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THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN LEARNING TO TEACH WRITING

WHAT TEACHER EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW TO SUPPORT BEGINNING URBAN TEACHERS

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The yearlong qualitative study this article describes explores how three beginning elementary teachers in urban schools struggled with policy, students, and their own commitment of learning to teach writing to their students. Findings indicate that beginning teachers learned to teach writing by drawing on a variety of knowledge sources, that beginning teachers' writing instruction was heavily influenced by various aspects of their individual teaching contexts, and that because these various aspects of teaching context often conflicted with each other, creating tensions for the beginning teacher, learning to teach writing was strongly shaped by how each teacher learned to manage the various conflicting aspects of her individual teaching context. Implications for teacher education emerged and include focusing on writing pedagogy, examining teaching contexts and decision making within various settings, and using case studies to examine how experienced teachers work successfully within a variety of teaching contexts.

Keywords: *writing pedagogy; beginning teachers; learning to teach; teaching context; urban schools*

Teaching writing in elementary classrooms is particularly difficult in urban schools where the literacy focus is often placed exclusively on reading. Finding ways to squeeze in effective writing instruction, although challenging, is possible for experienced teachers (Dyson, 2003; Manning, 2000). For beginning urban teachers, learning to teach writing is often neglected to prepare children for high-stakes testing and to meet policy requirements. The recent federal policy of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) focuses primarily on reading and mathematics and ignores writing, even though research supports the parallel nature of the cognitive skills needed

to acquire reading and writing (Kucer, 2001; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003) and demonstrates that many teachers find success in teaching the processes of reading and writing together (e.g., Tracey & Morrow, 2002).

In addition, many classroom teachers express discomfort and a lack of knowledge and confidence for teaching writing (Murphy, 2003; Napoli, 2001). Teachers often feel that they never learned to write well during K-12 schooling and that they were not taught how to teach writing in their teacher preparation classes (Graves, 2002). In fact, most states do not require prospective teachers to take a writing course and less than half of teacher education institutions even offer

such a course (Graves, 2002). In a study of pre-service teachers in a nine-credit block of language and literacy methods courses, Napoli (2001) found that preservice teachers often talked about their own K-12 writing experiences as negative and uninspiring. Beliefs such as these translate into a lack of attention to the teaching of writing in K-12 classrooms.

This situation is even more problematic in urban contexts where there is a disconnect between students' worlds and the world of school (Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Gee, 1992; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 1987, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995). In a landmark study, Heath (1983) reported that students in two poor communities in rural North Carolina, one White and the other Black, had different experiences and successes in school, in part because of the language mismatch between the Black homes and the local school. Heath found that when the language and culture of a child's home did not match that of the school, the children often became marginalized and less able to access school curriculum. James Gee (1992) described schools as having their own Discourse (the capital D is intentional) where words hold certain common meanings and, in theory, all members have equal access to the ideas in the Discourse. However, Gee also found that

mainstream parents very often spend a huge amount of time practicing (school-based) literacy with their children, and what this means is that they mentor or apprentice their children into certain Discourses that schools and wider mainstream culture reward. (p. 123)

Children of color and other nonmainstream children do not receive this additional mentoring and, therefore, find themselves left out of the Discourse of the school community.

This problem intensifies when we consider that urban schools often have the least qualified teachers (Oakes, Franke, Quartz, & Rogers, 2002), and many of the teachers are of a different race, background, culture, or language than those they teach (Delpit, 1995). This further complicates the issue concerning how teachers in urban contexts learn to teach writing. The study described here explores how beginning teachers in urban settings struggled with policy, students,

and their own commitment of learning to teach writing to their students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This work is framed by a sociocultural perspective that suggests people act and react in certain ways because of cultural expectations (Kucer, 2001). Many researchers have conducted ethnographic research through the lens of sociocultural theory (Britzman, 1991; Dyson, 1993, 2003; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Raphael & Au, 1998). From a sociocultural perspective, the diverse interests and perspectives of all players are understood to be part of the ongoing process of cultural production (Sutton & Levinson, 2001). To understand a complex social practice, such as learning to teach writing, examining the relationships in and among the players within a specific setting is crucial.

Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (2001) described learning as situated and defined legitimate peripheral participation as how learners engage in apprenticeships, both formal and informal. Part of the current school culture (as described above) is that teachers neglect writing. This study sought to look at what beginning teachers who claim to be committed to writing instruction did when confronted with a school culture that did not place a similar value on writing. Because learning is socially constructed and occurs through dialogue (Putnam & Borko, 2000) and schools are learning communities that maintain their own cultures and norms (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), I wondered what and how beginning teachers would learn to teach writing as they interacted with teachers who might not regularly teach writing.

Beginning teachers are often socialized (i.e., apprenticed) into the school learning community when they are mentored by a more experienced teacher and where they make assumptions about the common beliefs and practices of the school (Lortie, 1975). If, as Lave and Wenger (2001) suggested, learners absorb and adapt the behaviors of the surrounding peer group, it seemed crucial to study not only the teaching decisions of these beginning teachers but also the contexts and learning environments within which they were

TABLE 1 Demographic Information for the Participants and Schools During the 2003-2004 School Year

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Year of Teaching</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Magnet Status</i>	<i>Reading First School?</i>
Celina	29	Latina	Second	4th	Crestview	Not a magnet	Yes
Aileen	56	White	First	3rd	Forest Glen	Science, math, and technology	No
Bethany	24	White	Fourth	2nd	Parkside	Fine and dramatic arts	Yes

learning to teach. This study examines beginning teachers who were committed to teaching writing in their elementary classrooms and who were also being socialized into communities of learning with varying levels of importance placed on writing instruction. Using a sociocultural lens allowed me to examine the relationships and interactions among the different groups of people and ideas within each learning community and to examine the influence of situated learning.

