"YOU AIN'T GONNA TELL ME TO PICK ANOTHER TOPIC?" ONE STUDENT MAKES IMPORTANT CHOICES AS A WRITER[1]

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It is just after lunch on a Wednesday afternoon in central Virginia. Outside, the leaves are beginning to turn brilliant shades of red, orange, and yellow. Penny's third grade students are oblivious to the view outside their third grade classroom window, as they are hard at work during writers' workshop.

One student, Jamal, looks pensive. I watch him slowly, carefully put his pencil to his paper. It is only September and he is testing the waters. Jamal pauses, raises his head, his brow furrowed. He asks Penny, "So I can really write about basketball again? You ain't gonna tell me to pick another topic?" Penny reassures him of his topic choice, raising one eyebrow at me. This notion of choice in writers' workshop is still new to all of her third graders, but Jamal seems particularly skeptical of this freedom to make his own decisions.

As a researcher in Penny's classroom, I am intrigued by Jamal. On the first day of school, he came up to me and introduced himself. Then, he matter-of-factly stated, "I'm not that smart. Didya know I failed first grade?" Yet, despite his self-perception, I am told Jamal has written every day in the short month since the beginning of school, while other classmates muddled around, getting accustomed to writers' workshop. More interesting is that every single day, Jamal has written about one topic: basketball.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the journey of nine-year-old Jamal, who chooses to write about the same topic all year. I illustrate the growth he makes because he continually chooses to write about his passion for basketball. I show how Jamal uses the same familiar topic to gauge what he is learning about himself as a writer. This is a case study of a child who became motivated to write, because his teacher honored the one thing that was so important to him and scaffolded his growth as a learner (Vygotsky).

Choice in Writers' Workshop

A significant body of research supports the philosophy of writers' workshop and, specifically, the element of student choice. Donald Graves learned the importance of creating an authentic environment for writers—one where students write daily, study what other authors do, and focus intently on processes of writing. Most importantly, students write about what is important to them. Katie Ray states, "Serious writers have to find their own reason to write and things to write about" (90). The notion of choice is significant—students learn to make deliberate decisions as writers. They determine what to write about and what processes work for them, and they make decisions about audience and genre.

Lucy Calkins asserts we must teach the writer, not the writing. The purpose of a mini-lesson is to help each writer add another "tool to his toolbox" (Heard). This philosophy of writing instruction differs from the traditional way of teaching where teachers introduce a skill and then expect students to immediately apply it. Instead, Calkins stresses the importance of adding to the repertoire of the writer and enabling him or her to choose when to apply each strategy.

Jane Hansen highlights the link between author and "authority." The framework of writers' workshop enables writers to solicit specific feedback and to ultimately determine what changes to make to their writing. Through self-evaluation, student writers are able to determine what they do well, what they want to learn

next, and how they will meet each goal. Hansen observed teachers who supported student writing goals, and provided instruction based on what students determined they needed to learn next, to improve as writers.

However, despite what is known about the importance of student choice and ownership in writing, it is unusual to find a student who chooses to write about the same thing all year and, perhaps, even more unusual to find a teacher who will encourage this.

Research Methodology

My case study research on Jamal at Columbus Elementary was part of an ongoing research project called Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Virginia. This project allowed me to work with professors, other graduate researchers, classroom teachers, and teacher-researchers who all sought to answer the following research question: What do children do when they use writing to learn across the curriculum? And, more specifically, I wanted to know: What choices does one student make in his participation in writers' workshop?

I collected my data over a one-year period. I observed the children during writers' workshop, twice a week, for 90 minutes each visit. During this time, I recorded conversations, interactions, and dynamics of the classroom. I spoke to students individually, in groups, interviewed them, and copied samples of their writing. Penny and I met weekly with the six-person research team to share written reflections of the students' work, discuss findings, and analyze our data using an interpretivist paradigm (Erickson).

I chose Penny's classroom for two reasons. First, Penny had recently taken courses about teaching writing and was planning to implement a writers' workshop for the first time. As a fifth-year teacher committed to continually improving her practice, she recognized the power of teacher-research (Mohr) and wanted to participate on the research team to examine how her instructional practices influenced what her students did as writers. We agreed

to study her students together, in order to learn the impact of her actions.

