

# A Ticket to the Imagination

*An Investigative Look at the Effects a Setting  
Has on Students' Writing*



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Stepping down from the bus, you look behind you and smile at your close friend as they excitedly finish the jingle they learned yesterday. Routine finds you walking down the hall, laughing and singing with your friend, as you gradually approach Room 14. Curiosity fills your heart as you wonder what today will hold in another new day of second-grade. Looking down at your new shoes, you step into the classroom, entering what you think is another ordinary day at Radio Park Elementary School. However, as your eyes dance around the classroom, a sparkle and a sea of blue and white catch your attention. You walk further into the classroom, past the first set of desks. Five baby-blue towers, lined with a thin sparkle and topped with flags of yellow, red and green, hug the corner of the room. The new addition finds you smiling and searching the room for some other clues.



Looking toward the front of the room, you notice a large pink paper hanging from the chalkboard. Curly, blue, scripted letters catch your eye as you walk curiously over to read the new letter. *Who left a letter? What does it say?* Walking over to it, you start reading, “Dear Princes and Princesses of Room 14.” *Princes? Princesses? Could this letter be written to you?* As excitement and wonder fill your heart, you read on:

*“Greetings from the castle! It is with honor that I send you this letter. I have sent and placed crowns for each of you on your desks. Decorate them with the materials at your set because there is an invitation for you at Morning Meeting for a very special event! You will be able to wear them then! Good luck and have fun!”*

*“When you are finished with your crown, place it in a pile with your color of reading group. Work quietly and be sure to be ALL finished with your crown at 8:45 am or you might turn into a pumpkin!”*

*Your friend,*

*“Cinderella”*

*Invited to Cinderella’s castle? How could this be?* Your lowered jaw gradually lifts as the corners of your lips curl up once again. You hear a familiar, gentle voice, “Good morning, Princess Maysa. Good morning, Prince Daniel.” You quickly follow the voice and feel your eyes widening as you stare in awe at the glowing pink princess. She smiles warmly at you as she gently glides across the room like a glittering, ringing bell. Your heart overflows with excitement and joy, as you take another step on the marble floor of the ballroom. Waiting at



your seat is a crown. “Princess Maysa,” it reads. You walk over to the cubbies and carefully put away your royal belongings. You look down at your new shoes and see sparkling glass slippers. You smile.

Gathering your flowing skirt, you carefully take your seat and start preparing your diamond crown for the big day with Cinderella at her castle.

Little did you know, stepping into your classroom this morning, your suitcase of imagination had been packed and your creativity was ready for

departure. Your journey into the Land of Make Believe had begun!

## **Background Information**

### *My Teaching Context*

Out of a total of twenty-two second-grade students, my class is evenly split by gender with eleven male students and eleven female students.

Within this group of students, there is a range of social characteristics that affect their behavior both inside and outside of the classroom, influencing the way in which the students interact with myself as their teacher, and with their peers. There are three social leaders in the classroom, two males and one female. These students are high achievers in almost everything that they do. With their leadership skills, they have a great influence in the classroom and on other students' decisions socially, academically and behaviorally. There are three male and two female students who are easy to get along with, however they have trouble getting their work done. Then there is a group of ten students who are quiet and anxious to conform, consisting of seven female students and three male students. Finally, the last group of students, four males and one female, are challenges behaviorally in the classroom.

Among the twenty-two students, there is also a wide range of academic levels and needs. There are three students who are gifted in different areas, one female in math, one female in writing and one male in math and science. There are two students who are learning disabled, receiving outside extra help from the Special Education teachers. The students' reading levels cover a wide span of abilities. There are five students, three females and two males, who are reading at a first-grade level. These students are pulled out of the classroom for Title I support and instruction during Language Arts' guided reading station time. Nine students, four females and five males, are reading at the second-grade reading level, while four students, two females

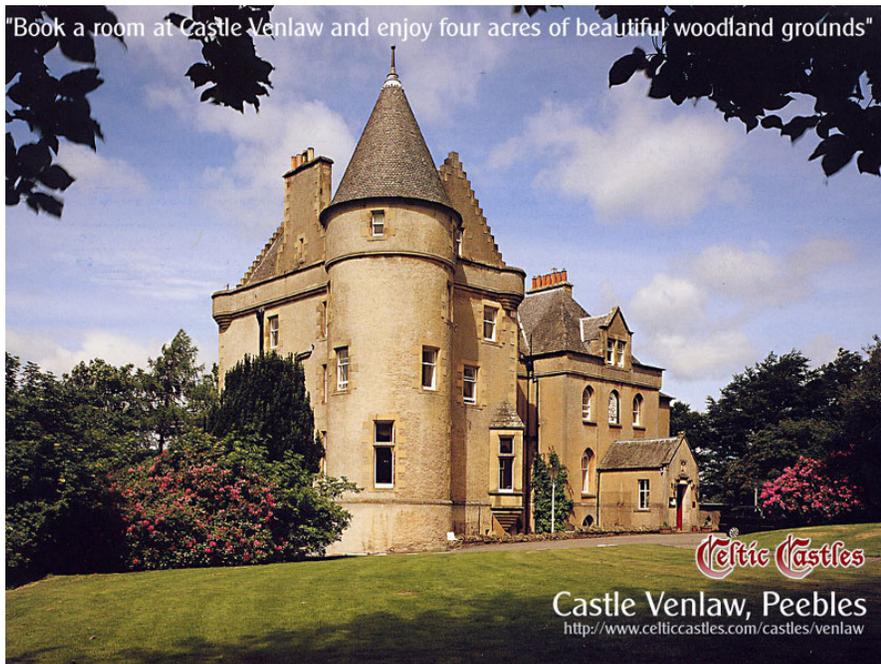
and two males, are reading at the third-grade level. A group of four students, two males and two females, are reading at the fourth-grade level.