METHOD

Research Questions

The main research question was, What influences beginning teachers in an urban setting as they translate and implement a particular aspect of their writing curriculum into practice? Early in the study, I asked each teacher to identify one aspect of her writing curriculum that she planned to make improvements on during the year. Setting this goal enabled me to focus my observations and to see more easily what influenced each teacher's instructional decisions.

Participants

This qualitative study follows three beginning elementary teachers in one urban school district across a school year to determine how each learned to teach writing. The selected district embodied common traits of urban schools such as layers of policy mandates, large numbers of students living in poverty, and instability of the teaching force (Mirel, 1999). All three teachers had previously completed a yearlong student teaching internship in the district where they taught at the time of the study. As part of a 5-year

teacher preparation program in a large, mid-western university, Aileen, Celina, and Bethany also had multiple opportunities to work in urban schools across the 2 years immediately preceding their 5th-year internship.

The teachers selected were within their first 5 years of teaching. Bethany, a 24-year-old White woman in her 2nd year of teaching, taught fourth grade at a performing arts magnet school during the study. Aileen, a 56-year-old White woman, was in her 3rd year of teaching first grade; during the study, she was in a math, science, and technology magnet school. Celina, a 29-year-old Latina, was in her 4th year of teaching second grade in the same classroom. Table 1 presents this and additional information about the schools in the study.

Both Crestview and Parkside were considered failing schools because they had not met annual yearly progress the previous year. Because of this, both schools were awarded Reading First grants that focused on improving the reading of students in Grades K-3. Because Bethany was a fourth-grade teacher, this mandate did not affect her directly. However, as a second-grade teacher, Celina felt the repercussions of the Reading First grant and it was influential in shaping how she learned to teach.

Data

Data sources included field notes, classroom observations, videotaped classroom observations that formed the basis of viewing sessions, interviews, materials discussions, and collection of artifacts. Viewing sessions involved each teacher and me watching a videotape of a recent writing lesson. In each viewing session, we collaboratively discussed the instructional moves she was making and attempted to get at the

underlying conceptual understandings for her decision making. In a sense, we created our own sociocultural learning community where the physical, social, psychological, emotional, and cultural factors that influenced each teacher were revealed. Materials discussions occurred once during the study and consisted of each teacher collecting all the materials that influenced her writing instruction during the school year. She then talked about each item and explained its influence and role in her instructional planning and teaching of writing. Artifacts collected included lesson plans, writing templates, and curriculum materials. The entire data set reflects my sociocultural stance in that I examined each teacher's writing instruction within the arena that it occurred, noting and validating the unique culture and context of each teacher.

Data were analyzed using an inductive coding process (Strauss, 1987) to sort the data and to identify categories within the data. This was done by reading and rereading each data set, labeling and coding for commonalities and patterns until categories emerged. Categories were reorganized and fine-tuned during the data analysis as needed until all the data fit into one of these categories. When potential discrepancies arose, I spoke with colleagues, read the work of other researchers, and revisited my categories to see if the data fit an existing category or whether it truly was an outlier. The biggest discrepancy that arose surrounded Aileen and her response to the Black Vernacular English (BVE) of her students; this example is described later in the article. These 12 categories were then organized into three broad structures, and the data were read again to confirm each structure and each category within each structure. Finally, I revisited each teacher's data separately, to seek discrepant cases and to triangulate the data. Using the initial categories and the broad organizing structures, revisiting the actual data, and comparing these to my own field notes and official documents allowed triangulation of the data and validation of findings.

The three organizing structures—*learning to teach*, *teaching writing*, and *working in urban settings*—are indicative of the kinds of knowledge beginning teachers had. From these three

sources of knowledge, the imperative nature of the role of teaching context emerged and within each structure, I focused specifically on seven key features. The learning to teach structure included knowledge about oneself and a tentative teaching identity and coming to understand the role of one's colleagues in forming this identity. Teaching writing included both knowing various teaching methods and using existing materials for teaching writing. Finally, teaching in an urban setting included understanding the community and the specific policy environment of each school at a particular time. The final factor I included in the teaching context was that of students, and I hypothesized that this factor drew from all three knowledge structures. These seven features of teaching context will be discussed in greater detail throughout the remainder of this article.

THREE CASES

Findings indicate that first, beginning teachers learned to teach writing by drawing on a variety of knowledge sources including prior experiences, teacher education, trial and error, professional development experiences, and self-reflection and by relying on their own beliefs and attitudes about teaching writing. Second, the beginning teachers' writing instruction was heavily influenced by various aspects of their individual teaching contexts, such as the policy environment, students, the community, colleagues and support in the building, the school, and the materials that a district or school provided (the seven key features outlined above). Third, because these various aspects of teaching context often conflicted with each other, creating tensions for the beginning teacher, learning to teach writing was strongly shaped by how each teacher learned to manage the various conflicting aspects of her individual teaching context.

Celina

Celina's teaching context. Celina's second-grade classroom was composed of 21 children; approximately one half of the children were White, with the remaining half split between African

American and Latino children. All but 1 of the Latino children was bilingual, although none were identified as needing support for English acquisition. About half of Celina's students received free or reduced hot lunch, and most of her students lived in the neighborhood surrounding the school and they walked to school. Celina's teaching context was shaped heavily by her policy environment. Because her school failed to meet annual yearly progress for the 2 years prior to this study, Crestview had been awarded a Reading First grant (Michigan Department of Education, 2003). This grant, a consequence of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), required Celina and the other teachers in her building to implement 120 minutes of uninterrupted literacy instruction every morning. The first 90 minutes of this time was to be focused solely on reading instruction, drawing from the five factors described in the National Reading Panel's (2000) report on effective reading instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Teachers were asked not to teach writing during these 90 minutes. These policies created tensions for Celina, who was accustomed to teaching reading and writing in an integrated way and who believed that reading and writing made more sense to children when they fluently moved between the two processes. Additional tensions existed because the pedagogies advocated by the Reading First grant (i.e., basal reading instruction in isolation from the other language arts) did not match Celina's preferred pedagogies of writing workshop, process writing, and literacy centers.

