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Abstract

This action research study investigated the effects of writing for an authentic audience on the achievement and engagement of students in a school in Southern California. The participants were 79 8th graders, split into an experimental group of 40 that wrote a review with the opportunity to be published in The New York Times, and a control group of 39 students that wrote a review for the teacher to read and grade.

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Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

Writing for an Authentic Audience in the Middle Grades

By

Emily Huffman

B.A. Dordt College, 2010

Action Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
Dordt University
Sioux Center, Iowa
May 2021

Acknowledgements

Recently my students asked me if I always wanted to be a teacher, to which I responded with a question of my own: “Well, that depends. Does everyone play school with their stuffed animals when they’re little?” We laughed, but I also shared with them how my own teachers played an integral role in where I am today. I specifically want to thank Mr. Ron Halma, Mr. Morris Blankespoor, Drs. Dave and Jeri Schelhaas, Dr. Leah Zuidema, and Dr. Pat Kornelis for their wisdom, support, and encouragement over the years. I will be forever grateful. I also want to thank my students and the hard work they put into writing their reviews. Although no reviews were published in *The New York Times*, their passion and dedication was inspiring. Finally, thank you to my husband, Brady, for his love and support.

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Abstract

This action research study investigated the effects of writing for an authentic audience on the achievement and engagement of students in a school in Southern California. The participants were 79 8th graders, split into an experimental group of 40 that wrote a review with the opportunity to be published in *The New York Times*, and a control group of 39 students that wrote a review for the teacher to read and grade.

“The middle grades are where we need to begin to plant the idea that school is connected to each student’s future.”

— Gene Bottoms, Senior Vice President, Southern Regional Education Board

(2011)

According to The Nation’s Report Card (2012), only 24 percent of the 24,100 8th graders tested on the congressionally mandated National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), scored at the Proficient level in writing, and beyond that, only 3 percent reached Advanced. This left the majority—74 percent—of the students at or below Basic in their writing skills. The percentage of 8th grade students testing at or above the Basic level decreased from 88 percent in 2007 to 81 percent in 2011 (Salahu-Din et al., 2008). A decrease in writing scores is not isolated to middle school writers. The NAEP detected a decrease in 12th grade as well, with 82 percent scoring at or above Basic in 2007 with a decrease to 79 percent in 2011 (Salahu-Din et al., 2008). The most recent national writing assessment is still under review, but preliminary findings are showing lower writing performances in 2017 compared with 2011 (“Technical,” 2019).

This trend is worrying given that nearly all jobs require proficient skills in writing. Employers are often shocked by new employees’ lack of writing skills, and some have approached business schools and social work classes, asking them to increase their writing focus (Haberstroh, 1994; Quible & Griffin, 2007, as cited by Coyle, 2010.) Coyle (2010) emphasized this point by concentrating on the students and how poor writing skills might affect their futures: “Their chances of successful transition to post graduation careers increase when courses identify written documents and writing styles used in their discipline along with the inclusion of writing skills in course learning modules” (p. 199).

This is what educators want— successful transitions for their students— so educators must recognize that much of the writing assigned in the classroom is quite different than what the workplace requires. Writing in a workplace setting is generally focused on communicating ideas; whereas, writing in a classroom is focused on proving competence (Beaufort, 1998, as cited by Coyle, 2010). To best prepare their students for the transition into the workplace, educators should create writing assignments that are meant to communicate ideas with an authentic audience, while simultaneously checking for competence.

Although writing in the workplace might seem a distant dream for middle school students, it is an important time in a student’s education to start this writing emphasis. While some may see motivation declining at this developmental stage, Armstrong (2006) noted that when middle school students are engaged in the “real world” educational experiences, their “burgeoning energies of adolescence” will not just stabilize, but enhance, what many think is dwindling motivation.

In their new mission for the middle school grades, Spence (2011) reiterated why writing is very necessary in middle school:

If we do not cultivate confident, willing learners in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades and give them a rock-solid foundation of skills and knowledge, hundreds of thousands of young people will go on to falter in high school, college and careers... (p. i)

If educators begin to create writing assignments that give students a chance to reach an authentic audience, then it should increase student achievement and positive student perceptions. An increase in student achievement and engagement should be attainable as research continues to show that “for students, language learning occurs best when the learning context matches the real functional context” (Duke et al., 2006, p. 345)

Previous research on student perceptions of authentic audiences for writing assignments has varied. A study by Kaldor and Flacks (2014) reported that 64 percent of students surveyed agreed that their writing improved when writing for an authentic audience, and 68 percent agreed that they cared more about their writing (p. 182). Weider (2012) offered similar insights on student perceptions regarding writing for an authentic audience, sharing that when students were writing for an audience beyond the teacher, they did not need to be reminded to stay on task during the class period because all students were engaged (p. 105).

There are fewer research findings regarding student achievement in relation to an authentic audience. Schwieter (2010) studied the growth of second language writers in essays that were published in a professional magazine and scaffolded in a way that was developmentally appropriate. He found continued growth between each of the four essays produced over time (p. 40). Another study by Behizadeh (2019) reported that student achievement appeared to go up when the 8th graders she observed were writing for an authentic audience. Unfortunately, this was not elaborated upon, begging for more research in this field of study (p. 416).

Purpose of the Study

Given the need for an improvement in student writing, the purpose of this study is to determine if student achievement and engagement increases when there is an authentic audience for student writing assignments.