Along with the social and academic needs in this classroom, there are behavior characteristics that affect these students' learning, academic performance, and social interactions. There are three students, two males and one female, who need strong emotional support. Each one is meeting regularly with the school counselor. There are two students in the classroom who are receiving medication for being classified as having ADD or ADHD.

*The Motives Behind This Particular Inquiry*

If I told you about this castle you are going to visit today...*It is made of a light grey stone, five towers in all, windows overlooking the water below, surrounding majestic flower gardens...*and then asked you to write about your day there visiting with the prince and princess, how much could you write? How much detail could you include?

Or if I showed you this photograph of a castle in France:



feel

Do you  
inspired to

write about your day with the Prince and Princess? Do you feel like you could allow your imagination to step into the castle and experience first-hand your trip to this enchanting castle?

So often limited inside the four walls of a classroom, there is only so much that an elementary school teacher can do to help students learn the most effectively about these places, people and time periods so far removed from their reality. Knowing that experience is one of our most effective tools for learning, I want to provide my children with personal experiences that will encourage their learning and create the most beneficial learning experiences. As I have been preparing to be a teacher these past four years in college, I have had many sources of inspiration that have affected my teaching philosophies. One of the first inspirations was my own mother, a current pre-Kindergarten and prior elementary school teacher. Teaching all of the letters of the alphabet to her class of sixteen five-year olds, she brings in cultures from around the world. Sitting down in rows on the carpet, my mother, in her colorful Hawaiian dress, prepares the children for their flight to Hawaii. Passing out little bags of peanuts to each student, she allows them to travel in their minds to this tropical island off in the Pacific Ocean.

I can still remember sitting in Panera Bread at a small table looking outside at the snow slowly drifting down as I opened the assigned book, *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*. I can still feel my heart swelling with excitement as I started reading the new chapter. Madame Esmé, as her students called her, a first year teacher in Chicago, created a time machine in her reading corner of her room in hopes of sparking the interest in her students for reading. She allowed them to travel to different time periods in this time machine, which was “really, an old refrigerator box covered with aluminum foil, with a flashing police car light rigged at the top and various knobs and keyboards screwed and glue-gunned on. Inside, a comfortable pillow for sitting and a flashlight attached to a curly phone cord” (Codell, 1999, p. 75). She left it in the

classroom, “buckled and locked closed with lots of signs all over it: “Top secret!” “Under construction!” “No peeking, this means YOU!” “Danger! Highly radioactive!” and the like to build anticipation. The big question buzzing: Is it real? Does it really work?” (Codell, 1999, p. 76). The first chosen one to enter the time machine, JoEllen, was sent off “with me pressing buttons and turning knobs feverishly, double-checking for accuracy that the medieval period was properly set, making her promise that her mother would not sue me should something...unexpected...occur” (Codell, 1999, p. 77). After half an hour, JoEllen was retrieved. Coming out of the time machine breathless, everyone stood and stared in curiosity, asking “What did you see?” She paused. Then went on:

“A joust.”

“A what?”

“Two guys. Fighting on horses. Their armor clanging as they rode. Even the horses wore armor on their heads. The guys carried two big sticks. Everyone was watching and cheering, like a sport. One of the guys died, ran through with a stick...” (Codell, 1999, p. 78).

Esmé later reflects on the experience, “ ‘Their armor clanging as they rode,’ I remembered. The words, the detail, they seemed different from what JoEllen regularly produces. I couldn’t help squinting suspiciously at the silver box before turning it off” (1999, p. 79). Allowing them to step into their learning, to take flight with their imagination, to travel with their fantasy, Esmé ignited a desire and a passion within her students to learn. She opened the door for them to experience something so far removed from their reality first hand. She gave them the ticket to travel through time through books. With her time machine, she allowed her students to experience and enjoy the excitement and adventure involved in learning.