Celina's writing instruction. Because of these tensions, Celina taught writing in two ways during the year—writing workshop and formulaic writing. Three days a week, “on the ninety-first minute, we start writing workshop” (Fall Interview, page 29). Writing workshop supported Celina's goal of engaging students in authentic, creative, and enjoyable writing that would help create lifelong writers in her students. Celina balanced this with formulaic writing instruction that would prepare her students for standardized writing assessments because

my students have a really hard time with . . . writing that's formulaic, and I think it's because it's regurgitate and spit, regurgitate and spit. It's hard . . . getting them to write exactly what they're supposed to say. It's not connecting to them . . . because it's not real. (Materials Discussion, p. 32)

Celina also integrated writing activities during reading instruction and through literacy stations even though the Reading First grant discouraged this. These instructional models supported Celina's beliefs of how children learned to write. That is, she believed writing was developmental and consisted of smaller units (writing skills) such as sentence structure, grammar, fluency, and so forth, and that all children could make progress in writing with practice and instruction.

Celina's writing goals. Celina's writing goals for the year included consistent use of modeling, creating a clear organization for writing workshop, and improving writing conferences. She worked simultaneously on all three goals throughout the year in different ways. Celina claimed, “I feel modeling is the key, modeling and teaching strategies and showing, sharing my ideas with them, and showing them what I do as a writer. [It] helps them become better writers and I think that's so important” (Spring Interview, p. 17). This goal was achieved because she simply made sure she did it every day. It was a matter of putting this goal in the forefront of her thinking. The organization of her workshop evolved during the year as her students progressed and were able to work more independently and as she understood the specific learning needs of her students. She did not have a plan for making her workshop run more smoothly other than changing things when they needed changing. This occurred several times throughout the year in terms of her expectations for the students during writing time and how she instructed the students regarding her expectations (e.g., creating and posting charts with her expectations).

Celina began the year with a vision of how writing conferences might work effectively in her classroom, gleaned from ideas presented at a workshop she attended near the end of the previous school year. She wanted to try conferencing

with one group of students per day (i.e., about five students). She hypothesized that by the end of each week, she would have conferenced with all of her students. She envisioned each conference lasting about 5 minutes, so that she would be able to talk to all five children in a group during the 30 minutes of writing workshop that she designated for writing time. Celina also decided to use a teaching points checklist during each conference—a list of writing skills that she wanted her students to accomplish across the year. Using the checklist would help her select one or two teaching points for each student during each conference and would permit her to revisit each earlier conference at a glance.

During the course of the year, Celina adapted and revised the physical and logistical nature of her writing conferences several times. Initially, Celina met with all the students who physically sat together in groups. She quickly discarded this structure because she found that all children in the group were not ready for a conference. She also had a hard time “seeing” all students in the class when she sat in a student desk within a group. On deciding to forgo sitting with a group, she moved to her own table in the back of the room but still worked with only one group per day. This gave her more control of the entire classroom because she could see the whole room and could still manage various students as needed. Later, however, she began conferencing with students who had completed rough drafts and were ready to move toward publishing because she felt they needed her help for revision and editing.

Celina also experimented with the way she conducted the conferences across the year. She tried having the children identify something about the piece that they wanted help with, but when children began saying “nothing,” she moved to her teaching points checklist as her primary tool for focusing quickly and immediately on one writing skill that she wanted each student to work on. She tried to determine if students should read the work or if she should (conferences were much shorter if she read the piece). She sometimes let students make notes and corrections as they talked, and sometimes she took the paper and wrote ideas or drew arrows to indicate text movement. Eventually,

Celina decided that she wanted her students to develop ownership of their writing and to see themselves as authors. This led her to the decision to always ask students to read their own papers during the conferences (although this took longer than if she read them) and to let them do their own writing and note taking during the conference. She expressed how frustrating it was sometimes because the children worked so slowly, but she felt she could not encourage ownership if she took the children’s papers and wrote all over them.

How did Celina learn to teach writing in this context? As Celina learned to improve her writing conferences across the year, she did so primarily by trial and error, by experimenting with various approaches, and by building experiences she could reflect on. She gleaned ideas from conferences and workshops and other teachers, and then she tried some of the ideas out in her own classroom. She discarded what did not work (such as conferencing with a group and sitting with that group) and tweaked ideas that had potential (such as a teaching points checklist). In a final interview, Celina said, “The most powerful tool I have ever used is trial and error. [I ask myself] what works and what doesn’t? If it doesn’t work, don’t do it” (Spring Interview, p. 16). Celina was not afraid to abandon ideas that were not working and to try something else. She let her own experiences and the reactions of her students guide her decisions. She had an ideal vision of what writing workshop should look like and what it should provide her students, and she worked on tweaking her current model in hopes of reaching her ideal.

In these ways, Celina drew from a number of knowledge sources including her previous teaching experiences, the workshop from the previous year, and her teacher preparation classes. In addition, she found ways to maneuver and manage various conflicting aspects of her teaching context. That is, she found ways to work within the constraints of the Reading First grant that allowed her to maintain the writing workshop and to help her students become better personal writers. Yet she also added formulaic writing instruction to her curriculum so that she could adequately prepare her students for standardized

tests. Celina was able to do this because she had the support of her colleagues, her students, and the parents in the school community. Penelope, Celina's principal, and Lisa, the reading teacher at Crestview, were very supportive of Celina's teaching methods. They affirmed her instruction after class observations and during staff meetings. Many of the teachers in Celina's school were not happy about the presence of the Reading First grant, and they were able to support and encourage each other through its implementation. These "harmonies" (i.e., positive relationships) within her teaching context propelled her forward and gave her energy to deal with the constraints of the policy environment that were so prevalent in her teaching context.

