interpretive research: (1) humans construct their reality by interpreting their perspectives on it, (2) tacit understandings and tangible accounts of experience, (3) the inquirer and what is to be inquired interact to influence the outcome of the inquiry, and

(4) values influence how we go about understanding and inquiring about the world and the conclusions we accept as knowledge (Morehouse, 2012). Next, the philosophical stances will be discussed in connection with the research study and how the stances were enacted.

This study is connected to interpretative research because the researchers were the inquirers and the phenomenon to be inquired was the impact of culturally relevant writing instruction. Culturally relevant instruction was facilitated in an effort to increase students' writing self-efficacy and potentially impact how students view writing. The researchers value culturally situated instruction and believe that culturally relevant instruction that incorporates the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of diverse students (Gay, 2000) has the potential to increase students' learning outcomes. In addition to interpretative research, this study is also aligned to the qualitative dominant crossover mixed research approach.

Qualitative dominant crossover mixed research integrates both qualitative and quantitative data in a research study (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). In this type of research approach, qualitative research is the dominant research paradigm that provides rich opportunities to understand the ways people make meaning of their lives, experiences, and structures of the world (Ochieng, 2009). The qualitative data collected throughout the study involved both open-ended and closed-ended items and included: a reading/writing interest form, reflective journals, learning logs, and student artifacts.

The quantitative data included (1) students' rating of their writing self-efficacy on a scale from 1-10 at the beginning and at the end of the study, (2) scoring of student expository and narrative writing products at the beginning and at the end of the study,

and (3) calculating the percentages of students that selected specific reading and writing preferences. The quantitative data were used to “associate qualitative data with quantitized data” (Frels & Onwebuzie, 2013, p. 187). This involved correlating the qualitative responses to quantitative data that were collected in reference to students’ self-efficacy ratings, students’ ratings of their expository and narrative writing, and students’ reading and writing preferences. The merger of quantitative data alongside qualitative data enhanced the representation and legitimation of the exploration of culturally relevant writing instruction, provided clarity to the voice of the participants, and provided richer interpretations (Frels & Onwebuzie, 2013).

Participants and Study Context

This research study focused on the middle school writing experiences of 63 eighth grade students enrolled in an English I class. The students entered the study with prior writing experiences and perceptions about their writing self-efficacy. The racial identity of the participants included: 60.4% African American, 25% Hispanic, 6.5% White, 4.3% Two or more races, and 3.2% Asian. The students that participated in the study were between 13 to 14 years of age, and 60% ($N = 38$) of the participants were girls and 40% ($N = 25$) of the participants were boys.

Data Collection

The data collection for this research study was based on several primary resources. The resources include reflective journals, learning logs, reading/writing interest forms (Winn & Johnson, 2011), cultural questionnaires, and student artifacts. Each of these sources provided pertinent evidence to understanding students’ writing

experiences, reading/writing preferences, and the impact of culturally relevant instruction on students and their writing self-efficacy.

Cultural Questionnaire

The first source of evidence was the cultural questionnaire. In this study, the cultural questionnaire was used to learn about students’ cultural backgrounds. Students answered questions about their (1) family and cultural history, (2) religious affiliations, (3) customs, and (4) experiences with racism. Before the beginning of the culturally relevant writing unit, students completed the cultural questionnaire independently or interviewed a member of their immediate family (i.e., mother or father) or extended family (i.e., grandfather, grandmother, uncle, or aunt) that was familiar with their cultural background.

Reading/Writing Interest Form

The reading/writing interest form (Winn & Johnson, 2011) was used to gather information about students’ reading/writing preferences. Students identified the last text they read, the activities they participated in outside of school, and they ranked their writing preferences for narrative, expository, and poetic writing on a scale from 1-3. The data collected from the writing interest form was used to select culturally relevant poetry, expository, and narrative texts students engaged with during the unit.

