

# Becoming Writers in the Elementary Classroom

VISIONS AND DECISIONS



KATIE VAN SLUYS

Principles  
**in Practice**

WRITING IN TODAY'S  
CLASSROOMS

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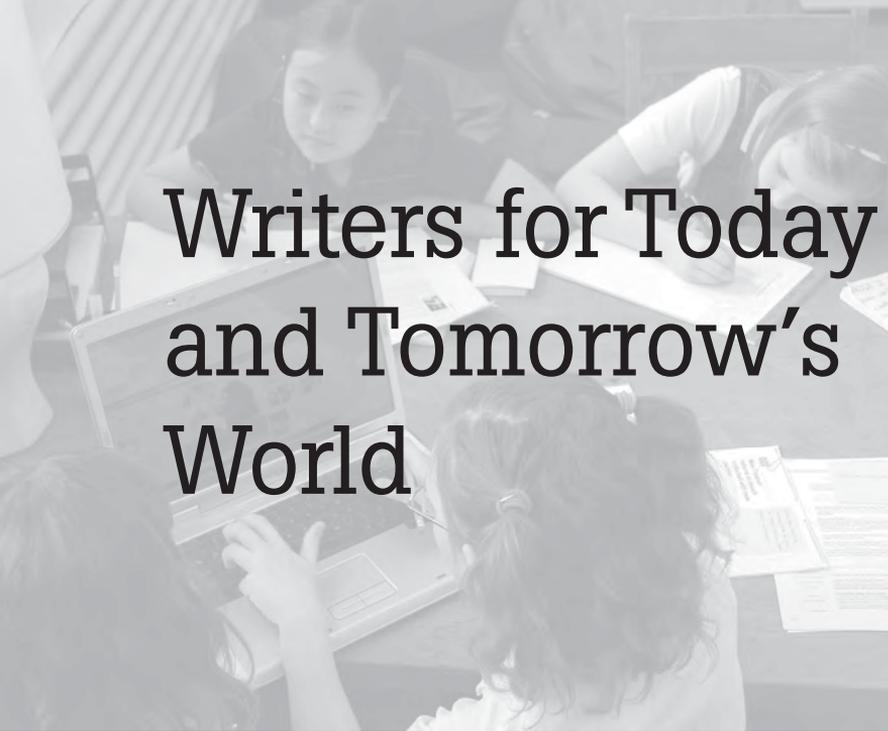
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# Contents

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	Acknowledgments . . . . .	vii
	<i>NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing</i> . . . . .	ix
<b>Chapter 1</b> . . . . .	Writers for Today and Tomorrow’s World . . . . .	1
<b>Chapter 2</b> . . . . .	Articulating a Vision: What We Know and Where We Can Go . . . . .	16
<b>Chapter 3</b> . . . . .	Making Decisions: Why We Write, What We Write, and How We Write . . . . .	27
<b>Chapter 4</b> . . . . .	Becoming Aware: Learning to See and Own Writing Decisions . . . . .	65
<b>Chapter 5</b> . . . . .	Teaching with Intention: Assessment as a Means to Understand Experiences and Pursue Next Steps . . . . .	91
<b>Chapter 6</b> . . . . .	Reaching Outward: Thinking Together about Visions and Decisions . . . . .	114
<b>Postscript</b> . . . . .	Becoming a Writer . . . . .	131
	Annotated Bibliography . . . . .	135
	Works Cited . . . . .	139
	Index . . . . .	141
	Author . . . . .	145



# Writers for Today and Tomorrow's World

**R**ecently, when I was working with a group of educators at a new school, a teacher named Andrea reflected in an introductory activity on the daunting task of raising young people in uncertain and constantly changing times. She also reflected on her fairly new role as a parent and noted how grateful she was that her son would have teachers, as well as parents, in his life. Having teachers in his life, she went on to explain, took some of the pressure off her to make sure she attended to everything her son needed for success in today and tomorrow's world. She ended her introductory vignette by stating that she also realized the flip side of this thinking—that she needed to be the teacher in many other children's lives. She needed to “create a community of learners with understanding and appreciation for the experiences kids bring with them [to school].” She needed to be a teacher who worked responsibly with each and every young person she encountered by “highlighting their successes, focusing on progress, encouraging openmindedness and the consideration of other perspectives, and offering opportunities to

experience learning in [rich] ways” to foster student engagement with present and future social life. To meet these challenges, she noted that she needed to actively continue in her own growth and development in the company of colleagues and to “make decisions that are best for [her] and [her] kids,” with keen attention to surrounding social life, “because the world is always changing.”