After reading this chapter, I knew that I wanted to provide the same life-giving and enthusiasm-building experiences for my students. I want to allow my students to travel with their imaginations to different places in different time periods to meet different people. After seeing the effect it had on her students--how it allowed her students to go deeper with their thoughts and insight and to experience the literature first-hand-- I wondered how I could allow my students to experience first-hand the material being taught in my classroom someday. Hearing the vivid details of JoEllen's report of her adventure, I wondered what effect creating a setting or structure in which students could step into would have on their writing. Will it stimulate and produce more detail as it did with Esmé's students? Will they be more motivated to write with this first-hand experience?

A third inspiration came through the teachings of my Art Education professor here at Penn State. Challenging us to think outside of the box, he pushed us to think about how we can enrich our students' learning experience inside the classroom. He challenged us to think about how we could allow others to "step into" a piece of art, to taste it, hear it, smell it, touch it, and see it. If we could not bring our students to the destination physically, then we had to think about how we could bring it here for them to experience it. He strongly believed that people could relate and understand more deeply through experiencing it first-hand, and therefore reflect and learn more vividly. The emotions and feelings drawn from a personal experience leaves a more powerful impact on the person's thinking, causing them to question, to wonder and ponder.

## *Research*

More recently, I was further inspired and motivated to research how to allow my students to “step into” their learning through first-hand experiences by the book, *Kindergarten Themes*. This book is organized by the different themes teachers can integrate into the classroom, offering ideas to incorporate into your classroom for a wide variety of topics, anything from transportation and bugs to dinosaurs and shapes. For each different theme, they offer an illustration of how to decorate your classroom to “immerse your class in a fun-filled learning environment” (Creative Teaching Press, 1998, p. 8). The ideas presented of how to set up your classroom illustrates the importance of allowing your students to feel as though they are truly “there,” whether that is on the seashore for the Sand and Sea unit or outside in the forest for the unit on bears. My mind started filling with questions, what is it about the learning environment that helps children to learn? What sparks their excitement? What will engage them the most in their learning experiences? How can we stimulate their minds, senses, creativity and imagination the most to allow them to produce their “personal best” work? It was with these five powerful sources of inspiration and motivation that I took off on my journey of inquiring.

After interviewing and speaking with Julie Jobe, a third-grade teacher at Radio Park Elementary School, my curiosity grew as she expressed the struggles she has faced with motivating students to write. One major struggle was engaging her students in their writing. She has found that personal experiences are most often the most effective topics for students to write about because of the ability to make the personal connections in their writing. Having personally experienced these memories, the students are able to dive deeper in their writing, embellishing and building on the details of the experience (personal interview, February 10, 2005). Hearing

this sparked my wondering again whether allowing students to “step into” a setting would open the door for their imaginations to take them to the place and experience it first-hand.

Although there has not been a lot of research done on the effect a setting has, or physical surroundings have, on students’ writing, *Untangling Some Knots in K-8 Writing Instruction* explains the findings of connecting drama and writing. Providing a setting for students to write in, the students are stepping into a role different from their own. Peterson explains “when students move from drama to writing and base their ideas on these first-hand, lived-through role-playing experiences, they can bring new insight and involvement to their interactions with language” (2003, p. 111). She continues, “Writing in role, or as a result of role-playing, lets students of all ages adopt a new set of attitudes and feelings generated by the role, and at the same time, lets them keep their own in mind” (Peterson, 2003, p. 111). Although “educating the imagination can be a slow process when students work in the written mode,” just as Esmé discovered with her time machine “drama is a catalyst that the teacher can use to help students tap resources that they may not have known were there” (Peterson, 2003, p. 111). Drama, or role-playing, therefore, has proven to open the door to students’ imaginations and connect through language in a more meaningful, enriched way.

### *My Wonderings*

Inspired to allow my students to travel in their imaginations inside the four walls of our classroom, many wonderings sprung about and therefore drove this inquiry project.

1. What is the effect of the setting or physical surroundings on students’ writing?
2. How does working within a setting or context effect students’ writing motivation, performance and engagement?

3. What is its effect on their motivation to write?
4. Does the students' enjoyment for writing increase?
5. What is its effect on the quality of their writing?
6. What is its effect on their on-task behavior while writing?
7. Is it manageable for me as a teacher?

## **My Inquiry Plan**

### *A Wide Variety of Data*

In order to learn the effect the settings had on the multiple factors that contribute to writing, I decided to collect several different forms of data so that I might better understand the effectiveness, if at all, of physical settings in the classroom to encourage and inspire learning and growth. Before and after the project, I created and implemented pre- and post-surveys for the whole class to fill out. The students' on-task behavior was recorded and later analyzed through the recording of their behavior on the data collection sheets. Their on-task behavior was recorded three times, once for a base sample and two times for the two test writing tasks. Students' writing samples were also collected as a source of data to measure the students' writing performance. Three writing samples, one base and two test writing tasks, were evaluated with the modified writing rubric found in Appendix E.

