Journey to Becoming a Writer:
Review of Research about Children's Identities as Writers

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In the early years of schooling, children represent themselves as writers in diverse ways. Writers write to communicate with audiences but they also construct their social and literate identities as they write; writers write their lives (Richardson, 2000). I maintain that writers write to learn and to learn about themselves. They also learn to write as they write. In this way, writing practices, which include social and discursive practices, have transformative potential. Writing at school can be preparation for future academic writing but it also can be a site for dialogue with oneself (John-Steiner, Panofsky & Smith, 1994; Street, 1984). The goal of this review of research is to examine how children's identities as beginning writers are constructed through writing practices, as represented in empirical studies of writer identities.

Literacy and identity are inextricably linked (Bourne, 2002, Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Moje & Luke, 2009). Through literate practices (i.e., reading, writing, drawing, and other forms of interaction with multimodal texts), one draws on identities and constructs new ones. Through the making of texts, writers are able to remake themselves and their relations with the world. Writing is a dialogic process wherein one takes up the words of others and creates new hybrid texts. One's utterances always reflect traces of other utterances. Our texts borrow elements from and speak to one another and we "live in a world of others' words" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 143).

Building on the crucial and interdependent relationships between literacy (here, writing) and identity, and the implications for young children's journeys as beginning writers, this paper is an investigation into empirical literature on writer identities, focusing on research that explored the literate identities of children, as they began to learn to write and to think of themselves as writers. The literate identities of youth have been explored in much more depth (e.g., Bulfin & North, 2007; Gilbert, 1992, Lewis & Fabos, 2005) but we know less about literate identities at the time that they are first being constructed, when children are beginning writers. The importance of writing, and how writing practices play out in the construction of literate identities, especially in the face of increasingly standardized writing assessment practices, is addressed here.

In this review, I begin with a theoretical discussion of how literacy (with a focus on writing) and identity work together and consider Moje and Luke's (2009) question: "How does one know identity when one sees it?" (p. 419). I follow with a review of key research studies about children's writer identities and relevant findings. The questions I pose are: How do writing practices, including daily practices as well as both formative and summative assessment, operate to construct children's writer identities within classroom settings? Do conceptions of writer identities allow for change and development across contexts and time? How might one re-imagine literacy settings in classrooms, in order to provide spaces for a wide range of children to gain access to the practices of design and communication that will allow them to become writers? In other words, how can children act as writers who, through

their writing, transform themselves?

These questions guide my selection of research on writer identities. I use examples from empirical research to support my claims, to illustrate children's experiences as beginning writers and to discuss the advantages and limitations of this review. I end with a discussion of these questions about children's identities and writers and the possibility for transformative practice.

Writing Practices and Identities – Theoretical Frames for Review of Research

In the section that follows, I discuss what I mean by writing practices in classrooms, how literacy and identity work together, and how the practice of writing can contribute to "becoming" a writer.

Writing Practices in Children's Classrooms

In schools and other educational settings, students engage in a range of literacy practices. Scribner and Cole (1981) define a practice as "a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge" (p. 236). They elaborate that "tasks that individuals engage in constitute a social practice when they are directed to socially recognized goals and make use of a shared technology and knowledge system" (p. 236). Literacy practices are influenced by social norms and practices and the influences of larger structures such as school boards, curriculum policies, and popular media. Kinds of reading and writing and other communicative practices, such as expression through drawing, speaking, and gesture, are often valued and interpreted in particular ways (Collins, 1995; The New London Group (NLG), 1996).

Writing is conventionally thought of as the creation of print, in a form that can be easily read by an unknown audience. It is possible to think of writing as any situation where a text is created. Texts can be drawings, dramatic events, text messages, web pages, and spoken stories, for example. In this paper, the term *writing* primarily refers to the creation of texts where print is foregrounded, as this is how researchers cited here use the terms *writer* and *writing*.

Literacy and Identity: You Can't Have One Without the Other...

When talking about writers and identities, it is necessary to clarify "what it means to write about and study people's identity" (Moje & Luke, p. 423). Within a sociocultural framing of identity construction, identities are constantly constructed and re-constructed (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998) through literacy practices. Holland et al. (1998), although not focused on literacy per se, view identity within lived worlds as both durable and changing, when they explain: "cultural production [is]...a codevelopment of identities, discourses, embodiments, and imagined worlds that inform each moment of joint production and are themselves transformed by that moment" (p. vii). Both identities and the worlds in which they are constructed are interconnected and in the process of change. The *figured worlds* in which identities are constructed, therefore, may open the possibility to consider potentialities and therefore the possibility for change. These figured worlds are spaces or contexts within which literacy (and writing) practices develop.