The second reason I chose Penny's classroom was that she worked at a "failing" school according to state test scores. Seventy-three percent of students at Columbus Elementary qualified for free or reduced lunch and 75% of the students were African-American or Latino. Teachers were under tremendous pressure to raise students' test scores. Despite this high-stakes climate, where many teachers implemented more "back-to-basics," teacher-centered instruction (i.e. students only writing to prompts), Penny was committed to implementing a writers' workshop model and I wanted to research this inception.

At the start of the year, I divided my time among all of the students in Penny's class. Each child, of course, presented his or her own challenge. Rhonda appeared to work on a different piece of writing nearly every day and never finished anything. Jason spent days with a blank page in front of him "thinking." Some students seemed to have limited vocabularies while others wrote without using punctuation or proper grammar. One girl's stories rarely made sense, even to her.

I noticed one student in particular, Jamal, who seemed particularly eager, but who also seemed to be "muddling around" in the same topic and genre. I was surprised at his diligence; past teachers had described Jamal as a student who avoided work at all costs.

Jamal is a nine-year-old African-American boy who struggles in every subject. Tests indicate Jamal has slow processing speed, but he does not receive special services. He comes from a single parent family; his mom works two jobs to keep food on the table, and Jamal helps care for his three younger siblings. His second-grade teacher describes Jamal as disinterested in school and completely unengaged, though not a troublemaker. He spends all of his free time playing basketball in the government housing project where he lives—it is his one passion.

Jamal chooses to write about his passion

I watch Jamal write intently, for the first few weeks in school. "One day," he informs Penny, "I'm going to play in the NBA." He returns to his writing. Here is his writing from one of the first days of school:

septber
3 rd
Basketball is my
favote sport my Dad ToT
me to play Basketball
I play with my fiend
Some Times my dad
Work at the high school
Some Time he Talk me
over to the Gym you are
pohs To passe in basketball
I know how To do a lay up

With the intent of preserving student choice and fostering ownership, Penny first builds Jamal's own confidence as a writer.

"Wow, Jamal. You seem to know a lot about basketball—you know how to do a lay-up and how to pass the ball. How long have you been playing basketball?"

"My whole life," Jamal proudly responds.

Penny calls Jamal an expert. She knows she must value his knowledge of basketball and his experiences if he is to continue to display excitement towards writing. Penny knows she will teach conventional writing skills when Jamal is ready—punctuation, capitalization, organization, etc. She also knows she must use writing that is authentic to him (Dyson). Penny must be careful not to step in too soon; Jamal may be crushed if she tells him now that his writing is not good enough. Thus, Penny makes no references to the errors or omissions of words, punctuation, or capitalization at this time.

Hansen writes about the process of finding value in one's work, an idea she terms "e-value-ation." In this case, rather than highlight Jamal's numerous errors, Penny merely acknowledges what he

does well: he chooses a topic he knows much about, something accomplished writers do. A more conventional approach is to praise the student for what he did well, but then correct errors in the draft. Many teachers do not hesitate to write on a student's work, provide unsolicited feedback, and attempt to correct at least some of the errors, in an effort to help the student improve his writing. This kind of teacher talk (Johnston) often removes the author from the position of authority, which may undermine the writer's sense of ownership, but also, his competency. Penny treads carefully. She prioritizes the need to create a safe environment for this young writer (Gee) and looks for ways to help Jamal decide for himself, what he needs to learn next.

Jamal chooses writing goals for himself

Penny teaches a mini-lesson on how authors set goals for themselves. Students in this workshop regularly learn processes other authors use and oftentimes, try out many of these techniques (Hansen). The students excitedly share some goals they have for themselves. They have been writing daily for almost two months and have learned enough about writing to determine appropriate goals for themselves. They have lots of ideas. Some want to create paragraphs; others want to work on punctuation, write in different genres, or conduct research.

Jamal chooses to fill one page with writing as his first goal. Though Penny hopes Jamal will target his need to edit, she honors his goal. At this point, Jamal defines good writing in terms of the space he fills. Penny knows that in order for Jamal to take ownership of his writing, he must make his own decisions. Further, she knows Jamal's definition of what "good" writing is will change.

