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The Family Writing Project: Creating Space for Sustaining Teacher Identity

Family writing projects can change the nature of classroom writing instruction and rejuvenate teachers. Marilyn McKinney, Saralyn Lasley, and Rosemary Holmes-Gull report on their study of one such project in an urban school district. Using the concept of “third space,” they describe the influence of this family literacy program on teacher practice.

W

ow! It's 8:00 on Thursday evening and here I am, ready to walk out the door all jazzed up again! A few hours ago I was totally exhausted; I didn't think I could make it—even the thought of staying late for the last night of our Family Writing Project seemed too much.

So mused Martha as she tossed the half-empty bag of chips into the trash and surveyed her cluttered classroom: a circle of worn desks, the “reading sofa,” and metal shelves stuffed with torn magazines, faded dictionaries, and young adult novels mended with masking tape. The vibrant walls boasting student writing and marker art contrast with the dark carpet and harsh light. Tonight, the last session of the five-week Family Writing Project, her classroom had been transformed once again into a space that allowed her to breathe, to reconnect with herself as a teacher, to connect with parents and students in alternative ways, and to witness the power of students, parents, and herself as a teacher writing together. As always, the future-letter-writing activity had stirred powerful emotions. During the previous four weeks, the families had shared stories of coming to Las Vegas and constructed maps reflecting childhood memories or their current neighborhoods. They had composed group poems that grew out of sharing personal artifacts and written individual and family “I Am From” and “I Am” poems. But tonight, Maria, Juan’s mother, composed a letter to her nineteen-year-old son, situating it ten years into his future. At the same time, Juan composed a letter to himself, envisioning his future in ten years. In soft, bro-

ken English, Maria shared her vision of her son’s future. Her confidence in Juan, her hopes for his future, and her unwavering love created such deep emotion that when she finished, this “cool” nineteen-year-old ambled across the room and enfolded his mother into his arms.

After two decades at Champion Middle School, a low-income, urban school, Martha had built a solid reputation as an inspirational teacher, teacher mentor, and hard worker. In only a few months, a new principal had changed all that. Suddenly her evaluations were low; the administration was finding fault with everything she tried. And yet, here she was, staying late again, rejuvenated: *These Thursday nights have seen me through the past few months. It is what has made me able to function. Listening to the kids, what they write about their parents, and the parents about their kids—writing, laughing, all of us really connecting. This is my inspiration; it is at the center of why I am a teacher.*

The Family Writing Project: An Alternative Perspective

This vignette offers a glimpse into a Family Writing Project (FWP) in Las Vegas, Nevada, a highly diverse and mobile community that encompasses the fifth-largest urban school district in the nation. Originally conceived by S. Arthur Kelly, a teacher-consultant of the Southern Nevada Writing Project (SNWP), the FWP provides opportunities for students, parents, and teachers from the area to write together outside of the school day. Groups led by

teacher-consultants such as Martha at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels focus on building and nurturing meaningful and respectful relationships and engage in projects important to their lives and school communities.

As researchers and writing project site leaders, we became intrigued with the power of these writing communities; there seemed to be something important happening for students, parents, and teachers within these out-of-school spaces—spaces that represented cultures that were different from the cultures of classrooms and home. Over and over, we were hearing stories about ways that FWP practices had carried over into everyday teaching and positively affected interactions with students and parents. FWP teachers felt reenergized, empowered to teach in creative and authentic ways, and in many cases they were able to rediscover why they had become teachers. Although we were well aware of research supporting the efficacy of family literacy programs that have drawn on parents' funds of knowledge about their communities, homes, cultures, and workplaces (Hammond; Moll; Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair; Spielman) for parents and students, we could find little research investigating the influence of family literacy programs on *teacher* practice.

Drawing on data we collected as part of a larger study supported by the National Writing Project that examined the impact of practices associated with the FWP on middle school students' writing achievement and attitudes toward writing, as well as on teacher practice (see http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/5683/LSRICohortIIISummaryReport.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d), we began to explore the notion of the Family Writing Project as a *third space* for teachers, a space that has the potential to influence classroom instruction and climate as well as to affect professional identity. A third space (Bhabha; Moje et al.; Soja) is not necessarily a physical place but rather a metaphor used to capture the conditions that create new possibilities for teaching and learning. It can be viewed as *between* a "first space" consisting of the networks formed around people's homes, peers, and communities and a "second space" of more formal institutions such as school, work, or church (Moje et al. 41). In this in-between or hybrid space, families and teachers interact in ways that draw on, validate, and recognize the knowledge and discourses of *both* the first and sec-

ond spaces in ways that do not privilege one over the other. The FWP, we learned, allowed teachers to grow more comfortable in their skins, to experiment with pedagogical practices, and to develop relationships that carried over into their classrooms in powerful and sometimes unexpected ways.