Reflective Journals

Students completed reflective journals at the beginning and the end of the research study. The purpose of the journals at the beginning of the research was to understand middle school students’ previous writing experiences and students’ writing

self-efficacy. Students were asked the following questions: (1) Describe your middle school writing instruction experiences before entering English I? and (2) On a scale from 1-10, rate your confidence in your ability to write narrative essays, poetry, and expository essays?

Additionally, at the end of the research study students completed a reflective journal and answered the following questions: (1) In what ways, did the writing instruction for the poetry, narrative, and expository lessons increase your ability to create these products? and (2) On a scale from 1-10, rate your confidence in your ability to write narrative essays, poetry, and expository essays?

Learning Logs

Each week, one writing genre was taught using culturally relevant writing instruction. The culturally relevant writing instruction consisted of students selecting a culturally relevant text to read and annotate. The first week the focus was poetic writing, the second week the focus was narrative writing, and the final week the focus was expository writing. At the end of each instructional week, students completed a learning log about how the instruction impacted their ability to create the specific genre of writing.

Data Analysis

Creswell's (2014) six-step framework guided the qualitative data analysis. Step one involved organizing and preparing the data for analysis. This process entailed sorting and arranging data collected from the research into manila folders. The manila folder included the following data: (1) reading/writing interest form, (2) reflective journals, (3) learning logs, (4) student writing products, and (5) student

feedback forms. To protect student identity, each student was assigned a number and this number was recorded on the folder and the documents inside the folder. The second step involved reading and looking at all the data and writing initial thoughts and gleanings. Step three involved hand coding qualitative data using In Vivo Coding analysis and descriptive statistics. This process involved, "segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories and labeling those categories with a term, often a term based on the actual language of the participant" (Creswell, p. 198). The quantitative data consisted of students rating their writing self-efficacy on a scale from 1-10 at the beginning and at the end of the research study. Descriptive statistics were used to provide an understanding of the students writing self-efficacy data.

Step four involved using the coding process to code qualitative data for open and selective codes. The results of this coding process assisted with the creation of themes used as headings in the results section. Next, a thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the themes that emerged from the reflective journals and learning logs. These themes were supported by direct quotes from the participants' responses. Step five involved presenting the themes and descriptions in a narrative passage. This involved a discussion about "the chronology of events, a detailed discussion of several themes, and interconnecting themes" (Creswell, 2014, p. 200). The final step involved interpreting the results of the study.

Results and Discussion

Previous Middle School Writing Experiences

The descriptions of students' writing experiences were not surprising, and the responses collected from students' reflective

journals captured the essence of these experiences. One of the primary perceptions about students' middle school writing experiences was that the instructional environment was described as *enjoyable* or *calming*. While students did not provide an explicit reason for their gleanings, one conclusion is that for many of the students the teacher contributed to the aura of the instructional environment which attributed to the *calming* and *enjoyable* nature of the classroom. The research study occurred during the last month of the school year and time was an impediment. After the collection of the data, there was not enough time to engage in member checking to ask clarifying questions regarding these descriptions.

Students' Descriptions of Pedagogy

One primary observation about students' pedagogy descriptions is that students described the completion of formulaic writing assignments and strategies they were expected to employ in the context of writing. Students discussed formulaic approaches to writing such as writing to state assessment writing prompts, using graphic organizers to draft writing products, and practicing with multiple choice passages to learn about revising and editing.

Formulaic Writing. One of the formulaic writing strategies students discussed was the use of an advanced graphic organizer used for planning student writing called the Longhorn Box. In the district where High Achieving Middle School (pseudonym) is located, this strategy was commonly used as a drafting strategy, when students were planning their writing for expository or persuasive essays for the Texas State Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). While this strategy was used in this study and it is effective, students associated the use of this strategy as

a tool to prepare them to pass the writing section of the mandated STAAR assessment. Participants also articulated that this formulaic approach to writing was paired with writing tasks that resembled STAAR-like writing prompts that students addressed on the state-mandated assessment. This point aligns with writing instruction scholars (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Au & Gourd, 2013; McCarthy & Ro, 2011) contentions about is happening in classrooms in the United States. Applebee and Langer (2011) reported that writing instruction in middle schools is dominated by teacher-directed tasks; students complete formulaic writing assignments connected to high stakes testing and produce writing materials based on information that the teacher was seeking. The results of the research suggest that there is consistency between students' experiences in the study and research on preparing students for high-stakes testing.