Research Questions

1. Does student achievement increase when there is an authentic audience?
2. What are students' perceptions regarding engagement and effort as it relates to the type of writing assignment?

Definitions

The following definitions are meant to give further insight into this study. Definitions are the author's own unless otherwise stated.

Authentic audience: Someone who reads student writing for the communicative purpose, not to evaluate. (Duke, et al., 2006, p. 346)

Authentic writing assignment: Classroom assignment that mirrors writing outside of the classroom. (Duke, et al., 2006, p. 346)

Advanced Level: "Represents superior performance" ("The Nation's," 2012, p. 7).

Proficient Level: "Represents solid academic performance. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter" ("The Nation's," 2012, p. 7).

Basic Level: "Denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade" ("The Nation's," 2012, p. 7).

Off-Campus Learning Instruction (OCLI): During COVID, parents had the option to enroll their student in OCLI with a special instructor that worked closely with each teacher to make sure the student was receiving the necessary attention while the other students were learning on campus.

Literature Review

Over the past 20 years, the nation's report card has recorded a decline in students' writing. Although the National Center for Education has yet to release the full report for the most recent 2017 writing assessment, the preliminary findings indicate lower writing performances in 2017 compared with writing performances in 2011 ("Technical," 2019). In 2011, 74 percent of the 24,100 8th grade students tested were at or below Basic in their writing, and 24 percent met the Proficient level in writing. This leaves only 3 percent scoring as Advanced ("The Nation's,"

2012). The drop continued from 2007, where at that time, 88 percent of students were at or above the Basic level but decreased to 81 percent in 2011 (Salahu-Di et al., 2008), a worrying trend.

Similar worries may also stem from the 2020 high school graduates' SAT writing and language scores, with an average of 26 out of a 10-40 score range. This average was the same reported in 2017, showing no improvement in writing. ("SAT," 2020). On the essay section of the SAT, the student average score was a 5 out of 8 for Reading, 3 out of 8 for Analysis, and 5 out of 8 for Writing. The Analysis average score decreased from a 4 out of 8 in 2017 ("SAT," 2020).

The implications of poor writing skills reach far beyond a grade in class; they impact students' future job success. In the National Association of Colleges and Employers' 2018 Job Outlook Survey, only 41.6 percent of the 201 employers surveyed rated recent graduates competent in written and oral communications, while nearly 80 percent of graduates considered themselves proficient in their communication skills (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). The American Association of Colleges and Universities expanded on the idea that employers do not feel college graduates are prepared for the work force: "This is particularly the case for applying knowledge and skills in real-world settings, critical thinking skills, and written and oral communication skills..." (Bauer-Wolf, 2018, para. 20). If educators are to prepare their students to become productive members of society, they must continue to adjust writing pedagogy as needed to best assist their students.

Writing instruction has shifted over time with the pendulum swinging between a product focus to a process focus. In 1963, NCTE commissioned a study now known as "The Braddock Report," which found that teachers had little understanding of how to best teach writing (Smith, 2000, p. 2) Writing instruction was narrowed down to proving competency in handwriting,

spelling, and mechanics. Student work had an audience of one—the teacher—and their work was often filling in the blanks for grammar work on independent sentences. This product-centered instruction mindset began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s when the five-step writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) was introduced (Lucas, 1993; Smith, 2000, p. 2). Yet this process will not improve student achievement if the students are not engaged.

Lenhart et al. (2008), reported that 93 percent of teens write outside of school for pleasure (p. 10). And while 98 percent of students believe that writing is “somewhat important for their future success,” and 56 percent view writing as “essential” (Lenhart et al., 2008 p.42), writing done in the classroom for only the teacher to read can seem pointless.

Students’ creativity and passion is often pushed to the side when writing for school. Pitler (2016) told the story of a 7th grade student who rarely turned in her English writing assignments, or when she did, they met only the basic requirements. Meanwhile, she was posting stories online. “When I write online, I know that people from all over are going to read my stuff. They will tell me what they like and give me suggestions to make my stories better....When I write in class, I do what I need to do to get a grade, and I am done with it” (Pitler, 2016, para. 6).

Similarly, Spanke and Paul (2015) shared the story of sixteen-year-old Derek who performed original poetry at the local coffee shop and had drafts of play scripts on his computer, but often sat in detention for plagiarizing class essays. His idea that “there were simply two types of writing: writing for school and writing that mattered” (Spanke & Paul, 2015) reverberates in the minds of many students today.

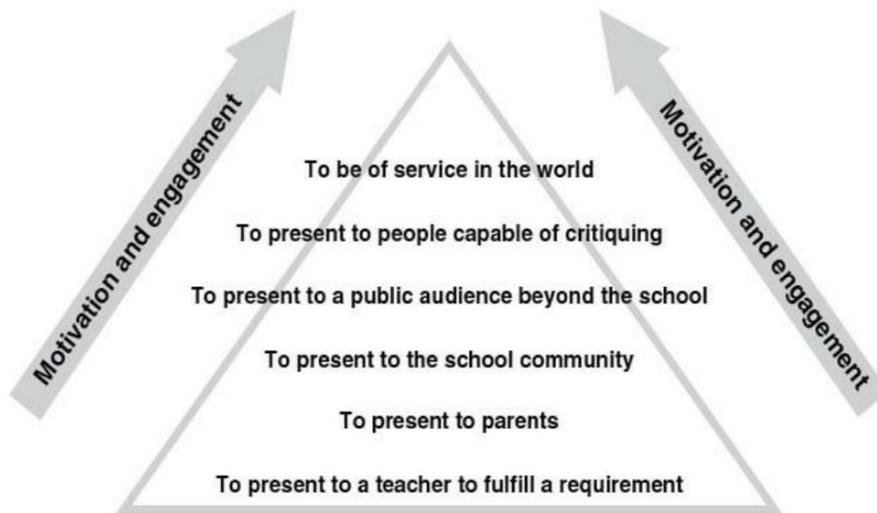
This “writing that matters” may be classified as authentic writing. Duke et al. (2006) explained, “We conceptualize authentic literacy activities in the classroom as those that replicate