### *Carrying out the Plan*

As the children took their seats in a circle at the back rug, I began to explain the research project I would be carrying out in the classroom in the upcoming weeks of school. "I am curious to find out your feelings toward writing," I started, "and how I can make it a more enjoyable experience for you." At the start of my research I held a class meeting to inform my students of

the wonderings I had and the process I would be carrying out in an effort to answer those questions and make their learning experience in school a better one. Holding this class meeting at the beginning of my research allowed me to include my students in the project. I wanted to keep them involved and aware of the research process. I explained that just like them, we as teachers ask questions, investigate, experiment and learn. We are students as well.

Six students out of the class were strategically chosen to be the subjects in my research. Looking at their writing performance from the beginning of the year, I chose two students writing at the upper-level of performance, or above and beyond the school and state standards for second-grade writing, two students writing at the middle-level, on level with the state standards and two students at the lower-level, not meeting all of the standards for writing in second-grade. This range of students was chosen to accurately represent the wide variety of ability in writing across the classroom of second-grade students.

After the class meeting, a class survey given to the whole class of students kicked off the start of my research project. The purpose of this survey was to find out their initial attitudes and feelings toward writing. These surveys served as a base for evaluating the effect the change in physical surroundings had on their attitudes and feelings toward the writing tasks. With these surveys, I then interviewed the six students with the same set of questions to help expand on their feelings and to help me better understand their views on writing.

Once the six interviews were complete, I set up a writing task at the writing station during our Language Arts Stations to act as a base for evaluating the effect the physical surroundings and new setting had on the students' writing performance. The students were given two titles to choose from to write their creative story, "The Starfish That Keeps Growing" and "The Toothless Shark." At Morning Meeting that day, I introduced the writing activity by giving

the two titles and leading a class discussion on the necessary elements we want to remember when writing a story. Then the students had 20 minutes while at the writing station to start writing their creative stories. If any students did not finish in that time and did not have Listening that day, they were to finish their writing, giving them a total of 40 minutes to write. During this time, I took notes on the students' responses to the writing and motivation to write. The six subjects' creative writing stories were later used as a base to compare against the two tests.

In order to evaluate students' on-task behavior, I first collected data during a writing session where students were writing their "Student of the Week" responses. With a data collection sheet, my Professional Development Advisor was able to keep record of the six student subjects' behavior during this writing session. She checked their behavior every five minutes throughout the 35-minute time period. If the students were on-task they received a  $\surd$ , while a "T" was given for talking, a "D" for daydreaming and a frowning face if they were being disruptive (bothering someone else). This served as the base data in which I was able to later compare against their on-task behavior during the two test writing tasks.

Once I had the two bases of data to evaluate the students' writing performance and on-task behavior, I was ready to carry out the two writing tasks that would test my wonderings. I chose two settings in which the children would be able to "step" into and write. The first test in my inquiry was a castle setting to go along with the fairy tale we were reading and studying,



*Cinderella*. When the children walked into the room that day, there was a letter from Cinderella hanging from the chalkboard, inviting the students to join her and Prince Charming for a day's visit at their castle. Crowns with

their names lay on their desks, waiting to be decorated with foam shapes. A white castle with baby blue roofs and lined with silver sparkles stood gallantly in the corner of the room at the back rug. An archway entrance into the castle warmly



invited them to crawl into the castle and travel back into time. Receiving royal paper with a crown, the students were going to step into the castle during the writing station and write about their day with Cinderella and/or Prince Charming as though they are writing to their diary.

Within the 20-minute writing station time, the students were to use the “My Day with



Cinderella/Prince Charming” prompt and write to their diary explaining the events of their day at the castle. Those students who did not finish their diary entry in the time allotted for each station were to finish the writing task at the normal writing station desks.

The second test invited the students on the bridge in the well-known fairy tale, *Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Set up on the ends of the writing station (a set of six desks), the white bridge provided the students with an opportunity to step into the hooves of one of the three Billy goats or the ugly feet of the troll. The students were able to choose whether they wanted to write from the perspective of the troll writing to the three Billy goats or from one of the three Billy goats’ perspectives writing to the troll. With the appropriate prompt, either “Letter to the Troll” or “Letter to the Billy Goats,” the students were to write a letter as one of the characters in the story.

During both of the writing tests, three different forms of data were collected. First, with the data collection sheets, their on-task and off-task behavior was recorded at five-minute intervals of time. Secondly, notes were taken as I observed the students' behavior and listened to their responses during the writing tasks. Third, the six student subjects' writing samples were taken to be evaluated and analyzed.

The last part of my inquiry research was through a post-survey in which the whole class participated. The survey was written and created with the intent to draw upon the students' feelings and attitudes toward the two specific writing tasks in the settings. It was also created to note and analyze the change, if any, in the students' attitudes and feelings toward writing prior to writing inside a setting and then after writing in a setting. The students completed this survey during the writing station during Language Arts station time.