We believe that the framework of third space offers a perspective about teaching and learning that stands in stark contrast to the tales of disenfranchisement, scripted programs, and regimes of accountability that teachers like Martha have so passionately articulated. In this article we describe what we have learned through our analysis of interview transcripts, observations, and videos about the benefits and challenges for teachers within this third space of Family Writing Projects. First, though, we situate the notion of third space within the professional literature related to family literacy and writing programs. We then provide some further explanation of the basic structures and practices of FWPs.

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Family Literacy, Writing, and Third Space

Many successful family literacy programs that draw on and value the funds of knowledge that all members of the family can contribute also challenge societal assumptions that parents and family members lack the ability or interest to help their children or their children's teachers with academic assignments (e.g., Moll). Family literacy programs have traditionally focused on reading rather than writing. In addition, the existing research on these programs, even ones that have investigated family literacy within a third-space framework (e.g., Cook; Pahl and Kelly) have examined effects for children and parents rather than for teachers. For example, in the Chicago-based "Parents Write Their Worlds: A Parent Involvement Program Bridging Urban Schools and Families" (Hurtig), parents were invited into their children's school to participate in personal-narrative writing workshops during which they worked to publish their writing in a magazine that was circulated to the school and community. Findings suggested that

parents developed confidence and became more involved in the school and larger community; in addition, the children developed a greater interest in reading and writing, were motivated to write their stories, and developed interest and pride in family histories and cultural heritage.

The writing and sharing of writing within family literacy programs can be a means for students and parents to be heard in a setting (school) that has traditionally marginalized the importance of their voices (Moll; Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair). Homi K. Bhabha suggests that interacting within a third space allows people to define themselves and their identities in productive ways because they can explore more fluid notions of what it means to teach and interact in social networks as opposed to defining themselves in opposition to a dominant discourse or set of expectations (e.g., NCLB expectations for their performance). Because these external expectations often require educators to teach in inauthentic ways, many teachers feel as if they are coming up short. Thus, we see the possibility of involvement in a third space as a way that teachers develop confidence in themselves as professional educators. We see evidence in our work with FWP facilitators that they may be more inclined to remain in the profession and take on leadership roles within their schools and larger professional communities.

Structure and Practices of Family Writing Projects

The Family Writing Project works effectively in schools at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. FWPs meet outside regular school hours at times that work best for participating family members and students. Thus, some groups meet like Martha's, on a weekday after school, while others gather on Saturday mornings. The groups typically meet for two hours once a week for five weeks. Although no two family writing projects are identical, certain basic structures occur across all sites and form the essence of the program:

- > Participants are teachers and students with adults and/or family members (immediate or extended, often younger or older siblings, cousins, grandparents)
- > Locations include schools (classrooms of facilitators or library), churches, homeless shelters
- > Individual, family-oriented, and group activities include the following:
 - > Writing, drawing, reading, and listening that center on personal and family narratives and draw on place, culture, and community
 - > Sharing and responding to writing
 - > Social and community projects (e.g., planting a garden, painting a mural)
 - > Publishing an anthology of FWP writing and art
 - > Providing and sharing food

S. Arthur Kelly's book, *Writing with Families: Strengthening the Home/School Connection with Family Scribe Groups*, provides a step-by-step guide for implementing FWP groups with ample examples that take readers through a weekly progression of activities and events.

Exploring Ways FWPs Affect Teachers' Classroom Practices and Identity

Part of our National Writing Project study involved interviews, videotapes, and observations of four middle school FWP teacher-facilitators. Analysis of these data revealed that facilitating a FWP affects teachers on multiple levels and in reciprocal ways. Their experiences with FWP helped create successes in the classroom, while their classroom successes created a sense of accomplishment, a sense of efficacy that carried over into professional experiences within individual schools as well as the larger community.