Additionally, participants' responses reveal that their teachers were not spending enough time teaching students how to write (Graham et al., 2013). Teachers were not focusing on developing students' writing skills. Instead, several of the participants discussed completing worksheets and completing multiple choice assignments on revising and editing, learning about writing genres, grammar, mechanics, sentence structures, and vocabulary to build their writing capacity.

Assigning Writing. Also, participants discussed being *assigned* writing instead of being equipped with the skills to create writing products. Nearly all the participants discussed the absence of both real-world writing assignments and writing assignments that challenged them to write about topics connected to their lives and experiences. Participants never mentioned the use of their culture, backgrounds, or lived experiences as content for writing products they created in the

English classroom.

Students' descriptions of their middle school experiences also revealed that they were not recipients of culturally relevant approaches to writing. Students' voices, perspectives, and lives were not included in classroom discourse and students did not engage in writing instruction that linked academic content with their ideas and experiences (Winn & Johnson, 2011). Overall, the research results suggest that students were recipients of writing instruction that focused on formulaic writing and their teachers focused on assigning writing instead of teaching students how to write.

Students' Reading Preferences

At the beginning of the research study, a reading/writing interest form (Winn & Johnson, 2011) was used to gather information about students' reading/writing preferences, the last text students read, and activities students participated in and outside of school. Students also ranked their writing preferences for writing narrative, expository, and poetic writing on a scale from 1-3. The data collected from the reading/writing interest form was used to select culturally relevant poetry, expository, and narrative texts students engaged with during the unit. The data revealed that 72% of the participants in the study preferred reading online materials. Reading on the internet is a popular practice for young people because (1) they spend time scanning and surfing the internet, (2) digital mass media has low cost and ease of access, and (3) the internet has up-to-date content (Shimray et al., 2015). Overall, students' online reading preferences is influenced by the advancement of technology and convenience of smartphones has provided a variety of options for content to reach students. Online reading has the

potential to have a positive impact on learning outcomes (Seok & DaCosta, 2017).

Students' Preferences for Fictional and Culturally Relevant Texts

In addition to students' preference for reading on-line, students also preferred reading fictional texts. When students discussed their reading genre preferences, many of the participants listed a fictional text as the last text they read and enjoyed. Several of the teacher-selected texts read in class during the 2017-2018 academic year were consistently cited by students. The texts were: *Othello* (1995), *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and *The Pigman* (1968). Researchers such as Jenkinson (as cited in Hopper, 2005) found that children select fiction because they are growing up and having trouble growing up. This statement suggests that students select fictional texts that mirror the adolescent struggle that children experience as they are developing into young adults. As evidenced by their reading/writing interest forms, many of the participants preferred reading texts such as *The Zodiac Legacy* (2015), *Insurgent* (2012), and *The Sword of Summer* (2015). These texts all deal with teenage issues, teenagers developing powers, and the challenges they face embracing the responsibility of their powers. The findings of the research suggest that students choose fictional texts about teenagers with magical powers because it symbolizes their challenges of growing up and trying to find their place in school and in life.

More importantly, the results imply that integrating fictional texts in the English classroom helped students visualize course content, stimulated discussion, promoted student interest and engagement and the narrative structure of fictional texts was familiar to students (Marsh et al., 2012). This point about narrative structure is

significant because it connects to students' narrative writing preferences. Many of the literature examples students cited as a reading preference connected to course texts, or the protagonists in the texts were relevant to the lives of the students. During the 2017-2018 academic year, students were exposed to fictional novel study on a continuous basis. One gleaning is that students preferred fictional texts because they were constantly exposed to this genre. As a result, exposure and familiarity with fictional texts influenced students' text preferences (Gallo & Ness, 2013). At the research site, focusing on genres assessed on the STAAR assessment was a common practice. The results suggest that students preferred fictional texts because the experiences in the researcher's classroom were contrary to the traditional assessment-driven instruction students experienced in the past.