Also concerned with identities being made, and with identities being used as resources, Rowsell and Pahl (2007) contend, "identities can be found within practices and… it is possible to trace the sedimentation of these practices into text making" (p. 393). They

elaborate how literacy practices—the kinds of practices that are valued and promoted in particular contexts—surface in the texts people produce. If, for example, journal writing is a valued classroom practice, in terms of the time and emphasis accorded to the development of competency in that practice, then elements of journal writing practices such as informal constructions, conversational tone, and description of day-to-day details, will show up and be sedimented in journal-writing texts. If oral storytelling is a significant component of one's family life, an oral storytelling disposition and the practices that surround it may be sedimented in one's multimodal texts. Rowsell and Pahl (2007) use the term "sedimented identities" to explain how identities are layered into texts, a metaphor that is similar to Latour's "laminations" of identities that are layered through activity and experience. Both provide an analytical metaphor for multiple identities and can suggest that identities appear more fixed over time.

From these perspectives, identities are constructed within practices and within spaces, in the social worlds where writing happens. Identity may be viewed as a narrative or story that one tells about oneself, but identity is also constrained by practices, by time and space, in interaction with others. Writing is a tool that can be used to learn in particular ways, and those who are developing as writers are also positioned by the possible writer identities that are available within practices. Writing texts and the processes of text making might be viewed as sites of struggle where conflicting identities and conflicting practices might co-exist through these texts. Keeping these struggles in mind, it is imperative to consider how practices might work against the development of writing and writer identities.

Writing as Becoming

Sociocultural theorists Packer and Goicoechea (2000) note that "Human being is becoming – striving to be what it is not (yet)" (p. 234). Identity is in development, in process, unfinalizable, and is continually renegotiated with others, through relationships, in contexts (Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). This perspective does not involve a stage-like approach to development or a finite end when one becomes a writer or not. Children need to have room to create new narratives or occupy new positions as writers. Richardson (2000) suggests that people often write to figure out what they think and can consider that which is "written as method of knowing" (p. 940) Conventional modes of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) offer this potential, as do other modes and possibilities for communicative practices.

Writer Identities in Children's Classrooms: Methodological Approach to Review of Research

This review examines empirical research about the ways in which writing practices construct children's writer identities and influence their beginning development as writers, the possibility for change in the ways that identities are constructed in writing contexts, and the potential for transformed writing classroom practice based on the findings of existing research on young children's writer identities.

Using the key terms "literacy", "reading", "writing", and "learning" each in conjunction with the term "identity", a broad search for empirical studies research journal articles, books, conference proceedings using Academic Search Complete, Education Index Full Text, ERIC (EBSCO Interface), and PsycINFO was carried out. Although the primary interest was in writing, studies that described their focus as reading or learning sometimes discussed writer identities as well. In order to keep the review manageable, and keeping in

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mind that the consideration of identity as socially constructed is more recent, only research studies of children in classrooms since 1995 were considered.

Within these results, only studies that investigated children's writer identities in monolingual school settings were reviewed in detail. Although studies in bilingual settings and/or those that focus on English language learners offer interesting and important information about writing in schools, the desire here was to focus on identities as writers rather than writing as connected to English language learning and identities as described by social markers such as ethnicity or language spoken. In addition, research about adults, preschoolers, and youth was excluded. Again, these studies offer rich data and analysis about how writer identities are constructed but the particular focus of this review was on the construction of writer identities through the early years of school where extended writing opportunities begin and child are learning to become writers.

Based on the initial search for empirical studies and the journals that featured these studies, the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Review of Educational Research*, *Review of Research in Education*, and *Reading and Writing Quarterly* were identified as sites for discussions about writing and identity. These journals were also reviewed in detail until a point of saturation was reached and subsequent searches yielded the same articles.

After reviewing the research in this area, this review identified 15 core studies that focused explicitly on the writer identities of children in elementary classrooms (approximately Kindergarten to Grade 6) and met the criteria described above. I reviewed these studies and the portrayals of writers and findings about writers' identities and classroom writing practices were noted and charted to look for patterns as well as interesting or unexpected descriptions. In this paper, I organize my claims according to the three questions posed earlier.

Table 1 presents these 15 studies and lists the researchers, grade level of participants, the kinds of literacy activities with which participants were engaged, and the names of key participants. Only a sample of these writers is described in the section that follows. Most of the studies examined children's writer identity from a sociocultural perspective and viewed writing and identity construction as primarily social. Research on writer identity consisted of qualitative research approaches, including ethnographies, surveys, and case studies.

Table 1

Summary of Core Research Studies about Writer Identities

Research	Grade	Literacy Activity	Participants
Bourne (2002)	Gr. 3-4 (8-9 years)	Writing science texts	Tuk, Terina, Ashique, Somiron, Alea
Christian & Bloome (2004)	Gr. 1	Peer-group reading/writing response	Michelle, Katie, David, Oscar
Compton-Lilly (2006)	Gr. 1	Reading Recovery – with modifications	Devon
Dutro, Kazemi & Balf (2004, 2006)	Gr. 5	Writing - various	Max, April, Mirabel, Philip