Jamal writes a new draft about basketball and fills one page. He is thrilled. Now, like many other writers, Jamal chooses another goal for himself. "I want to make my writing look real," he announces. Penny asks him to clarify. "I want it to look like it does in books." He decides it is time to use capitals and periods. As a third-grader, it is important for Jamal to understand the basics of

capitals and periods, but it is more authentic if he generates this goal.

Jamal chooses to write another draft about basketball to practice using punctuation.

> I like Basketball. I play Basketb
> all at a lot of placs. I
> play at the park. every time
> I got ther I meet new
> people frend. I don't play
> basketball a lot ther any
> more becuz it is hard to
> baunce the ball in the snow.
> so I play at the gmy at
> the downtown becuz it is
> warm ther. I used to
> play at C▬▬▬ high
> school but my dad doesn't
> work ther any more. Some
> times I play where I
> live at f▬▬▬ court.

Penny confers with Jamal about his latest basketball draft, interested in learning more from an "expert." He has yet to exhaust the topic; he knows much about basketball he has not yet written. Penny praises Jamal for using some good punctuation and helps him change some of his capital letters. He is interested in improving his writing and puts considerable effort into the task.

Although the topic and genre are the same, Jamal elaborates on his previous ideas and adds new details. He is aware he can improve the mechanics of his writing within his basketball drafts. Ray states that a common misconception is that new topics generate good writing, when in reality, high-quality writing often stems from finding fresh ways to write about the same topic. By honoring Jamal's interest and allowing him to write continually about a topic of his choosing, Penny was able to coach him through what he needed to learn, and as a result, strengthen their relationship as teacher and student (Rickards & Hawes). It no longer mattered that Jamal kept writing about the same thing. It

was almost as if Jamal used his basketball writing to "self-regulate" his abilities as a writer (Perry & Drummond). His knowledge of the content was fixed, but he was able to gauge his own growth as a writer by returning to the same topic over and over again.

Jamal chooses to organize his writing

As Jamal's use of punctuation steadily improves over time, he begins to focus on other elements such as organization. Specifically, the following examples illustrate how he learns to organize his writing:

> I love basketball. One day I want to be in the NBA I want to play like Michael Jordan. If you play in the N-BA they go by your last name. Sometime when I go with my dad he pick me up I play basketball with him. Love to tech peolp how to play basketball. Sometime when my cous came over to my house we play basketball. Players that play in the NBA. my frend can draw Michael Jordan gest like him. Every moroning I play basketball I've never been on a basketball team. My bother play basketball with me. When you play basketball you make alot of money. you got to be hathey you can not smoke.

Although Jamal stays on the topic of basketball, the content is scattered and can benefit from organization. Penny explains to Jamal how his writing will improve if he arranges his ideas logically. Jamal agrees to work on this; he wants to make his writing better.

Penny demonstrates how to use a web. She places each topic in a bubble and teaches Jamal how to classify his ideas around main headings. Although Penny and Jamal add some new ideas to his web, they mainly use the information from his first draft of

writing to fill in the web; in this case, Jamal learns to use the web as a revision tool, not a pre-writing activity.

Many teachers introduce webbing as a pre-writing tool used only before drafting. Although students usually learn various methods of pre-writing, we sometimes mistakenly teach students about "the" writing process, which simply does not exist. Rather, there are a set of processes writers might use to help them compose. Many texts introduce "the" writing process as a five-step, sequential process that includes pre-writing, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing. "The" process might be misinterpreted as a lockstep, point A to point B progression. Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi state, "Each writer has his or her own herky-jerky, highly personalized, often ritualized way of

getting words on paper. Any one-size-fits-all writing process would be not only inaccurate but destructive to students" (62).

Penny knows processes are tools to help the writer and that any practices that impede a writer's creativity or flow should be eliminated. Further, writers cycle among various processes and often engage in multiple processes simultaneously (Graves). Penny teaches Jamal different writing tools so he can choose to use what works best for him.

