Several months into my exploration of how my fifth grade students' reading was influencing their writing, I conducted a survey. I asked questions like, "Where do you get ideas for your writing?" "Do you ever get ideas from stories you read?" "Have you ever tried to copy a famous author's style?"

More than half of the students commented that they got ideas from reading. Some said ideas came from movies or television, and many were influenced by their friends' ideas.

While students generally agreed that it was okay to get ideas from an author for their writing, I was surprised by several of the responses regarding the question about copying an author's style. To these students, the idea of copying was not acceptable. Simon wrote, "I never cheat." Jack wrote, "That's playgerrism."

I know that in some way I am responsible for those attitudes. Earlier in the school year, I spent several weeks teaching the process of how to write a research paper for social studies. I had emphasized the importance of paraphrasing when taking notes. I told them not to copy.

Simon and Jack had confused copying, a practice I very much discourage, with a practice I encourage: an immersion in the work of accomplished writers that allows students to assimilate the skills, ideas, and creative direction of these authors either consciously or by osmosis.

Since 1994, when I became involved with the Rhode Island Writing Project, I have been researching the reading/writing connection. Even before this involvement, I knew that I could help students understand such features as story elements and writing strategies through illustrating these elements in the work of professional authors. For instance, after explaining the concept of internal conflict during a writing workshop focus lesson, I might select *Ira Sleeps Over*, a picture book by Bernard Waber. In this story, the protagonist is a young boy who is invited to sleep at his friend's house. He struggles with the question of whether or not to bring his teddy bear with him, afraid his friend will laugh if he does, yet afraid to sleep without the bear. For some time, I had used picture books to provide students with effective examples of writing features such as imagery, characterization, and setting.

Now I wanted to look in a more formal way at the link between the reading my students were exposed to and how they write. What effect, I wondered, did the books students were reading and the stories they were experiencing through read-alouds have on their writing? When I began my research, I suspected I would find that students borrowed topics, used particular words, or emulated what I loosely refer to as author style. After looking at the writing more analytically, I was able to see more clearly a host of connections between the authors' works and the subject, tone, genre, diction, and rhetoric of my students' work.

**Subjects**

One read-aloud that had an impact on student writing was *Grandad Bill's Song*, by...
Jane Yolen. In this moving story, Yolen's protagonist mourns the loss of his grandfather as other family members share their memories of the man as they knew him. Dealing with the loss of a loved one as it does, *Grandad Bill's Song* can be a difficult story to read aloud. The last time I read it, I had to ask a student to finish the reading because I was too choked up to continue. Some of my students experienced the same emotional reaction, and we had a lengthy discussion afterwards about why some of us responded the way we had. We talked about death. We talked about how a good book can make you cry sometimes. It was a powerful literary experience for them and for me. When writing workshop commenced, I did not require students to write on the topic of death and loss. Writing workshop for me is about choice, and I know my students appreciate this crucial element of our writing environment. (“This class is like *Choose your Own Adventure*!” Dylan blurted out one day.)

But, without prodding, Anna began “All About My Great Grandpa.” Unlike Yolen’s story, Anna was reporting not a firsthand experience but a secondhand memory of her great-grandfather’s death as it was related by her mother who was ten years old when the man died. When Anna shared that memory, students were moved by her story, and, at the same time, Anna’s friend Sheila opted to write about her grandmother who had passed away the previous year. In both of these cases, writing topics were chosen as a direct result of the students’ exposure to *Grandad Bill’s Song*.

**Tone**

Another book I selected to read aloud was *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka. Scieszka adopts a tone of irreverent humor to parody the genre of the classic fairy tale. Most students love his approach. As I shared this book, I spotted some of the elements of the fairy tale that Scieszka was treating lightly. The book includes stories such as “The Princess and the Bowling Ball” and “The Really Ugly Duckling.” The students had previously heard other Scieszka books including “The Frog Prince Continued” and “The True Story of the Three Little Pigs.”

That week, again without my intervention, two students began writing tales similar in tone to Scieszka’s. Marty started “Chicken Licken Gets Fried,” a humorous account of his title character’s ill-fated trip to Kentucky. Tammy worked on “The Princess and the Porcupine.” I was amused at how the attitude of Scieszka’s work was reflected in Tammy’s writing:

> Once upon a time, there was a stupid prince who was looking for a stupid princess. Now he was not just a person who was called names. He was really stupid. He decided that if he wanted a pure princess who was kind, he had to see if she could feel a porcupine through ten mattresses.

> He found a princess who was kind and loyal, but he needed to do the porcupine test. He found a porcupine, ten mattresses, and told the princess she had to feel the porcupine. Well, that night, the porcupine jumped out from under the mattresses, bit the princess on the butt, and ran away.

> In the morning, the princess said, “Yeah, I felt the porcupine. He bit me.”

> The princess left and the prince lived unhappily ever after.