Aileen

Aileen's teaching context. There were 23 students in Aileen's first-grade classroom; 15 were African American, 4 were White, 3 were Asian American, and there was 1 Latina student. One of the White students was from Bosnia and was in the process of learning English. All 3 of the Asian American students were identified as English as a second language students and were supported by additional district personnel. About two thirds of Aileen's students participated in the free and reduced hot lunch program. Because Forest Glen was a magnet school, many of Aileen's students were bused from across the district, although a few students did live in the neighborhood surrounding the school. Aileen's instructional decisions for writing were influenced by the math, science, and technology magnet focus of her school. Students, parents, and colleagues expected teacher-centered, quiet, and orderly classrooms. As a newcomer to the school, Aileen faced making decisions about adhering to this kind of teaching philosophy or remaining true to her own understanding of teaching based on child development theories. The tension Aileen felt between the expectations of her peers and students and her own desires to teach using developmentally appropriate, child-centered approaches influenced many of the writing decisions she made during the year.

Aileen's writing instruction. Because this was Aileen's 3rd year of teaching first grade, she began the year using methods that had proven successful in the past. She taught writing through morning message during the first half of the year and through journal writing during the second half of the year. She felt these methods were consistent with child development theory and that they encouraged children to make consistent progress in writing. Aileen also used a morning seatwork activity that drew on the connections between reading and writing and that focused her students on writing complete sentences each morning in response to a short story. This kind of work appeared more traditional and matched the expectations of her students and some of the parents, whereas the morning message and journal writing supported Aileen's personal goals of using developmentally appropriate pedagogies. She claimed, "[Students] can take risks here. That's my philosophy. Try it; so what if you make a mistake?" (Viewing Session 3, p. 34).

Aileen's writing goals. Aileen's writing goals included an emphasis on her own organization of writing instruction, consistent and extended instruction in phonemic awareness, and getting her students to write a paragraph by the end of the year. Because this was Aileen's 3rd year of teaching, she felt like she would be able to get started on the right foot and that she would be able to maintain her instructional goals. In the previous 2 years, Aileen had been assigned a classroom just days before the school year began. Both times she found each classroom cluttered with materials and furniture from the previous occupant. Aileen felt like she began each year "behind" because she was dealing with the physical organization of the classroom after the children arrived. Aileen had high hopes for staying organized this year—which to her meant keeping her instruction sequenced and regular (i.e., consistently occurring each day) and moving children along at an appropriate pace—things that she felt did not happen in her first 2 years. Aileen worked on meeting this organizational goal during the entire school year.

How did Aileen learn to teach writing in this context? Aileen learned to teach writing by relying

on her past experiences, observing her students and moving on when they seemed ready, and by reflecting on conversations with other professionals, professional readings, and a workshop of modeling journal writing. Aileen subscribed to a national education journal that focused on the teaching of elementary reading and writing. Early in the spring of her 3rd year, Aileen read an article in this journal that described the role of phonemic awareness in first-grade classrooms. About this article she said,

[The article] said you should really teach [phonemic awareness] for the first four months [of the school year]. I have not done that. I've done it for about the first two months . . . [and now] it's showing up later in the year that they really don't have a good grasp [of phonemic awareness]. So, next year, I will do that. [I'll teach phonemic awareness] for four months—all the way to December. (Viewing Session 5, pp. 15-16)

Aileen's past experiences included her years as a volunteer and paraprofessional at her sons' elementary school, as well as her internship (i.e., student teaching) and first 2 years of teaching. She often claimed that she knew what she needed to do, she just needed to get organized enough to do it in a coherent way. Aileen knew a lot about her students, who they were as literate beings and what they could do as readers and writers, both collectively and individually, as evidenced by our conversations and her notes. She paced her writing instruction based on her students' needs and the long-term goal she had of getting them to write paragraphs by the end of the school year. This included attention to oral language within a development approach. She explained, "[Students] need to talk. So many teachers want to just have everybody else quiet and just have one person raise their hand" (Viewing Session 2, p. 7). By maintaining the beliefs she held, and being true to her own identity, Aileen was able to successfully teach writing during this school year.

Finally, Aileen was a reflective practitioner. She thought about her conversations with other teachers and me, she read from professional journals regularly, and she attended district-sponsored workshops and a state-level reading conference. She was constantly focused on

improving her practice by drawing from the wealth of ideas available to her from the "best practice" literature and then reflectively making instructional decisions based on these ideas. In particular, a workshop she attended in January on how to model journal writing was just the push she needed to move from morning message to her own version of journal writing. She had been talking about changing her instruction because she could see the children were ready to do more of their own writing, and the workshop was the push she needed to move on in her writing instruction. Aileen also used our relationship as a way to think about her practice. In her final interview with me, Aileen commented,

[This experience] has been really positive. I really had to think about how I wanted to teach. I had these ideas in my head, but you know, to be able to do it for you. It was a good thing when you came in. It reinforced my thinking . . . [and I realized] I'm not doing everything wrong here. I'm doing quite a lot right. (Spring Interview, p. 48)

Aileen found ways to manage the various elements of her teaching context; in particular, the tension between the expectations of her students, their parents, and her colleagues with her own identity and teaching philosophies. Because Aileen was older than most beginning teachers, and she worked as a volunteer and then a paraprofessional for many years, she was strong in her convictions about the kinds of pedagogies she wanted to use and her ideas about how children learn. Although Aileen successfully managed this didactic tension, she was less adept at determining how to handle the tension that existed between her own values and expectations for students to use Standard English and the BVE that most of her students used.