The research results not only revealed students' preferences for fictional texts, but also the salient need to incorporate culturally relevant texts as a springboard for culturally relevant writing instruction. Research scholars (Au, 2001; Au & Gourd, 2013; Conrad et al., 2004; Ferger, 2006; Hefflin, 2002; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015; Méndez, 2006; Murphy & Murphy, 2016; Newman & Fink, 2012; Rozansky, 2010; Winn & Johnson, 2011) suggest that integrating culturally relevant texts that are connected to students lives and experiences is an important component of writing instruction. Many of the participants spoke to the importance of the culturally relevant texts and how the texts served as a mentor and model text (MacKay et al., 2017) for their own writing.

Impact of Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction

Students discussed how the writing instruction provided them a choice in the content they wrote about, and it ignited their interest and writing passion. Many of the participants explained how the writing experiences prioritized their interests and they talked about how they enjoyed having autonomy over the content they selected for their writing products. Several of the participants also spoke about the concept of passion. Participants suggested and explicitly stated that they were passionate about the topics that they wrote about for their poetic, narrative, and expository writing pieces. Culturally relevant writing instruction prioritizes the writing choices of students, provides them the opportunity to write about topics aligned to their interests and backgrounds, and this pedagogy ignites writing passion in students. Nearly all the participants articulated that the writing unit was effective because they had the opportunity to choose the texts, topics, and content for the writing products they created.

Increased Autonomy Over Writing

The research results further reveal that in the past students did not have autonomy over their writing. Participants did not choose the topics and content for the writing products they produced during their previous middle school writing experiences. Research scholars have found that student choice increases students' engagement with a task and elicits deep thinking (Knight, 2009), increases the authenticity of the writing product (Behizadeh, 2014), and has the potential to increase student ownership (Gadd & Parr, 2017). Providing students choice in the content for their culturally relevant writing increased students' sense of

ownership and investment in the writing products they created. Students moved from *writing for writing's sake* to taking ownership of the writing content included in their writing products. One of the biggest takeaways is that for the first time many students became owners of their writing process and the products they created.

Writing Connected to Students' Interests

In addition to providing student choice in writing, the results of this research study imply that culturally relevant writing instruction enabled participants to create writing products that converged around their interests. Participants discussed the importance of writing about texts aligned with their interests and being able to do so increased their ability to write. Participant "Max" stated: "I am able to be creative about what I want to write about. Based off what I have read from the article. When you write your writing must come from experience of what the topic is about."

Throughout the research study, students often commented that they never considered their own lives as a source of writing content. The results also revealed that the topics students wrote about for their products were meaningful for them. Participants discussed painful experiences with family, being addicted to medication, abuse, articulated the beauty of their cultural background, and discussed cultural artifacts. Scholars have maintained that engaging students in tasks that are relevant to their lives and experiences increases student motivation (Lipstein & Renninger, 2007), supports students in creating meaningful products (Beaton, 2010), and aligning writing to students' interests is a differentiated form of writing instruction and has the potential to increase student writing capacity (Shea, 2015).

Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction Ignites Students' Passion

Another impact of culturally relevant writing instruction is that it has the potential to ignite students' passion for writing. Many of the participants explained that the writing topics they wrote about were aligned with their interests, experiences, and cultural background and these factors ignited their passion for writing. Fredricks et al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal study and examined how passion was manifested in gifted high school and college students. The authors found that passion can be developed if instruction is aligned with the needs and interests of students. The results of the study imply that students' passion developed because they were allowed opportunities to write about topics that were aligned with their interests.

Similarly, the results of this research study align with the work of Fredricks et al. (2010) and suggest that students' passion developed because they were allowed opportunities to write about topics they were interested in. "James" explained that the essence of true writing is being able to leverage personal experiences and as a result of the culturally relevant writing unit he was more passionate about writing. He commented: "I like the fact that we could write about something that is personal or something we are passionate for. That is the true essence of writing." Scholars have found that aligning writing instruction with the lives and experiences of students (Gorecki, 2014) and having a passionate teacher (Johnston, 2011) encourages students to be passionate about the content they write about.