Dyson (2003)	Gr. 1	Writing – writers' workshop	Lakeisha , Marcel, Noah,Denise
Kendrick, McKay & Moffatt (2002)	Gr. 1-6	Representations of selves as readers and writers	various – Dylan cited here
Lassonde (2006)	Gr. 5	Writing – various	Jamie
Martello (2004)	Gr. 1	Spelling strategies	Leesa, Melinda
McCarthey – Study 1 (1990)	Gr. 5/6	Personal writing (not fiction)	Miguel, Anita, Ella
McCarthey – Study 2 (1994-5)	Gr. ¾	Personal Journals Written book responses Writers' workshop Sharing writing	Rita , Greg, Mandy
McCarthey – Study 3 (1999)	Gr. 5	Readers' workshop Writers' workshop Reading Renaissance	Jennifer, Lucas, Daniel
Moore & Seeger (2009)	Gr.4/5	Letter writing – students and student teachers	14 Grade 4 students 38 pre-service teachers
Rogers, Light & Curtis (2004)	Gr. 5	Writing across the curriculum	Monica, Devon
Wohlwend (2009)	Kinder-garten	Writers' workshop	Zoe, Mei, Yu, Clare, Nicholas, Peter
Zacher (2008)	Gr. 5	Writers'workshop, homework writing	DeAndre, Marcus, Arturo, John

Note. I use the term *writers' workshop* as used in the respective studies. I do not describe all of the students mentioned here in this paper.

Researching identity, especially how one thinks of oneself as a writer, requires in-depth and longitudinal studies of events and processes in writing contexts. Because of the qualitative methodological focus in this data, there was in-depth data about a small number of students. In addition, I did not have access to the raw data, viewing only the portions that other researchers have chosen to share. Researchers chose their focal students for reasons of their own—possibly related to access and an attempt to show a range of writer identities. Any patterns or claims drawn as a result are, therefore, tentative and ask more questions than they provide answers.

This review forms an introduction to how writers' identities might be formed in particular contexts as well as the ways that other researchers have viewed contexts and the kinds of data that they found most salient. In contrast to reviews including meta-analysis of a large number of studies of vast amounts of often quantitative data, herein I explore the "the smallness of situated lives" (Hicks, 2002, p. 33) described by others. The richness of this approach for theorizing about power relations allows one to trace histories and the shaping of practices and of identities through the everyday observation of these relations. A critical mass

of research is brought together, in conversation, to present what has been done, and what has been said about children's writer identities.

Through this examination of qualitative studies, it was possible look in depth at writing practices and to point to instances where it is possible to see the construction of particular kinds of identities in the contexts of writing practices. From this examination, one can notice instances where this data resonates with other contexts. The relatively small number of empirical studies about children's writer identities points to a lack of in-depth data about the construction of children's identities as writers.

In the sections that follow, claims about writer identity research are supported by examples of particular students and their engagement with writing practices and constructed writer identities. These examples are chosen to illustrate findings that were present across research studies, as well as those that complicate understanding of how writing practices might function, and that answer the questions that frame this review.

Writer Identities, Writing Practices

Findings outlined in this section address the questions posed earlier in this paper and are grouped under the following headings: a) writing practices: how classroom relationships influence writing practices for certain kinds of writing practices, and especially how assessment practices might influence how students engage with writing; b) how writer identities are generally perceived in static ways by students and teachers alike; and c) how practices might be transformed to encourage writing development, as children are learning to write.

Writing Practices are Co-constructed in Relationships with Teachers and Peers: Teachers

The literature demonstrates that teacher expectations for students were often influenced by perceptions of ability and identity markers such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and lead to differentiated writing practices. Teachers may have unwittingly provided more support for students they perceived as more like them (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2006; Lassonde; 2006; McCarthey, 2002). Strong initial judgments about students' competencies often persisted, and differentiated expectations lead to different learning experiences and writer identities for different students (e.g., Bourne, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Renold, 2001a, 2001b). Students who were constructed as less competent writers had fewer opportunities for participation and choice in writing practices. Students tended to adopt the expectations of their teachers and other students but these expectations varied from class to class, over time, in different learning situations or persisted in the face of increased writing competency (Christian & Bloome, 2004; Dutro, Kazemi & Balf, 2004; Reay & Wiliam, 1999).

At times, teachers and students could not seem to find common ground (McCarthey, 2002). Anita, a Grade 5 girl engaged in personal journal writing, was described as struggling at school and as having troubles at home. She and her teacher were not able to negotiate writing tasks in which they both felt invested: "Each time Anita introduced a possible topic, Ms. Meyer ignored it. Likewise, when the teacher brought up her father, Anita focused on a different topic" (p. 43). The teacher would not allow the student to choose her own writing topic and the student would not write about the teacher's preferred topic, the girl's personal feelings about her relationship with her father. This teacher-student conflict was not resolved and their relationship made it difficult for Anita to develop writing competencies and feelings

of success at school.