For me, Andrea’s thinking makes visible several key issues. First, teaching and learning are ongoing, humanistic enterprises. They involve minds and identities. They’re primarily about having a vision for the kinds of people needed to participate in society and then about making smart decisions regarding how to foster the growth of such people over time, weighing the many options and “right ways” for what and how we teach. Second, she situates teaching and learning as collective challenges that are not easily solved or accomplished by individuals but instead call for creative responses by groups of collaborators, from the young people who make up classroom learning communities to educator colleagues—and perhaps community members, parents, school administrators, legislators, and so on. And in doing so she points toward the intentionality and impact of decisions made within schools

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## Ways to Read This Book

Before moving deeper into this book, I thought I’d comment on how you might interact with this text. *Whom you’re reading it with* and *why you’re reading it* will likely shape *how* you go about your reading.

*The company you’re reading with will likely vary.* You may be reading this book on your own; if so, your responses to it will be an interaction between your thinking and the thinking shared in the book. However, you might instead be reading with a teacher in your own school, or a teacher-friend across town, and you plan to converse regularly about your thoughts and reactions. Or you may be reading this book with a study group that meets either face-to-face or online. You might even be reading this book as part of a class. Whatever the context, I urge you to think about the resources and people whom you might turn to and talk with as you work to connect and extend the thinking laid out here.

*Your reasons for reading may influence the pace and the way you tackle reading this book.* If you’re not well versed in the development of process writing, the overview provided in Chapter 2 may be the context you need. If you’re concerned with how you invite kids to actively think about their writing work, the cases and examples in Chapters 3 and 4 may be just where you need to focus. If you and your school community are concerned with understanding and practicing genuine assessment, digging deeply into Chapter 5 should prove helpful.

*Thinking about your purposes for reading and the company with whom you’re reading might inform how you tackle this text.* Chapter by chapter? Reading the introductory chapters for context and then slowing down to digest case by case as you watch the writers in your classroom? As the author, I invite you to read in the way that makes the most sense for you and your colleagues.

while extending her gaze beyond classroom and school walls, noting that in three, five, or twenty years from now, she wants her students to be able to take what they've learned about writing in particular to "communicate their thinking clearly by composing cohesive [texts] in many formats that reflect . . . rich vocabulary and language (and life) experiences." Her thinking calls us to consider how surrounding social worlds and social landscapes impact teaching and learning in schools, and how schools impact the development of our society—present and future.

Reflecting on Andrea's vignette, I can't help but wonder what we *really* know about the contexts in which we and our students currently live. What do we know about the communicative and meaning-making practices alive right now in our students' lives, or even in our own? What do we know about possible futures? Furthermore, what do we know about learning? What are the most effective lines of thinking that can inform our actions and interactions with young people, not only today but in the decades to come? And while Andrea's reflection didn't focus solely on writers and writing instruction, her questions can be easily connected to central issues and concerns on the minds of those who work daily with young writers. What are our visions for writers in today's and tomorrow's worlds? How will we continually transform our practices to align with our beliefs? What curricular decisions will we make as a result of our visions? What decisions will our young writers make in pursuit of these visions? In what ways will local, state, and federal policies impact our work? How can we monitor progress and growth and make changes as we move forward? And what kinds of writers (and people) will we construct?

