

# 'Right Writing' in Classrooms: Learning to be Artificial

*Nidhi Kunwar*

## **Introduction**

Writing is a medium to express our thoughts, feelings and views. The basic need to communicate and express constitutes the core of writing. Being one of the core literacy skills, writing is always strongly emphasized in schools. From language to mathematics, from science to social science, writing is a core part of learning. A student spends the maximum time in school 'writing'. However, does this emphasis make our students good writers? Do they engage in writing in a creative way? Do they use writing for real expression?

The present paper has been written with a view to explain and explore what type of writing students encounter in schools. The study is based on data collected from the school notebooks of middle grade students. For the study, writing samples from Hindi language notebooks of middle grade students were collected and analysed to understand how writing is taught in schools. Attempts have been made to explore the following areas:

- The type of writing topics given to middle grade students in schools
- The type of language used by middle grade students to express their thoughts
- The quality of writing found in the school notebooks of middle grade students
- The type of feedback given by the teachers to middle grade students.

These topics have been explored to understand what shape writing takes in our classrooms. What type of writing by students is accepted as 'right writing'? What type of writing is portrayed as 'right writing' through our pedagogy?

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides an analysis of school writing samples collected from the school notebooks of middle grade students. The second section contains a discussion on the status of writing in our schools. The last section provides suggestions for improving writing pedagogy.

## **School Writing Samples: An Analysis**

For the study, Hindi language school notebooks of grade six and seven students were collected from different schools. The compositions written in the notebooks were used as data and analysed. The following themes emerged while analysing the data (these themes have been explained and consolidated with excerpts from the collected data):

### **1. Topic Selection**

The students' writing samples revealed highly traditional and conventional topics. Compositions were found on topics such as "Varshaa Ritu" (Rainy season), "Adarsh Vidhyarthi" (Ideal student), "Pustakalaya ke Laabh" (Benefits of a library), "Swatantrata Diwas" (Independence Day), "Gantantra Diwas" (Republic Day) and "Delhi ke Darshneeya Sthall" (Historical monuments of Delhi). The level of the topics seemed to be far beyond the age of the students. It is worth reflecting at this

point that if writing is a form of expression, then would an eleven-year-old child really wish to write on such standard and conventional topics?

## 2. Writer's Voice

'Voice' refers to the reflection of the writer's feelings, perspectives, thoughts and ideas in his/her writings (Graves, 1983). It is the writer's desire to share which gets reflected in his/her work.

All the collected school writing samples showed an absolute lack of writer's voice. After reading the content, one did not feel that an 11-12 year old child was talking and sharing his/her ideas. The child's natural urge to express was completely absent. The compositions written by the students were merely informational with a clear lack of purpose and sense of audience. The following samples taken from school writing samples clearly support the above described findings:

- “*Grishm mein jab surya ke aatank se manushya aur pashu-pakshi to kya, ped-poodhe tak vyaakul ho jate hein, tab varshaa ritu hii uneh sahan pahuchaane ka karye karti hai.*” (In the summer, when due to the scorching heat of the sun, not only human beings, animals and birds, but even trees and plants begin to wilt, only the monsoon provides relief to them.)
- “*Aaj bhi aadarsh vidhyarthi sushil, vinarma, aagyaakaari, guru-bhakt, anushasanpriya, adhyayansheel, satyaviryaa tathaa sadaachaarii hote hein.*” (Even today, ideal students are humble, modest, obedient, devoted to their teacher, disciplined, studious, truthful and of good character.)
- “*Pustakaalaya gyaan ka bhandaar hain aur ek sachaa shikshak hain. Vidhvaan logo kii gyaan ki pyaas inhii pustakaalayo mein baithkar bujhti hein.*” (A library is a store house of

knowledge and a true teacher. It is where intellectuals can quench their thirst for knowledge.)