Culturally responsive pedagogy has been described as occurring at the intersection of culture and teaching and includes notions of academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2001). Cultural competence is when the teacher understands his or her students' culture and its role in education and bases consequent instructional decisions on the students' culture. One might argue that BVE is a part of the culture of many African American students and as

such, might be used as a basis for learning in classrooms. Aileen did value oral language, and she often encouraged her students to read along with her, to tell their own stories, and to talk with each other while working. However, Aileen consciously corrected her students when they said *math* as *maf* or *bathroom* as *bafroom*, believing that the children misheard the letters in those words. She explained,

I'm really picking on language because I think first grade is the time when they really have to learn about all the mistakes they make and then start correcting them. [They need to] realize what mistakes they had and to realize how people will interpret it. I tell them, you misheard this, and that's okay. (Viewing Session 2, p. 29)

This example seems to suggest that Aileen was not culturally responsive because she assumed her students "misheard" the ending of a word, not that they were speaking a dialect that often leaves off word endings. Other researchers (e.g., Delpit, 1995) have written about helping children of color understand how to code switch, to teach them when and why they need to speak Standard English and when it is okay to use the BVE dialect. Aileen never indicated that she understood that her students might need to know when to code switch or that as a part of their cultural identity, it was important for them to maintain their home language at school. Aileen was not able to recognize and work within the mismatch between her own value system and beliefs about culture and language and those of her students.

Bethany

Bethany's teaching context. Bethany's fourth-grade classroom was composed of 20 students; 8 were African American, 7 were White, 3 were Latino, and 2 were Asian American. Of the 20 students, 14 received free or reduced hot lunch, and most of Bethany's students were bused in from across the district because of the magnet focus of Parkside. A 2nd-year teacher; Bethany, was in her fourth school setting at the time of this study. During her 1st year, she was placed in three different schools and three different grade levels as student enrollments shifted and

a teacher resigned midyear. In many ways, Bethany was a 1st-year teacher again, trying to acclimate and socialize herself into a new learning community and school culture in yet another grade level. As a fourth-grade teacher, the biggest influence in Bethany's teaching context was the fact that the state assessment for language arts was given in fourth grade. Because Bethany's school had not made annual yearly progress the preceding year, the fourth-grade teachers in Bethany's school felt great pressure to ensure that their students performed well on the upcoming test. To help Bethany and another fourth-grade teacher, the reading teacher in Bethany's school met regularly with the two teachers to support their learning to teach writing prior to the administration of the test. The presence of the reading teacher and the looming nature of the state assessment created tension for Bethany, particularly because she wanted to teach writing in ways that were consistent with what she had learned about in her preservice teacher education classes (i.e., process approaches and the writing workshop).

Bethany's writing instruction. Bethany taught writing to her fourth-grade students using a modified writing workshop whose main purpose was preparing students for the state test. Bethany believed that modeling was crucial for helping kids learn to write, and she consistently and regularly modeled writing for her students at the beginning of each writing workshop. Writing workshop occurred 4 days a week for about 45 minutes each. This time was constrained because Parkside held an Art's Academy four mornings a week for 2.5 hours each day. In keeping with the school's performing arts magnet, students in Grades 4 through 6 selected from courses such as dance, theater, art, scrapbooking, and music. This limited the amount of available time that Bethany had to teach writing.

Bethany assessed student writing using a 4-point rubric that was created by teachers in her building and that drew heavily from the rubric used to assess writing by the state of Michigan. Bethany also connected writing to reading through the use of comprehension strategies such as visualizing and inferring. The Visual

Training Strategy program that focused students on understanding and interpreting art (because of the performing arts magnet status of Bethany's school) also provided Bethany an opportunity to engage her students in creative writing.

Bethany's writing goals. Bethany maintained that she wanted her students to perform well on the state test. This building goal initially conflicted with her personal goal of establishing an effective writing workshop. The climate at Parkside Elementary School included a strong focus on test preparation, which Bethany recognized almost immediately. During the 1st week of school, she was provided with templates (i.e., graphic organizers) and rubrics that were to support and guide her writing instruction, so that by the time I first interviewed her in mid-October, she had internalized the goal of test preparation. As she talked about how she would meet the building goal, she included ideas of modeling and process writing. As we continued to talk, Bethany described a perfect writing workshop where "everyone [is] working on different things, at their own pace, and [where I'm] doing a mini-lesson" (Fall Interview, p. 17). Bethany believed in the writing process; one of her embedded goals was to teach her students the process and to successfully bring them through the process—from drafting to publishing—across the school year. She expressed uncertainty about achieving this goal given the focus on test preparation, but in October, she felt like this was an attainable goal. In February, when asked whether her students had published work or not, she reported,

They haven't published anything that's in my classroom library, which was my goal. Here it is over half the way [through the school year]. I think I'm not conferencing enough. It might also be because we only write on four days for a short amount of time. I don't feel like I'm giving them enough [time] so they can conference and get it published. (Viewing Session 2, pp. 41-42)

It is evident from this transcript that Bethany places blame on herself rather than the focus on test preparation that has consumed her writing instruction up to this point. Bethany's lack of experience and inability to manage

multiple facets of her teaching context simultaneously contributed to her interpretation of the lack of student publications in her classroom.

How did Bethany learn to teach writing in this context? In the fall semester, because test preparation was in high gear, Bethany learned to teach by modeling her instruction after the instruction and advice of Suzy, her reading teacher colleague. In fact, about Suzy, she said,

I think Suzy influences me the most. I mean that's her thing, reading and writing. She's been teaching for so much longer than I have. I respect how she thinks and how or what approach I should take. The only bad thing, well not bad thing, well, it is a bad thing. She is so driven by the [state tests] that it's like what she's saying is to prepare them for the test, not necessarily prepare them to be good writers. (Spring Interview, pp. 32-33)

Bethany appears to be acting in opposition to the teachers in Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde's (1998) work who found that best practices in writing in a standards-based environment was to spend time in class on writing original pieces all the way through the writing process, engage in teacher modeling, write for real audiences, and teach grammar and mechanics in the context of real writing. It was only in hindsight that Bethany was able to name the tension that existed between her own beliefs and intentions for teaching writing and the guidance she received, and took, from Suzy.

