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Collaborating in the Community: Fostering Identity and Creative Expression in an Afterschool Program

Leslie M. Cavendish
Sarah F. Vess
Kirsten Li-Barber

ABSTRACT: Nationwide budget cuts have forced many public school systems to significantly reduce opportunities for engaging in creative arts in the classroom despite the fact that such programs are associated with positive child outcomes. To address this deficit, we developed and executed the "Afterschool Creative Expression Program" (ASCEP) and opened it to 66 elementary school children attending a Title I school in the Southeast. Employing a process approach, which included using mentor texts, writing, editing, and revising, each child published one written piece. The program combined both writing and photography experiences to teach children how to write for authentic purposes, and through this process, encouraged these children to explore their identities. We used both quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the program's effect on students' writing identities, as well as their overall experience of the program. Researchers used an open coding method to examine participant surveys. Findings of the study included the identification of three themes: 1) identity building, 2) importance of incorporating photography, and 3) the significant social aspect of the program. The implications of these themes and how they may inform future efforts to engage children in creative arts programs are discussed.

Keywords: writing, pre-service education, community education

Leslie M. Cavendish, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary and Middle Grades within the School of Education at High Point University. Her primary research interests are in the areas of summer reading programs, culturally responsive pedagogy and international teachers. Her most recent publication (2015) focused on using discourse analysis to explore the role relationships play for pre-service teachers' development as confident and competent literacy elementary educators.

Sarah F. Vess, PhD is an Assistant Professor and Department Chair of Specialized Curriculum within the School of Education at High Point University. Dr. Vess is a Licensed Psychologist who earned her PhD in School Psychology from the University of Georgia. Dr. Vess' current research agenda focuses on embedding Response to Intervention (RtI) field experiences, study abroad, and service learning into the educator preparation program.

Kirsten Li-Barber, PhD is an Associate Professor of Psychology at High Point University. She earned her PhD in Experimental Psychology with a major focus in Developmental Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her primary research interests are in examining parent-child relationships among children and adolescents. Her most recent projects include examining the concept of "over-parenting" behaviors and its impact on student adjustment in college and the workforce.

It is the first day of the Afterschool Creative Expression Program (ASCEP) and there are four times the number of elementary students in attendance than had been planned for, but half the number of pre-service educators to serve as teachers. With 100 people in the crowded, noisy media center and no microphone or working technology, I wondered if they even heard a word I said, much less got the point of my lesson. I worried more time was spent on preparing the student folders and paperwork than preparing the pre-service educators to teach that day's lesson. Just as I was about to call my colleague over to declare the day an absolute failure, I overheard a conversation between a pre-service teacher and one of the elementary students:

Pre-service teacher: "Do you like to write?"

Student: "I used to write all the time and thought I was a good writer, but I don't write anymore".

Pre-service teacher: "Why is that?"

Student: "My teacher told me that I was not a good writer. I spent a long time working on writing and I was really proud of it, but my teacher said that is not the type of writing we do for school. My writing was not on the same topic the teacher wanted us to write about. She said it had too many errors and it was too long so now I don't like to."

Over the sound of my heart breaking, I heard the message loud and clear—students need to be here.

When we started ASCEP (Afterschool Creative Expression Program), our goal was simple: to provide our pre-service teachers attending a local undergraduate university the opportunity to gain valuable hands on experience working with elementary school children while engaging them in the writing process. We hoped to provide a small service to the children of the local community in the form of a short-term afterschool experience which offered writing opportunities to build their identities as writers. The added element of photography was designed to help the children link their home and school lives and to extend the depth of their writing through the use of a visual format. In addition to providing this experience to the children, we also wanted to examine the impact of a short-term writing program. In particular, we wanted to investigate the children's perception of the program and their identities as writers. Our initial plan was to create a small, short-term service learning project, but we did not realize how many children would be thirsty for this type of afterschool program.

Welcome to ASCEP

The purpose of the current study was to examine the impact of a short-term afterschool creative writing and photography workshop for elementary school children attending a Title I school in the Southeast. As explained earlier, ASCEP was a short-term afterschool program. We had limited time, one day a week for four weeks to execute our program's mission. We incorporated both photography and writing elements in all of the afterschool sessions. In particular, we wanted to use quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine how participation in a short-term creative arts program focusing on photography and creative writing would increase students' self-esteem, impact their appreciation for the creative writing process, and solidify their identity.

