

# Children who write ‘off the beaten track’ and what we can learn from them

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**I**n a recently initiated research project, I explore children’s voluntary creative writing and its possible significance for their motivation, engagement, writer identity and capacity to work with other types of writing. In this article I share some preliminary insights from my current field work among these children who write “off the beaten track” in the sense that they spend their free time outside of school writing together and being taught by professional authors. I argue that we can learn a great deal about some basic characteristics of writing, craft, community, and enjoyment in writing from these children and their writing practices. I also share some of my own (human) writing experiences (with reference to Badley, 2019), and I present a thought of not post-, but pre-academic writing: writing that is built on learning the craft of writing, becoming a writer, and working with story and voice early on and throughout education.

*Keywords:* children’s fiction writing, writing community, writing enjoyment, Progymnasmata, writer identity

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## Introduction

*“What I like about writing is that you only need your imagination. There are no boundaries, you are really just in your own world. It is also fun because you can get inspiration from all sorts of things, you can seriously write a poem about a flower swaying in the wind and nothing more”*

Sara 13

Sara, the girl I am quoting above, is one of the children that I have spoken to in my research. She and other children express to me how the freedom to use their imagination without restriction is something that they really value and enjoy in writing. Most of us probably don’t think of typical academic writing as something that involves using only

our imagination or poetically describing a natural phenomenon, and there certainly are restrictions when we write academically. In his article *Post-Academic Writing: Human Writing for Human Readers* (2019), Graham Francis Badley calls for a more accessible academic writing: writing that has a more human perspective, writing that connects the writer to the reader by showing that there is someone behind the text, a human with a voice. He also encourages us to immerse ourselves, practice and learn more about the craft of writing, so that we will be able to write more lively, creative and less inflated and disembodied. He wants us to improve as storytellers. He wants us to *enjoy* writing more. With this in mind, I will argue that we can learn a great deal about these aspects of writing from Sara and other child writers.

### **Academic writing: Persuasion and practice**

Being a rhetorician by education and training, my view on writing is fundamentally rhetorical. Writing and the teaching of writing have been a vital part of the rhetorical domain since the birth of the discipline around 400 BCE (Kock, 2013). The teachings of rhetoric had from the beginning a strong focus on the practical activity, the development and display of text production. Many rhetoricians, going back to Aristotle, generally define rhetoric as the capacity to discern the available persuasive potential in any given case (Jørgensen & Villadsen (Ed.), 2009). So to me, academic writing is primarily about persuasion and building arguments. An argument can take various and sometimes also creative or narrative forms, but regardless, persuasion is at the core of the academic genre and text in my understanding. Learning to write well, to build an argument, to write with flair and creativity requires lots of practice, and – quoting Badley – “*The trouble is that neither academic nor post-academic writers get much or any training in writing*” (Badley, 2019, p. 186). To become good writers, we need to practice, also by doing different kinds of writing. For us to actually spend time writing, for us to really sit down and do this varied practice of writing, we need to feel like writing is something that we like to do. We need to feel like writers. As one of my favorite writing teachers Donald Murray would say, *our attitudes usually predict and limit our accomplishments* (Murray, 1986): How we feel about writing, and what we think of ourselves as writers is paramount. This may come as no surprise. However, I am learning new and interesting things about this fundamental circumstance of writing when I observe, spend time with, and talk to

children between the ages of 11 to 18 who write. They write because they enjoy it and because they see themselves as “someone who writes.” I will share with you what I think we can all learn from these children and their writing practices and why. To get there, I begin by sharing some insight into the intimacy of my own current writing practice and the attitudes and feelings towards writing that to my experience are quite common. Sharing is essential, in fact it is a fundamental part of the human writing experience (Badley, 2019).