During peer conferences, a few other students became interested in Marty’s and Tammy’s writing. They asked if they could form a small group and work together. I was beginning to see a pattern that would occur repeatedly as I observed students making connections between reading and writing. The children were being influenced not only by the professional writers they were reading, but also by the writing of their classmates. The short stories that resulted from this venture included “Lucky Ducky and the Four Eggs” “Hippie Locks and The Three Bears,” and “The Melted Cheese Man and the Nachos.” I was noting something of a chain reaction. Marty and Tammy were inspired by the original stories I read and other students were motivated to similar projects after listening to Marty and Tammy read their creations. In *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Donald Graves suggests that “no distinctions are made between the reading of children’s writing and the writing of professionals. Both are treated as important writing” (76). When Marty and Tammy shared their stories aloud, their texts were important enough to inspire their classmates.

**Genre and Style**

For children, alphabet books are a familiar genre. Most kids experience them in their earliest years, but Jerry Pallotta’s books make clear that there are alphabet books and there are alphabet books. His informative texts are colorfully illustrated, with one alphabet letter per page, a structure that is easy for children to imitate. Here are a few excerpts from *The Ocean Alphabet Book* by Pallotta:

> E is for Eel. Eels are slimy! Eels are long and thin like snakes. If you do not like to hold snakes, then you probably would not like to hold Eels.

> F is for Fiddler Crab. Most crabs have claws that are the same size. The
Author to Author

Fiddler Crab has one big claw and one tiny claw.

We cannot think of any fish whose names begin with the letter X! Can you?

Oops, we found one! X is for Xiphias gladius (pronounced—Ziphias). This is the scientific name for Swordfish (Pallotta, 1986).

Borrowing Pallotta's take on the alphabet genre, Joel wrote “ABC Sports,” which includes the following:

H is for the Hartford Whalers. The Hartford Whalers are a hockey team, even though they are not very good.

Q is for Quarterback. A Quarterback is a position in football. The Quarterback throws passes and hands the ball to the running back.

T is for the Texas Rangers. The Texas Rangers are a baseball team in Texas. They are having a heck of a season.

X is for the X Cleveland Browns. They are the X Cleveland Browns because they moved to Baltimore.

Joel illustrated his alphabet book with the help of two classmates. Other alphabet books started popping up: “The Animal Alphabet Book,” “The Fruit and Vegetable Alphabet Book,” “The ABC Book about School.” Were they modeled after Jerry Pallotta's books or Joel's? I believe that both authors influenced the students in my class.

Style, Diction, and Rhetoric

Looking beyond Joel's borrowing of Pallotta's form, I see that Joel also emulates Pallotta's conversational style. Some of his pages, like the one about the quarterback, simply give information, as Pallotta does with his page on the fiddler crab. On another page, Pallotta informs his readers that eels are slimy and that they might not want to hold one. Joel, in a similar fashion, gives his opinion about a particular hockey team (who happened to be having a less-than-perfect year). He later lets us know that the Texas Rangers are “having a heck of a season,” and he also has some fun with X, as Jerry Pallotta did in his book. Shelley Harwayne notes that students “frequently choose to borrow language patterns from individual picture books” (298).

Silent Reading Influences Public Writing

I was seeing ways that students, after hearing stories read aloud, are influenced in making decisions about subjects, tone, genre, and style, but much of the reading students do in my class is silent reading in books of their own choosing. I was curious about the effect that reading in this context has on student writing. When A.J., an avid reader, shared his story “The Cry of the Wolf” during a conference, I tried to plum the sources of this sophisticated piece of writing. Here are some paragraphs from A.J.'s work:

The young wolf sat on a rock sniffing the wind as it blew across his wet nose. He could pick out the sticky-sweet smell of the Spruce Tree. But the strongest smell was the approaching snow.

Without warning one of the pups from his pack knocked him from his rock. A second pup joined the playful fighting and nipped at his fur.

The wolf allowed the pups to charge into him. They[!] weighed only forty pounds, much too small to really hurt him. Besides, it was his turn to watch them while their parents rested. Just then, a piercing howl interrupted their playing. Fifty yards away, the alpha male was pacing nervously. Back and forth he went. Suddenly, he stops. His body was stiff, his ears shot forward. He stopped to look at the mountains. Then he raised his head and howled. His mate joined him, their voices blended in an eerie cry up the mountain.

The caribou herd, their only source of food, was a gray smudge in the distant light. The caribou had also smelled the snow and were moving to a new feeding ground.