Some students had more access to the negotiation of classroom writing than did others. In contrast to Anita, Mandy, a student in a Grade 3/4 classroom engaged in writers' workshop and other writing practices, often made her views known in class and argued for change. Mandy said, "You know, we're always having to be boys [when writing from a character's perspective]. We had to be Pedro, now we have to be James" (McCarthey, 2002, p. 82). Mandy was able to negotiate a change in writing task and the teacher acknowledged her self-determination as a writer by agreeing with the changes that Mandy suggested. Her mother was a teacher and Mandy spoke out on social justice issues. Did Mandy bring more social capital to school than Anita—social capital that allowed her to negotiate her access to writer identities and practices?

In these studies, students' identities, like their writing, seemed to be co-constructed in relationships that operated around writing practices (Gee, 2000-2001; Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007). Tuk, in a study of 8- and 9-year-old children, was able to interact successfully with his teacher and receive encouragement for his work (Bourne, 2002). Tuk's writing, and even his expressive language as he planned his writing, was similar to that of other students. What were different, however, were his demeanour and his willingness to engage with the teacher so that she supported and intensely scaffolded his attempts at producing writing. Whereas for Tuk, the teacher focused on control of writing structure, for other students she focused on factual presentation of ideas. Bourne (2002) explains that "working with Tuk is satisfactory for the teacher because he answers her, rather than standing tongue-tied and silent, as other children in the class regularly do [...] However, it is clear that the teacher constructed the context that enabled Tuk to happen. His identity as bright is jointly constructed in the interaction" (p. 250). Does this differentiation of teaching within a classroom context reflect an accurate assessment of students' differential needs for writing and inherent abilities of the students, or are students being positioned by teachers in particular ways?

Devon, a Grade 1 boy, was identified as needing beginning literacy support. Compton-Lilly (2006), using reading and writing strategies related to Reading Recovery, located his struggle, at least partially, to how "being a cool, video game playing, male superhero did not initially reconcile easily with being a reader and writer in a classroom" (p. 74). In contrast to what happened during classroom literacy sessions, Compton-Lilly was able both to honour the boy's out-of-school literacy practices and to show how to make explicit links to school texts. In his classroom, Devon felt that the teacher did not like boys and thought that only girls were good at reading and writing. Some of Devon's frustration was attributed to his identity as an African-American boy with mostly White students and teachers. His preferred school relationship was with an African-American female aide in his classroom.

Children in these studies were often marginalized from focal classroom writing practices, and even excluded through relationships that did not value their particular interests and expertise (e.g., Christian & Bloome, 2002; Kendrick et al., 2002, 2004; Lewis, 2001). Dylan, a boy in Grade 5, drew a picture of himself in response to a researcher request to draw a picture of reading or writing (Kendrick et al., 2002). He felt like an outsider in his writing classroom: "Dylan's picture showed a buck hanging upside down with blood dripping from its head…He later explained that the picture was about 'something else I wanna put down but we're not allowed'…'She just wants us to write about sunny days and stuff'" (pp. 198-199). Dylan, who went hunting with his father on the weekends, was not allowed to write about his

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important, favourite activity. Kendrick et al. (2004) described Dylan's drawings, and the drawings of other children in this study, as "snapshots" in time. They represent the child's impressions and construction of writer identity at that moment.

Peers

According to the research on writer identities, power relations among peers influenced access to writer identities. Students took up the enforcement of appropriate forms and functions for classroom writing that were set by the teacher. They also reinforced unofficial norms of coolness or athleticism that competed with the possibility of academically successful writer identities. In a study of how children use spaces and classroom resources, four Grade 1 students worked as a group to draw a response to a story that would lead to a dramatic piece (Christian & Bloome, 2004). Michelle and Katie, both strong readers and writers, were assigned to distribute crayons and kept control of the materials that were needed to complete the activity. They dominated the physical space—the paper—that students were to use for their response and others had to asks for the tools (crayons) in order to write. Certain Grade 1 students, who held more power in the classroom, regulated the behavior of other students; "Michelle and Katie controlled access to learning tools, spaces and opportunities" (p. 381).

In a similar way, Arturo, a Grade 5 student, in a class using writing with social justice goals, was able to speak his written stories in ways that other children in the class could not (Zacher, 2008). Arturo aligned himself with DeAndre, a boy in the class with high status related to his school success and leadership abilities despite his low socioeconomic status. Arturo, while reading a homework story to the class, used DeAndre's nickname, "Shorty," which others were forbidden to use, and was able to position Marcus, the least powerful boy in a four-boy friendship group, as a thief in his story. Arturo's storytelling caused the rest of the class to laugh and Marcus to become embarrassed. Arturo became a writer who had the right to speak and to be acknowledged. It seems that young children can take up positions of power and status in the classroom when engaging in literacy practices and these positions can influence the literate identities of other students in their classrooms.