### **My own writing**

When I was working on the first drafts (yes, plural) of this article, I found myself stalling, hesitating, getting stuck: What position was I writing from? What did I want to say? What could I say? Who was I to say anything, really? I shared my doubts with a friend, Marie, an anthropologist and fellow researcher and writer. “*You know,*” she said matter-of-factly, “*We all feel that way. All the time, really.*” It is comforting, isn’t it? To know that you are not the only one who struggles with writing. Marie knew what I needed to hear, and she was able to help me, because she, too, is writing, exposed and vulnerable in the same way that I am. But, to receive this kind of comfort we must be willing to show how vulnerable we are when we write. We need a sense of community. When I feel vulnerable and unable to write (and if Marie is not around), I also like to consult with Murray:

“*Put yourself on the spot,*” he says. Share your doubts.

“*Respect your own judgement,*” he says. “*Of course, you should be aware of the scholarship that has preceded you, but pay close attention to what you see with your own eyes, hear with your own ears, think with your own mind. Ours is not only a profession of confirmation but also of exploration [...] If I publish my guesses, others might respond with their truths.*”

“*Write for yourself,*” he says. “*Don’t try to figure out what other people want but try to figure out what you have to say and how it can best be said.*”

*“Lower your standards,” he says, quoting William Stafford: “The so-called ‘writing block’ is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance [...] One should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It’s easy to write. You shouldn’t have standards that inhibit you from writing.”*

*“There is no need to be consistent,” he says. “Learning does not stop with publication. [...] “Of course I will contradict myself from time to time.”*  
(Murray, 1986).

I like to think of Donald Murray as ‘My friend Don’: The way he smiles at me, the reader, from the cover of *The Essential Don Murray* – friendly white beard, glasses, twinkle in the eye – makes me feel like he wants to help, and reading his advice instantly changes my attitude and my feelings towards my own writing. It works every time.

### **Being a writing teacher**

Murray (who died in 2006) has been called America’s greatest writing teacher, and his mission was to demystify writing by revealing as much as possible about the habits, processes, and practices of writers (Newkirk & Miller, 2009). I took on Murray’s mission as my own when I worked for nearly a decade as a writing teacher and consultant at The Danish School of Education, Aarhus University in Denmark. Working as a teacher of academic writing I learned that most of Murray’s advice also helped my students. I saw that a lot of students had never really learned to master the craft of writing. Not only were they insecure about the academic genre(s) and what was expected in the final texts, they were also very insecure and inexperienced with handling the writing process. I have seen this fact come as a surprise to other university teachers, who believe strongly that writing is something students must have learned at least in high school, that teaching writing isn’t something we really have time to deal with, that we can expect students to just be able to do it. At the same time, it is a widespread notion that “students can’t write” (Hvass & Heger, 2017; Laugesen, 2021). Of course, students do learn to write in the Danish school system: They are exposed to many different writing tasks and to writing in many different genres through primary, secondary and high school. But do we teach *the craft of writing*?

I have my doubts. My students had been told since high school that an academic text needed to include analysis, but they didn't understand exactly what analysis was, how or *why* you write it. They knew of course that they had to meet the deadlines, but they often didn't know what to do or how to get there. They were unfamiliar with strategies for handling the process of writing, and they would tell me: "Can't you just tell me what I should write?", "I'm just not a good writer," "I am someone who never really wrote much," or "I just don't enjoy writing." In the lines of Badley, you could say that many students don't feel they have a writing voice (Badley, 2019). They don't know who they are supposed to *be* as writers, what they are supposed to say or why; they are unsure about whom they are writing to or under what circumstances (Heger & Hvass, 2018). Even to experienced writers, the act of writing can feel new or different every time we have to write in a new genre, a new context, for a new audience. This is the case for me, and maybe for you? Certainly for students.