or reflect reading and writing activities that occur in the lives of people outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose” (p. 346). To truly be authentic, writing must filter into classes other than English, and students should have opportunities to be immersed in the community. This might look like field research in a science class, time spent with the elderly in the community to learn and write about the city’s history, or online blog communities where students get instant feedback from those with similar interests (Kiefer & Leff, 2008). The hope is that authentic audiences will ignite the students’ passions and trigger more care in their writing, and that online collaboration and publishing sites will open up more opportunities. (Weider, 2012).

Berger et al.’s (2014) Hierarchy of Audience supports this idea (See Figure 1). They emphasized that as the importance of the community grows, so does student motivation and engagement. The first level of the hierarchy is when a student writes for the teacher to fulfill a requirement. This level is followed by writing for parents, for community, for a public audience beyond the school, for people capable of critiquing, and finally for the audience with the most influence on student motivation and engagement: writing to be of service in the world (Berger, et al., 2014, p. 216).

Figure 1

Hierarchy of Audience.



Reprinted from *Leaders of Their Own Learning* (p. 216) by Berger et al., 2016.

While there is much research to support writing for an authentic audience, most is focused on student perceptions of engagement, with fewer results on the effect it has on student achievement. However, studies performed by Schwieter (2010) and Behizadeh (2019) reported that student achievement does increase when writing for an authentic audience. Schwieter (2010) studied second-language writers and their growth in writing with appropriate scaffolding and an authentic audience as the student essays were published in a magazine. He found that with each piece of writing submitted over the course of the semester, student achievement increased (p. 38). Behizadeh (2019) studied 8th grade students and also observed that student achievement appeared to increase when writing for an authentic audience (p. 416).

Research indicates positive student perceptions regarding authentic audiences increase as well. Weidner (2013) gathered qualitative data about her students' perceptions on writing for an authentic audience through observations and interviews, finding that students were more focused in class and were told to stay on task fewer times. Interview comments included, "I want to write for others to read. It gives me a purpose for writing and makes me want to write well" and "I think by writing for others to read it does make you want to improve more and be more concise and credible" (Weidner, 2013, p. 104). Writing for an authentic audience "engaged students in their writing at a higher level, they cared more about their work, and were more willing to spend additional time editing and revising..." (Weidner, 2013, p. 122).

Conner and Moulton (2000) reported, "Knowing they were to be published did motivate students to make more effort with revision, editing, and presentation, most especially after the first working copy of the text had been produced" (p. 78). Behizadeh (2019) also supported this finding: "Observational data consistently demonstrated high student engagement. Thus, attending to student-generated factors for authenticity appeared to increase student achievement and engagement" (p. 416).

There are many best practice teaching writing strategies, but it is clear that students deserve the opportunity to show people beyond their teachers the work they create. Authentic audiences for the students' writing give them an opportunity to interact with real people and students can better see the purpose of their writing (Burns, 2016). Zemelman et al. (2012) emphasized that students must have a real audience to reach and a real purpose to write.

Arbitrarily assigned topics with no opportunity for choice deprive students of practice in a most crucial step of writing— making the first decision about what to write. Publication of writing is vital for fulfilling these purposes: making bound

books, cataloging student works in the school library, and displaying products in classrooms, school hallways, local libraries, neighborhood stores, and local dentists' waiting rooms. When the teacher is the only audience, students are robbed of the rich and diverse audience responses that build a writer's skills and motivation. (p. 140)

Once students are engaged in their writing, then teacher can work on grammar and mechanics in the context of the student's own writing.

Marculitis (2017) took this best practice idea further, stressing the importance of writing beyond the classroom as professionals, not just students. "In our country, we are expected to write for a variety of purposes, regardless of our economic or social position....Writing is more than just a communication tool; it is also used to persuade, encourage, change, demand, inform, and entertain the world" (Marculitis, 2017, p. 9). Hochman & Wexler (2017) supported this fact: "No matter what path students choose in life, the ability to communicate their thoughts in writing in a way that others can easily understand is crucial (Hochman & Wexler, 2017).

While the Common Core Standards don't include the phrase "authentic audience" under the writing standards, the CCS does say that in 8th grade students should "produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience," and they also say students should "use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others." In the United States today, educators recognize that students need to write for a variety of real-life purposes, making flexibility and adaptability a key goal when teaching writing, (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 22)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) supports the idea of writing for a variety of authentic purposes in three of their twelve ELA standards. Standard Four says, “Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes,” while Standard Five states, “Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.” Both standards mention a variety of different audiences for student writing. And finally, Standard Eleven of the NCTE expresses, “Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.” That word “community” is important as it moves beyond student-teacher to student-community (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 1996).