Bethany also drew from ideas she had gleaned from a professional development course and the texts she was reading for the course (e.g., Fountas & Pinnell's, 2000, book on guided reading). This book was introduced during a yearlong course required and paid for by her school district that focused on balanced literacy instruction. The *Six Plus One Traits of Writing* (Culham, 2003) was also a key book in the course. Although Bethany gravitated toward many of the ideas in the books and the course, she found she was unable to implement them during the fall semester because of the intense nature of test preparation.

After the test was given in January, Bethany learned to teach through critical self-analysis and reflection. She began to question me and the texts she had read and compare these ideas to what

she was doing in the classroom. She drew from ideas presented in a workshop she attended in January focused on writing, and she began to make plans for changing her instruction. In the second semester, she adjusted templates, wrote notes to parents describing her writing instruction, created and implemented a narrative addition to her report card, and moved into more conferencing and publishing. Her critical examination of her own teaching practice in the fall led to reflection, discussion, and changes in her spring semester teaching. She relied somewhat on trial and error but more on reflection and thoughtful planning and implementation of her restructured ideas.

Bethany was not able to manage the various aspects of her teaching context, particularly prior to the high-stakes test. She acquiesced (Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002) to the policy expectations of the test and to the wishes of her reading teacher as she strove to prepare her students to perform well on the state assessment. She felt tension between the expectations of test-preparation writing and what she wanted to do with writing instruction, but during the fall, she was not able to do anything about it. As the year progressed, and after the test was given, Bethany began to think about ways to manage this tension as she tried to improve her writing instruction. The findings suggest that Bethany's lack of experience, and the nature of her 1st year of teaching, constrained her efforts to work more effectively with the tensions that existed across her teaching context.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Beginning teachers such as Bethany, Celina, and Aileen draw from different types of knowledge as they learn to teach. The discussion below focuses on the knowledge that beginning teachers need to know about content, pedagogy, and context.

What Knowledge Sources Do Beginning Teachers Draw on to Teach Writing?

Much has been written about teachers' professional knowledge, where it comes from, and how

one acquires it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Kennedy, 2002; Shulman, 1987; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987). To compare the three teachers in the current study to the work of others who study teacher knowledge, it is helpful to examine one researcher's system for organizing teacher knowledge. Kennedy (2002) described the knowledge that teachers need for teaching in terms of craft knowledge, systematic knowledge, and prescriptive knowledge. In a study of 45 teachers' lessons, Kennedy found that teachers draw on all three sources of knowledge when making instructional decisions. She described craft knowledge as that which is acquired through experience; systematic knowledge as the knowledge acquired through undergraduate preparation, reading journals, and continuing professional development; and prescriptive knowledge as that acquired through institutional policies.

Celina and Aileen drew on craft knowledge as they considered their past teaching experiences. Because Bethany had less overall teaching experience to draw on, it makes sense that this was less visible in her teaching. All three teachers were influenced by systematic knowledge as they engaged in professional readings, conversations, and through attending workshops and conferences. Prescriptive knowledge was important to both Celina and Bethany as they modified or shaped their instruction based on policies such as standardized testing and the Reading First grant. Although policy mandates were much less influential to Aileen—her students were 3 years away from taking the state test and her school was not affected by a Reading First grant—Aileen was aware of these policies and their potential influences on instructional decisions.

The teachers in Kennedy's (2002) study were experienced teachers, not beginning teachers like Celina, Bethany, and Aileen. However, the current study suggests that beginning teachers draw on the same set of knowledge sources that experienced teachers do. But this study also suggests that beginning teachers are faced with finding ways to manage their individual teaching contexts—something that is distinct from acquiring traditional knowledge. The

next section discusses the seven contextual factors that overwhelm beginning teachers like Celina, Aileen, and Bethany and suggests implications for teacher education.

What Do Beginning Teachers Need to Know About Teaching Context?

This study adds support to the literature that suggests understanding context is important for beginning teachers (Grossman, Valencia, et al., 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Grossman and others (Grossman, Thompson, & Valencia, 2001; Grossman, Valencia, et al., 2001) studied beginning English teachers' writing instruction through an activity theory lens. Activity theory (Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1981) suggests that activity settings are social contexts within which learners participate and appropriate knowledge. Grossman and her colleagues found that the various settings—courses, field placements, student teaching, and so forth—each presented its own set of relationships and expectations and that beginning teachers were faced with learning different things in different ways from each setting. Examining the differences in the teaching contexts in the current study deepens our understanding of how beginning teachers' contextual factors influence their instructional decisions.

To represent these influences, I created a visual map (i.e., concept webs) of each teacher's context. Taking the seven influences that emerged from this study as parts of a teaching context, I revisited the data for each teacher to determine the relative importance of each influence for each teacher. I calculated the number of times throughout the data that each influence emerged and used those numbers to decide if each influence was significant, moderate, or slight. The sizes of the circles in the webs varied, and a larger circle indicated a stronger influence, whereas a smaller circle indicated only a slight influence on pedagogical decision making. To conserve space, I present a table that summarizes each teacher's concept web (see Table 2).

Table 2 highlights the factors related to teaching context revealed by this study and the amount of influence exerted on each teacher's writing instruction. The left-hand column lists each factor and provides a brief definition.

