Longitudinal Study of the Writing Matters Program

June, 2008

Overview of the Program

The Writing Matters Program (formerly known as the Freedom Writers Program) was first implemented with eighth grade students attending Grover Washington Jr. Middle School (GWJ) located in the North Region of the School District of Philadelphia in the fall of 2004 under the direction of Dr. Robert Vogel. The program continued at GWJ until June 2007 under the guidance of the eighth grade teacher, Michael Galbraith. Michael also participated in training sessions based on the original Freedom Writers program in Los Angeles, California and continues to serve as a teaching fellow for the program.

The Writing Matters Program was geared for a middle school population at GWJ. The program provided students with numerous opportunities to write journals based on their personal experiences and share these journals with their teacher and peers. In addition to the writing of journals, students interviewed parents and victims of violence in Philadelphia and studied violence through newspaper, magazine and internet sources. Much emphasis was placed on Holocaust studies including visits to the Holocaust museum in Washington D.C. during the second and third years. Students read the Freedom Writers Diary, a book compiled by Erin Gruwell of her inner-city, high school students’ journals. A movie was made in 2006 based on the book, which exposed students to Erin Gruwell’s story through this medium. Erin Gruwell visited Grover Washington on several occasions to inspire students to use journal writing as a vehicle for telling their own stories.

The Philadelphia-based program’s name was changed to Writers Matter in September, 2007 to better reflect the emphasis placed on student voices, writing skills, mentoring and teacher training. The four year initiative has produced a publication called Voices of Teens: Writers Matter, published in June, 2008 by the National Middle School Association.

Research Design

The Writers Matter Program ran concurrently with the School District of Philadelphia’s literacy curriculum with eighth grades students attending GWJ from fall 2004 to June 2007. Since little is known about the long-term impact of this program, it is important to investigate whether it had positive or negative effects on participating students in order to establish the program’s credibility. Therefore, students who participated in the program since its inception were also asked to volunteer to participate in the longitudinal study.

The design of this study was based on results of survey data from the last cohort (2006-2007). The data revealed markedly positive findings. An overview of these results revealed strong themes related to the effects of the Writers Matter Program obtained directly from student surveys at the end of the school year:

1. Allowed a free expression of feelings and emotions involved in their personal life stories;
2. Enabled the realization that many of the problems students were experiencing were shared by a majority of their peers;

3. Stimulated empathy for peers struggles;

4. Helped students to become more mature, responsible, and persistent in achieving their goals;

5. Developed stronger coping skills in dealing with internal pain and anger; and


7. Improved writing skills

Based on the findings from the 2006-2007 cohort above, interview protocol and questionnaires were developed to address the major question of the program’s long-term effects, if any, on participating students. The design of the study is qualitative in order to capture the rich stories of the students and their personal impressions and recollections about the program.

Students from all three cohort years were contacted via letters and surveys sent via mail to their homes. Approximately 100 student home addresses were located; these students were sent a letter explaining the project. Attached to each letter were: 1) a permission form to be signed by the parent and students if the student wished to participate in the study, and 2) a preliminary survey. At the end of the survey, students could volunteer to participate in a personal interview or not. Five responses were returned from the initial mailing.

It should be noted that the survey was originally developed to gain an understanding of the impact of the program from a broader population of students. However the only surveys returned were from students who volunteered to participate in the study interviews. Thus, the survey data added little additional information.

The second attempt to recruit students involved obtaining phone numbers and e-mail addresses from the students’ former teacher, Mr. Galbraith. He provided approximately twenty phone numbers and e-mail addresses from his former students. All twenty students were personally contacted via this method and subsequently agreed to participate in the personal interviews.

The third recruiting attempt involved sending letters to graduates of GWJ who were attending the feeder school, Fels High School. Names were gathered from teachers at GWJ and cross-listed with students attending Fels. Those students whose names appeared on both lists were sent letters. Approximately 45 letters were sent to this group. Nine students from this pool agreed to participate in the study.

Due to scheduling difficulties or inconsistent contact information, not all students who agreed to participate were able to do so. The final student pool was 27. Students were given a $10 Dunkin’ Donuts gift card for participating in the interviews. Interviews took place in neutral environments such as their school or at a public location not far from their homes.
The study, design, method, and research protocol were approved by the Institutional Review Board at La Salle University.