Creative Arts Programs in the Classroom and the Community

For most communities, significant support exists for the development and continuation of creative arts programs open for public consumption as these programs are recognized as an important mechanism by which children and their families can be exposed to the visual arts. Stevenson and Deasy (2005) found that participation in the arts both in and after school not only enhanced student learning and creativity but also increased connectedness within the community. Participation has been found to create a "culture of learning" outside the classroom, as well as to connect members of the community together through the appreciation and expression of the visual arts (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005). Attendance and participation in the visual arts has also been linked to overall psychological health and well-being (e.g., Turner & Senior, 2000; Bygren, Konlaan, & Johansson, 1996).

Despite evidence emphasizing the importance of

arts education, public school systems around the nation have experienced drastic budget cuts in funding for programs emphasizing the creative arts, significantly reducing opportunities to engage in the creative process (Halcomb, 2007). Limited incorporation of arts within general classroom curricula has also been reduced and replaced with an increased emphasis on standardized test scores, despite repeated mention among school systems to develop "well rounded students" and "explore additional partnerships that support the expansion and integration of arts and culturally diverse and enriching experiences for…students" (Guilford County Schools, 2014).

The inclusion of arts-based programs in the public school curriculum has received support from multiple sides. For example, Remer (1990) advocated that afterschool arts programs be included as a standard part of the public school curriculum in New York to increase creative arts and aesthetics. Fiske (1999) advocated in a national report that arts curriculum offered unparalleled opportunities for learning that extended well beyond the traditional educational curriculum. The Polaroid Education Project (PEP), in conjunction with the National Writing Project (NWP), has funded programs focusing specifically on the art of photography, providing small grants to teachers to provide cameras to the children in their classroom. Since original inception, the NWP and PEP programs have funded approximately 6000 teachers with photographic materials (Marcus, 1996). These small grants have in turn allowed teachers to bridge the gap between visual and written creativity, which teaches children how to use photography as a source of inspiration for their writing (Marcus, 1996).

Photography can make writing more authentic by providing a real-world context. The utilization of photography in the classroom is one mechanism that can provide hands-on experiential learning for children and provide a source of inspiration for other creative works. Photography has been successfully incorporated into elementary science curriculum (Capello & Lafferty, 2015), literacy curriculum for urban high school students at-risk for dropping out of school (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009), and has been utilized as a catalyst for teaching informational writing to 4th grade students (Lilly & Fields, 2014).

A secondary mechanism, one that works on a more individualized level, but has demonstrated strong linkages with measurable development in both academic and psychological domains, is creative writing. Graves (1994) explained that "writing comes from the events of our daily lives, from what appears at first to be trivial. . .the writer's first act is to listen and observe the details of living" (p. 36). Ray (2001) discussed that through writing, students can begin to appreciate their world from new perspectives and think about themselves as a part of a greater community. These studies have also shown that when students mediate between one sign system to another (e.g., visual and written), their literacy skills, including thinking, are enhanced (Albers, 2001).

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Theoretical Framework

During the elementary school years, children develop a more concrete sense of identity and connection with their community (Tuckman & Monetti, 2011). Identity is a complex framework, for we are never speaking from one stagnant perspective of who we are. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) defined identity as "the way a person understands and views himself, and is often viewed by others, at least in certain situations" (p.68). Building on this definition, it is understood that identity in a socio-cultural framework is a fluid, social and linguistically mediated construct (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). With this framework in the center of our research, we examined how children's participation in an afterschool program that involves both large and

small groups (social) could impact their identities of themselves (fluid) and how they describe both themselves and the writing process. Kirsten examined belongingness and self-perception as it related to identity in the field of psychology. Sarah, a school psychologist, had a similar stance and bridged this understanding towards children. Leslie, a former elementary teacher, focused on an educator's stance of identity with an understanding that literacy identities impact achievement and attitudes. Working together, we were able to have ASCEP grow and build upon research across disciplines.

Menzer's (2015) report for the National Endowment of the Arts advocated for the necessity of a strong creative arts program in public schools because of the psychological and academic advantages it offered to students. For example, critical and creative writing among elementary school-aged girls was found to be linked to development of gender identity, self-concept, and awareness of the self in relation to society (Jones, 2006). Brown and Sax (2013) examined the impact of a creative arts program among low income at-risk youth and found that participation in this program was associated with more positive emotions (based on student self-assessment) as well as teacher ratings of greater emotion regulation in the classroom.