In 2018, Helle Hvass (a fellow rhetorician) and I published a book based on a writing counseling project. In the project we had provided help with writing to more than 1,000 students over a period of five years. The students all came to us because they were experiencing some kind of writing issue and needed help with their writing assignments. Our job as trained rhetoricians and writers was to be the 'someone' that students, and sometimes faculty, could turn to with questions and doubts about academic writing. Our book has a Danish title that might translate to: *Keep On Writing*. We wrote it by collecting all the questions we had received from students in writing counseling, and we also collected the answers we provided that seemed to have helped the most. The first and most important part of the book touches on handling the processes and the craft of writing, because we saw that this was the fundamental issue that all students had. We made it our most important task to help keep up the student writer's spirit by giving out the kind of comfort that we naturally gave each other on a regular basis, or that Marie gives me: knowing that you are not alone in your struggles. "*Many students think that their questions about writing are stupid. They are ashamed to be experiencing writing problems. They think that they ought to be able to write in (all) the academic genre(s), but at the same time they are missing someone who will tell them what they are actually supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it*" (Heger & Hvass, 2018, p. 7 translated from Danish). So many of my students felt that they were just not writers – sometimes

only because they experienced recurring problems, problems that I think we all experience when writing. I have long been wondering what we can do to help all students feel like they are writers. How can we help ourselves when writing? This brings me back to the work I am currently doing in my research with children and young people who *do* feel like they are writers. Working with them is constantly inspiring and educational.

### **Why we should be interested in children's fiction writing outside of school**

We have been used to thinking that the ability to read contributes to success in education, employment, and citizenship: Reading is a democratic craft. Writing has traditionally been considered something that few would master like a fine art, and the rest of us just had to learn to make it through (Clark, 2006). In recent years there has been a so-called turn in the development of mass literacy. As writing researcher Deborah Brandt has put it: Writing has overtaken reading as the basis of people's daily literate experience (Brandt, 2015). To become a writer early on has become vital in learning, education, and civic life. *Writing* is a democratic craft. Despite the importance of this, many students still fail to develop strong writing skills and many struggle to develop motivation in writing. Motivation actually tends to recede through the school years for many students (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007; Camacho, Alves & Boscolo, 2020). It is known that children who do enjoy writing and are motivated to write are eight times more likely to achieve well academically (Clark & Teravainen, 2017; Young & Ferguson, 2021). Factors like interest, identity, engagement and motivation are vital to the development of strong writing skills (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Krogh, 2012; Laugesen, 2021; Matthiesen, 2015). This we know; but we know very little about what kinds of writing instruction, teaching or writing practices can actually strengthen these factors (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007; Camacho, Alves & Boscolo, 2020; Nolen, 2007).

Some argue, however, that fiction writing and literary participation might promote children's desire to write and their overall development as writers. Bret Healey, an Australian writing researcher shows in his research that children appreciate writing in creative, narrative, and personal genres when they are developing as writers (Healey, 2019). In her work from 2019, Danish researcher Marie-Louise Molbæk notes that children benefit from experience with fiction writing when doing other types of writing tasks (Molbæk, 2019). In England, the organization First Story has a similar point in their

yearly reports from the creative writing program that they offer to socially or academically challenged students: The young people who participate in their program experience a significant improvement in writing skills, but they also seem to improve in all other school topics across the curriculum (First Story, 2019). Baran, a boy who has taken part of the program is quoted in the newest report from 2021:

*Before First Story I didn't like writing anything, I felt it was something that I couldn't do. I really hated my English lessons because I had to write. When I found out that my class were involved in First Story, I didn't want to do it. I thought it was going to be just like my English lessons. However, I soon realized that it was different – interesting. The workshops allowed me to express my feelings. Being given the freedom to write whatever I wanted made me feel free. I didn't have to think about the rules of writing, techniques, spelling and grammar, and I was always encouraged to write in whatever way felt natural to me. It felt like I found my own voice. (...) I have proved to myself that I can write and I can write well. I have found that I have my own unique style which is appreciated by others. (...) I now feel confident about my writing skills and being able to speak in front of my class, which is something that I would never have done before. I have come such a long way and I'm proud.*

As a writer and writing teacher I am moved, inspired, and enamored by this quote. Stories like this one are repeated by other participants of First Story's program. We might imagine the kind of writer Baran would (not) have been had he not had this opportunity to discover himself as a writer through creative writing. When this first came to my attention and I started my current research, I soon realized that children and young people's creative writing is researched very little both in L1 studies (i.e., first language education research), in writing research and in children's literature or culture studies. In research within the field of children's literature there has, however, been a recent growing interest for children's creative text production as part of understanding the concept of "children's literature" or "youth literature" (Christensen, 2016; Gubar, 2013).