This book aims to illustrate how teachers of elementary-age writers bring their beliefs to life—through the *visions* they hold for writers, writing, and the world, as well as through the *decisions* they make every day in their classrooms. Taking this stance enables us to (re)claim aspects of our professional practice. As teachers, we're faced with contextual challenges (from external pressures for particular sorts of performance, to curriculum that is set by those outside of our classrooms, to changing demographics, to one-size-fits-all programs, etc.)—pressures that sometimes seem to contradict a vision we hold about teaching. And while each of our local challenges is unique in some ways, we

### **What to Expect as You Read . . .**

You might anticipate that in a book about becoming writers you'll be invited to write—and this book does just that. Periodically, chapters offer direct invitations for you to take time to pause, write, and think deeply about your contexts, experiences, and responses to the ideas raised. At various points in the book, I'll explicitly invite you to record your current and evolving thoughts about beliefs and visions that shape your teaching practices. I encourage you to do this whether you're reading for a class, with a group, or on your own. Returning to earlier thinking always surprises me as I reread the books on my shelves, and I imagine that you too will enjoy seeing the shifts and changes in your own thinking over time.

Remember, reading is always interactive, and talking with text transforms reading from an act of consuming information to using and generating knowledge that can move us all forward.

have this in common: the young people who inhabit our classrooms. Every one of our students deserves opportunities to become a competent, constantly growing writer who uses writing to think, communicate, pose, and solve problems, and who learns not only to write well but also to use writing to create the world he or she wants to live in. While others may continue on the fruitless quest to find uniform curricular answers for teaching writing, in this book I call on teachers to draw on and expand their professional knowledge, to articulate their visions, and subsequently to make decisions that meet the needs of real people living and learning in their classrooms—such that young writers not only learn in our company but also learn to use their skills as writers beyond the walls and timelines of school. In my mind, more important than a specific curriculum or a specific strategy is a focus on the vision we hold and the decisions we make as a result of that vision—this is what should drive teacher practice (see Table 1.1).

### **Beginning with (a) Vision: Writing, Writers, and the World**

Beginning to articulate a vision of what it means to be a writer involves first looking closely at writing, writers, and the world to explore and better understand the real work involved in acts of writing. If I were to make a list of the many ways I've used writing in the last week, for example, my list would include responding to an Evite; writing a thank-you note; updating my to-do list; crafting an email message to colleagues; responding to a survey/questionnaire; translating a permission form; narrating life events on a social networking site; sending a text to update our family on travel progress; drafting a syllabus; creating plans for professional development experiences; IMing to solidify social and work-related plans, including communicating electronically with a librarian regarding a resource issue; and revising an annual report through Google Docs with colleagues. If you were to make a list of the many ways you've used writing recently, you are bound to find overlaps with mine as well as unique demands and interests that arise from your life space. Perhaps you

**Table 1.1:** Visions and Decisions

Visions	Decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beliefs you hold about writing and writing well</li> <li>• Imagined skills and practices you understand to be necessary for writers to live, think, and act within and beyond their time in schools</li> <li>• Aspirations for who young writers can become as thinkers, communicators, and participants in our changing world</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choices you make about what, how, and when to teach or study particular skills, practices, and genres</li> <li>• Choices writers make about reasons to write, what they write, when they write, how they write</li> </ul>

too crafted emails, but maybe you also updated a family scrapbook or webpage or wrote a letter to an insurance company, filled out a form or used writing to reflect on a situation, or drafted a memo or class newsletter.

Our lists, regardless of the exact items, demonstrate the diversity in the ways and reasons we use writing as a tool for living in our world today. They illustrate not only what we write and why we write but also with and for whom we write. When I look over my list, I know that the way I approached writing an annual report for a supervisor in a collaborative fashion with Google Docs is quite different from how I composed an entry on a social networking site that would be read by friends and family. The decisions I had to make as a writer in each instance were varied. For example, when writing the annual report, I had to reread writing composed by others and decide how to match voice and register so that the report would read in a cohesive manner. I had to read carefully for content to make sure my contributions added unique and needed information. When writing for the social networking site, I made decisions about what kind of text was required. For instance, text did not stand alone; photos would help tell the story I wanted to convey. Also, intimately familiar with my audience, I knew I could jump right into the heart of the event without a lot of background experiences that my readers would come to the site already knowing.