We have organized the discussion of our findings into three main sections: Creating a Culture of Writing, Fostering Relationships, and Developing Professional Identity. In the first section we describe ways that the FWP provided a third space that affected instructional practices so that both students and teachers developed a writing culture that nurtured authenticity, process writing, and more democratic practices. The Fostering Relationships section examines the effects of building relationships between and with students and parents. In the third section—Developing Professional Identity—we focus on ways that participating in the FWP appeared to cultivate a sense of teacher efficacy and helped to counter feelings of burnout; additionally, participation supported the develop-

ment of teacher leadership. Although we discuss these outcomes of FWP participation in three separate sections, in reality, they are reciprocal—each nurturing and nudging the other.

Creating a Culture of Writing

Involvement with the SNWP Family Writing Project has helped facilitators understand how they themselves work as writers. During the FWP, teachers write alongside students and families. As writers, they struggle, change topics, share their work, and respond to the work of others. As teachers, they create a setting, a third space, where writing is fostered rather than regulated. Kari, a sixth-grade English teacher, explained, “It’s not I’m the teacher and you’re the student, whereas before it was. And now it’s kind of like . . . this is *our* classroom.” This shift, however, takes time and patience. Many teachers and students have become comfortable with the traditional roles of teaching and learning, with teachers making all the decisions and students passively following along. Changing to a more democratic model that allows for increased student choice and responsibility can initially create a fear of the unknown for both teachers and students.

Meagan, a third-year middle school English teacher, explained that choice makes writing “relevant to students,” and Kari told us, “Every year they love to write a little bit more. And I think it’s because I’m giving them more freedom.” Likewise, the FWP teacher-consultants found that students were more willing to stay engaged as writers and to work on their writing for longer periods of time: “I know that if they say they want to work on this for another day, it’s not because they’re trying to waste time; it’s because they’re really into whatever we’re doing.” Over time, as Kari experimented with and modeled authentic writing practices, she focused more on the intrinsic motivation of students as writers who had messages to communicate, rather than on deadlines and grades.

Both Meagan and Kari commented that they had begun to journal and compose their own pieces of writing with the students, and they participated during class sharing, creating a “more democratic classroom” that encouraged students to enjoy writing and see themselves and their teachers as writers. Their experiences with the FWP afforded them the confidence to provide more opportunities to share

and receive responses in their classrooms. Although parents and families were typically reluctant to share at first, eventually they found “everyone wants to share.” Therefore, as facilitators they had to be “very patient and nonthreatening.”

In a community of writers willing to share and respond, students write more drafts yet fewer final papers. In more-traditional secondary classrooms, many teachers are so overwhelmed grading everything students write that they cut back on the amount of writing they assign. FWP teachers understood—and communicated to students—that trial and error, revision, and refinement are part of the writing process. Incorporating peer response teaches students that everything doesn’t have to be perfect at every stage, that writing is a continually developing process. Initially this type of instruction can be more time consuming than traditional stand-and-deliver methods, but as students and teachers become accustomed to process writing, students spend more time writing and responding to writing, and they become more motivated to do so.

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Fostering Relationships

The teachers we interviewed consistently talked about ways their teaching practices had changed as a result of relationships formed between and with students and parents. Meagan noted, “you just create a stronger bond” through the writing; that attitude of mutual respect carried over into the classroom. In the FWP settings, teachers slow down; they wait for parents and students to gather the courage to respond, to write, to share their writing. The mutual respect that develops affects relationships with students—not just the FWP students, but all students. The teachers reported that because the FWP fostered respect for students as individuals, they came to believe more strongly that *all* students are capable. Teachers talked about not allowing students to fail. They described ways they push until students achieve the best of what they can do, never giving up on them, providing them time to reach their full potential, starting where they are, and giving them time to develop as writers. In describing how she had learned to deal with students’ initial

reluctance to read their writing, and to respond to each other productively, Martha contrasted her current experiences with what she had done in the past: “eventually they do all get around to reading, but I work into it more slowly and I sort of ‘work’ the classroom so the other kids are getting them to do it. . . . So it’s not me and nobody’s really pushing them. They decide.”