However, while building this writing community, teachers must recognize the vulnerability of their middle school students. Armstrong (2006) explained “there are dramatic changes that occur during this time of life requiring a radically different and unique approach to education” (Armstrong, 2006). He continued to list developmentally-appropriate middle school teaching practices, including, but not limited to, safe school climates, small learning communities, personal adult relationships, engaged learning, positive role models, and honoring student voices. Honoring student voices requires middle schools teachers to be diligent in assigning purposeful writing that allows students to discover their writing voice. “This may be the most important thing that educators at the middle school level can do for their students: help them find their own true voice.” (Armstrong, 2006, para. 39). Jansen and Kiefer (2020) expressed that middle school teachers must make sure their students receive the tools needed to succeed beyond the classroom. “As a period of opportunity to shape cognitive and social-

emotional development and to influence social and academic outcomes, adolescence is due for rebranding” ((Dahl et al., 2018, as cited by Jansen & Kiefer, 2020, para. 3). At this tender age, teachers must give students the opportunity to find their voice and share it with an authentic audience. Conner and Moulton’s (2000) publish projects revealed this understanding:

I believe it's important for eighth graders to publish because they are so immensely concerned with image and impressing others. They wanted the sixth graders to be amazed by how much their own writing would mature by the time they reached eighth grade. In turn, the sixth-grade teachers said that their students really were impressed by the older students' more mature writing skills.

Unfortunately, the eighth graders were less able to accept criticism magnanimously; they loved getting back the sixth graders' comments when they were positive but discounted almost all of the negative comments by saying that the sixth graders didn't know what they were talking about. (p. 78)

Giving students an authentic audience for their writing should increase their engagement, which over time should increase their skills. “Once you go beyond the classroom, you open up writing considerably. Artificial audiences restrict writing in a classroom setting. Real world writing allows students to do real, substantial kinds of thinking” (Hampton, as cited by Lucas, 1993, para. 62). Thomas (2011) agreed: “One of the surest ways to motivate students to not only write, but to write with passion, purpose and power, is to make sure they have an authentic audience” (Thomas, 2011, para. 1).

In summary, research conducted thus far suggests that giving students an authentic writing assignment and audience increases student achievement, and that student perceptions regarding their engagement and effort are more positive as well. Given the weak writing skills

indicated by the national report card and SAT writing scores, it is imperative that educators consider all best practice options when teacher writing, including the need for an authentic audience.

Methodology

Methods

This quasi-experimental study compared student achievement and perceived engagement between 8th grade classes: the experimental group who wrote with an authentic audience in mind and the control group who wrote for the teacher to read and grade. Growth was determined through data collected from student scores and survey responses.

Participants

The research participants in this study included 79 8th grade students, 47 males and 32 females, in a private Southern California school during the 20-21 school year. All students were from similar socio-economic backgrounds of middle-upper class, with about 9 percent of the class representing a minority population. The experimental group that wrote for an authentic audience had 25 males and 15 females. Out of these 40 students, three had Individualized Learning Plans (IEP), two had a 504, five were enrolled in the afterschool intervention program for extra time dedicated to schoolwork, and three were enrolled in the Off-Campus Learning Instruction (OCLI) program. The control group had 22 males and 17 females. Out of these 39 students, two had an IEP, one had a 504, four were in the intervention program, and one student was a part of OCLI. All students, except those enrolled in OCLI, spent two and a half days each week on campus and two and a half days each week distance learning.

Materials

Both the experimental and control groups used the Creative Expression review assignment from *The New York Times*' "The Learning Network." The Learning Network provided guidelines, student examples, and lesson resources, which the teacher adjusted to fit her students' needs and writing abilities. The teacher altered the rubric from "The Learning Network" as needed to work in the classroom (See Appendix A). At the end of the unit, each student completed a Google Form survey that was created to collect quantitative data about students' perceptions regarding engagement and interest during this unit. Out of the 12 survey questions, five asked the students to rate particulars of the assignment and their work, while the remaining seven questions asked students to elaborate. The survey concluded with an opportunity to expand on whether or not they were proud of their final submission and who they hoped would read their work. (See Appendix B).

Two copies of the survey were created: one was distributed to the experimental group, and the other to the control group. The teacher piloted this survey the month before, in December 2020, for a literature review assignment. In the survey's first draft, the students were not required to elaborate on their rankings in questions one, three, five, seven, and nine. The teacher adjusted this question to make sure all students thought more deeply about the survey's questions.

Research Design

This quasi-experimental study measured the writing achievement scores of students who wrote a review that was to *The New York Times* contest, with the possibility to be published, and compared them to the writing achievement schools of students who wrote a review for a class assignment to be read and graded by the teacher. The teacher used the same rubric to assess all four classes. The experimental and control groups were assigned based on the current

configuration of English classes. The researcher set up two English classes with a total of 40 students as the experimental group, and two other English classes with a total of 39 students were used as the control group. The independent variable was the authentic audience. The dependent variable was the final scores on the students' reviews.

Procedure

To conduct the study, the teacher guided the four 8th grade classes through *The New York Times*' "The Learning Network" Creative Expression Review student contest with the guidelines and resources available, while adjusting the lesson plans as needed. All classes received the same instruction, but the experimental group wrote knowing they had prospective publication in *The New York Times*, while the control group wrote knowing they were only writing for the teacher and not for *The New York Times*. The teacher shared the rubric in advance, offered strong student reviews as examples, and provided written and verbal feedback to each student during the three-week writing process. During the last week, after the students revised and submitted their final product, they completed a survey regarding their perceptions on engagement and effort.