What about you? Take a moment to fill out this list yourself (see Table 1.2). What have you written in the past week? And what were some of the decisions you had to make as a writer to complete each piece?

Whether you're reading this book on your own or as part of a class or study group, I again encourage you to take the time to write out your thinking. Putting pen to paper or fingers to keys often leads writers to new discoveries and insights—thinking that often doesn't emerge from “just thinking.”

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**Table 1.2:** What Have You Written? What Decisions Have You Made?

What did you write this past week?	As a writer, what were some of the decisions you made?
Report on Google Docs	How to frame my contributions in a way so that others would concur with (and keep) my additions
Texting for social plans	When to use abbreviations and condensed spellings based on my knowledge and assumptions about my audience (the friend I was texting with)

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Examining these lists and the decisions underlying the writing in each case suggests to me the importance for us as teachers of exploring how changes in our world impact the ways in which teaching and learning unfold in our classrooms. These lists call us to consider the ways in which changing landscapes demand a shift in our visions regarding what writers need today as well as in the future, and they call us to think about how our visions can be translated into practice in ways that ensure we support writers in becoming wise decision makers capable of responding to the writing demands that unfold in their futures. Good writers increasingly are not those who can follow step-by-step instructions about what writing is (if good writers ever were that!); good writers in the twenty-first century are those who know how to make decisions about what to write, when to write, and how to write: for different purposes, for different audiences, in different genres, and with different technologies.

Let me illustrate what I mean: I've been formally teaching and learning with young learners (ranging in age from five to fifteen), their families, and their communities for a little more than fourteen years. I began my formal teaching career working with fourth-grade readers and writers in the mornings and a class of bilingual kindergartners in the afternoon. In the years that followed, I worked as both a multi-age teacher in a public Minnesota school and a resource teacher at a school in Mexico. My professional inquiries then led me to graduate school, where I worked regularly in multilingual classrooms focused on the literate lives of elementary students across the ages. Now, as a Chicago resident and university professor, I am regularly working with educators and young people in city schools. Reflecting on my experiences, I can already see dramatic shifts in the ways in which people (individually and collectively) use words, texts, images, and design to think, communicate, reflect, inquire, negotiate, and take action. When I was teaching in a primary multi-age classroom in the mid-1990s, my students authored books, wrote reflections on math-thinking processes, took notes, and so on. On one occasion, when left with an unanswered question in our study of outer space and our solar system, we wrote a letter to a kids' science magazine seeking expert advice. Within a year, we were fortunate to read a published response to our letter in a subsequent issue. Given a similar situation today, we could have used a number of different strategies to access more immediate (and perhaps multiple) responses to our unanswered question(s). For example, we might have simply Googled our question, posted it on a science blog, or reviewed FAQs on NASA Quest and submitted our question if it was still unanswered after our review of listed questions and responses.

For teachers, this shift implies huge changes in the decisions we make in the classroom. But it also implies huge changes in the decisions *the writers* in our classrooms need to make. They need to be able to figure out how to choose the best venue for acquiring the information they need. They need to know how to be

critical information consumers who can sift through various websites and other resources to find the most current and accurate information. They need to know how to succinctly craft a question that meets submission field constraints if their inquiry is not already addressed. And they need to see themselves as potential participants in such dialogues.

Years later, when I was working with fourth graders to create an interactive brain museum as a way of unifying our inquiries and insights from a shared unit of study, some students crafted an interactive game using HyperStudio software, while others used word-processing software to create labels and extended commentary to accompany their exhibits. In this situation, students worked with more than words. They designed multimedia texts and had opportunities to see firsthand how the museum visitors successfully (or unsuccessfully) made sense of their work. And just this past spring, I worked with fourth-grade writers pursuing writing projects aimed at shifting readers' worldviews and actions. One young person wrote an article about a respected athlete and his perseverance through challenges; another wrote on behalf of an organization she's active in and passionate about; one crafted a letter to a large chain restaurant to inquire about their immense portions and the health of patrons; and still another turned a family story of adoption into an invitation for readers to look beyond the neighborhoods in which they live. In this case, young people's agendas, purposes, genres, and audiences were many given their awareness, passions, and concerns regarding their social environment. Classroom practices can provide evidence of the ways in which changes in our social landscape affect the tools, resources, genres, and practices students draw on and engage with in their writing work.