Our identities are culturally contextualized and impact how we view and learn everything around us (Holland et al., 1998). We construct new understandings and engage with one another within a socio-cultural context. "Socio-cultural" refers to learning that occurs in interactions with others (whether they are present at the time or not) and within a cultural framework. This does not mean we are bound by cultural context as we have agency within ourselves to stretch and reframe a lens. Meanings are not necessarily individualized, but shared between people (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Bakhtin, 1981; Geertz, 1973). For example, several researchers (Capello & Hollingsworth, 2008; Christensen, 2001) found that writing about themselves increased students' sense of their identity as writers and their relation with community members. As writers, students are conscious of their writing not just for themselves, but also for the audience of the other writers in their group. Their experiences frame what they see and value, while they also develop agency to determine aspects to share (or not). As teachers and educators, we also need to recognize that cultural constructs are constantly in flux and participation is also active in identity and cultural framework formations (González et al., 2005; Lewis, Encisco, & Moje, 2007; Rosaldo, 1993; Holland et al., 1998). It was with this lens that we designed the program, encouraging students to bring to their writing and photography their sense of self, their experiences and their lives.

Combining Photography and Creative Writing

A sociocultural framework opens definitions of literacy to focus on "understanding, valuing, and actively making use of each child's language and literacy" (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 17). Teachers with a sociocultural framework are curious to learn about a student's home life and bring family and previous experiences into the classroom. One way this is accomplished is through the inclusion of a creative arts program that blends elements of photography and creative writing instruction. Students' passions, interests, curiosities and capabilities are celebrated. The writing and photographic experiences that were part of the current project were designed to invite the children to write for authentic purposes that encouraged them to explore their identities—how they saw themselves within a variety of contexts. We believed that the inclusion of photography as a visual creative element could serve as both a backdrop and potential writing inspiration for the children participating in the program. For example, Sinatra, Beadry, Stahl-Gemake, and Guastello (1990) found that when children had personal photographs to use as an anchor for creative writing projects, they showed measurable improvement in creative writing skills. Similarly, Lilly and Fields (2014) incorporated the visual element of photography into an informational text writing project. Based on informal assessment data, the use of photographs during writing excited and motivated the students and led them to write more detailed and descriptive texts as well as engage in

more conversations than usual with their peers and families. Capello and Lafferty (2015) integrated visuals into science curriculum for 4th graders studying geology. The incorporation of photography into the lesson resulted in greater participation by students in the inquiry process and helped students to gain concrete understanding of complex concepts. The students used photographs as tools to acquire content knowledge and academic vocabulary in the sciences, but they found students were more comfortable orally explaining the acquired academic vocabulary than writing it. Based on these findings, Capello and Lafferty (2015) recommend teachers include shared writing or interactive writing assignments into a photography infused content lesson to assist students in transferring their oral academic vocabulary knowledge into writing.

In our ASCEP program, one of our creative writing assignments was to take photographs of meaningful objects, environments or animals and use them to critically think about what the children value most in their lives. We used a process approach to our writing activities, including using mentor texts, writing several drafts, and choosing one piece to revise, edit, and publish. Few published studies exist that have systematically examined the impact programs like these have not only on skills-based learning, but also the psychological and emotional impact on the children who participate. Of those that have been reviewed (e.g., Brown & Sax, 2013; Turner & Senior, 2000; Byrgen, Boinkum, & Sven-Eric, 1996), there have been strong indications of positive impact on the well-being of the children who participated. We sought to address this limitation by adding to the small, but growing body of empirical literature investigating how afterschool creative arts programs impact the children who participated. Our inspiration for utilizing photography and combining it with creative writing assignments was drawn from the work of Wendy Ewald (2002), who has published several books discussing her experiences utilizing photography and creative writing in enhancing children's creative writing skills and artistic expression. Ewald conceptualized Literacy Through Photography (LTP), which uses student-centered critical pedagogy to integrate writing and photography

into classroom instruction (Hyde, 2010). LTP could involve brainstorming how to represent ideas visually, how to frame and shoot photographs, how to "read" a photo, how to write a descriptive caption for a photograph, or how to think through and write stories based on photographs. Ewald's philosophy is to bring the student's world into the classroom instead of trying to make the student fit the classroom world. She encourages students to write about themselves, their dreams, their families, and their communities and has discovered that the excitement and energy from this process translates to classroom work (Ewald, 2007). Ewald has found that taking photos of their communities, families, and themselves can help students develop a sense of self-confidence (Stainburn, 2001).