### *Data Analysis*

#### **Pre-and Post-Surveys**

Although the whole class of students filled out both the pre- and post-surveys, I focused on my six student subjects' surveys for the purposes of analyzing my data. I set up a chart with each of their names to more easily compare their feelings and attitudes prior to and after writing inside the two settings. On the pre-survey, I looked at where writing was ranked for them among the activities in the classroom. Was it the activity they liked the most or the least? I recorded this onto the table in Appendix C, along with their response to "My feelings about writing are...I love it! I like it sometimes. I don't like it at all." From these two responses, I was able to summarize their responses with a plus sign (+) or a minus sign (-). If the student had writing as one of the activities they enjoyed the "most" or if they had circled "I love it!" for their feelings

toward writing, they received a plus sign. However, if they answered writing as their least favored classroom activity, or they only sometimes liked to write, they received a minus sign. These symbols were then used to summarize the students' responses to the post-survey.

From the pre-survey, there were four students with plus signs and two with minus signs, meaning four students with positive overall feelings and attitudes toward writing prior to the testing and two with negative ones. Then there were five students with plus signs and one student with a minus sign for the post-survey, meaning five students with positive overall feelings and attitudes toward writing in the settings and one with negative overall feelings and attitudes toward writing in the settings. There were three students, out of the six student subjects, whose overall feelings and attitudes remained the same prior to and after the tested writing experiences, while the other three students' feelings and attitudes changed. Two changed from negative to positive, while one changed from positive to negative.

I specifically looked at questions one through four on the post-survey for their reactions and feelings toward writing inside the castle and six through nine for their reactions and feelings toward writing on the bridge. With the two symbols, one representing their feelings prior to writing inside a setting, and the other representing their feelings toward writing after writing inside a setting, I was then able to look at and analyze the change, if any, in feelings or attitude toward writing in the two different circumstances. Did the settings affect their feelings or attitudes toward writing? If the symbol changed from a minus sign to a plus sign, I was able to conclude that the settings affected their feelings and attitudes positively. With the specific responses recorded in a table next to the symbols, I was able to look at more specifically how they changed prior to and after writing inside the settings. If the symbol stayed the same, I was able to conclude that the settings maintained the positive feelings and attitudes these children

already had prior to the two tested writing tasks. If the symbol changed from a plus sign to a minus sign, I was able to conclude that the writing experience inside the settings decreased the positive feelings and attitude toward writing.

Specifically looking at the occurrence among my six student subjects, one student's survey results came out positive in the pre-survey and negative in the post-survey. With the students' written responses as to why they felt a certain way toward the writing experience, I was able to refer to it and better understand what may have been the cause for this change in feelings. In this particular case, his negative responses toward writing inside the castle were explained through his response, "because I did not go in the castle (it was too crowded)." Again, when asked what his favorite part about writing inside the castle, he responded, "I dided (didn't) sit in the castle." With these written responses, I am able to better understand and conclude that these negative feelings were fostered due to the student being unable to fit inside the castle during this writing experience. Therefore, the change in feelings and attitude toward writing does not accurately reflect the impact the tested settings had since they were not able to directly experience writing inside the setting.

### **On-Task Behavior Data Collection Sheets**

In order to analyze and draw conclusions on the effect the settings had on the students' on-task behavior, I first gathered together each of the six student subjects' on-task data from the three writing experiences. Since the duration of time between writing tasks varied, I calculated the proportion of times the student was on-task out of the duration of the specific writing tasks from the data collection sheets for each of the three different writing experiences. For example, Student A was on-task four out of the five times checked, therefore I recorded  $\frac{4}{5}$ , or 80%, meaning Student A displayed on-task behavior 80% of the time during the writing task. I then

recorded the off-task proportion, being 1/5 or 20% and took note of the type of off-task behavior, whether it was talking, daydreaming, or being disruptive. For each student then, I had collected the percentage of time they were on-task and off-task for each of the three writing experiences (the base creative writing experience, and the two tests: inside the castle and on the bridge).

With the proportions and percentages calculated for each of the six student subjects, I was able to compare the amount of time the students were on-task during the base, or controlled writing experience to the two tests. Did the students' on-task behavior increase during the tests? Did the settings influence their on-task behavior? Comparing the base to each of the two tests, I then recorded "I" for increase of on-task behavior or "D" for decrease of on-task behavior. The record of the type of off-task behavior was also taken into consideration for the effect the setting had on the students' motivation to write. Along with the proportions and percentages, notes were taken on the students' reactions, responses and behavior during the three different writing experiences. These notes were used to help support or add to the evidence already gathered.