## **Shifting Visions**

At the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we might say that the writing is on the wall. Young people will encounter many changes in the months, years, and decades to come. While change has been a constant across our development as people and societies, the rate of change has intensified. We may be able to anticipate some changes and challenges our students will face; however, we cannot accurately map all they will encounter in their life journeys. They will need to draw on known skills, strategies, and habits of mind to engage in new as well as changing situations. This has significant implications for schools' visions and decisions because schools are critical spaces for shaping what students believe writing is, as well as the kinds of skills and practices they have the potential to develop.

Andrea's introductory vignette, the stories drawn from my life and work, and the margin or mental notes you've made about writing in your life do not stand alone. Many in the literacy community have been calling our attention to the

changing nature of literacy and literacies. Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič (1999) and others emphasize the situated nature of literacy practices and how children experience multiple literacies in their everyday, beyond-school lives. Some children come to school well versed in practices associated with running a family business, others with rich histories of oral language use or experiences with computer-connected learning and communication. Kress (1997) writes that while there are some enduring features of modes of thinking, forms of actions, practices, and values, it is increasingly clear that thinking, composing, and representing are changing. For example, the words we write are often accompanied by images. Likewise, where words are positioned, size and selection of font, and so forth play important roles in shaping the meanings constructed by readers. Bomer, Zoch, David, and Ok's (2010) work with fourth-grade writers, for example, illustrates how young people today with only limited access to technological tools compose networks of texts in which linking, multimodal practices, and design are central to constructing and communicating meaning. Furthermore, the tools we use for composing, both technological and social, shape how, with whom, and why we write. Though some claim that new technologies are detrimental to literacy learning, the truth is that young people today are writing far more frequently than those of previous generations. The Stanford Study of Writing (Haven, 2009) not only points to the volume of writing students are engaged with beyond classroom contexts but also notes that the writing young people engage with in today's world almost always has a genuine audience—they have reasons (beyond grades) and eyes (beyond their teachers') for their writing. While right now that writing is all about texting, IMing, blogging, and social networking, we don't know what the future holds. The only guarantee we have is that change is inevitable. To respond intelligently to such changes, we need to have a clear vision of what we're after in our work as teachers. Who do we want the young people in our classrooms to become? What kind of writers do we want to help construct? And how might we meet our goals?

### **Articulating *Our/a* Vision**

Literacy educator Jerry Harste offers, from my perspective, one of the most useful phrases for engaging in continued growth as professional educators and people. He often begins speaking by stating, "What I believe/think right now is . . ." The beauty of this phrase is that it gives us the right to revise our thinking as we continue to learn and grow. In that spirit, I first invite you to stop and think about what you believe right now about writing, writers, and the world (see Invitation 1.1). Then I offer windows into the visions of others—mine and those of other teachers—visions that are, as Harste says, "right now." By doing so, I hope to identify a point of departure for reading the possible decisions, practices, and actions

**Invitation 1.1: Current Visions for Writing, Writers, and Writing Instruction**

**Take time to reflect on and record your current vision. *Right now, this is what I believe about writing, writers, and writing instruction:***

included in this book and to make connections with possibilities in other (including your) classrooms. When I posed these same questions to elementary faculty with whom I have worked, here is what some of them said:

**What I Believe Writing Is**

- personal, valuable, and vital (Meg, teacher, grade 1)
- most meaningful for students when they can choose what they write about (Jennifer, bilingual teacher, grade 3)
- an ever-changing and evolving process (Dena, teacher, grade 3)
- creative (Andrea, transitional bilingual teacher, grades 3 and 4)
- part of the human/community experience (Kimberly, media specialist)
- an opportunity to explore who you are and [to] communicate your thinking in unique, creative, informative, and educated ways (Stephanie, bilingual teacher, grade 1)