### **Children's perspectives in writing research and how they matter**

This brings me to another thing that is poorly researched, namely children's *experiences* with writing in general and with creative writing specifically (Healey & Merga, 2017). In my research and in exploring and understanding these creative writing practices, I strive to include as best I can the perspectives of the participating children. This can be an ambiguous claim (Warming, 2019, Spyrou, 2018), so let me elaborate a bit on that: My project explores children's "writing enjoyment," "writing desire," or "writing for pleasure" (Heger, 2020; Young & Ferguson, 2021). The aim of the project is twofold: to theoretically explore this terminology ("skrivelyst" in Danish), and to empirically explore children's fiction writing experiences. The overall method is qualitative, drawing on anthropological approaches to theory making (eg. Bundgaard et al., 2018; Cerwonka & Malkii, 2007). I carry out the empirical fieldwork as an explorative case study with ethnographic methods – that is extensive participant-observations, informal conversations and interviews (Bundgaard et al., 2018; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Hoek, 2014; Spradley 1979) and phenomenological, hermeneutical analysis, inspired by e.g., Healey (2019) and Healey & Merga (2017). I am currently in the process of carrying out this field work in three (possibly four) author schools for children and in two (possibly three) school classes (grades 5th and 6th), where authors act as visiting writing teachers. The main interest of my fieldwork is the writing practice that takes place, and the participating children's experiences and perspectives. The empirical findings will feed into the development of terminology and theory (Bowen, 2006; Bundgaard et al., 2018; Hoek, 2014). This means that I actively include the children in the process of understanding and theorizing "writing enjoyment". I draw a fundamental inspiration from children's literature studies as well, adopting Marah Gubar's '*kinship model*' understanding of children and childhood when I work with the children in my project. "[The kinship model] is premised on the idea that children and adults are akin to one another, which means that they are neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar. The concept of kinship indicates relatedness, connection, and similarity without implying homogeneity, uniformity, and equality" (Gubar, 2013, p. 453). This means for instance that I don't claim that I am able to experience exactly what children themselves experience. I am not a child, and I don't pretend that I can assume the position of one in my research. I am conscious of the fact that I – the adult researcher – have both responsibility and power to make

decisions about the project in a way that the children don't. But I do my very best to explore and understand their experiences, and to consider their points of view. In my research I respect and value their statements and experiences on writing as much as my own and those of the adult authors who teach in the author schools. The children's views on what it means to enjoy writing are pivotal in the selection and development of theory in my project. Adopting the kinship model of understanding children and childhood also sets the foundation for my firm belief that we, adult academic writers and writing teachers, can certainly learn valuable lessons from these children, their writing practices, and their experiences with writing and being writers.

So, in this article, drawing also on Pahl (2019), I investigate ideas about writing across age, contexts, and genres. This "writing-across" perspective means moving from a focus on "writing-in" (writing as a single mode in a single context) to a perspective on writing as something that is unavoidably entangled and emerging across different situated events and settings (Smith, Hall & Sousanis, 2015). Pahl points to the need in writing research for "a new onto-epistemological stance – that of affect" (Pahl, 2019).

*Ideas lie across and are located in the everyday, opening out new modes of thinking about patterned practices [...] [T]his approach requires a much more diffuse set of research practices, or 'thinking devices' to look at writing on the move. Research methods have to be agile to make sense of these processes, requiring a new horizontal mode of inquiry. This might mean re-doing research ethics so that children and young people become agentive in what gets researched and how, and they themselves can become part of writing research as it unfolds in their midst. (Pahl 2019, 2)*

And so, I move on to some details about the writing practice in author schools for children that I am currently studying.