During interactions at FWP sessions, teachers learned about the lives and experiences of their students; often they learned about personal factors that

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might affect academic performance. This awareness then carried over into the classroom with both FWP students and non-FWP students. Sometimes these interactions dispelled assumptions about why students were not performing. Kari told us about a student she assumed was being lazy: “So I take the time to ask a couple questions and all of a

sudden I find out he and Mom are living in the shelter now because his dad smacked him around.” FWP teachers suggested that such knowledge helped them to be more flexible with students and to look for opportunities to work with families or find ways to be helpful to these adolescent learners.

Another benefit of forging personal connections was that teachers came to better understand the assets that parents brought to the educational setting, assets that often go unrecognized by schools. Martha told us, “I sometimes look at a kid . . . and I think he leaves here and he just gets on his skateboard and never thinks another education-type thought, but that’s just not true. They have their time sharing at home and whether they’re putting it on paper or not, they’re certainly forming thoughts that could later become a paper.”

Teachers worked with parents and students during FWPs as they revised their own papers, enabling parents to see the writing process in action. Some also involved parents in their classroom teaching, seeing them as partners in their children’s education. Martha, for example, encouraged (even “required”) students to read their writing to parents at home, and she talked with parents about the importance of listening to content rather than focus-

ing on misspelled words. And she established a time for parents to come in to talk about writing. In addition to these new ways of thinking about how parents help children at home, teachers also commented that the family relationships that were revealed through the FWP experiences reminded them that parents do care about schooling and their children: “I have seen such compassion for their kids. I need to remember that all families are that way. And I need to show the same compassion.”

Developing Professional Identity

Finally, analysis of the teacher impact data revealed changes in FWP teachers’ attitudes toward themselves as teachers and as teacher leaders. The community they built with students and family, the community that they reconstructed in the classroom, nurtured them as well. When asked why she kept coming back to the FWP, Kari stated, “It’s like therapy. It’s motivating. I think because it’s so positive; it kind of balances the effect of any negativity.” For Martha facilitating FWP has been “rejuvenating,” filling her with the passion and the energy to continue teaching. “They are so appreciative of me, and so complimentary. . . . It’s like going to gym once a week.” Kari also felt that her work as an FWP facilitator had helped her to become more confident in her ability to teach the writing process in an authentic and engaging way. She felt better prepared to balance district and state demands while continuing to instill a love of writing in students. All of the teachers recounted ways that their experiences in this community of writers helped them to recognize their professionalism and trust in their knowledge of teaching and learning.

As FWP teachers’ attitudes toward themselves and their teaching changed, their willingness to take risks increased. FWP teachers discussed specific practices that directly resulted from trying out something in the FWP session and then having more confidence to explore it in their classrooms. They each expressed a sense of efficacy as a teacher and as a leader. Meagan described the fear she had felt about having to start her FWP on her own rather than working side by side with an experienced teacher-consultant as she had the previous year; however, she felt that the year on her own had better prepared her to understand students and to relate to their parents. She felt more confident as a

result of her experience and relished the idea of starting another FWP in the new school she was moving to out of state. Like Meagan, Kari started facilitating the FWP in the shadow of a veteran teacher, but as time passed she increasingly took on leadership responsibility: “I just wanted to be in the background . . . I wanted to go every Saturday and just write. And he let me get away with that the first year, but then . . . he would surprise me and say Ms. S. is going to lead this next part. . . . And now yes, and now it’s just second nature.”

Reaping the Rewards

In the context of NCLB requirements, many teachers feel they are discouraged from making decisions based on their educational expertise or knowledge of students; rather, they are required to follow predetermined programs, adhere to administrative mandates, and implement simplistic scripts. In contrast to the current climate of distrust and blame, participants of the family writing projects we have studied were afforded opportunities to mingle discourses and knowledges of home, community, and school in a hybrid “outside of the traditional school day” space—they have in effect created a third space. For teachers, the act of drawing on these experiences has affected their practice and helped to generate a sense of efficacy, inspiring confidence and a renewed commitment to the profession. Tracy, a high school English teacher and FWP facilitator, expresses her elation: “[W]hen a teacher forms an alliance with the families at the school, something magical happens! This community of writers is by its very nature an empowering experience. Students and parents explore their lives together in a non-threatening environment. They begin to see teach-

ers in a new light, as leaders and facilitators, rather than dictators of learning. Their appreciation is genuine—and you can’t put a price on that.”

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