Jamie was a consistently resistant student in a Grade 6 class, where the writing teacher (who was also the researcher) documented Jamie's writing experiences over the year (Lassonde, 2006). According to Lassonde, Jamie felt that the risk-taking necessary for writing participation was insurmountable. Jamie said, "They all look up to me. I was in fifth grade last year, so I know all the answers…and they think 'he doesn't have to do this cause he already knows this stuff'" (p. 136). Jamie's struggles were partly due to his lack of participation in reading and writing practices, but also connected to his desire to be perceived as "cool" by his classmates. Jamie wrote more as the year progressed, although primarily as expressions of self-enhancement, and sometimes in a highly engaged manner. Jamie's identity as a cool guy, and as a guy who was repeating Grade 5, and a guy who did not want to appear unskilled or uninformed, seemed to hold him back from fuller participation.

Even when other roles did not compete with writer identities, there were examples of students enforcing teacher-created norms of appropriate writing. In a study of 8- and 9- year-old children, Terina was a high-achieving student assigned to sit next to Ashique. Terina, in her attempts to 'help' Ashique, set norms for what is and what is not competent, appropriate writing:

     Terina: 'It looks like a…' 'It looks like a…'
    Ashique: Bit, bit, a bit wobbly.

Terina: Yes, but you can't say 'It looks a bit wobbly!'
Ashique: No. (pause). What else does it?
Terina;   No. Show me, it looks like grasshoppers' legs.
Ashique: Yeah!
Terina: Do you want that? (Starts to write…) 'looks.like.grasshopper's.legs.'
(Bourne, 2002, p. 257)

Over the course of this writing assignment, Ashique learned about the classroom norm of figurative language, even for science writing. In addition, he was physically isolated from the other children while he worked, on several occasions, and therefore denied access to any collaborative efforts and to teacher or class feedback about his work.

Teachers often responded to students based on qualities other than demonstrated reading and writing ability (e.g., Good, 1987; Rist, 2000; Rosenthal, 1974), tended to have lower expectations for students belonging to marginalized groups or students for whom English was not a first language (e.g., Bloome, Katz, Solsken, Willett, & Wilson-Keenan, 2000; Murphy, 1997; Panofsky, 2003), and tended to treat boys and girls differently (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2006; Lewis, 2001; Renold, 2001a, 2001b). The relationships that were formed between teachers and students appeared to affect the student's access to writing practices in terms of topic, support, and opportunities for practice.

The research shows that both teacher-student relations and relations among students influence the construction of a student's writer identity in a classroom. Power and status among students can influence access to and participation in literacy practices. Competing identities or valued practices may influence the kinds of risks students may want to take as writers in classrooms. Not only do schools construct writer identities, they may respond to these identities with differentiated practices. In order to shift notions of ability as residing in the bodies of individual students, and of literate identities as stable and singular, it is useful to look at how students' understandings of themselves as writers might be constructed in classrooms. *How might teachers and peers unintentionally construct situations that limit writer identities for some students while supporting the development of competent, even powerful, writer identities for others?*

Writing Practices as Daily Practices, Assessment Practices

Writing practices, both daily forms and more formal assessment practices, influenced writer identities. Particular daily writing practices were favoured in particular classrooms. In many of the qualitative studies of writing classrooms described here, teachers used process-oriented, student-centred and literature-based approaches: readers' and writers' workshops, literature circles, process writing, journals and personal writing, and literature-based fiction as models (Dutro et al., 2004; McCarthey, 2002). Occasionally popular culture and the personal interests of students were integrated into writing activities (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Dyson, 2003; Wohlwend, 2009). The approaches varied from teacher to teacher but tended to be focused around a small range of practices and genres.

In one exceptional classroom described in Dyson (2003), a wider range of writing practices were valued and encouraged. Miss Rita's Grade 1 class used popular culture references—such as sports texts, song lyrics, video games, and films—to bridge their out-of-school literacy experiences with those needed for school. Throughout the school year, the children wrote longer pieces and learned how to use more conventional school forms than they had used at the beginning of the school year. These textual hybrids, which Dyson refers

to as "remixes," are the result of the language play and imitative practices in which the children were engaged. In a similar way, Kindergarten students in a different study were able to use Disney princess dolls as a resource for writers' workshop (Wohlwend, 2009). Using illustrated storyboards in writers' workshop, a core group of girls created hybrid princess identities beyond their original predefined roles. In this classroom, toys were encouraged as important resources upon which children could build to become writers. However, in general, writing practices were narrowly defined. Following Freire, Allan Luke (1991) argues that "[t]here are no exemptions to offer. Teaching the word, we selectively socialize students into versions of the word, into possible worlds, and into a version of the horizons and limits of literate competence" (as cited in Kelly, 1997, p. 10).

Other classroom teachers implemented practices that focused on personal expression and description of feelings (e.g., Dutro, Kazemi & Balf, 2006; Lassonde, 2006). Three studies of classroom practices in three different elementary classrooms represent how descriptive, personal writing was highly valued (McCarthey, 2002). In one of McCarthey's three studies, the teacher actively discouraged the writing of fiction because she thought the genre was too difficult for her students. Journals and written book responses were common, yet other examples of the many possible forms of written expression such as poetry, research writing, songwriting, and persuasive writing were not available or endorsed. In the classroom, story genres were privileged over other types of texts. In a study exploring "funds of knowledge in the literacy experiences of Grade 5 students, Devon remarked, "I wish they could know that I could draw real good" (Rogers, Light & Curtis, 2004, p. 197).