**Interview/Survey Protocol**

A former graduate of La Salle University familiar with the Writing Matters program and about to enter medical school was hired to oversee the recruiting process and to conduct interviews. The interview protocol contained numerous questions/prompts as follows:

1. Let’s discuss your experiences with the Freedom Writer’s Program. What can you recall about the program?
   
   **Prompts:**
   - What did you write about?
   - Did your writing help you come to terms with “…….”
   - How did you feel after you shared this writing sample with others?
   - What were the other students’ responses to your writing?
   - How did that make you feel?
   - Were you satisfied with this approach to writing?
   - If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

2. Discuss how the Freedom Writer’s program has helped you on a personal level in high school, if at all. (If the student is not currently attending high school, ask if he/she thinks the program has helped in the current situation)

3. Do you think the program helped you academically in high school? If so, in what ways? If not, could you explain why you think so?
   
   **Prompts:**
   - Are you a good writer?
   - (If yes) - Do you think your progress is due in any way to the Freedom Writer’s program? Explain.
   - (If no) - What seems to be the problem? Do you think that the program might have helped you if it was run differently?
   - Would you like to see a similar program offered in your high school?

4. How are you doing in school (or in your job or situation)?
   
   **Prompts:**
   - Is high school hard?
   - Do you think the Freedom Writer’s program has helped you in any way?
   - Do you feel you have the confidence to succeed in school?
   - (If yes) – Where did that confidence come from?
   - (If no) – When you were involved in the Freedom Writer’s program, did you gain any confidence at that time? What happened to that confidence?
   - Has the program helped you out at all with your future goals? In what ways?

5. What is high school like for you on a social level? Has the program helped you understand or get along better with your peers in high school? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
Survey Protocol contained the following questions:

1. If an 8th grade student said to you, “I just finished the Freedom Writer’s Program and will be entering high school next year. Has the program helped you in high school or in life?” How would you respond?

2. If the program has helped you personally or socially in high school or your current situation, describe how it has helped you in these areas.

3. If you were given an opportunity to participate in the Freedom Writer’s Program in high school, would you want to do it? Why or why not?

Twenty-six surveys were returned. One student, who completed the interview, did not provide a survey.

Demographic Data on Sample

Twenty-seven students participated in the longitudinal study, which was comprised of one-on-one interviews with a member of the Writing Matters Program staff. A total of 15 ninth graders, 5 tenth graders, and 7 eleventh graders participated in the interview process. The mean age of this group is 15.5, with students ranging in age from 14 years old to 17 years old. The sample of students attended 14 different high schools. Samuel Fels High School had the largest number of students from this sample at 12. Other students attended schools such as Central, Delaware Valley Charter School (2), North Penn High School, Bok Technical School, True Bright Science Academy, Franklin Learning Center, Philadelphia High School for Girls, Charter School for Architecture and Design, Northeast High School (2), Tusarara High School, Little Flower Catholic High School, and Abraham Lincoln High School. The male/female ratio was almost evenly divided. The mean grade point average of the twenty one students who reported their scores was 3.04, with the highest GPA reported as 4.0 and the lowest at 1.8. The majority were students of color, which is typical of the racial demographics of GWJ.

Method

The data were analyzed using grounded theory procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The QSR’s NUD*DIST software was used to assist in organizing the emergent data categories. The interview protocol were first analyzed using open and axial coding of both context (the situational elements contained within the data based on the questions) and process (themes emerging from questions that had shared qualities) simultaneously. In addition, special attention was given to each cohort as more years separated each cohort from the program experience.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from a qualitative analysis of interview data: 1) Personal Growth; 2) Multiple Perspectives, and; 3) Academic Progress/Skills.
Personal Growth

Within this broad category of personal growth, several sub-themes emerged to tell the students’ stories of how the Writing Matters Program affected them on a personal level, which include: Future goals, increased confidence, self-expression/relieving stress, staying out of trouble, and introspection/metacognition. Students attributed the program as helping them focus on their future goals, use writing to express themselves and relieve stress, stay out of trouble, and understand themselves in the context of their world more clearly.