Although the exact nature of each contextual factor may have varied across teachers (e.g., Celina's policy environment consisted of the Reading First grant and a paced and sequenced curriculum guide, whereas Bethany's policy environment consisted of the state assessment test), evidence supported that all teachers had the same set of contextual factors. Each of the other three columns indicates the relative significance each factor had on each teacher's writing instruction. For example, Aileen was significantly influenced by her own identity when making decisions for teaching writing but was also influenced moderately by her students and the teaching tools at her disposal. She was influenced only slightly by her community, her colleagues, and her materials; and the influence of her policy environment was not significant.

Each of these contextual aspects existed for all three teachers, but the various aspects did not always interact in positive ways with each other. For example, Celina's policy environment, particularly the Reading First grant, conflicted with her own identity and the teaching tools that she employed in the previous 3 years. Celina was being asked to teach in a way that did not match what she believed was best for her students, nor did it match what she felt was best writing practice. This work suggests that mismatches between various aspects of a teacher's context create tensions. Coming to understand how beginning teachers learn to manage these tensions can inform the work of teacher educators in preparing novices to teach. I also propose that as beginning teachers become more experienced, they are able to do more than juggle (which Bethany appeared to do) and more than manage (which is much of what Aileen did); they are able to finesse their teaching contexts (much like Celina did).

Managing dilemmas (Lampert, 1985) may help teachers in the spur of the moment as they make frequent and on-the-spot decisions. In introducing and using the term *finesse*, I suggest that teachers go beyond managing dilemmas to actually sorting out and understanding the various interconnections between and among the aspects of one's own teaching context. Finesse indicates teachers' skillful manipulation of teaching context to shape their

TABLE 2 Teaching Context Factors' Influence on Teachers' Writing Instruction

Teaching Context Factor	<i>The Degree of Influence</i>		
	<i>Celina</i>	<i>Aileen</i>	<i>Bethany</i>
Identity —Demographic and human aspects of what makes each teacher unique	Moderate	Significant	Moderate
Policy environment —Various policies and mandates that create curricular and assessment expectations	Significant	Insignificant	Significant
Teaching tools —The repertoire of conceptual and pedagogical tools known to the teacher	Significant	Moderate	Slight
Students —The particular students in each teacher's class—including factors such as race, socioeconomic status, language, culture, and ability	Moderate	Moderate	Insignificant
Community —The neighborhood surrounding the school, as well as the community that exists within each school	Slight	Slight	Slight
Colleagues —The people a teacher works with—including formally assigned mentors, other teachers, and the building principal	Slight	Slight	Moderate
Materials —The resources and materials available for teaching writing	Insignificant	Slight	Slight

evolving writing practice. Although some people might suggest that finesse has negative connotations, and might imply a surface move rather than a substantial one, I argue that finesse is a finely tuned craft representing a sophisticated level of skill. I believe it takes a certain amount of diplomacy to appropriately draw from one's own knowledge about teaching, balance the requirements of policy and education reform with the needs of one's students, and maintain one's personal identity.

During this study, Celina demonstrated her adeptness at finessing. She determined that she would give a nod to the mandated basal series and the required 120 minutes of instruction; yet she also maintained a focus on integrated language arts and writing workshop. She drew from her 4 years of experience in a fairly stable context to teach in a way that she not only was comfortable with but also felt her students would be best served by. Aileen demonstrated the ability to finesse as well, although not to the same extent as Celina. Aileen was confident enough in her own knowledge and abilities to teach in ways that were different from the norm. Much like Celina, she maneuvered her way among her teaching colleagues, materials, and teaching tools to stay true to her identity as a teacher and for her students. However, Aileen was not able to manage as many aspects of her

teaching context as Celina (recall her struggle with her students' use of BVE), suggesting that learning to finesse takes a continuity of experiences across time. Bethany has not yet learned to finesse, which makes a great deal of sense given that she has had unstable teaching contexts and she was so heavily indoctrinated into her current setting by the reading teacher, Suzy. Near the end of the study, Bethany began to show signs that she was becoming more aware of her instructional decisions and was engaged in critical self-analysis and planning for future change. This may suggest a movement toward finessing, although more research is needed to confirm this.

IMPLICATIONS

This research unveils some of the complexities that existed for these beginning teachers as they learned to teach writing. Although the study's generalizability was limited by the small number of participants, the findings and implications resonate with my broader experiences as a former teacher, teacher educator, and educational researcher. Each of the teachers in this study made progress toward achieving her individual writing goals, yet each also struggled with one or more aspects of her teaching context. Smagorinsky, Cook, and Johnson (2003)

described a phenomenon of beginning teachers traveling a twisting path of learning to teach because they may hold only partial or pseudo-conceptual understandings of models and tools they are trying to implement. Although I believe this was happening in this study, and it was clear that all three teachers had more to learn as effective teachers of writing, I also think these teachers were trying to find ways to navigate and manage their own teaching contexts. In particular, the teachers were trying to learn about the various policies and mandates that shaped their teaching. Grossman, Thompson, et al. (2001) had similar results when they found that beginning teachers could not pay attention to everything and that because of the high stakes and foreboding presence of policies and mandates, beginning teachers often put their energy into understanding and working within these policies.

Realizing that the relationships between the various aspects of teaching context are the potential problem spots helps us think about how teacher preparation might support beginning teachers as they learn to teach writing. Implications from this study are primarily for a teacher education audience and center on providing teacher candidates with information about and discussions and examples of managing teaching context prior to their first solo teaching job.

Conceptualizing Writing as Subject Matter and Writing Pedagogy

First, learning to teach writing is not easy; beginning teachers struggle with understanding the conceptual frameworks and the pedagogy of teaching writing. All three teachers relied on trial and error to help improve their writing instruction. Teacher preparation has traditionally emphasized teaching reading as opposed to teaching writing, thus, suggesting to beginning teachers that teaching writing is not important. Furthermore, when the topic of teaching writing is covered, it is often presented in a writing workshop model (International Reading Association, 2003), with no attention paid to rhetorical, problem solving, or other composition theories. Recent programs such as Scholastic's *Six Plus One*

Traits of Writing (Culham, 2003) or Santa's RAFT technique (Saskatoon Public School Division, n.d.) might provide beginning teachers with additional ways to think about and organize writing instruction.