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of writing for an authentic audience on student achievement and engagement. To answer this question, the teacher assigned all 8th grade students a Creative Expression Review writing assignment, but the first and second English period classes were the experimental group and wrote with the opportunity to be published in *The New York Times*, while fourth and fifth period functioned as the control group and wrote for the teacher to read and grade. After the writing was complete, all groups filled out a survey about overall engagement (See Appendix B).

Findings

After three weeks of working through the writing process, the teacher graded and submitted the experimental group’s writing to *The New York Times*’ contest and graded the control group’s writing. Both groups were graded using the same rubric that was provided by *The New York Times*’ Learning Network and adjusted slightly to fit the classrooms’ needs (see Appendix A). Results showed there was no significant difference in scores for the experimental group (M=86.6) and the control group (M=87.1) (See Table 1). However, a closer examination of the rubrics indicated some differences between the experimental and control groups’ specific scorings, most notably in the Guidelines category. 30 students in the experimental group scored 4/4 in the guidelines category, while only 16 students in the control group scored 4/4 in the same category. Many students in the control group paid little heed to what they may have viewed as the smaller details: the maximum word count, spacing, and the title requirement. The other categories showed little variation in the final scoring.

Table 1

Overall Results Comparing Achievement of Students Writing for an Authentic Audience to Students Writing for the Teacher.

Students	N	Mean	SD
Authentic Audience	40	86.6	9.37
Teacher	39	87.1	

Effort Given to the Writing Assignment

In terms of engagement, the survey did show some variance between the experimental and control groups. When asked how much effort they put into this Creative Expression Review,

77.5 percent of the experimental group ranked their effort above “a usual amount of effort” compared to 64.1 percent of the control group said the same (See Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2

Experimental Group Results

How much effort did you put into your Creative Expressions Review?

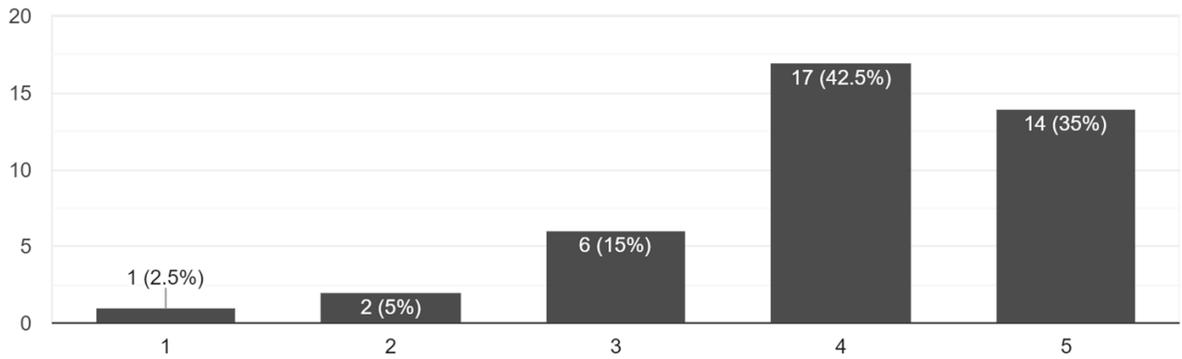
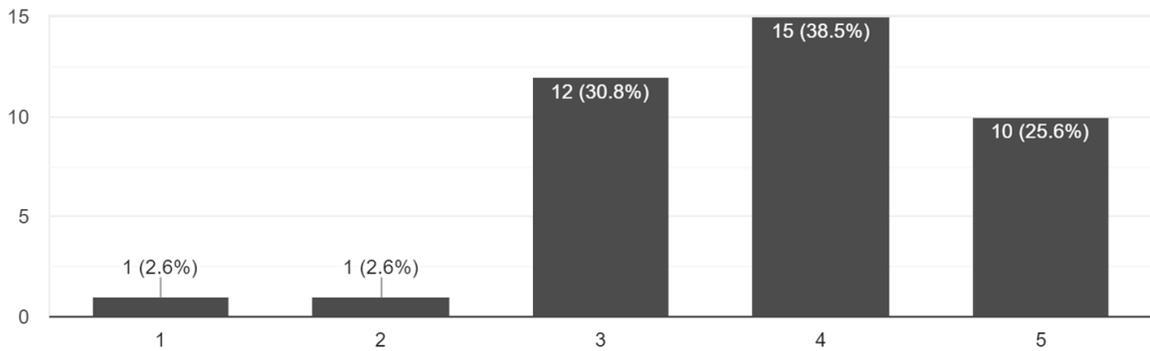


Figure 3

Control Group Results

How much effort did you put into your Creative Expressions Review?



When given a chance to expand on why they gave more or less effort, 30 percent of the experimental group specifically mentioned the authentic audience as the reason they gave more

effort. Student comments included, “When I learned that this review was going to be submitted to *The New York Times* and that it might get posted on their website or at least looked over by the NYT, I tried to make it as perfect as possible simply because if I'm sharing something I've written or worked on... I want it to be 100% perfect, especially if someone in a higher place than me is going to hear it” and “I put in more effort in to this review because it is going to be turned into New York Times” and “I put lots of effort because if I even make it top 10 that would be cool and it would be nice to get your name out there and be known as a good writer.” No student in the control group mentioned audience as a reason they put in more effort.