I discovered that A.J.'s piece was generated by reading, but not a single piece of reading. Graves states that “when information is the classroom focus, and literature is the center of activity, children will work with a broad assortment of reading materials” (67). When I asked A.J. about his process when writing this piece, he told me he had originally become interested in the topic of wolves from a book he had borrowed from the library. After he decided to write this story, he borrowed several more books, some of which he read during reading workshop but most of which he read at home. A.J. also looked for information in National Geographic. He read some fiction as well, mostly books by Gary Paulsen, and he had just finished Call of the Wild by Jack London. In writing workshop, A.J. was able to dig deeply into his own literary resources in the way Harwayne describes: “[students] need to call upon their own internalized sense of what good writing is and to recall those works that have affected them as readers. They need to form mentor relationships with the writers they admire, trying to do what those writers have done” (154). It
is evident that A.J. formed those mentor relationships and also knew where to find information that made his writing more effective.

In an equally challenging endeavor, Sam attempted to write a story like “Hatchet” by Gary Paulsen. In “Hatchet,” the protagonist, Brian Robeson, flies in a single-engine plane to visit his father. When the pilot has a heart attack and dies, Brian must land the plane and then survive alone in the wilderness. His only aid is a hatchet his mother gave him before he left. Sam’s story, “The Knife,” relates the adventure of a boy named James who gets knocked unconscious while walking in the woods with his dog. When he regains consciousness, he realizes he is lost and must survive on his own. Fortunately, James remembers that he has his pocket knife with him.

Looking at Sam’s writing, I saw obvious similarities to Paulsen’s work. Although Sam intentionally set out to write a story like “Hatchet,” he was not cognizant of all the parallels between his story and Paulsen’s. Here is an excerpt from Sam’s piece:

Then he sensed what he needed most.
Food. He looked at the bushes. What he saw was beautiful. Berries were everywhere. For the next hour James ate as many berries as he could. When he couldn’t eat another berry he crawled into his shelter and fell asleep.

Though not verbatim, the passage reflects Sam’s connection to Paulsen’s text in several ways. The idea itself is taken directly from “Hatchet.” Paulsen writes,

The slender branches went up about twenty feet and were heavy, drooping with clusters of bright red berries. They were half as big as grapes but hung like grapes and when Brian saw them, glistening red in the sunlight, he almost yelled... there was such a hunger in him, such an emptiness, that he could not stop and kept stripping branches and eating berries by the handful, grabbing and jamming them into his mouth and swallowing them pits and all.

Sam’s diction and sentence structure are also reflections of Paulsen’s style. The word “shelter,” for instance, is used several times in “Hatchet.” One-word sentences appear often as well. Paulsen writes, “And now, he

Typically in fifth grade, I would be emphasizing the need for students to avoid sentence fragments. I did not teach Sam how a fragment can, in fact, become an effective structure. Gary Paulsen did.

In all the situations I have mentioned, the students were aware, at least on some level, that they were emulating a particular author. When I asked Tammy about where she got her idea for her story “Evil Time,” however, she said the idea just came to her. She was not aware of how much her story resembles Avi’s City of Light, City of Dark until I brought the similarities to her attention during a writing conference. In Avi’s book, the characters are in search of a token that will save the people from darkness. Tammy’s plot revolves around finding the Golden Mushroom so Time will not be frozen forever. In City of Light, City of Dark, a text within a text appears, explaining the treaty between those who hold the power and the people who must search for the token. Tammy also effectively uses a text within a text in her writing, as shown in Figure 1.

Tammy was surprised to see how much her story was like Avi’s. I was not. She had read Avi’s book twice.

Even though I was becoming increasingly aware of the ways professional writers influence some students’ writing, I was also coming to view the whole phenomenon of borrowing as more complicated than I originally had seen it. Why do some students appear to make connections between reading and writing while others do not? Interestingly, both Simon and Jack, the students who considered borrowing as copying and plagiarism, had difficulty reading. As I think about it, I cannot recall having any outstanding writers who were struggling readers. Perhaps this will be a
topic for further study. I am also curious about how much borrowing was conscious and how much was not. While I strongly believe that students should choose their own writing topics, I wonder if their topics are just as likely to choose them. Student texts are affected by many factors: conversations, teacher modeling, student writing, and, of course, reading. It appears that some students are very much aware of their borrowings. Most, though, are not cognizant of such intertextuality.

As a result of my classroom research, I have strengthened my belief in the reading and writing workshop as an effective model of classroom instruction. When students are immersed in a literature-rich environment, they are exposed to many teachers of writing: the authors I read to them, those they select to read on their own, and the student authors in our classroom. Student writing takes on characteristics of all those authors. According to Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels, “Researchers and teachers are discovering more of the connections between reading and writing. Of course, reading provides specific data and topics for immediate writing projects, but it can do much more than that. At a deeper level, immersion in certain kinds of reading helps all writers assimilate the tone, flavor, structure, norms, and rhetorical strategies of particular genres of writing, a prewriting activity that’s no less effective for being osmotic and unconscious. Further, reading helps students identify themselves as fellow writers” (143).

Finally, if writing is so strongly influenced by what students read and by the stories they hear, surrounding children with quality literature should be our first objective. As Graves writes, “All children need literature. Children who are authors need it even more” (67).

**References**


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**Works in Progress**

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