Future Goals. Seventeen students noted that the program helped them to stay focused on the goal of graduating from high school or pursuing higher education. Three students indicated that the program did not help them with future goals. Excerpts below depict the majority viewpoint:

“The program influenced my life. It made me think twice [about] what I am doing and what I’m working towards. If it wasn’t for this class, I wouldn’t have gone to CHAD, the Charter High School Architecture and Design.” (KV, 9th grade)

“The program helped me to stay with my goals and conquer it.” (JE, 9th grade)

“I would say that the experience made me want to thrive and go further, to succeed and help people – to move on.” (JENE, 9th grade)

“The Freedom Writers got me more serious, down to earth. And there I told myself that I don’t want to lose in society. I want a future in society. The Freedom Writers was about real things. I was like, “I don’t want to live that kind of life. I don’t want to live in the ghetto. I don’t want to live in the hood. I want to be heard.” (DL, 10th grade)

“It kind of told me that no one can be left behind. That we all can be somebody.” (JM, 10th grade)

“I remember when the movie came out I ran to see it. You see how they overcame certain things and they succeed[ed]. . . . And it actually is inspiring, because it [made] me feel like life isn’t that bad, it could be a lot worse, . . . so you can overcome anything. It actually [gave] me more hope to go to college and become something more.” (AV, 11th grade)

“It helped me see more, what I mean is, get an understanding of how life really is. That everybody out there is not as nice as you see on TV, that there are problems out there that are out of your reach. It made me feel that there is something out there you can’t control, but it’s good to try to deal with it or help it.” (YC, 11th grade)

Self expression/relieving stress. Seventeen students discussed the impact of the program as helping them to express their emotions about life circumstance and to relieve stress. None of the students mentioned a negative effect on their thinking or actions. Excerpts follow:

“I thought it was a very unique program because a lot of kids don’t get a chance to express themselves the way they should and they hold in a lot of emotions and when it comes out, it usually blows up in people’s faces…” (LD, 9th grade)

“Kids need to be heard. If kids aren’t heard they will, like, explode. Kids need to be heard, they need to decide the future.” (DL, 10th grade)
“I think the project itself was a great way for students to really show how they feel. You can fill up pages and pages of things you kept bottled up deep down inside and I think the project let us be free in a way.” (RP, 11th grade)

**Increased Confidence.** Thirteen students spoke about the program as having a great impact on their confidence levels. Excerpts follow:

“Talking about everything I’ve been through made me more confident about everything.” (CN, 9th grade)

“…to become a better person, have a positive attitude and always believing in yourself.” (DS, 9th grade)

“From listening to people’s stories and how they go through life…Like, when you don’t have self-esteem, what can happen to them… I need confidence in order to have a better life.” (MC, 9th grade)

“It made me confident. Mr. G. always told me I could be whatever I want to be. So now I am trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up.” (VW, 10th grade)

**Staying out of Trouble.** Eight students attributed the program to helping them stay out of trouble. Excerpts follow:

“It helped me a lot. Before I went to Mr. G.’s class a lot of times people would get me mad. I would get mad real quick and be ready to fight somebody. Now, instead of taking my anger out on people, I write it down. And when I’m frustrated and have everything on my mind, I just write it down instead of doing the other stuff.” (VH, 9th grade)

“Because I was bad, like (sic) I was in trouble a lot of time[s]. But when I started doing this project I started to realize what goes on around me and opportunities that I have that I need to take advantage of because other people didn’t and they didn’t get anywhere.” (CF, 10th grade)

**Introspection/Metacognition.** Eight students spoke about a personal transformation resulting from thinking more deeply about their own lives as well as having been exposed to the stories of others. Excerpts follow:

“It made me think more about things. Like the things we had to write about, it made me think more about everything I had been through so now I just go back at it, and rethink it, and write more about it.” (CN, 9th grade)

“I actually felt better after I finished writing something. I’d write about something that was on my mind for a week and so I would feel better about it.” (TC, 9th grade)

“It helped me understand myself; so, getting to know myself helps me better able to understand other people and why they do certain things and accept them for that.” (WB, 11th grade)

In summary numerous students attributed their experiences with the Freedom Writer’s Program as having a big impact on them personally. Some believed that having the opportunity to express themselves and their life circumstance helped them to see their stories in the larger societal context. Other students noted that having the freedom to write relieved stress and for several, prevented them from taking their anger out on others. A majority of students noted the program’s effects on their maturity levels and persistence to reach
their academic goals and dreams. It should be noted that no students in this sample spoke of the program as having any negative influence on their thoughts, feelings, or behavior.