In a number of classrooms, the only accepted purpose for writing was for personal expression and the written forms were limited to only a few genres. Students did not write notes for themselves, summarize their ideas, or write informational, procedural, or expository texts. Students did not write for comic relief or about violence or popular culture and media, except for the students in Dyson's (2003) and Wohlwend's (2009) study. A narrow focus in many classrooms may limit access and feelings of belonging to classroom literacy practices, as well as the potential for multi-faceted writer identities (McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

Daily Feedback and Support

The research reviewed suggests that ongoing writing feedback/support from teachers and peers within the context of classroom writing practice constructs identities of competence and/or incompetence. Competent writer identities were constructed through the forms of writing that were acceptable, the supportive talk that was given, and the extra instruction and attention provided to students or challenges required of students (e.g., Martello, 2004; McCarthey, 2002; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). In a study of Grade 3/4 students writing letters to student teachers, the young writers relied on student teachers to provide models of writing and to attend closely to the information presented and questions posed to them by the younger students (Moore & Seeger, 2009). Students became frustrated and critical when student teachers did not respond in supportive ways.

This research suggests that although supportive, one-on-one relationships may work well for some students and be less helpful for others. Max's story is interesting because of his explicit awareness of himself as a writer, and because his stories were told in detail, in two separate publications by Dutro and her colleagues. Max, a boy in a Grade 5 class that focused on writers' workshop and process writing, wrote a story about a boy who died from writing (Dutro et al., 2004). He had struggled with writing during the school year and had internalized

negative feedback about his competencies from the adults, both teachers and aides, who kept on telling him that his writing did not make sense. Max's teacher, Ruth, wrote to Max: "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" (p. 14). Max started to equate writing with erasing and needing help, and he became anxious whenever he was asked to write. The attention he received did not help as much as intended because, in retrospect, those adults did not show him how to make his writing "make sense." As time went on, in this set of relationships, his constructed identity was of someone who needed to improve.

Other students also appear to have adopted labels of incompetence or un-readiness that were assigned to them by others. They saw themselves as students who were "trying" but "need to improve." In response to a question about how she might improve her spelling, Leesa who was starting to write, in Grade 1, said, 'You'd have to go read a book, then try to copy it, then try to write it by yourself, without the book'" (Martello, 2004, p. 281). The word "try" dominated Leesa's speech about her writing and seemed to hinder her development as a writer and a speller. This focus on improvement, which is perhaps part of many classroom writing practices, may construct some writer identities as always in the process of getting somewhere, but not good enough.

Standardized Assessment

Mandated, governmental practices influence classroom practices. Under mandated assessment, expectations become standardized in assessment situations and teachers and students may forget the importance of collaborative work and individual growth. Although most students experience standardized testing in their early years of schooling, there has been little research that directly studies what happens when beginning writers are assessed in formal ways. Students may begin to equate school writing with the kind of writing that happens for tests (Murphy, 1997). Formal, standardized testing situations tend to narrow teaching practice (Linn, 2007; Valli & Chambliss, 2007). Teachers may change teaching style and ways of working, moving from cooperative to individual efforts and from choice to requirement (Reay & Wiliam, 1999). In these situations, students face the challenges of this more restrictive teaching, individual responsibility for writing, and the challenges of writing for a difficult-to-imagine audience. In the studies reviewed here, there was little data about the students writing for formalized assessments.

April, a highly successful writer in a Grade 5 classroom focused on writers' workshop and process writing, both in the classroom. On state assessments, she was a "highly successful writer by any measure […]. April seemed particularly paralysed by "prewriting" activities, a key part of the writing process as taught in this and many classrooms" (Dutro et al., 2004, pp. 8-10). As a result of April's "paralysis" and aversion to pre-writing activities, her teacher became more flexible and supported April's need to talk through ideas before writing but allowed her to omit pre-writing prescribed formats. In the state exams, April became very frustrated and was irritated by "boring" topics that did not allow for student choice. However, with adult encouragement—beyond the defined parameters of examination guidelines—she was able to complete her writing tasks successfully.

In a study about learner identities in assessment contexts, Year 6 students point out how classroom practices shifted in the face of writing assessment: "Terry: But we're not allowed to help, to help anyone, they're all on your own./Jackie: Yeah, but we're used to helping each other" (Reay & Wiliam, 1999, p. 351). The students in this discussion were

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highly sensitive to the change from collaborative to individualistic competitive practice, as well as the shift in the way that teachers talk to students about learning in the face of upcoming standardized tests (Graham & Neu, 2004). This shift seems inevitable as teachers feel pressure for their students to do well and pass on this pressure to their students.