Looking at the difference in percentages of time on-task from the base writing experience to the first test (or writing inside the castle), three students increased, one from 87.5% to 100%, another from 33.3% to 50%, and the other from 62.5% to 100%. The other three students' percentage of on-task time decreased from 62.5% to 50%, 80% to 25%, and 100% to 75%. Looking at the change in percentages from the base writing experience to the second test (at the bridge), four students' percentages of on-task time increased, one stayed the same and one decreased. The four increases were 62.5% to 100%, 87.5% to 100%, 62.5% to 100% and 33.3% to 100%. The one decrease was from 80% to 75%, while the one student whose percentage remained constant was 100% through both writing experiences. On an interesting note, the off-task behavior recorded during the base writing experience included talking to the teacher, talking

to peers and daydreaming. However, the only off-task behavior recorded during the two test writing experiences were talking to the teacher.

### **Writing Samples**

The writing samples from each of the three writing experiences were evaluated using a modified version of a rubric taken from the book, *Scaffolding Young Writers: A Writer's Workshop Approach* (found in Appendix E). After evaluating the six student subjects' pieces of writing for each of the three writing experiences (base or control and the two tests), the scores received from each writing task were compiled into a table for each student for comparison. (Please refer to Appendix G). The scores received in the control group writing experience were compared to each of the two test group writing experiences. If the score increased during one of the tests, then claims could be made that the setting positively impacted the students' overall writing performance, whereas if the score stayed the same or decreased, conclusions could be drawn that the setting had no effect or negative effects on the students' writing performance. Individual scores in specific areas of writing were also compared and recorded for any surprising or interesting changes.

Since there were some students' scores who increased in both tests, some whose scores both decreased, one whose stayed the same throughout the three trials, and some whose scores increased in one test and decreased in another, no claim or conclusion can be drawn on the effect the settings had on students' overall writing performance. (Please refer to Appendix G). With more tests with different settings, patterns might be more observable. However, at this time, with the data collected, no claim or conclusion can be accurately made.

## What I Have Learned or Now Know

### *Claims and Evidence*

#### ***Claim 1: Writing inside a setting fosters positive feelings and attitudes toward writing.***



*Evidence:* Looking at and comparing the results from the pre- and post-surveys, the feelings and attitudes of the six student subjects remained positive or changed from negative to positive. Both Students E and F, who were the two students considered above grade level in their writing, expressed in their pre-surveys that writing was the classroom activity that they enjoyed the most out of reading, writing, science and math.

They also both expressed the highest rating for their feelings toward writing, that they loved it. Then looking at their post-surveys, one can see that they both expressed the highest rating of regard about their feelings toward writing inside the castle and writing at the bridge. Further supporting that choice was their agreement to enjoying writing inside the castle. Therefore, the positive feelings and attitudes toward writing were maintained through these two new writing experiences.

Student C's feelings and attitudes toward writing also maintained the same both prior to and after the writing experiences. He expressed that writing was neither one of his favorite classroom activities, nor his least favorite activity. However, in his post-survey, he chose the highest rating for his feelings about writing inside both the castle



and at the bridge. He also expressed that he did enjoy writing inside both settings and was more excited to write in both of them. Furthermore, he prefers the castle and the bridge over the writing station. In reflection of writing inside the castle, he wrote, “I liked it because it helped me think of ideas” and that he likes “to write in a new spot.” Then thinking about writing at the bridge, he wrote that he enjoyed writing at the bridge “because it was fun” (Appendix B).

The feelings and attitudes of Students A and D toward writing changed from negative to positive after writing inside the castle and at the bridge. Student A, one of the two students considered below grade-level in her writing, expressed writing as the classroom activity she enjoyed the least. Her feelings toward writing were expressed through the straight face and the paired response “I like it sometimes.” As mentioned earlier, this student often struggled with her writing and often expressed feelings of frustration and anger during past writing experiences. However, in the post-survey, this student expressed the highest rating for her feelings about writing inside the castle and writing at the bridge. She also answered, “Yes” for enjoying writing in these two settings, writing that “it was fun and I like writing” (Appendix B). This student also responded “Yes” to being more excited to write inside the castle and at the bridge and expressed her preference to writing inside the castle and at the bridge over the writing station. The positive remarks from this student are encouraging as her teacher to see this change in her feelings and attitude toward writing change from negative to positive.

As mentioned earlier, Student D’s feelings and attitudes also changed from negative to positive as a result of the two writing experiences in the settings. She did not circle writing as the activity she enjoyed the most or the activity she enjoyed the least out of all the classroom activities. She chose the straight face and the response, “I like it sometimes” to express her feelings toward writing. Then, looking at her post-survey, she circled the highest mark for her

feelings about writing inside the castle. She expressed that she was more excited about writing inside the castle and that she preferred to write inside the castle than at the writing station.

Although it seems that Student B's attitudes and feelings toward writing changed from positive to negative with the experiences inside the settings, investigating it further with his responses, it seems that he did not actually get to experience writing inside the castle first-hand because of it being too crowded for him to write. Therefore, we cannot count his feelings and attitudes after the castle experience as evidence since he did not experience it first-hand. There are other factors interfering with his experience and therefore affecting his feelings and attitudes.