**Who I Believe Writers Are**

- people who come in different shapes and sizes hence bringing different backgrounds to the paper (Andrea, bilingual coordinator, preK–8)
- empowered through choice (Linda, teacher, grade 6)
- communicators (Aubrey, teacher, kindergarten)
- something everyone can become (Trish, teacher, grade 1)

### **What I Believe about Writing Instruction**

- It should include practice (Jennifer, bilingual teacher, grade 3)
- Instruction should attend to the reason why we write before teaching the hows (Jay, teacher, grade 4)
- It should include teacher engagement in writing (Dena, teacher, grade 3)
- It should encourage risk taking, invite writers to try new things, and see mistakes as part of learning (Linda and Michael, teachers, grade 6)
- Too often it is systematic and formulaic (Andrea, transitional bilingual teacher, grades 3 and 4)

When I accepted the same invitation, this is what I came up with: For me, writing is a tool for thinking and communicating issues and ideas that matter to us and to the world. Young people in our classrooms need to be flexible, adaptable problem solvers capable of navigating change with confidence and grace. They need to be regular writers, well versed in diverse tools and practices for writing well, and know that they can modify tools and practice as contexts and needs change. They need to have a known relationship with the purpose of and audience for their writing. And they need to be participants in instruction—people who are well aware of the decisions they make and how their decisions impact their growth and development as they use writing to reflect, remember, and act.

My vision isn't something I've developed on my own; rather, it's influenced by the contexts in which I live, think, and work. I'm betting that the same is true for you. Often, surrounding discourses shape what we think about writing, writers, and instruction: for example, standardized testing discourses that prescribe essay structures; teacher training discourses that emphasize teaching narrative, expository, and persuasive writing; or discourses about curriculum as packaged programs or scripts versus curriculum as a course of experiences and a space that includes not just what is to be learned but also conditions and practices that shape how learning transpires and how people develop (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Furthermore, what we read and who we think with also help to shape our visions. For me, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) plays a critical role in my thinking within this book and beyond. Their perspectives regarding what it means to live a literate life in the twenty-first century, as well as what it means to teach writers in contemporary contexts, merit specific attention in order to understand my stance and perhaps to help you articulate your own.

### **NCTE's Current Vision**

NCTE, as a professional organization, pulls together the research of many literacy educators to capture our current best thinking and create policies, definitions,

and belief statements aimed at influencing local and national policies, professional development opportunities, and daily classroom practices. From their work with 21st century literacies, to their work with assessment, to their work with writing, NCTE publishes many policy documents that center on putting forth a public vision that reflects the best of what we know about how to teach and learn the English language arts. For many of us, these policies unite what we already know and believe; for others, these policies and positions offer new ways of thinking forged from research and practice in the field. In either case, these resources help provide a starting point from which we can articulate our visions and our beliefs and then work together to make decisions about our practices.

This book builds on a particular document, *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing*, a collection of eleven principles aimed at guiding curricular decisions and practices, written by and for teachers. Its genesis and organization emphasize that teaching is anchored first in a vision—who do we want writers to be? What habits of mind or ways of being must writers possess or embody to be successful today and well beyond tomorrow? The document then breaks down NCTE's shared vision into component principles or beliefs. It is from these principles that communities of learners, through regular reflective work, can bring their beliefs to life.

### Reading NCTE's Beliefs

Recently, teacher colleagues and I spent time discussing and assessing our current beliefs and practices through a three-step process. As I talked with teachers, I asked that they first describe their current vision for writers, writing, and the world, just as I asked you to do in Invitation 1.1. I then asked that they take time to describe current instructional and learning practices in their classroom. At this time, I invite you to do the same (see Invitation 1.2). After making notes about our current beliefs and practices, teachers and I then embarked on the third step: reading and rereading the *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing*, documenting how this set of beliefs connects to our own beliefs and practices. (You might want to do the same, if you haven't already. The full NCTE statement is reprinted in the front of this book, and a short summary can be found inside the back cover.)