The Current Study

The purpose of our study was to investigate the impact of a short-term afterschool creative arts program using a mixed-methods approach. We had three main research questions. First, what are the children's perceptions of the program? Specifically, what did they value and what did they learn from participation in the program? Second, does participation in a creative writing program change how students feel about themselves as writers? Our third question revolved more around a global sense of self, specifically would participation in a short-term program like this one impact the children's identities as writers? In order to examine the efficacy of our program and test these research questions, we included both quantitative as well as qualitative analyses. First, using quantitative data, we examined whether children who participated in the program had measurable differences in their confidence in, and liking of, the creative writing process. Second, using qualitative data we examined the children's reactions and impressions from participating in the program. In particular, we incorporated open-ended questions in surveys. We chose to use constant-comparative analysis to be able to discern patterns across the data from the children to seek answers to our research questions.

Methodology

In this section, we will discuss who our participants were for this afterschool program, how we recruited them, and what they were asked to do as part of their participation in the program.

Participants

After university IRB approval was obtained, a recruitment flyer was sent home with each 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade student enrolled in a partner school. Parents were asked to return a permission slip by a specified date to indicate they were interested in enrolling their child in the afterschool creative expression program. A total of 71 students returned their permission slips by the due date. An additional 18 students returned their permission slips after the due date had passed, giving us a total of 89 potential participants. In the interest of serving as many students as feasibly possible with an understanding of limitations of staff and resources, the decision was made to allow all 71 students who turned their permission slips in before the deadline to enter the program.

Of the initial 71 students admitted to the program, 19 were 5th graders, 25 were 4th graders, and 27 were 3rd graders, however only 66 students attended the initial session and completed the program. Parental consent/student assent to participate in the research portion of the program was obtained for 59 of the 66 participants. Of these, 67.8% identified themselves as female. The ethnic breakdown of the final sample was as follows: 71% self-identified as African-American, 12% as Hispanic, 12% as Caucasian, 2% as Asian American, and 3% as other.

Setting

This research was conducted at a semi-urban elementary school in the Southeastern United States. The school was identified as a Technology Magnet School and had 638 students enrolled in grades PK-5 at the time of the research project. Nearly all (94%) of the students enrolled in school qualified for free or reduced lunch. About half (53%) of the students enrolled were male and 70%

of the students identified as African-American, 13% as Hispanic, 6% Asian, 6% Caucasian, and 5% multi-racial. The school exceeded growth expectations from the previous year on end-of-grade tests: 45% of students were identified as proficient in reading and 56% identified as proficient in math based on state-wide end-of-grade testing evaluations.

Measures

The Creative Writing Assessment (CWA) scale was a study-specific measure designed to assess participant's feelings about writing in general, as well as beliefs about his/her own writing ability. The assessment contains two parts, five rating items with a 5-point Likert scale and three open-ended questions. The first part of the assessment asks the student to rate to what degree they agree or disagree with a written statement, such as "I think that I am a good writer" or "I feel comfortable when asked to write about something". The second part contains three open-ended questions: "How do you feel about writing?", "What do you hope to learn in this workshop?", and "What strategies do you use to write?" The post-assessment contains four additional open-ended questions which ask specific questions about the student's final writing product, such as "What do you think you did particularly well in this piece of writing?" and "Did you learn anything while writing this that you can use in the future?" The initial CWA was completed by the participants at the beginning of the first session and the post-assessment CWA was completed during the fourth session.

Procedure

The pre-service educators included 19 undergraduate students, majoring in Education, who were responsible for implementing the instructional lesson plans taught each week as part of the ASCEP program. All pre-service educators were supervised and mentored by two of the authors. The program was conducted at the conclusion of the school day in the library and cafeteria areas of the partner school. Students were dismissed directly from their classrooms to the school library where they joined their small group

teacher after their attendance was recorded. Each session began with all students in the library for a 10-15 minute large group lesson, with students then meeting in small groups of 3-5 students with the pre-service educator serving as the group teacher. Half of the small groups remained in the library and half moved to the cafeteria for the next hour of the session to ensure adequate space was available and to control for noise level. The entire body of students then reconvened in the library during the last 15-20 minutes of the session for a second whole group lesson and re-cap of "take-aways" from that day's session. Students were dismissed from the library to either the car rider or walker line. A description of the format of each session follows:

Session 1. Byron Garett, author of multiple children's books, visited the afterschool program. After reading his latest book, There's Greatness on the Inside (Garrett, 2015), Mr. Garett spent time talking with the students about the writing process and explaining how to focus on writing from their experience and personal perspective. Additionally, we introduced how to write a Bio Poem using models and templates for students to follow. Students were given a short lesson on photography which focused on using photographs as a symbolic representation of who you are.