Labels and Assessment

The discourse of writing assessment presented in these studies seemed to narrow practice and the potential for competent writer identities. The ways that writers were described and labels were constructed for their identities and competencies seemed to be intensified under assessment. Students may begin to see themselves in more static and less helpful ways. In general, even when tests are designed with professional feedback in mind, teachers often take up the language of the tests, and may define students more narrowly. In response to these pressures, and an increase in self-consciousness about their competencies and their possibilities for the future, students may take up these identities and futures for themselves. If the way they are perceived, or perceive themselves, is not valued, they may reject an identity as a reader or writer, at least at school.

The construction of learner identities and literate identities has become part of public discourse. Murphy (1997) argues that school assessment has a particular impact on identities because it not only deals with   identities revealed through the acts of reading or writing, it also creates them. Any assessment situation, such as the assessment of reading and writing, can lead to such unwanted identities as giftedness, average, illiterateness, and learning disabledness, identities that intersect with already held visions of self, system, and state (p. 261). The ways in which students are thought of as inevitably "struggling" or "good," the ways in which people accept labels that signify individual ability or a lack of effort, work against the possibility for analysis of how identities are constructed, and how they may be expanded or transformed. The words of a student, Hannah, from a student of assessment and learner identity, are disturbing: "I'm frightened I'll do the SATS (standard assessment tasks) and I'll be a nothing" (Reay & Wiliam, 1999, p. 345). Many students in this class adopted the fatalistic discourse around these assessments and felt their futures would be determined by the results. It is worth considering how assessments encourage the labelling of students and assume more fixed, inherent learner identities.

Writer Identities Persist

Although there is the possibility for change in how young children think of themselves as writers or how others might describe one's writing competencies, writers in these studies were often described in static, unchanging ways. This section provides examples of how writer competencies seemed to change and were described in more or less complex ways. In the research reviewed here, however, there was little documentation of how writers' identities were perceived over time and few attempts to address the idea of change.

I return to Max, the student in Grade 5 who wrote about a boy who died from writing (Dutro et al, 2006). He became a stronger and clearer writer throughout the year, and did well on state assessments, but his feelings of struggle persisted. When asked about whether he liked to write, Max said, "No…because I'm not good at it, and I need to go to summer school because I need to focus on writing more" (p.16). Max's teacher and the researchers had to work hard to see the meaning in Max's writing from time to time and he knew this. The signifiers that were salient to Max - his teacher's confusion, the presence of a teacher's aide

while he wrote, and the impending experience of summer school - precluded any belief in his own competence.

The contrast between how one uses writing in school and outside of school can result in varied uses for writing and a range of feelings about oneself as a writer in different contexts. In the same class as Max above, Mirabel, an avid writer (in Grade 5) of fictional social dramas outside of school, and, later, in school, failed the state assessment for writing. However, over the course of the school year, Mirabel was able to use writing to improve social relations: "I was like a loner in the beginning of the year and then me and Brittney started hanging out a lot of the time…I just got some more friends and they have been really helpful at school" (p. 24). Mirabel engaged her classmates in the dramas that she wrote, and her teacher gave her an audience by providing opportunities to share her writing. Stories of change and/or multiple writer identities were uncommon in research about beginning writers.

The ways in which teachers think about children as writers, especially in the face of external assessment processes, seem inevitably static. Peers may reinforce these static constructions, as may students themselves. This process is intensified in the face of more standardised formal assessments. Is it possible to consider assessment in a different or more holistic way or to rethink the terms of assessment? A first step may be to ask questions about the ways in which educators' practices constrain or afford the possibility for change and the ways in which these practices might be expanded. What might allow children to develop as multimodal, competent designers of their own futures with opportunities for engaging in open-ended, purposeful, and creative writing practices?

Possibilities for Transformed Practice

If educators' goals include helping students to gain access to competent writer identities across a range of contexts and modalities, then the ways in which students develop writer identities and gain access to writing practices that help them to think of themselves as writers must matter. It seems that an obvious place to start would be to open up and create flexible ways of understanding and talking about writer identities and possibilities.

The literature reviewed here provides guidance about the influence of classroom writing practices on the construction of writer identities and ways to foster identities that are more competent for more students. Some prevailing patterns or concerns emerge. For example, when students are given some choice during some writing practices, when the they can envision their audience, when more authentic[1] practices are used, sometimes through connections with popular culture—especially as a starting place—or through writing through characters in literature they read, then more students seem to engage in and have access to writing practices.

These studies argue strongly for access to a wider range of textual forms in classrooms for students—texts that allow for greater potential for engagement and interests (McCarthey, 1999). In addition, researchers in this area argue for a greater range of writing topics and forms in schools and look to literacy practices that build connections with communities and with parents (e.g., Landis, 2003; Lewison & Heffernan, 2008; MacCleod, 2004). Textual practices that allow children to experiment with new media such as those available through email or other on-line formats may allow children to explore different kinds or an expanded range of literate identities (Merchant, 2004). Peer-led discussion or writing response groups in classrooms may constrain some students' participation in classroom

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literacy practices while they may reinforce the high status and active participation of other students (e.g., Bourne, 2002; Christian & Bloome, 2004; Lewis, 2001). The research points to a need for teachers to find ways to support students who are unclear about their roles, who may not fully understand texts, or are being regulated or silenced by other students. At the same time, peer-led discussions seem to be positive experiences for other students and allow for critical discussion of texts and classroom practices (e.g., Dyson, 2003; Lewis, 2001; McCarthey, 2002). Students may be freer to express their opinions and ideas among peers without a teacher present.