***Claim 2: Children's excitement to write increases when writing inside a setting.***

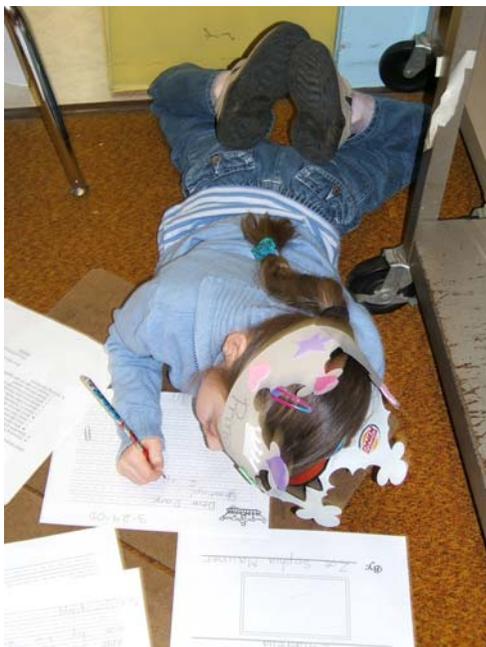
*Evidence:* The post-survey's positive responses to the questions, "Were you more excited to write inside the castle?" and "Were you more excited to write at the bridge?" found in the table in Appendix B support the notion that writing inside a setting increases students' excitement to write. Furthermore, responses from students while entering and writing inside the castle further support the increase in excitement to write and experience the new setting. One child exclaimed, "This is so cool inside here!" I noted another student, a reluctant writer, who expresses frustration and lack of motivation while writing, smiling and glowing with excitement. I asked her what she thought about writing inside the castle and she said, "You know, Miss Pieper, this is the smile I have when I see my best friend in the world, and this is the same smile I had when I went into the castle. I felt like a princess." Two students were also noted for wanting to continue working on their piece of



writing past the two 20-minute time slots allotted for the writing activity. These two students ended up writing three whole pages about their experience with Cinderella and Prince Charming.

During the bridge writing activity, Student A was noted for working and focusing really hard on her writing. Excitedly, she came up to me at the end of the station and asked if she could read it to me. She read it confidently and seemed very proud of her work. Student C enthusiastically asked, “Can I read this to you?” after he finished his piece of writing. Since “educating the imagination can be a slow process when students work in the written mode” (Peterson, 2003, p. 111), the setting provided the opportunity for the children to actively step into a “fictional world” that stirred up their imagination to write. The setting was the ticket for the children to travel to a new place and put on the shoes of another character or person. The excitement from this journey carried over into their motivation to write in role.

***Claim 3: Allowing students to “step into” a different setting increases their on-task behavior while writing.***



*Evidence:* For the bridge writing experience, students’ percentage of being on-task increased from the percentage on-task during the base or controlled writing experience. Five out of the six student subjects were recorded to be on-task 100% of the time while writing at the bridge. Only three of the six-student subjects’ percentage of on-task time increased from the controlled writing experience to the castle writing experience. However, the type of off-task behavior during the castle

writing experience for the other three student subjects was talking. The talking, however, was not disturbing or distracting other students, they were recorded asking a teacher a question or needing help with a spelling. Unlike the two tested writing experiences, off-task behavior was recorded during the controlled or base writing experience that included talking to their peers and daydreaming (Appendix D).

Flowing from the evidence of the second claim, their excitement to be in a setting where they are allowed to step into the shoes of a different character or person, the students are more excited to write and therefore naturally are more engaged in the task.

***Claim 4: Writing inside a setting allows children to step into a world different from their own, filled with fantasy and make believe. This stirring of the imagination aids them in stepping into a different role in their writing and think and reflect from a new perspective.***

*Evidence:* Reading over the student subjects' writing samples from writing inside the castle and at the bridge, I noted their creativity and enhanced insight in writing from the new perspectives. Student D wrote about her experience as a princess spending the day with Cinderella. She included specific details about what she saw inside the castle and experienced as a princess. She wrote, "I jest (just) spent the best day of my life with Cinderella. When I went there I got to see every room in the castle. The ballroom was humungies (humongous) and her family room was filled with glass and her bedroom had shandalers (chandeliers) and a big cunfunny (comfy) bed but the best part was when she shoul (showed) me my room. It had closets filled with outfits and a bed bigger then hers" (Appendix F). She



then added, “When I was at the castle she said that I could wear anything I want but I can’t wear any pants” (Appendix F). Stepping into the castle, Student E was able to describe the view, “Living in a castle is pretty cool, you can see for miles around, then we practest (practiced) shooting arowos (arrows) into the bullseye” (Appendix F). Student F eloquently reflects on her experience in the castle with powerful describing words as she writes, “We went to pick flowers and butterflies and dragonflies and let them go! We saw colorful flowers and beautiful bugs and saw shapes in the clouds...We ate fresh and tasty food like tomatoes pull (pulled) off the vine with out being washed” (Appendix F). She then describes the specific details about what she wore in her role as a princess. “I wore a long pink dress with purple flowers all over it and blue jewels and green shoes and a red ribbon in my hair” (Appendix F). Each of these snippets from the children’s writing samples displays their ability to step into role as a prince or princess inside the castle. They were able to describe specific details about what they saw inside and outside the castle and what they wore in this new and exciting role.