- “*Kisi desh ki sampatti uske bank mein nahi balki uske vidhyaalayo mein hoti hai.*” (The wealth of a country lies not in its banks but in its schools.)
- “*Is tyohaar ko Bhaarat ke karoron hindu, muslim, sikh, isaayyii aadi harsh aur ullhaas ke saath manaate hain. Kisi ne sach kahaa hai, 'Aapnaa raajya narak bhalaa aur daastaa swarg ki bhi buri.*” (This festival is celebrated by crores of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, etc. with joy and enthusiasm. Someone has rightly remarked, 'Our state, even though a hell, is better than the slavery of the heaven.')
- “*Praacheen kaal mein jeevan ko vyavasthit karne hetu brahmacharya aashram mein vidhyarthi maataa pitaa tathaa gryah ko tyaag kar gurukulon mein shikshaa praapt kartaa thaa.*”

(In ancient times, as part of the organization of their lives, young students would leave their parents and their homes and go to live in the house of their guru to acquire education).

What is striking is that an 11 or 12 year-old child is writing in this way. If writing is indeed a form of expression, it is really difficult to accept that middle grade children would express like this in their daily lives too.

## 3. Language

Highly sanskritized and artificial language which in no way reflects the type of language used by the children dominated all the collected school writing samples. They were also overloaded with heavy vocabulary which showed a clear gap between the content, and the writer (child). Some of the words found in school writing samples are listed below:

- *adhyansheel* (studious)
- *saachcharitrata* (good character)
- *dhvajaarohan* (flag-hoisting)
- *vitārit* (distributed)
- *saatvik* (simple living)
- *prachalit* (popular)
- *vidyamaan* (existing)
- *dushchaari* (bad character)
- *sarvatra* (everywhere)

A strong resemblance was noticed between the language of guidebooks and the language found in the students' school notebooks.

#### 4. Feedback by Teachers

Not one sample had any meaningful or relevant feedback provided by teachers. All the compositions were corrected with the entire focus only on spelling. This exclusive focus on mechanics by teachers indirectly communicates to students what 'right writing' is in the framework of school. Students on their part accept it and therefore attempt to achieve reproduction from guidebooks to the highest degree of perfection.

This observation shows the type of writing students engage with in schools, and in turn, how they construct the notion of 'right writing'. In all school samples, it was found that neither the topic nor the content belonged to the child. The topic was taken from the syllabus and the content was taken from the guidebooks. 'Voice', of course, will not find existence in this writing since the student does not get an opportunity to express his/her own thinking. To make matters worse, correcting so many copies of artificial content does not provide any stimulus to teachers, and hence they prefer to correct notebooks only by signing and pointing out errors. It is really a pity for our education system that rather than focusing on creating reflective

minds, we use 'writing' to create regressive minds.

None of the writing samples seemed to be original; all of them appeared to be copied from guidebooks. If a student had photocopied the entire essay from a guidebook and pasted it in his/her notebook, the result would have been the same. So, rather than creating 'writers', we are creating 'copying machines' in our schools.

#### **Creating Identical Writers: The Core of Classrooms**

The above analysis is a reflection of the sad condition of writing pedagogy in our schools. However, it must not be assumed that this analysis is limited to middle grade students only and our primary classrooms do not suffer from this handicapped version of writing. This practice of creating identical writers starts right from pre-primary grades, and all possible attempts are made to ensure that students stop reflection. Graves (1983) believed that about ninety per cent of the children entering first grade believe they can write. Young children love to make marks and drawings on walls, pavements and in books and newspapers. However, the school soon takes away this confidence from them by making them believe that this is not writing, and they cannot write. Young students are made to spend hours practicing sleeping lines, standing lines and tracing dots to design perfect alphabets. The core of desire, expression and communication are sacrificed in this attempt to create identical learners. School does not build on a child's functional knowledge or attempts at writing. On the contrary, pedagogy practices discard the developmental aspect of writing (scribbling, drawing and invented spellings) as 'silly' work and present writing in a strict conventional form to students. Students are made to copy and practice letters of the alphabet, words, sentences

and paragraphs. As the students progress to higher grades, the school further shuts their minds by providing them with options such as guidebooks. We just want identical writers and we happily sacrifice the creative expression of our students for that.