### **Researching 'author schools for children' in Denmark**

An author school in Denmark is a free-time writing activity taught by professional authors. It typically takes place at a local library. The participating children write "stories and poetry" as they themselves put it. Children are aged 11 to 18, and meetings are

typically once a week for two hours. Much of the time they just sit and write together quietly, but they also talk about writing, read aloud, give feedback, and receive writing prompts, tips, exercises, and knowledge about writing from the author. The author typically also shares her own personal experiences with writing processes, making stories, building characters, playing with language, etc. Some author schools publish the children's stories and poetry in books (anthologies). The children are seen and treated as apprenticing authors (see also Cremin, 2020). The author works as a kind of mentor, helping the children to navigate and master the writing process and to tell their stories, craft their poems, etc. Some of the children have hopes of becoming professional authors themselves one day, but this isn't the main point of their participation. The author schools that I study are not talent programs; they are free-time activities like music lessons or soccer practice. Within the past 10 to 15 years in Denmark there has been a significant increase in the number of these author schools for children (Skyggebjerg, 2016). Despite this rather flourishing literary writing culture among children and youth, there is almost no research on the subject. This to me was a remarkable realization: Writing is a fundamental and crucial activity in school at all levels, and motivation towards writing is a persistent challenge, as I already stated above. Yet, very little attention is paid to this growing number of organized free-time activities where children write and receive professional writing instruction for the simple reason that they enjoy it. Skyggebjerg – the only Danish researcher who so far has written about this – suggests that knowing more about these activities and the experiences of the participating children might inspire new ways of promoting written engagement and motivation, also in traditional, academic school settings (Skyggebjerg, 2016). An obvious inspiration for my project.

In my fieldwork I visit the author schools when they meet on a regular basis. I participate as much as possible in what is happening, but at the same time I try to observe the writing practice “as it is” without interfering more than I have to by just being present (Bundgaard et al., 2018). Writing is a vital part of my own methodology, and I aim at becoming an accepted member of the children's writing community. I learned quickly that the children and the author share a quite intimate space, and that I had to work to become part of this space for them to want to speak to me and share their thoughts and experiences with me. I write as much as possible *with* the children. I try to experience what they are experiencing through writing. This means that when they write, I write.

When they stop writing to talk or share texts and thoughts, I also stop writing, and I also share when possible. Sometimes I take part in a writing exercise and share the outcome of that – for instance a poem written in twenty minutes time (because that is what they do) – sometimes I write and share my field notes. I thus do everything I can to show that I am willing to be vulnerable in writing just like they are with each other. So far, this has helped me to gradually gain the children’s trust and confidence, so that I can get as close as possible to their perspectives and lived experiences. The interviews I conduct range from “talk here and there” to “informal conversations” to more structured conversations with guiding questions.

From these conversations with the children specifically some themes emerge quite clearly when I ask them questions like, “What do you like about the author school?”, or “What makes you enjoy writing?” Below I sketch out these themes as a preliminary insight from my research into children’s experiences with writing enjoyment and being writers. Afterwards I will return to my overall argument – what I believe we (academic writers and teachers of academic writing) can learn from these children and their writing practices.

### **Current research status – analytical assumptions**

This article builds on meticulous *episodical readings* of the first four months of my ethnographical studies. These readings involve reflections on the data already produced, its relevance and gaps, reading through my fieldnotes in intervals and so on (Bundgaard et al., 2018; Hoek, 2014). Based on these readings I outline a number of themes, i.e. topics that I see coming up somehow in and across all my conversations with the children so far. I will now bring forward examples of three themes. There are more potential themes than the three, but they are so far the most dominant throughout my data material: When I speak to the children about why they enjoy writing in the author school, they all eventually talk about 1) a strong sense of belonging to a *community* of writers or “others with the same interests,” 2) the agency, independence or sense of *freedom* to “decide for oneself what and how to write,” and 3) the importance of being able to use their *imagination* “without restriction.”