The same percentage of students in the experimental group, 30 percent, explained they gave more effort because of the topic. One student said, “I put more effort into my review because it was on a topic I was excited to write about and give my personal opinion,” while another stated, “I put a lot of effort into doing this because I like playing Call of Duty and I had fun doing the review.” Similarly, 33.3 percent of students in the control group specifically mentioned choice as a reason they gave more effort. Comments included, “I really liked this movie so I wanted to write a good review. I focused a lot on word choice” and “I tried to explain enough without giving spoilers. I want to make people excited to watch what I am writing about...”

Grades were a motivator for 15 percent of students in both groups. In the experimental group, one student shared, “I'm going to be honest, I just did this because it was an assignment,” and another said, “I put effort into this review because I need to up my grade.” Some students in the control group had similar comments as well: “I wanted to do a good job on it because I want to keep my grade up for this quarter” and “In any assignment but especially this one I want to get a good grade on it so I should put in as much effort as possible.”

The remaining 25 percent of students in the experimental group shared they didn't give any more effort than they usually do, with comments like, "I put the same amount as normal" and "I put the same amount as normal, which is a lot." The majority of students in the control group—51.3 percent—also said they gave the same amount of effort they usually put in assignments. One student simply shared, "You should always try your best." These responses suggest that writing for an authentic audience had little impact on the amount of effort given to the assignment.

Reaction to the Writing Assignment

When asked about their reaction to this review writing assignment, 50 percent of those in the experimental group leaned toward "very excited" compared to a lower 41 percent of the control group that leaned toward "very excited" (See Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4

Experimental Group Results

What was your reaction to this writing assignment?

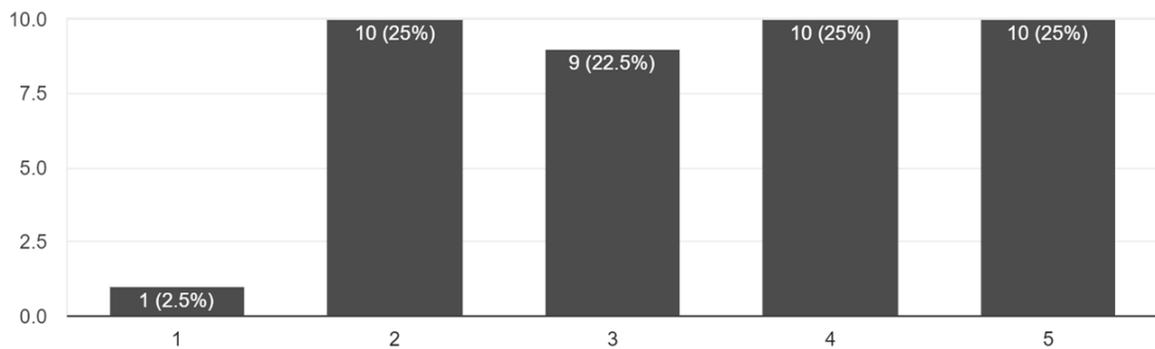
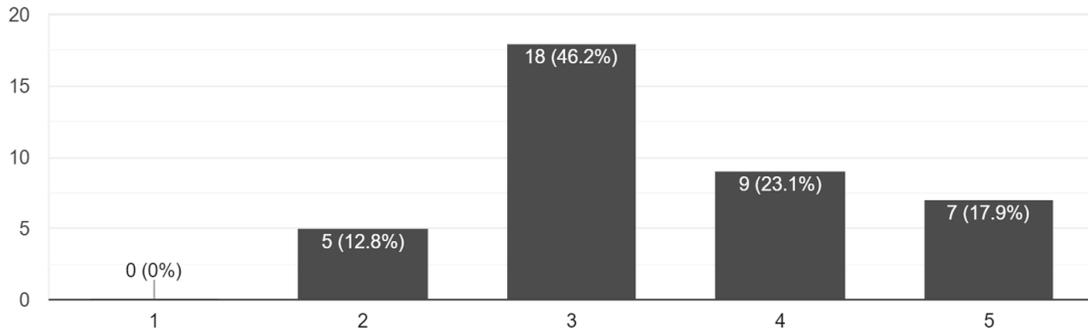


Figure 5

Control Group Results

What was your reaction to this writing assignment?



Out of the 50 percent in the experimental group that leaned to “very excited,” 65 percent were excited because of the writing topic, while 20 percent of them loved to write, and the final 15 percent of the excited reacted this way because they were writing for an authentic audience. The authentic audience was brought up on the “unexcited” end of the spectrum as well. One student expressed that the pressure of the authentic audience made her nervous and another shared, “I know that I’m not that good of a writer, (and don’t really aspire to be) and I know that my chances of being selected are very, very slim.”

In the control group, 87.5 percent of the 41 percent that was excited explained they were happy about the writing topic. One student shared, “I love Minecraft and I was very excited to research how everything got started,” and another shared, “As soon as she said a review, I knew I wanted to do *Revenge of the Sith* so I was stoked.” These results suggest that writing for an authentic audience had a minimal impact on the excitement for the writing assignment.

Focus During Class

When asked about their focus during class time given to this writing assignment, 67.5 percent of the experimental group leaned toward “very focused,” while only 48.7 percent of the control group leaned toward “very focused” (See Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6

Experimental Group Results

How focused were you during class time?