Teachers through their limited feedback further ensure that all students' notebooks appear identical. Most of the feedback either appreciates the students for copying perfectly, or penalizes deviation, usually by demanding that the student write the 'correct answer' ten to twenty times. This feedback seriously damages the student's enthusiasm to write. Kumar (1994), expresses the problem in conventional feedback style of teachers as:

In many primary schools in our country, the only response the teacher makes consists of corrections of spellings or grammar. Copybooks of children are littered with corrections made by the teacher in red ink. On the other hand, when the child has written everything 'correctly', the teacher simply puts a tick mark and signs. Both such responses are highly inadequate if not outright destructive. (pp. 61-62)

Teachers mostly correct students' notebooks only to locate the errors and highlight them. Calkins (1986) identified this focus on errors as the main reason for killing the child's desire to write and therefore said that this factor must never find a place in writing classrooms. In contradiction, school notebooks are corrected solely to mark errors, and students are punished for the deviations. The result of this over emphasis on mechanics is a fear of writing. In order to produce error-free writing, students prefer to use guidebooks and fulfil the teacher's expectation in one easy attempt.

The manner in which our students are exposed to writing begets serious reflection. Writing is a skill of expression and communication and not of copying blindly. The active energy of students

can only be utilized when we allow students to explore the functional and developmental aspects of writing. The extreme mechanical treatment of writing has created such classrooms where one guidebook can damage about thirty-five bright, young and creative minds.

### **Creating Space for 'Right Writing'**

This alarming condition of writing calls for serious reflection and analysis. The creation of a positive environment for writing is the need of our time. Writing is a basic literacy skill and a handicap in writing can have far reaching damages. In this section, some suggestions have been offered to create meaningful and creative writing classrooms.

#### **1. Importance of personal expression in writing**

Writing is a form of expression. Hence students must be provided with the scope to write freely and on topics related to their own life. Calkins (1986) emphasized that children too have rich lives. When they come to school, they have their own concerns, ideas, memories and feelings. For teaching writing, it is best to tap the human urge to write and help students realize that their lives are worth writing about. Britton et al. (1975), Martin et al. (1976) and Barnes (1976) suggested that learning is facilitated when students are allowed to use their own language rather than being forced to conform to the particular language conventions of specific subject areas (as cited in Cairney, 1995, p. 126). Hence practices such as morning message, free writing and response journals, which give space to students' personal writing must be integrated in the daily classroom routine.

#### **2. Constructive Feedback**

Teacher's feedback is an extremely important component of creative writing classrooms. The

power of feedback must never be underestimated. Atwell (1987) shared that teachers must never criticize students, instead they should try to give feedback which can enable students to develop the writing piece in better way. Feedback must never threaten the writer's dignity. Brill (2004) too supported the idea of 'meaningful response' to students' writing. The extended interviews conducted in his study with children point towards significant writing development when the teacher listened to his/her students and provided meaningful feedback. Kumar (1994) suggests that feedback from a teacher must include his/her response to students' writing. In fact, the feedback must become a dialogue between the teacher and the student.

### 3. Creating an Enabling Environment

Emig (1983) emphasized the need to create an 'enabling environment' for students. In this environment, students get several opportunities to write and read without the fear of criticism or disapproval. Additionally, the teacher provides appropriate support to students in terms of experiences and feedback. Creating such an enabling environment in our classes is the need of the time. Teachers must ensure that students in their classes must experience:

- Freedom
- Trust
- Frequent opportunities to write and express themselves fearlessly

With this support structure, our young writers can really develop and progress.

We need to understand that writing is a medium of expression and not simply a tool to learn mechanics. How long can we continue to suppress our students' potential to write and express under the pressures of accuracy and mechanics? There is a serious need to revisit our conventional ideas that result in the creation

of artificial writers. We must make writing a meaningful experience for our students by giving the due space to the 'writer' hidden in them. They must be provided with the opportunities to engage with 'right writing' of expression and sharing.

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**Nidhi Kunwar** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary Education, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi. Her specialisation is in Language Pedagogy.  
[nidhikunwar80@gmail.com](mailto:nidhikunwar80@gmail.com)