### Writing community (vulnerability and belonging)

Writing researcher Steve Graham proposes an understanding of a writing community where:

*Writing is conceptualized as a social activity situated within specific writing communities. Writing in these communities is accomplished by its members. [...] [W]riting is simultaneously shaped and bound by the characteristics, capacity, and variability of the communities in which it takes place and by the cognitive characteristics, capacity, and individual differences of those who produce it. (Graham, 2018, p. 258)*

The practice of writing is thus viewed at the same time as both an individual and a social activity. Some important features of a functioning writing community are: a shared purpose, members feeling like a part of something bigger (a *collective history*), and engaging in shared common activities. Using Graham's definition of a writing community, one could say that in the author schools, the children definitely find a strong shared purpose in writing together. They improve their writing (skills) through shared activities, they can express whatever feelings, stories, or thoughts they want to express in writing, they share an interest and a passion for writing with peers, and they get guidance from a professional writer who accepts them and sees them as writers on their own terms. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes is from one of my visits to an author school. In this particular case, a group of nine children (aged 11 to 17) meet with the author "Lisbeth" at a local library every Monday afternoon from 4:30 to 6:30 pm. The library is quite small and located in an old railway building. All the exhibited books on the library shelves face out into the room, the covers of hundreds of stories facing the children as they write their own. The children sit quietly together and write. Trains rush by outside, while the only distinct noise inside is the tapping of fingers on keys. After having written for a while, they stop to talk about their writing, how it is going, or what to do next.

Lisbeth is sitting on a chair that is a bit higher than the low coffee table, her socked feet resting on the edge of the tabletop. The children are seated in the small grey sofas around the table, laptops in laps. One girl is writing by hand

in a notebook. I have managed to find a stool; I have placed it in a corner between two of the sofas. I am 'in' their circle, but also not quite part of it. (It's an OK position, I think). Lisbeth continues: "What about your story – what was the conflict in yours?" (she is talking to Bera) [...] "It is what makes the person do stuff, right?" says Bera. They keep on talking about basic conflicts, goals and obstacles in stories. Lisbeth turns to Selma and talks about her story from last week, then she adds, to everybody: "Your stories make impressions on me, I remember them" – and she keeps on referring in detail to the children's different texts from last week. [...] "What is the conflict there?" (to Selma). Selma says that she doesn't quite think that there is a conflict yet? "That's right" says Lisbeth, "it is something that this character hasn't met yet, but what could it be?" Selma says something about meeting a new character who then betrays the first character, and then falls in love maybe? [...] Lisbeth keeps on talking to the group about Selma's story, and the others join in with suggestions as to what could happen and how the story could evolve. [...] A main character and a goal is good, says Lisbeth, but there must be obstacles and challenges (conflict), otherwise the story becomes dull. [...] (Heger, field note, 2022).

After this, they keep on talking about what they want to do today. As per usual, Lisbeth has different suggestions, one group could work with poetry, and another could keep on working with building plots. They all agree to do that, and they get to writing quietly together again. Lisbeth is also willing to share some of her own experiences with writing – how does she come up with ideas? What does she do when she cannot write? What are her strategies in the process of writing or coming up with ideas for stories? Both Young & Ferguson (2021) and Cremin (2017) touch on this aspect: the importance of being taught writing by someone who is him-/herself a writer. In the rhetorical writing teaching tradition this is almost taken for granted (e.g. Murray 2004; Lindemann 2001), but it isn't the norm in the Danish educational system, and this is something the children in the author schools really value (see also Cremin & Oliver, 2017; Cremin, 2006).