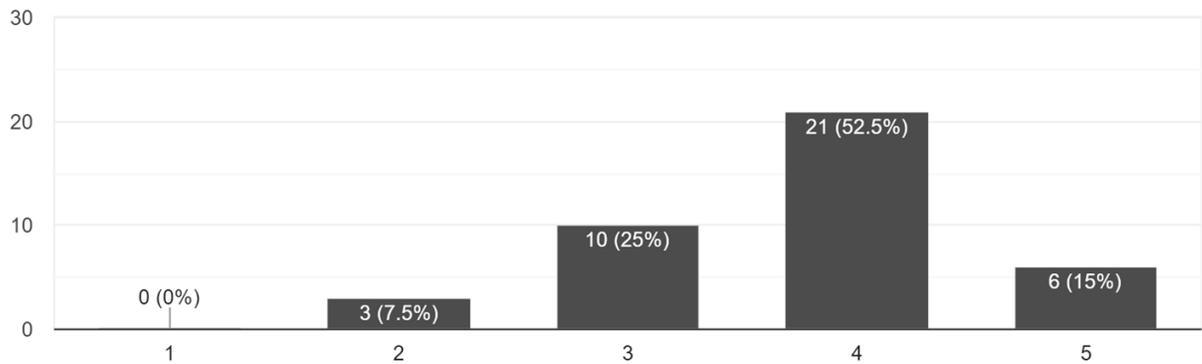
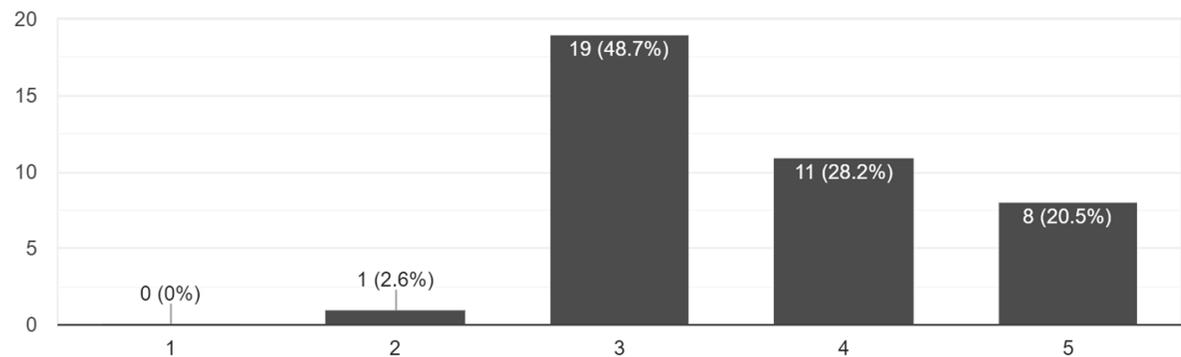


Figure 7

Control Group Results

How focused were you during class time?



No students in the experimental group said writing for an authentic audience was the reason they stayed focused, instead out of the 27 students who said they were very focused,

81.5 percent equated their focus in class to not wanting to have homework and about 22 percent of those students specifically mentioned wanting a good grade.

In the control group, out of the 19 students who said that were very focused, 73.7 percent were focused so they did not have homework with about 43 percent mentioning their grade as a factor. It is necessary to note that half of the class times dedicated to this assignment were conducted over Zoom. Students in both the experimental and control groups mentioned that as a factor on their lack of focus. One in the experimental group shared his focus was limited because “I was staring at a screen all day,” and one in the control group said, “I doze off in class a lot when we’re on Zoom.” Even with that in mind, these results still suggest that writing for an authentic audience had no impact on students’ focus during class.

Thoughts on Their Final Submissions

After they submitted their final draft, students shared whether they were proud of the review they wrote or not. In the experimental group, 75 percent of students were proud of what they submitted, 17.5 percent were somewhat proud and 7.5 percent were not proud. In the control group, 71.8 were proud, 23.1 were somewhat proud and 5.1 percent were not proud (See Figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8

Experimental Group Results

Are you proud of the review you wrote?

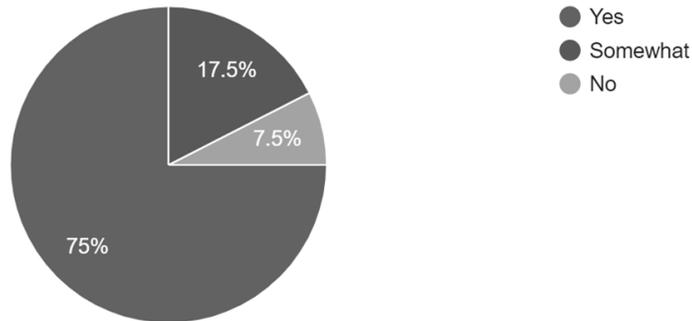
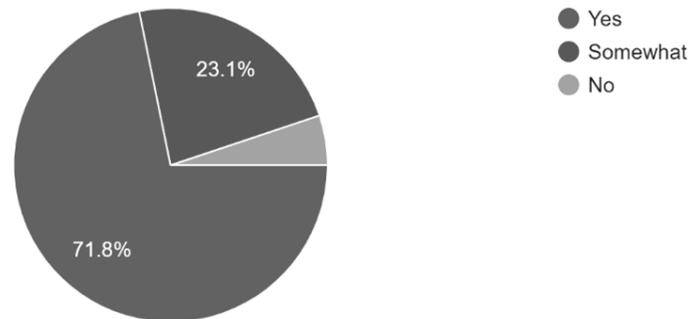


Figure 9

Control Group Results

Are you proud of the review you wrote?



The pressure of *The New York Times* may have inspired some, but it may have also intimidated others, as one student shared, “Overall, I am proud of my review because I think that this is one of my best pieces of writing, but I do not believe it is ‘*New York Times* worthy.’”