Multimodal text making practices (i.e., practices that draw on visual, dramatic, verbal, elements, for example) may enhance this potential for representing meaning and constructing identities in more ways for more students (Kress, 2000). The authority of written, print forms of texts over other possible forms may constrain what is possible and available to students. The current spotlight on assessment puts pressure on schools to move from visual, oral, and dramatic modes of meaning-making to print text modes as children get older (McCarthey, 2002). When children are offered a wider range of literate practices and choices about what they do, they have more opportunities to develop competence and confidence and to engage in multimodal literate practices (e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 2005; Nixon & Comber, 2006). If schools are preparation for a multimodal, multi-literate world, these expanded notions of literacy become crucial.

The classroom writing practices that seem to foster competent writer identities for a range of students are suggested by research on writing. When teachers support students through conferences and dialogue, when students work with peers to support and encourage each others' writing, when talk is valued as part of writing and texts are recognized as co-constructed, and when students' preferences or choices are given considerations, the potential for more competent writer identities is possible (Dutro et al., 2002, Jeffrey, 2008; McCarthey, 2002). All of these suggestions require a shift in traditional power relations and an increased awareness and critique of power asymmetries in classrooms.

Conclusions

This paper reviewed case studies and ethnographies of writer identities amongst young children at school. More longitudinal research is necessary and desirable and other sources of information about the potential for building multiple multimodal literate identities through developing reading and writing competency would be useful. Larger-scale or more long-term studies that attempt to uncover the complex construction of children's literate identities across school and out-of school contexts would contribute to this discussion.

Returning to the Questions

Drawing from the extensive review of literature as presented above, the following section represents my preoccupations and concerns about writing and children's identities as writers in classrooms.

How do writing practices operate to construct writer identities within school settings? The development of potential competent writer identities that are open to change and that access a range of modes, contexts, and purposes is influenced by the relationships that mediate access to literate practices. These relationships, and the power relations embedded within them, influence one's sense of self as a writer. The social and discursive practices that comprise writing practices in many classroom settings tend to define writer identities in

narrow ways that constrict the possibilities for change and for academic success for a wide range of students.

Do conceptions of writer identities allow for changes across contexts and time? Narrow ways of describing writer identities are akin to labels. Writers tend to be described in static ways by teachers, by students about themselves, and by researchers who investigate writer identities. Narrow definitions of writers and writer identities preclude the consideration of writing as learning and writing as play, in which new ideas and possibilities are considered. Larger-scale or more long-term studies that attempt to uncover the complex construction of writer identities and the potential for influencing identities that interfere with success at school or in out-of-school literacy communities would contribute to this discussion.

How might one re-construct literacy settings in schools in order to provide spaces for a wide range of children to gain access to the practices of design and communication that will allow them to become competent writers? How can children act as writers who, through their writing, transform themselves? Power relations between teachers and students influence how academic competencies and practices are made accessible to different students. Status and power differentials between students have to be acknowledged, as well, in consideration of students' participation in and exploration of writing practices. Particularly concerning is the writing development of students who are marginalized in and through classroom writing practices. It seems possible, and often likely, that many children are being discouraged from writing and from thinking of themselves as writers, just as they are being asked to write in more extended ways. How might these conflicting messages be played out in young students' lives?

These concerns for beginning writers argue for action and suggest that "to affirm and value children's writing, from the earliest stages forward, serves to advance the child's motivation to write, and to think of themselves as writers" (Moore & Seeger, 2008, p. 186). A consideration of children's identities as writers and the construction of their writing futures may open possibilities to plan/change/transform how curricula and tests are designed. More equitable writing assessment tools and curriculum designs may benefit children who are beginning to develop writing competencies (Kelly & Brandes, 2008; Lund, 2008; Shepard, 2002). Not only should the impacts of large-scale, high stakes testing be considered, but also how assessment is enacted on a day-to-day basis through teacher-led assessments, casual or deliberate verbal feedback, and even decisions about how instructional experiences are constructed, perhaps differently, for different students. Most importantly, what happens when assessment intensifies when children are having their early writing experiences in school? Educators and researchers need to consider the effects of writing assessments on the long-term literacy and identity development of children, particularly those who are marginalized (e.g., Dyson, 2003; Panofsky, 2003), given the central role that writing plays as the medium of learning throughout the school years. The framework presented here provides an impetus to initiate these conversations and to look more closely at writer identities.

Notes

[1] Here I use "authentic" to indicate when writers use writing for real-life purposes. For example, one would write a letter to mail or send to a real person in order to communicate something such as a request or in order to share information and greetings (Purcell-Gates, Jacobsen & Degener, 2004).

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