Looking at this writing community from the outside and coming into it, I would say that it is also built on willingness to share and be vulnerable in writing. When speaking to the

children, it is obvious that the sense of belonging to this community is of great importance to them:

*“I like it that I am here with others who also like to write, that we’re writing together.”*

– Sara 13

*“What is so special about the author school is that the others read what I write (...) that you get to see how different we can all write... that we see each other’s (texts).”*

– Selma 12

*“I think the best thing about being here is that you can write together with others, because - I mean, it’s also fine to write at home, but I – it just doesn’t give me the same, the energy is just not the same. If I write at home I can often feel like, no I don’t want to do this, this is boring, I can’t come up with anything. But here, we’re inspired by each other, or at least I feel I’m inspired by the others.”*

– Natasja 12

### **A sense of freedom (agency)**

In their book *Writing Voices – Creating Communities of Writers* Cremin and Myhill point out how children and young people in their research “value and enjoy writing more when they are in a position to exert a sense of their own authorial agency and ownership. [...] The older primary writers [...] desired more independence and increased imaginative involvement in their writing; many also voiced a marked pleasure in narrative writing.” (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 84). This corresponds very well with my own preliminary findings. I am writing here about the theme I call *a sense of freedom*. Below I present another theme, *imagination*. As the quote from Cremin and Myhill suggests, these two themes might be closely related, but in my data I do see them as two separated themes. The Danish children in my study frequently use the word “free” (“fri” in Danish). Going further in my research I will dive deeper into this concept of ‘freedom’, drawing also on

other researchers' work on children's understandings of freedom or *agency* (Spyrou, 2018; Wyness, 2015). My current focus here is the fact that the children, across all my conversations with them, talk a lot about the value of being free to write what you want and how you want:

*"It is fun to write when it is really free (...) when you can just decide for yourself."*

– Alexis 16

*"If Lisbeth says that we have to do something, then you can just write something else if you don't think what she's suggesting is fun for you."*

– Emilie 11

*"It is like this; writing at school is like a small claustrophobic room, and you have to constrict yourself through it (...) and then here, then you're just in a mansion with lots of space."*

– Bera 11

*"I want to say that I do like writing in Danish (lessons at school). But then I just think Danish (writing) is more fun when there aren't so many rules. And that is also what is so great about the author school, that there aren't so many rules about character traits, specific story lines and all that."*

– Alexis 16

It is quite striking in my data how the children in these conversations create an image of the author school as a contrast or even an opposition to writing in school: At the author school writing is free and you can decide for yourself what and how you will write, whereas in school, writing is restricted and instrumental. This is something that I will also investigate further throughout the course of my PhD research. Whether writing in school really is so restricted and instrumental, I cannot say from my current data. But as I am taking the children's perspective seriously, I must note that this is the clear experience of the children in my study, across the different author schools. The children of my current

data attend a total of 12 different Danish schools (both from urban and rural areas). It is worth mentioning that these children obviously don't represent all children. As a group they represent children who are already interested in writing and in this sense the sample of children is biased from the get-go. Later in my PhD research I will explore what happens when the writing practice represented by the professional author in the author school "travels across" (Pahl, 2019) to a conventional classroom where 'all children' participate in the writing practice.

### **Imagination (story)**

The last theme I will highlight in this article is imagination. I see it quite clearly in my data and it has to do with "coming up with stuff," "making up stories," and "using your imagination" without restriction. The children tell me that they value and enjoy writing stories and just making things up, playing with characters, plot and language – without the restrictions of predetermined framing, topics, storylines or the like. The following is a transcript excerpt from a talk I had with a group of girls from an author school. In the situation, we are talking about a specific writing exercise that they have told me that they all like a lot. It is a "warming-up" exercise where they are given, for instance, a word, an image or a piece of music – and then just have to write whatever comes to mind non-stop for 10 minutes. Esther is 14 years old, the others – a group of seven girls - are 12 to 15 years old.

*Esther: You can easily get going with writing something. And then there aren't so many boundaries... Maybe it's also just that, at school... I don't know, at school there must always be SO many boundaries. You can try to bend them, but the teachers don't like it. But then with this, I like it that if you really come up with something good, you just feel like I could go home and keep on writing, and – well, I feel that way about the other exercises too.*

*Stine (me): Tell me more about what you mean by boundaries?*

*Esther: So, like, assignments from the teacher at school...?*

*Stine: Ah OK, so the frame or the writing instructions – that it has to be a certain way?*