We structured our conversation using this three-step process as a means of putting to paper what came immediately to our minds—those reflections and thoughts of the first two steps that, when we looked back at them, did not always fully represent our best thinking about writing and writers because they were too often shaped by immediate contexts or experiences. Therefore, taking time for the third step—reading the NCTE belief statement—helped us step back from the daily demands of our professional roles to really think about what we believe and how our beliefs relate to the ongoing choices we make. As teachers read the belief

### Invitation 1.2: Current Writing Practices

Current vision for writing, writers, and the world (see Invitation 1.1)

*Right now, this is what I believe about writing, writers, and writing instruction:*

#### Current practices

*Right now, this is how I teach writing and writers:*

*[What does it look like, sound like, feel like when student writers are engaged in work? What kinds of work are writers pursuing? What are teacher responsibilities? What are student responsibilities? What are writers learning? How are they learning it?]*

statement, I noticed most heads nodding in agreement. The teachers' marginal notes and side commentary included reflections about how their own practices relate to specific beliefs and/or how their hopes for growing their practice relate to specific points made in the document. For example, when they read, "Writing has a complex relationship to talk," teachers reflected on the need to be better at conferring. "People learn to write by writing" and "Writing is process," followed by a detailed explanation of what that means from an NCTE perspective, pushed readers to reflect on the need to rethink practices in their own classrooms, such as how much time we offer our students for writing and what a process model of writing means in their specific classroom contexts.

Using this document as a catalyst for further discussion (but, more important, using it as a tool to build on teachers' beliefs and practices) led us to dialogue about areas for growth and how to better align classroom practices with beliefs. A few days after initial reads of this document, Dena noted that she, like NCTE, believed that "Writers learn to write by writing," and went on to connect this statement with thinking about life in her classroom. She explained that, in previous years of teaching, writing in her classroom had gone "down the tubes" by about January.

When asked what she meant, she talked about the writers' notebooks on which she based her writing instruction and how students lost interest, energy, and enthusiasm with their notebooks, and how the volume of writing diminished as the year progressed.

While there are many strategies on how to fill notebooks with student words, our conversation turned from a focus on a particular tool to a discussion more grounded in visions, principles, and practice—in other words, *Why notebooks?* Before encouraging Dena to make changes in classroom practice, we realized we needed to be grounded in why we were advocating for a particular tool. What did we think this tool and associated practices could offer writers? How did such practices impact writers' skills and identities? Through dialogue we agreed that writer's notebooks could allow students a space both to develop thinking and to write in volume—hence helping them learn to write by writing. Notebooks could be places that encourage writers to explore issues, ideas, and events on paper. Notebooks could also encourage writers to be flexible, to play with thinking, and to learn to see entries from different perspectives. But this doesn't just happen. It requires supportive contexts and teaching—from adults and peers. Given Dena's newly articulated clarity about her beliefs about writers, she was able to form a goal for her work with writers in the coming year. Specifically, she decided not only that notebooks needed ongoing attention throughout the year, but also that her students needed to be privy to why they were using notebooks and how their engagement with notebooks was something that could help them learn to write better and differently—if they wrote regularly and tried new ways of engaging with writing, thinking, and the world. And she began to make plans to pursue this goal in her teaching.

An immersion in *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing* and reflection on their professional knowledge helped Dena and the other teachers both articulate their own visions and reconsider some of their teaching practices. I invite you to try this as well by adding on to the chart you've begun to develop and by talking with other teachers or colleagues about what you're noticing (see Invitation 1.3).

The heart of this book is about moving from documents about stated beliefs and/or our own teaching philosophies to well-aligned actions and goals related to potential areas for growth. Decisions do (and should) follow from visions.