In this case, Jamal drafts first and now revises and plans with Penny after he has composed. Would a web have helped him before he drafted? Maybe. But likely, it would have slowed him down and interrupted the flow of words he was intent on writing. Instead, Penny presents Jamal with the necessary tool of revision in a way that works for him. And, Jamal, determined to make this basketball draft just a bit better than the last, chooses to engage in revision. This is his next revision:

> I like to play basketball a lot. Sometime people take me to the park and play basketball. Basketball is my favrit sport. Me and my frends play basketball togethr. When I'm bored I play basketball. My dad used to work at the hi school. We woud play in the gym. I want to be on a basketball team this year. I spend a lot of time playing basketball. When I was little I had a little basketball court my dad bot. Peopl buy me a lot of basketballs. They know that I like to play basketball. Some I watch with my dad.
>
> When I got to collej I want to play basketball. When I go home I might play basketball after I do my homework. When I grow up I woud like to be a basketball player. One time I wrote about Michael Jordan.

> He is a famus basketball player. If you
> get to be a basketball player you can
> make a lot of money. That is good.
> I want to be like Michael Jordan when
> I play basketball. I want to have
> the same number 23.

Jamal has not mastered the concept of organizing his ideas, but this draft is more clearly organized and complete than the previous one. He is now aware that a web is a tool some writers use to improve their writing. Jamal manipulates his first draft to create a second draft, and each paragraph has a different focus. He starts to recognize the usefulness of paragraphs. Over the next several days, Jamal continues to write about basketball and chooses to continue to practice creating paragraphs. Had Penny given him a miscellaneous piece of writing or worksheet, where Jamal would have to designate where paragraphs begin, it is unlikely he would have been as engaged in this task. Yet, because Penny uses this constructivist mode of instruction, where Jamal practices a skill through real application to authentic context, he is motivated to grow as a writer (Holt-Reynolds).

Penny employs other tactics to aid Jamal in his revision process. For instance, she sometimes reads his writing aloud to him, so Jamal can listen to the words he has written. Additionally, Jamal relies on feedback from his peers, who often help him to clarify and rephrase his writing. Penny also asks Jamal to rewrite the same draft in different genres. For example, he turns a non-fiction draft into a list of the rules of basketball. She has exposed her students to different genres throughout the year, rather than presenting one at a time and waiting for students to master it. This way, students know multiple formats to present information and can choose what tools work for them. Georgia Heard suggests many of these techniques help students to understand how revision works as a natural part of their writing process.

Jamal's choices lead him to learn new skills

Jamal then chooses to write a biography about his favorite basketball player Michael Jordan. First, he reads a book from the classroom library about Jordan. Then, Penny provides him with biographies of other famous basketball players; she chooses mentor texts that will matter to him (Skinner). This is Jamal's first attempt at a Michael Jordan biography:

> Michael Jordan started basketball when he was 5 years old. Michael was going out to play. He got out of the shower. His dad drove to his basketball practice. He picked up his two friends. When they got to the gym they practisd there jump shots. They were done at 1:00. They walked back to Michael's house. Jordan wanted to be in the NBA. Jordan got older and joined the NBA. Michael scored 25 points in one game. There was a team called the Chicago Bulls. The Bulls had a game at 8:00.

Jamal takes the initiative to research his favorite player and writes about how Jordan joined the NBA to play for the Chicago Bulls. Nevertheless, he does not write a clear biography. In this draft, some of the facts about Michael Jordan are accurate, while others are made up by Jamal. Moreover, Jamal attempts to write chronologically in terms of Jordan's life, but omits major portions, adding to the disorganization of the piece.