Session 2. George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" was a mentor text used for the second lesson following a model provided by other educators (Jones, 2006; Christensen, 2001; Lyons, 1999). This mentor text allowed us to introduce a different type of poetry and invited students to write for themselves and to write about their personal experiences. We also taught a second photography lesson. This lesson emphasized the use of the rule of thirds to adjust their framing of photographs. Again, the students were invited to take photos to apply the photographic strategy as well as draft their "Where I'm From" poem. At the end of this session, the students were given disposable cameras to take home for a week.

Session 3. Using the "On My Block" book (Goldberg, 2012) as a mentor text, the teachers read different entries from illustrators. Each entry included a description of a place that is special to them, such as a bunk bed, park, or grandmother's house. This was a narrative piece, allowing students to explore and share themselves in a different genre. The photography lesson focused on attending to foreground, background, and middle ground. The children were invited to use the teacher's iPads to take photographs which followed that rule or to take pictures that were reflective of the writing they were working on from the previous sessions.

Session 4. The writing lesson for this week was a revising strategy lesson, which included re-reading work and revising using the "Show, Don't Tell" strategy. The teacher modeled the strategy with an example poem written during previous sessions. In this session, students decided which poem they wanted to publish as well as which photographs they would choose to accompany their writing. Once the writing piece was chosen, the children revised their piece to prepare for publication.

Results

We will first discuss the findings of our quantitative analyses pertaining to the children's perception of how participation in the program improved their writing skills. This will be followed by an examination of our findings pertaining to the qualitative analyses of the children's responses regarding what they took away from this program in terms of development of themselves as writers and their experiences in the program.

Quantitative

The quantitative analysis portion of the study included an assessment of the changes in students' perceptions of their creative writing skills and required that we collect data from each child both at the beginning and end of the program. Of the original 71 participants in the program, only 41 assessment packets were included in the analysis due to absences or incorrect completion of forms (e.g., marking multiple answer choices, skipping questions, or providing unrelated answers).

Results. To examine whether children's assessment of their creative writing abilities changed between the beginning and end of the program, we performed a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), which compares the average scores at Time 1 and Time 2 of assessment to determine if there are any significant differences between the average scores obtained at each assessment period. The results indicated a non-significant effect across time, $F(1,38) = 2.78$, $p = .103$, $\eta 2 = .068$, indicating that, although the children reported having positive experiences with the creative writing aspect of the program (see qualitative data analysis below), their perception of how much this program affected their writing skills was not very different between the start and end of the program.

Qualitative

For the qualitative portion of the study, we focused primarily on the benefits the children experienced from their participation in ASCEP. For this portion of the analyses, we were able to include only 51 of the original 71 participant packets due to incomplete data. Additional data collected included: photographs, field notes from experiences, ongoing conversations with the pre-service teachers, informal conversations with school personnel, photographs, children's writing samples, and pre-service teacher-participant surveys.

We chose to use a constant-comparative methodology, classifying survey responses, identifying content relevant materials and locating insights (Creswell, 2007). Constant-comparative methodology allowed for us to examine similarities and dissimilarities within the children's responses to open-ended questions in the surveys (Yin, 2016). In order to address validity and reliability issues in using qualitative data, we used a triangulation method, which utilizes multiple investigators, sources of data, and data collection to confirm our

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emerging findings. Using open coding, the data analysis process focused on interpretation and reflection on meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). When constructing categories using this method, it is important to be responsive to the purpose of the research and to engage in an exhaustive coding of the data such that all categories derived are mutually exclusive (Merriam, 2009). While a student's statement may fit multiple categories, the actual comment made would be segmented so aspects fit in exclusive categories. The final result included 26 categories which aligns with Creswell (2007)'s recommendation of 25-30 categories.