Multiple Perspectives

All students participating in the interviews discussed the impact of the program on their ability to see others’ points of view and to realize, many for the first time in their lives, that they are not alone with their problems, life challenges, and worries. For many, this had a major influence on their ability to put their problems into perspective. Numerous students commented on the fact that so many of the stories they heard were similar to their own, which made them see the broader view of adolescent and family-life circumstance as being more commonplace than they originally thought. For many students, hearing their peers’ struggles enabled them to more clearly understand their behaviors. This appeared to allow for empathy and collegiality to develop instead of divisiveness among students in these classes. Two themes emerging from this category were: 1) Understanding others, and; 2) Empathy.

Understanding others. Twenty-three students discussed the impact of the program on their ability to understand their peers’ issues and problems, which in turn helped them to deal more effectively with their own problems. Excerpts follow:

“It helps many people see what life really is beyond what they see [and] they think people are.” (JENE, 9th grade)

“The Freedom Writer’s Program helps you to see what’s wrong with everybody and how similar they are to you, so you can’t just make fun of a person because of what they look like or how they dress because you know you have the same problems when you are in their shoes.” (KV, 9th grade)

“I got to see other people’s lives by the Freedom Writers, in Philly. It’s not only me who goes through this, its other kids. Then I thought to myself. This is not only Philadelphia. This is around the country. Kids got their issues, too. Before the Freedom Writers I always thought that these were my problems. If anyone got in the way with me, there was going to be a problem. Now, I understand them more. They are going through problems and issues just like me. So I have to cool it.” (DL, 10th grade)

“...it made me see, “Wow, look what she’s going through and it made you connect on a deeper level.” (RP, 11th grade)

“...everyone has struggled and [has] gone through the same things, but everybody doesn’t express their feelings the same, so you can’t just go on the offensive. You have to figure out where they come from and what they go through and take that into consideration.” (VR, 11th grade)

Empathy. Seven students attributed the Freedom Writer’s program as helping them to empathize more deeply with others. In addition, this category included the students’ views regarding how the teacher, Mr. G., developed empathy for them through their stories. Excerpts follow:

“It was a situation that happened to some of my family and it made me understand what they were going through even though I didn’t go through it.” (SK, 9th grade)
“It not only helped me relate to people I associate with everyday but people, the victims. It helped me understand the parent’s point of view and the victim’s point of view, the person that got shot. It helped me realize that I related to their personal life.” (TB, 11th grade)

“It really helped me to open my mind to things. I used to think everything around me was pretty good, like nice, not crime and all that. But when I was told stories of gangs and pregnancy and things like that it just hit me.” (YC, 11th grade)

“I think that in the beginning it opened his [Mr. G.’s] eyes to see a lot that was going on.” (VH, 9th grade)

“Mr. G. was always a good teacher, but when you learn from your students and stuff you will become a better teacher.” (TG, 9th grade)

“Everybody had a different story to tell so he learned more about us on a personal level.” (WM, 10th grade)

In summary, the majority of students attributed the Freedom Writer’s Program as having a huge impact on their ability to understand others’ points of view and life challenges. This understanding led many to relate differently to these students, since understanding of what motivates a behavior helps one deal more effectively with it. For some students and their teacher, hearing the difficult challenges that many students have to face each and every day led them to develop empathy for them. This included Mr. Galbraith, the students’ eighth grade literacy teacher. Several students noted that having him hear their stories made him more aware of who they were on a personal level, which led to greater understanding of them as students and members of the class.

**Academic Progress/Skills**

This theme focused on how the Freedom Writer’s Program enhanced their academic progress in high school. Most spoke about the program’s influence on their writing skills and reading. Four out of the 27 participants noted the program did not help them at all academically in high school and one student indicated that he did not know whether the program helped him or not.

**Writing.** Numerous students noted that they developed more skill and confidence in their writing which translated to their success in high school. Excerpts follow:

“I always used to think about what I’m writing before I write and sometimes I got stuck. Freedom Writers allowed me to just write and then later on check to see if it makes sense and most of the time it did.” (TC, 9th grade)

“I write more and I write better. I take time when I write.” (SC, 9th grade)

“Before Freedom Writers I used to write real vague but when we did the project I started using words that made it sound better. I use good metaphors.” (RL, 9th grade)