During the bridge writing experience, the students were able to express the feelings and emotions of the different characters in the story very effectively. In Student D’s letter, as the troll writing to the three Billy goats, she is able to step into the grumpy, ugly troll’s feet and successfully express his anger and hostility toward the three goats. She wrote, “Never cross my brige (bridge) agin (again) or I will eat you nomater (no matter) what. I feel more grumpy then usual...I am not sorry because you dunked me in the water. I mite (might) deside (decide) to have you over and we mite (might) become friends but it is unlikely. I am never going to make it up to you. I never

want to see you again” (Appendix F). The results of a two-year research project done by The Centre for Language in Primary Education in London support the evidence and conclude, “where students are writing in role, out of a fictional situation in which they have been able to explore and discuss thoroughly, they are able to access areas of language and feeling that they might not normally be thought to be aware of” (Barrs & Cork, 2001, p. 213).

The students’ written responses to questions in the post-survey further support the ways in which the setting allowed them to write more effectively and powerfully. One student enjoyed the experience “because it helped me think more about what we were writing.” Another reflects about his experience in the castle and why he enjoyed it, writing “it kind of helped me think what it would be like to live in a real castle.” One student’s favorite part about writing at the bridge was “thinking that I was a character in a story.” Finally, another student expressed that he enjoyed writing inside the castle “because it helped me think of ideas” (Appendix B). Each of these written comments reflects the children’s true enjoyment of the writing experiences inside the settings and how the settings aided them in their writing. With their imaginations ignited, the students were able to step into role and write with ease, creativity and insight.

***Claim 5: Elementary school teachers can only effectively manage to build and incorporate one setting (or structure) into the classroom per year.***

*Evidence:* After building the two structures, the castle and the bridge, I realized what a lengthy time and energy commitment it was to invest into while carrying out the responsibilities of being an elementary school teacher. As an elementary school teacher, there are so many different things to plan for, attend, prepare and carry out. Building and constructing more than one structure during the school year is not wise or manageable. Including the sketching and

brainstorming of the structure, shopping for materials, cutting, constructing, decorating, transporting, and setting up, I tallied approximately 40 to 50 hours of work. In addition to all of the other roles and responsibilities of an elementary school teacher, the extra hours of labor are not feasible.

It would be recommended and advised to plan out and build a structure or setting during the summer months when teachers are not in school. That way, teachers can build a new one each summer and add to their classroom's collection. Or, another suggestion from a third-grade teacher at Radio Park Elementary School, Ms. Kimber Mitchell, is to build a basic wood structure that can be decorated according to the theme of the current unit by the students. This saves building and constructing time and allows the students to have a part in creating this new imaginative setting for them to travel to and explore.

## **Conclusions and Future Directions**

### *Implications for your future practice as a teacher*

After conducting this inquiry research project and seeing the positive results on students' motivation, excitement and quality of writing, I am confident that I want to continue investing the time in creating these imaginative settings. Having seen the positive impact it had on the students, I want to further explore how to make it more effective learning experience. After experiencing some of the complications that go along with building these settings, for example one student not being able to fit inside, I will be able to plan more effectively to accommodate all of the students in my class. Also seeing students' excitement increase simply stepping into a new role, I want to see how I can further develop those roles to help them grow in their language experience and understanding.

Inquiring about how to improve my teaching strategies, I am encouraged and inspired to continue inquiring each new day and each new year as a teacher. It is with these new wonderings that I will be able to explore, investigate and research how to create the most effective learning environment for my students. This inquiry project has allowed me to set sail on the waters of a life-long learner. With this inquiring mindset, I want to always encourage my students as well to question, to wonder and to inquire.

### *New Wonderings*

While carrying out this inquiry project, many new wonderings arose that I would like to investigate and research further as my career as a teacher unfolds.

1. How can I incorporate more drama and role-playing with the settings to even further develop and enhance their writing abilities?
2. How can I include the students more in the building of the settings?
3. What effect will a structure or setting have on students' motivation to read? What effect will it have on their involvement with literature?
4. What effect will a structure or setting have on students learning English as a second language? Will it enhance and or encourage their language development?
5. Would allowing students to model their writing after a story they have read increase their excitement or motivation to write?
6. Would a list of general helping questions help them along when they get stuck? Would they refer to those and use them?

7. Would reading their stories (in the draft stage) to a friend, to a teacher or to someone else help them in the writing process? If it did make it a less stressful or frustrating experience, would it increase their motivation/excitement to write in the future?

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