Courses designed to address the writing process, look at various approaches to teaching writing, and investigate how teachers make decisions to teach writing and how they improve practice would address some of the issues raised by this study. Using case studies, in traditional text form or in many of the new hypermedia formats (Rosaen, Degnan, VanStratt, & Zietlow, 2004; Rosaen, Johnson, Koehler, & Ruggerio, 2004), would support teacher candidates in understanding the complexities of a classroom context. In addition, courses might want to focus on standardized forms of writing, high-stakes assessments of writing, and the use of rubrics for assessment of writing. Helping teacher candidates to understand the various purposes and goals of writing in elementary classrooms might make them more aware of the choices they will face when asked to teach writing and can help them build stronger conceptual understandings of what it means to teach writing to young children.

Although it is likely that most of these kinds of courses would occur with teacher education departments, making cross-university connections by working with English and composition faculty would also support teachers in thinking about writing in terms of decision making and would support the growth and development of teachers' knowledge about writing. When teacher candidates engage as writers in classes in the arts and sciences, they experience writing in different ways and learn about writing as a way to learn subject matter. A teacher who is part of a community of writers can become a more effective writing teacher because he or she comes to understand the problems facing writers (Fletcher, 1993; Hillocks, 1991; Romano, 1995). These kinds of experiences can also work to support the development of a strong conceptual understanding of writing in beginning teachers. Finally, these experiences can help them reflect on their own experiences as elementary school writers and as future teachers of writing.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Villegas and Lucas (2002) suggested that teacher preparation programs make diversity central to their mission, recruit and retain students and faculty of color, work with the arts and sciences within their institutions, invest in faculty development work, and collaborate with teachers, schools, and districts that are culturally responsive. If we consider the example of Aileen's tension regarding the use of Standard English and her students' use of BVE, we can imagine how working with Ladson-Billings's (1995, 2001) notion of culturally responsive pedagogy might have helped her recognize and think about that tension in more sophisticated ways. This study suggests that more is needed to prepare beginning teachers to enact culturally responsive pedagogies.

Learning About Policy

For Bethany and Celina, the tensions that existed because of the current policy environment were highly instrumental in their instructional decisions and ultimately shaping their evolving practice. The lack of policy environmental constraints for Aileen was just as noticeable, in that it created a freedom of sorts for her, and this obviously influenced the decisions she was able to make. In the study of beginning teachers mentioned earlier, Grossman, Thompson, et al. (2001) found that "directly and indirectly, district policies teach beginning teachers what to worry about and how to get help" (p. 2). My research confirms that beginning teachers do not know how to work with policy mandates and suggests that they should be taught about policy prior to their first teaching job. Bethany and Celina felt overwhelmed at times by the policy mandates in their schools, even going so far as to claim ignorance of the role that the No Child Left Behind Act played in their schools. Examining various policies at federal, state, and district levels could more adequately prepare teacher candidates for understanding and managing the policy environment they will eventually find themselves in. Teacher preparation courses might increase awareness of

policy by addressing how these various levels of policy work together and how they create tensions for the teachers who are affected by them. Helping teacher candidates examine the decisions made by experienced teachers through the use of case materials would help them think about actions such as managing, navigating, juggling, and finessing. Beginning teachers, like Bethany, who are confronted with a number of conflicting and constraining policies and who have no prior experience with navigating them are likely to give in and consequently, the policy "functions as a curriculum for teacher learning, helping to shape what and how beginning teachers learn about teaching" (Grossman, Thompson, et al., 2001, p. 2).

Although all settings have unique and complex contexts, the tensions that existed in the study's setting seem particularly tied to urban contexts. Many urban schools are considered failing based on annual yearly progress and have been awarded Reading First grants. Urban schools traditionally have fewer financial resources, less technology, and fewer course offerings for their students (Anyon, 1997; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Mirel, 1999). Urban schools often have unstable student populations, thus, leading to teacher changes well into and across the year (as happened with both Bethany and Aileen). Therefore, it seems clear that helping beginning teachers learn about the various aspects of urban, suburban, rural, and private schools would initiate both internal and school-based conversations about the role of the school context in learning to teach.

Managing and Finessing Teaching Context

Finally, teacher education courses could introduce the idea of teaching context to students and help them to understand that teaching is more than knowing about children, content, and methods. Teacher candidates are often quite naïve about what it means to teach, and as beginning teachers, they often learn about things because they are forced to (e.g., the school's expectation that Bethany would teach in ways that would improve test scores). This is

not something that methods courses regularly address. Grossman, Valencia, et al. (2001), in their study discussed earlier, suggested that "teacher education could play more of a role in identifying predictable dilemmas in the teaching of writing . . . [to help] preservice teachers negotiate responses to those dilemmas" (p. 97). At the very least, introducing the notion of teaching context and presenting teaching as a decision-making process that involves managing, navigating, and finessing one's teaching context would be a small step in this direction. If the multilayeredness and interconnectedness of teaching context, teacher knowledge, and pedagogical decision making were more explicit and evident to beginning teachers, they might enter their first solo classroom with more accurate expectations for what they would confront.

CONCLUSION

This research suggests that the role of teaching context influences pedagogical decisions and that teaching context should, at the very least, be considered among the kinds of knowledge needed for beginning teachers. It also suggests the need for more work in this area to understand more fully the role of teaching context in learning to teach writing. It is likely that teachers' knowledge development can be understood only in terms of understanding individual teaching context and through further exploration of the experiences of beginning teachers. What beginning teachers need to know must include a focus on the multiple, overlapping, and often tenuous contexts within which learning to teach occurs.

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