Again, Penny and Jamal work together to clarify his writing. This time, Penny introduces how to take notes on index cards as another way to organize his ideas. Jamal retrieves the same book he used to conduct his initial research and double-checks which facts in his first draft are accurate. He learns how to record one fact per index card and adds additional facts to include in his next draft:

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bron Feb 17, 1963        1
Brooklyn new York


he move to M.J.
Wilmington noth
Carolina


                m.J.   3
he played foot Ball
Basketball, Basball,


                    4
his tall brother name
larry cape beting him.
Thats how he got into
basketball
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Jamal takes notes during the revision process rather than during pre-writing, where some models of instruction appear to suggest that it always belongs. Jamal uses his notes for a revision, and includes some of the same ideas and facts from his first draft, but his second draft is much more detailed. He tells Penny, "I like this way better than the web." Jamal determines what works well for him; Penny has given him the tools to make decisions for himself, an authentic way writers work (Fletcher). This is Jamal's revision after using note cards:

Michael Jordan started basketball when he was 8 years old. Michael was going to practice. He got out of the shower. His dad was going to drive him to practice. He picked up his two friends. When they got to the gym they practiced jump shots.. They were done at 1:00. They walked back to his house. Michael Jordan was getting older. He was 13 years old.

Michael played basketball at walker middle school. Michael had walked to practice with his friends. They practiced playing, jump shots, dribbling, and lay ups. They had a game tonight. His mom and dad were going to come. They were on there way to the game. When they got there Michael had to get ready. Michael scored 25 points. They won

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the game. 12 years later Michael Jordan was 26 years old. Michael and his two friends Jordan and Matthew played in the NBA.

There was a team called the Chicago Bulls. Michael Jordan was living in Brooklyn New york. Michael Jordan was famous and his friend was too. They had a game at 8:00. They were winning by 26 points. They had 30 points. The game was over. One month later Michael Jordan got married. His wife's name was Slonu. Michael Jordan and his friends went to the gym to shoot around.

THE END

This final example shows improvement in organization, depth of content, and writing mechanics. Jamal uses his knowledge of making webs, taking notes, using paragraphs, and punctuation, to choose what works best for him. He has not mastered these skills,

but practices with writing that is meaningful to him. Jamal is motivated to learn certain writing skills especially when he writes about his passion and his experience and feels supported within his classroom environment.

Classroom Implications

Jamal's journey highlights two key factors for classroom teachers to consider. First, teachers must honor what our students know and care about (Newkirk). Penny not only supported Jamal's insistence to repeatedly write about the same thing, but actually encouraged it. She asked deliberate questions about basketball, provided biographies about basketball players, and encouraged Jamal to practice new skills with his basketball drafts. This enabled Jamal to make decisions for himself as a writer and to determine what worked best for him, in a supportive environment. Students must recognize that their teacher respects their choices. Because Penny encouraged Jamal to explore basketball repeatedly, he was safe to explore what he didn't know about writing within the confines of a topic he was an expert on.

Second, it is important to note how Penny stayed true to her notion of best practices in writing instruction. In this era of high-stakes testing, many teachers are feeling the pressure to change their literacy instruction to prepare for the "test." Bronwyn Williams writes, ". . . the increasing pressure of standardized testing disconnects literacy education from human concerns. Students face writing prompts and reading tests that have no connection to their lives, communities, or interests" (154). Penny is preparing Jamal for the state literacy test by engaging him daily in writers' workshop to learn skills necessary to succeed on the state test.

Shelby Wolf and Kenneth Wolf write about "teaching true and to the test in writing." They studied six exemplary teachers of writing who teach in high-stakes accountability systems and found common characteristics of all six teachers: "[Teachers] encourage daily writing in their process classrooms and give many opportunities for topic choice as well as conferencing. They

emphasize craft through the study of published models and lessons on voice, developing ideas, organization and convention" (230). Although these teachers familiarized themselves with state test writing requirements, they focused primarily on components such as children's responses to one another, self-reflection in writing, and rehearsal of writing.

Not surprisingly, Penny was successful: Jamal scored proficient on the third grade Standards of Learning state assessment, while students in other third-grade classrooms, where writing instruction was solely based on prompts, did not. Although not every student in Penny's third-grade classroom scored proficient on the state test, all students showed tremendous growth not only in their ability to write and in their confidence as writers, but more importantly, in their interest in learning to write.

Conclusion

Through his writing about basketball, Jamal learns and is able to practice new skills—lessons he may not have learned without the benefit of writers' workshop. Feeling like an expert leads to Jamal's excitement about learning overall, as he has found a comfortable place for himself in school, where his choices and interests are respected.

Notes

[1] All names (except Penny's) are pseudonyms.

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