Exploration of Cultural Backgrounds

One of the most noticeable observations is that students explained that

the culturally relevant writing instruction enabled them to explore their cultural backgrounds, learn about themselves, and learn about the backgrounds of others. “Nkechi” captured the essence of what participants shared about being inspired by their cultural background:

Culture is something that I am inspired by so when I saw that this poem was about culture, I was quite excited. When I am inspired by something, I pour my heart onto it so people can see my work and who I am.

Gay (2000, 2002) maintained that culturally responsive teaching involves using the cultural background and experiences of students and incorporating these strengths into the classroom to support student learning. This research study provided students the writing space to explore their cultural background in original poems and personal narratives about their culture and lives. Students’ cultural background provided both the content and inspiration for the writing products they created.

Increasing Writing Self-efficacy

Many of the participants spoke to the fact that they believed the writing unit was beneficial for their writing development. Students’ mean score for writing self-efficacy increased for poetic and narrative writing: (a) poetic writing self-efficacy increased from 5.17 to 6.51, (b) narrative writing self-efficacy increased from 6.49 to 6.95, and (c) expository writing self-efficacy decreased from 6.84 to 6.78.

The results of this research imply that culturally relevant writing instruction has the potential to increase student writing self-efficacy. To increase student writing self-efficacy this research employed two primary strategies: vicarious experiences

and positive social persuasions. Pajares et al. (2007) defined vicarious experiences as learning experiences that involve modeling, students observing writing, and incorporating student exemplars as mentor texts. The authors defined social persuasions as a “verbal judgment that others provide” (p. 107). These social persuasions can be either positive or negative. The authors expressed that the social persuasions that are positive can “encourage and empower” (p. 107) the development of students’ self-efficacy. In this study, social persuasions consisted of the writing feedback received from the students and the researcher. The results suggest that the vicarious experiences students experienced through models, explicit instruction, and the positive social persuasions from the feedback process were key factors in increasing their writing self-efficacy.

Throughout the research study, the researcher provided mentor texts that students read before they wrote their original writing products. The researcher modeled writing for each of the writing genres covered and students observed exemplar writing from the researcher and students in the classroom. The strategies of modeling and observations are aligned with the work of Schunk (2003) in that the researcher provided a writing model for each genre and students observed the strategies employed by the researcher, so that they could implement the strategies with their own original products. Additionally, Schunk and Zimmerman (2007) found that exposure to multiple models of an instructional task is one strategy teachers can employ to build students’ writing self-efficacy.

Impact of Student and Teacher Feedback

The results of the research also suggest that student and teacher feedback were positive supports in increasing student

writing self-efficacy. Participants commented on the effectiveness of the feedback received from their peers and the teacher throughout the study. “Angelica” shared: “The writing unit was helpful. What benefited the most were the peer evaluations. Getting feedback was great as it made my essays stronger. It also helped me with the flow of ideas.” As students reflected on the impact of the writing unit a large majority of the students commented on how the feedback they received helped develop their writing capacity. Participants cited the importance of the cultural questionnaire and the detailed expectations for creating the writing products as important instructional supports that aided them in creating writing products for each genre covered.

Conclusion

The students, as a result of this study, realized that they brought a wealth of knowledge to the English classroom. They also confirmed that they possessed the writing skills needed to create texts that brought to life their own lives, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. James eloquently stated that the writing instruction afforded him the opportunity to write about topics he was passionate about and as a result he felt free. To a large extent, many of the students discussed how culturally relevant writing supported them in finding their writing voice and gave them writing freedom. Culturally relevant writing instruction has the potential to validate the voices of students often not heard. It is important that educators free these voices, so that students not only change themselves and their perspectives about writing but use their writing to engage critically with the world and transform society with the texts and stories they create.

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