“Before, when I was in the 8th grade, I couldn’t write for nothing. But, in Mr. G.’s class I would write whatever comes to my mind and I’d check over it. If it didn’t seem right, I’d just fix it, which helped me a lot.” (KV, 9th grade)
“Just being able to get down what I want to say on paper, knowing what I want to say, knowing my topic, what I want to talk about. And it helped me to learn that background is a big part of writing about anything – acknowledging your topic.” (WB, 11th grade)

“It helped me focus more and put more attention to my writing. It made it meaningful and now I like writing.” (VR, 11th grade)

A few students noted that many of their classes did not involve a lot of writing, but they continued to write on their own. For example:

“I don’t have any language classes. I got my own book. I write about my life, people, anything around me.” (CN, 9th grade)

**Reading.** Six students commented that the Freedom Writer’s program helped them to become avid and better readers. Excerpts follow:

“I’m doing better with reading than I was in 8th. Before, I got C’s and now I have A’s.” (DS, 9th grade)

“Before I did not read a lot and now I enjoy reading.” (RL, 9th grade)

“Freedom Writers got me more into poetry and literature.” (DL, 10th grade)

In summary, the Freedom Writer’s Program appeared to have a significant impact on a majority of students’ writing skills and for a few, their enjoyment of and achievement in reading. A few students also noted that even though it is not required in high school, they still keep a journal at home to write their innermost thoughts and challenges.

**Discussion**

Twenty-seven students who participated in the Writing Matters Program over the three years at GWJ, also volunteered to participate in this study. These students shared their views regarding the impact that the program had on them personally, socially, and academically. Not one student in this group indicated that the program had a negative impact on them in any area. Only a few students noted that the program did not really help them academically in high school, but shared that the program helped them personally and/or socially. The conclusion drawn based on the results of this study is that the Freedom Writer’s Program had a markedly significant impact on this sample of students in one or more of the major domains identified earlier. Since this was a fairly large sample of students, findings from this study can be generalized to the majority of students who participated in the Freedom Writer’s Program. However, it should be noted that because data could not be collected from the entire population, conclusions drawn relative to the lack of a negative impact cannot be made with certainty.

The majority of students discussed the huge impact that the program had on them personally. For some, the program gave them the necessary motivation, drive, and persistence to focus on their goals of graduating from high school or pursuing higher education. Others noted that they have become more able to express
their anger through writing, rather than fighting. Thus, this could be construed as a coping strategy – a method that helps students deal with overwhelming feelings of anger, self-esteem problems, or distress. Several students commented that writing journals and the sharing of their troubles and life challenges greatly relieved their stress and, consequently, helped them to see their situation more clearly on a metacognitive level.

The majority of students commented that hearing the stories of others helped them to understand the perspectives of others. Understanding multiple perspectives appeared to enable a majority of students to comprehend why their peers behave in certain ways that might otherwise be aversively interpreted or responded to by them. This comprehension led the majority of students to see the similarities among their peers regarding their mutual problems and challenges. Moreover, this insight added to a deeper understanding of them in the context of a larger world.

A majority of students noted that the program enhanced their writing skills and motivated others to read more or achieve better grades in high school. The program appeared to help them openly express their ideas on paper in a free and unhampered manner. This had been a challenge for some students before they were introduced to the program. Many of these students discussed writing as a process, starting with writing thoughts down on paper and then reviewing and editing for content, organization, and grammar. Several students who were reluctant writers became more motivated to complete the journal-writing assignments. Some students indicated that they regularly write in journals at home.

Conclusions and Implications

Several students shared their belief that more schools should provide opportunities for students to experience the Writing Matters Program. In fact, some students in this sample commented that they wished their high school had the program. Students had high praise for all aspects of the program including the writing of personal journals, which allowed them to express their fears, challenges, successes, and family/life situations. Many also enjoyed hearing others’ stories or having their journals read to the class.

Another positive feature of this program, from the student interviews, is the impact that reading the book and viewing the movie (The Freedom Writers) had on their motivation and persistence. Many shared that these aspects of the program were very inspiring to them. In addition, some classes visited the Holocaust museum or read The Diary of Anne Frank, or visited with Holocaust victims, or investigated victims of crime in Philadelphia. These experiences appeared to provide a more global context from which these students could view their own life circumstance. For some this helped them to see that their lives, comparatively, are not so bad. For others, reading about students like themselves who overcame many challenges to find success and attend college opened their eyes to this possibility.

Based on the positive reviews of the Freedom Writer’s Program gained from interviews of participating students, it is recommended that this program continue to expand its operation to other middle or high school environments.