This process of content analysis produced a set of generative codes. Researcher 1 analyzed the 51 surveys independently. Two other researchers then independently analyzed the 51 survey responses. The generated codes were then compared across researchers. There was nearly identical coding with minor discrepancies on particular theme terminology, but the content and meaning were aligned.

Results. Revisiting our initial research query, we were interested to identify which aspects of a short term writing program impacted the children the most. Three of the strongest themes the researchers identified in the qualitative data coding were 1) the use of writing to build and celebrate student identities 2) the importance of incorporating the multimodal form of photography and 3) the significance of the social aspect of the program to the children.

Identity. The writing mentor texts and the photography experiences were purposefully designed to invite the children to focus on their home lives, their own spaces and how they viewed themselves. Learning is a moment of participation within a context, a socio-cultural context interacting with each other and with the teachers (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). The ASCEP program allowed children to bring to the forefront their experiences: who they are, where

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they are from, and their daily home lives. Many writing experiences in the schools are based on skills learning. We designed this program to focus on the writing process itself as giving the children choices within a framework was central to the program. We emphasized the students having the agency to tell (or not) about their lived experiences. A common theme among the student's reflections regarding their writing was the value they placed on the ability to write about themselves and to celebrate their world. For example, when asked why they chose a particular piece to publish, students responded: "it talks about myself and my world", "I think I bring my person out", and "because it is my world, my passion". Incorporating writing mentor text pieces (bio poems, "Where I'm From" poems and "On My Block" narratives), allowed the students to explore and focus on who they are, their families, and celebrate their daily lives.

The students showed a great deal of pride as they identified themselves as writers and photographers. One student explained that through the program, "I got to be a better writer". Another student earned a great deal of pleasure through engaging and celebrating the challenge of the writing process, explaining, "I like my hard writing." The fluidity of the student's writing identities was particularly evident through the student's own words and responses, noting the children's ability to remake and construct the self. None of the students stated they thought the photography or writing process was easy, but they all saw themselves as capable. Through the challenge of new learning, new thinking and new experiences, new identities began to emerge as evidenced by statements such as, "I can make poetry!" and "I think this is the best because I can look after my own writing and choose my own pictures." Students saw themselves as the creators of their work, instead of someone completing a prescribed set of tasks. It is this identity as creators of their own work, as having agency to make choices within the writing process that guided their behaviors and learning in ASCEP.

Admittedly, this was a short 4-week program, so while we hoped to have students walk away with a positive attitude towards writing, we did not expect to see such strong affirmations to the role of identity within their responses. The post-Creative Writing Assessment asked "what did you learn during this program that you can use in the future?" The students' responses included: "I learned that I can love to write", "That I can write better" and "I feel like my life is in the writing." The attention to identity started to shift towards agency as a student noted, "I am free to express myself through writing" and another, "I like writing because it looks cool and it is cool. Now that I tried it, I'm making my own writing club." Another student explained, "I learned how to express myself." This data underscores the critical component of incorporating writing opportunities for children to share their lives and their passions. The students need to see themselves as writers and embrace that identity (Johnston, 2004).

Photography. To say that photography was important to the children is an understatement. When asked about strategies used in the program, students most frequently explained the skills and strategies that applied to photography. Photography was strongly embraced by the children due to its concrete nature, the fact it allowed them to explore new skills, and the opportunity to take photos with friends and family. The incorporation of the three photography skills: using objects as symbols in photos, rule of thirds and understanding foreground, middle and background were all noted by the students when discussing aspects they learned from the workshop. One student explained, "I learned there are more [than] just pictures" demonstrating he is learning to look at photography, not just his own, in new ways.

The children also became more confident in their use of photography. They were more confident in their ability to discuss elements of photography and demonstrated an ability to apply these new skills to their own photo taking. Interestingly, when asked about why they chose a particular photo to publish with their writing, the children mainly discussed the content of the photos. For example, "I picked this photograph because this is no ordinary pit bull. It is my pit bull. I also like this photograph because my dog brings happiness to me." Again, the role of identity, what the students wanted to

share about their lives and their feelings, as well as the agency to choose were incorporated within the photographic publishing aspect of the program. The children underscored the importance of bringing their home life, family and previous experiences into the program, not just in their writing but also through the multimodality of the photography. We need to listen to the student's voices. It was not just in sharing themselves through writing, but through their ability to share their life in visual ways that impacted the children as participants in ASCEP. The photographic strategies inspired them to look around their world and view the ordinary to be extraordinary. The publishing gave them the voice to share and bring more of their home lives to their school environment.