Discussion

Overview of the Study

If students desire to be active and successful members of society, writing proficiency would be beneficial. When learning the writing basics, students have different intrinsic or extrinsic motivators. The purpose of this study was to determine if student achievement and engagement increases with the extrinsic motivator of an authentic audience for a writing assignment. Previous research had little information on how writing for an authentic audience affected students' academic achievement, but there were studies that suggested writing for an authentic audience had a significant impact on student engagement (Behizadeh, 2019; Conner & Moulton, 2000; Weidner, 2013). Because writing for an authentic audience has been shown to be an effective way to engage students, it was worthy of this study's investigation.

Summary of Findings

The results of the experimental and control groups' scores shown in Figure 2 indicated that writing for an authentic audience had no significant impact on student achievement. The survey results also indicated, as shown in Figures 2-9, that writing for an authentic audience had little to no impact on student engagement. Only 30 percent of students mentioned the authentic audience as the reason they were more engaged, while 45 percent cited topic choice and grades as their motivator, and 25 percent claimed to give no more effort than usual.

The writing topic, however, did also have a positive impact on student engagement. 30 percent of the experimental group expressed increased engagement due to the topic choice, and 33.3 percent of the control group conveyed excitement because of the topic choice as well.

Recommendations

Based on the results, the researcher recommends continuing to find authentic audiences for students' writing assignments. Although the results of this specific study may not have shown a large impact on the overall achievement or engagement, it certainly had a significant impact on some students, as well as some of the details that may have otherwise been overlooked.

A previous study completed by Weidner (2012) showed high levels of student engagement when writing for an authentic audience at the high school level, which she documented through interviews, surveys, and detailed observation protocols. Previous studies, one by Behizadeh (2019) and another by Conner and Moulton (2000), focused on middle schoolers and their engagement when writing for a specific audience. Both studies reported that students were engaged, but the data retrieval methods were a little more relaxed, simply based on the teachers' general observations. While all three studies offered some insight on student engagement through observations, research by Behizadeh (2019) and Conner and Moulton (2000) may have uncovered more student perceptions with the use of interviews and surveys.

Another recommendation would be professional development on writing for an authentic audience for all teachers. Writing across the curriculum is an important first step, but it would be even more beneficial to students if they were engaged in real-world writing in various subjects. "Writing that matters" (Spanke & Paul, 2015) means something different to each student. While some might excel in reviewing the creative arts, other may prefer to prepare an argument to the school board on dress code or write lyrics to a choir song. Writing for an authentic audience should not be limited to English teachers. Teachers can collaborate on interdisciplinary authentic

writing assignments and find new ways to support their students by offering them writing opportunities that may increase their engagement, and in turn, their achievement.

Finally, it would be beneficial for future researchers to design an entire writing curriculum around writing for authentic audiences. Instead of studying a singular study, this researcher recommends a year-long study where a control group only writes for the teacher to read and grade, while an experimental group writes for various authentic audiences. This also creates an opportunity to spend more time studying how the writing topic may also impact engagement, as well as the authentic audience. It may be valuable to find a way to differentiate between students' engagement because of the topic and their engagement because of the audience.

Limitations

Although the researcher took great care to plan and implement this study, there were some factors that may have affected the findings. The first limitation that must be recognized is that data was collected from only one writing assignment. Surveying student engagement for multiple assignments and audiences in the experimental group may have been more telling. In addition, a timeline similar to Schwieter (2010) where students' academic achievement when writing for an authentic audience was measured over a year may have also enhanced this study.

A second factor with possible limitations is grade level. Middle school is a precious, yet precarious, time. Armstrong (2006) said, "Educators need to understand the developmental needs of young adolescents, and in particular, their neurological, social, emotional, and metacognitive growth" (para. 5). Not only are many middle school students preoccupied with social changes as their levels of unsupervised time, input in decision-making increases, and peer world increases, but these students are also dealing with biological changes—a prominent change being the

“development of regions associated with executive functioning, including cognitive control, decision-making, inhibition, and working memory” (Caballero et al., 2016; Juraska & Willing, 2017, as cited by Jansen & Kiefer, 2020, para. 6). It is also important to note that the developmental needs of pre-adolescents varies considerably, as it is often dependent on when puberty occurs (Blakemore, Burnett, & Dahl, 2010, as cited by Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). The developmental needs of pre-adolescents is a lot for them to tackle, let alone asking them to gauge their perceptions of a writing assignment.

Perhaps the biggest limiting factor was due to Covid-19 and the many changes due to the pandemic. First, not all students were on campus consistently, and OCLI students had a different instructor most days. It also meant that students had three 90-minute block periods each day, which may have affected how long they could focus on the assignment. They students were also restricted to their one classroom, so the teacher did not work in the comfort of her own classroom.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Review Rubric

	Advanced (4)	Proficient (3)	Basic (2)	Beginning(1)
Opinion: Review expresses an opinion and supports it with evidence. It communicates your subjective* experience and your reactions (intellectual, emotional) in a clear and engaging way.				
Attention to Detail: Review presents relevant and accurate details from the creative work coherently.				
Audience: Review is written for a broad cross -section of people and takes into account for whom the creative work is intended.				
Language: Review has a strong voice and engages the reader. It uses language style and tone appropriate to its purpose and features correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.				
Guidelines: Review follows all requirements: max word count of 450 words, NYT formatting requirements, acceptable topic to review				

11. Who do you think will read your review?

12. Who do you hope will read your review?