### **Making Decisions: Matching Visions and Actions**

Dena's story is not an isolated one. In many interactions with teachers, when I inquire about ideal visions for writers in their care and what they need to bring their visions to life, teachers share responses that range from a need for greater awareness about how writing practices genuinely unfold in real writing lives, to the need

<p><b>Invitation 1.3: Current Connections</b></p>
<p>Current vision for writing, writers, and the world (see Invitation 1.2)</p> <p><i>Right now, this is what I believe about writing, writers, and writing instruction:</i></p>
<p>Current practices (see Invitation 1.2)</p> <p><i>Right now, this is how I teach writers and writing:</i>  <i>[What does it look like, sound like, feel like when student writers are engaged in work? What kinds of work are writers pursuing? What are teacher responsibilities? What are student responsibilities? What are writers learning? How are they learning it?]</i></p>
<p><b>Connections with NCTE’s current thinking</b></p> <p><i>Right now, this is how I see the ideas articulated in NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing connecting to my current vision and practices:</i></p>

for support in making decisions that align with beliefs (versus accepting inherited practices that often run counter to teachers’ actual visions).

As educators, we first need clarity about what we believe—in other words, we need vision. We need to know what we’re working toward so that we monitor our progress en route. We need to articulate our own vision and think about what beliefs help form the basis of that vision—whether it comes from an NCTE document or another source. In the chapters to come, you will be invited to watch how this process has unfolded for a number of teachers as they work to achieve quality writing instruction, taking into account current local and global challenges and

changes regarding what it means to become a successful writer. You will be invited to join these teachers who are committed to better living their visions for young writers through everyday decision making. And, after examining examples of classroom practices and the thinking that informs teachers' as well as writers' decisions, you'll be asked to revisit your vision and think about how these experiences influence the current and potential decisions you make regarding young writers' lives.

In the chapters to come, we will dig deeper into our visions by first looking at how historical and current efforts within our profession and beyond inform what we believe is possible when it comes to learning to write well. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview and context with which to better understand where thinking about writing pedagogy has been, how it has changed over time, and how the challenges we face today are intimately tied to particular histories and understandings of writers, writing, and writing instruction. Chapters 3 through 6 are the heart of this book because they feature ideas, experiences, thinking, visions, and decisions made by teachers and young writers alike. These chapters unpack thinking and suggest possibilities for how educators might approach the challenging work of encouraging and supporting young writers.

In Chapter 3, we will look closely at specific classrooms to make visible the range of decisions that teachers and young writers make as they engage in everyday efforts to become strong teachers and writers. Children and teachers featured in Chapter 3 have made a habit of talking about their thinking and work; they are experienced in articulating what they do and why they do it. However, they didn't arrive in their respective schools with explicit understandings of what they do and why. They learned these things. Chapter 4 also uses lively case studies to explore how we can help young people identify the decisions they make and how their decisions affect their growth as writers. The only way we can know how we are growing and developing is through the ability to mark and monitor progress so that teaching and learning experiences provide writers with just the right next step; therefore, Chapter 5 looks specifically at assessment and how we can craft practices to meet teacher and learner needs. And because we don't and can't work in isolation, Chapter 6 explores how we can move beyond our classroom walls to help others come to know and understand why we do what we do and how classroom activities impact people—people who are writers and decision makers, people whose many future decisions will help shape our collective social world.

As the book comes to a close, you'll be invited to revisit your visions, think about what is most pressing in your contexts and lives, and begin to articulate your intentions for shaping writing experiences so that writers write, writers understand the power of writing, and writers use writing well to accomplish the work needed today, as well as to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

This book illustrates how teachers of elementary-age writers bring their beliefs about teaching and learning to life—through the *visions* they hold for writers, writing, and the world, as well as through the *decisions* they make every day in their classrooms. Teachers today face contextual challenges and pressures that may conflict with their visions of effective teaching. Katie Van Sluys demonstrates how to (re)claim our professional practice to ensure that young people have the opportunity to become competent, constantly growing writers who use writing to think, communicate, and pose as well as solve problems.

Using NCTE's *Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing* as a starting point for understandings about writing research and what it can tell us about effective writing practices in elementary classrooms, Van Sluys invites us to articulate our own beliefs as we explore why and what we write, how we write and how we teach, how we assess progress, and how we advocate for the practices we believe in. Through real classroom examples and teacher and student reflections, she helps us understand how the decisions that both we and our students make today can help them learn not only to write well but also to use writing to create the world they want to live in.

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