Social Element. We recognize that learning is constructed within our interactions with one another (whether they are physically present are not). When asked what they learned through participating in ASCEP, we were pleasantly surprised to find that students mentioned strategies related to writing. These responses reminded us of the importance of having students focus on the actual writing process throughout the experience. During each of the first three visits, the teachers emphasized the role of pre-writing and drafting. The writing process is not an independent endeavor by any means; students develop through the use of language and interactions with others (Lewis, Encisco, & Moje, 2007; Owocki & Goodman, 2002). Discussions about their lives prior, during and after drafting each week gave the students opportunities to explore the writing and photography process with one another and talk through their thinking.

The social aspect was not an area we were expecting students to address when asked, "What strategies did you use to help you write?" on the post-Creative Writing Assessment. From our perspective as teacher educators, we assumed the

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children would name the particular writing strategies they were taught (e.g. "Show, Don't Tell"; use a mentor text; or reread your piece aloud). However, student responses frequently focused on how they relied on their small group to support them as writers. Some response examples are, "I used pictures and friends", "I shared ideas", and "I learned how to work with a partner." The role of the pre-service teacher in the small group was also highly valued. The children loved bonding with the college students, explaining the best part of their piece was "spending time with their teacher" or "coming here every Thursday, I come here and the teachers help me with poetry". This reinforced the role both older and peer mentors have with students as they attend to trying new experiences.

Discussion

The ASCEP program provided a much needed creative expression program for youth attending a semi-urban elementary school within our local community. Based on our review of the literature, we anticipated that a program like this would provide children an opportunity to engage with their community on a new creative level. We hoped the program would allow the children to utilize the skills associated with photography and creative writing to think about and communicate their community and their world to others. The results of our study provided us with valuable information regarding planning and executing an afterschool program like this one and demonstrated that the children who participated in the program learned some valuable lessons about writing, photography, and most importantly, themselves.

One of original research questions was to examine changes in children's perceptions of themselves as writers as a result of participation in this program. Students completed open-ended questions pertaining to their existing attitudes about writing both at the beginning and end of the program. Findings indicated that our program had minimal

impact on attitudes towards creative writing, quantitatively. We feel this is largely due to the fact that a population of students who would dedicate time after school to attend a writing program tended to enter the program with a positive attitude, which was supported by the fact that the majority of the students held a positive attitude both before and after the program was over.

While the findings of the quantitative element of our study were not what we expected, the qualitative analysis of the writing survey provided strong evidence of the positive impact our program made on the lives of the children who had participated. From our experience with this program, we took away several valuable "lessons learned" that we feel are important experiences to share with other educators who may be thinking of conducting similar afterschool program workshops in the near future. We have structured the remaining portion of the discussion in a format where we first discuss our research from the authors' perspective in terms of what we learned while facilitating ASCEP and then discuss our research in terms of what the participants learned as discovered through qualitative analysis including sharing direct quotes written by the children. We conclude the discussion with an explanation of limitations and future directions of our research.

When we initially planned this program, we anticipated approximately 20-25 children would sign up as we were conducting an afterschool program that required parents to pick up their children and did not provide transportation. As this was a new program for all of us, we were shocked that 71 students signed up by the registration date with an additional 18 students submitting requests to participate after the due date. We decided not to serve the children who submitted their requests late, but this high turn-out just underscored for us the high interest in the community for more creative writing programs such as this.

The great degree of interest in creative expression led to challenges when facilitating the program on a week-to-week basis. The need to be flexible was a theme that emerged from the researcher's point of view. Balancing the increased demand for these services from the community with the available university-based resources was a continuous juggling act. In the beginning, the discrepant ratio of students to teachers along with the lack of available space required a significant amount of scheduling and planning. Once the sessions began, the needs for flexibility on our part and fluidity in the schedule became apparent as the number of students and teachers fluctuated session by session. Further, the available space and the working technology in the partner school varied weekly requiring additional adjustments to planning and scheduling. We attempted to lead by example for our pre-service teachers and remain calm in the face of pressure. We can only hope that they internalized the lesson that teachers must be flexible and adjust to the circumstances at hand and will apply this knowledge in their future teaching careers. While our point of view as teacher educators was that facilitating the program was somewhat stressful, the results show that our perception was not reality as the children had an enriching learning experience.

An unexpected parallel emerged in the theme of mentoring. As teacher educators, we are naturally concerned with mentoring our pre-service educators and scaffolding them through new learning experiences. Without realizing this parallel during the design of the program, we created four layers of mentoring in our program. As just mentioned, the first layer involved the authors of the study guiding and mentoring the pre-service educators in their roles as teachers of the program. The second layer of mentoring involved the inclusion of mentor texts into the session lesson plans to guide and foster the children's writing. The third layer occurred as pre-service educators mentored the elementary students enrolled in the program. The fourth unanticipated layer of mentoring was found at the peer level as the students in small groups worked cooperatively and gave one another feedback on their creative work. A strong finding from our qualitative analysis indicated that the students placed great value on their relationship with the university student who served as their teacher as well as the relationships developed with their peers while discussing the writing process. While unintentional, mentoring

became one of the key factors of success in our program.

We also discovered that, while not ideal, we did not have to be experts in photography to effectively incorporate this tool into teaching. While our research team originally included a professional photographer, in keeping with the message of flexibility, she was unable to continue with our project, thus requiring us to adapt and teach the photography lessons ourselves. The results of our research show that despite our lack of expertise in photography, the children learned a great deal in this area and thoroughly enjoyed the process that we were able to implement in our short program.

While we as researchers may have fallen a little short in our expectations regarding the measurable impact our program would have in the short-term, the results of our qualitative data clearly showed us that the children themselves valued and gained quite a bit from their participation in this short 4-week program. From the children feeling they can use texts and peers as mentors, to applying new strategies in their photography and knowing they have agency within themselves to frame their writing, the children demonstrated that the experience was valuable. We feel the most powerful way to convey the lessons the children learned from completing this program is to share the children's writing. Listed below is just a sampling of student responses to the question, "What did you learn from participating in ASCEP?" It is their voice, their perspective, their experience that reminds us why we do what we do:

"I learned how to express myself"

"Revise. Foreground, middle ground and back ground"

"I learned to be creative and add Pizzazz to sentences."

"About writing, taking pictures, and having a good time."

"That I am a good writer."

"I like to write because it grows the real me"

Implications

The two main limitations of our research are also limitations teachers and school administrators fight on a daily basis: time and resources. We were limited to only four sessions with the students and we had to pick and choose which photography and creative writing elements we thought would be most impactful during our short time with the participants. While our results show that the program was impactful to the participants despite the short duration, we feel that a greater number of sessions would have allowed us to explore photography and creative writing in more depth, provide the participants with more opportunities to express themselves, and explore their identities and sense of community. Resources were a limiting factor: we did not have 35mm cameras for the participants or a professional photographer to teach them photographic concepts. This led to one of our most important lessons: do not let lack of resources become a barrier to implementing the program. This program is proof that you can get children excited about expressing themselves even without all the bells and whistles or the luxury of unlimited time. This realization has important implications for teachers who might be afraid to tackle adding photography to their lesson plans due to lack of expertise or equipment. Teachers can still create a wonderful opportunity for their students to express themselves despite limitations.

Future Directions

We plan to extend our research further by analyzing the participants' actual writing pieces from each session to determine if the concepts of identity and community belongingness are also present in the participants' creative work. We want to see how the participants' writing changed over the course of the program. Given the fact that two of the authors are teacher educators, we also plan to study the effect serving as teachers in ASCEP had on the university pre-service educators participating in the program. As teachers are reflective practitioners, the pre-service educators wrote reflections about their experience with

ASCEP in addition to completing quantitative measures of community belongingness. In our work as teacher educators, we continually evaluate the field work experiences we provide our pre-service educators to ensure they are relevant, value-added, and connected to coursework and educator competencies. Studying the pre-service educators' reflections will provide valuable data to either support the inclusion of similar experiences in their future coursework or guide necessary revisions to the development of future community based experiences.

While the immediate next step in our research is to evaluate the impact ASCEP had in the development of our pre-service educators, we plan to replicate this program in the future and include several classroom teachers as small group leads alongside our teacher educators. We want the classroom teachers to discover the process alongside the students and then learn how to further develop the participants' learning during the day in the classroom setting. We will measure the impact exposure to creative writing and photography skills in both the after-school environment and the classroom environment has on the participants' concepts of identity, self-esteem and community belongingness. Our greater goal is to support classroom teachers in the seamless incorporation of these techniques into their existing daily lesson plans.

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