*Esther: Mmhmm, yeah!*

Stine: *And – you don't like that, or?*

Esther: *No! Because then you're not allowed to use your imagination (...) I think it's really boring when you don't get a chance to come up with something on your own.*

[There is scattered mumbling of “yeah”, “mmhmm” and other acknowledging sounds from the others]

Stine: *You said yes, Ingeborg, and you're nodding too, Clara-Sofie? Do you all feel this way? [all nodding and saying yes or yeah].*

Again, the opposition to school writing is quite obvious, but so is the emphasis on the value of being able to just come up with stuff, any way you like, using your imagination. Summing up, it seems that these children feel like writers and enjoy writing because of a strong sense of belonging to a writing community. In the intimate space of this community, they can share thoughts, feelings, writing attempts and so on, and they can be vulnerable in writing together. They value and enjoy the freedom of independence in writing and the unrestricted use of imagination when writing stories or poetry. They simply have fun writing together, writing is a form of play. But there may be even more to fiction writing than having fun and enjoying writing.

### **What if imagination and story prelude argument and logical reasoning?**

Let us go back to the report from First Story and the quote from the boy Baran that I presented earlier in this article. Being able to write creatively brought something about in his writing that wasn't there before. Confidence, engagement, identity, voice. I see notions of this too in my conversations with the children from the Danish author schools:

*“Well, I've gotten better at writing stories and stuff, of course, because I have started coming here, and uhm, I also think I am better at giving feedback to others in school now.”*

– Natasja 12

*"I think I have gotten better at presenting and performing at school, and things like that, and also, I've gotten better at reading aloud. I feel more confident."*

– Ingeborg 15

*"I also am better now at just... talking to people, really. I didn't really do that before."*

– Maja 14

The children's notion of being 'someone who writes' is quite strong. If they didn't already have a strong writer identity when they arrived at the author school, the author and the children among themselves generate and amplify the feeling of being a writer, of authorship. The confidence they gain from this seems to spread to other areas of school and life.

Although my results are preliminary, I will now risk the notion that creative writing or fiction writing specifically might have a potential in writing enjoyment, building a writer identity and improving writing skills more broadly. I get this idea from the First Story reports, from my own data – and also from knowledge about the system of teaching prose composition and elementary rhetoric practiced in European schools in the Hellenistic period until early modern times (as described, among others, by Kennedy, 2003). Stay with me as I explain this connection. The handbook of writing exercises which is called the "Progymnasmata" was the common basis for teaching writing and composition for centuries. "Progymnasmata" means "preliminary exercises" and the curriculum described in this work consists of a "*series of composition exercises, which present a graded, cumulative sequence of writing tasks, manageable at each step, within an explicit rhetorical framework. The method uses the part as a pattern for the whole. You learn how to compose a whole speech or written essay by first becoming proficient in the parts*" (D'Angelo, 2000). So, the idea of this writing program is that when you have done all the single exercises, you will be proficient in the craft of writing as a whole and ready for participating in civic life, public debates, etc. The sequence of exercises reads as follows: the narrative, the fable, the description, the proverb, the anecdote, refutation/confirmation, the commonplace, praising and blaming, the comparison, the

speech-in-character, the thesis, and “for” and “against” laws (D’Angelo, 2000; Kennedy, 2003). What I want to emphasize here is that in all accounts of these exercises, the first things one must practice as a developing writer are “narrative” and “fable” – fictional exercises – and the underlying idea of this pedagogy is that in order to become an educated participant in the democratic conversation, someone who is able to reflect on issues of civic importance, someone who can successfully argue a certain viewpoint, someone who can understand and analyze contexts and audiences, one must first and foremost develop one’s imagination and understand the power of story. As D’Angelo writes: *“Imagine learning the art of persuasion through such interesting and enjoyable forms as myths, historical episodes, descriptions, fables, proverbs, and other kinds of wise sayings, anecdotes, speech-in-character, and the like.”* So going back to recent research in Denmark: When Molbæk (2019) notes that it seems the children in her study can use what they learn from fiction writing in other types of writing tasks, she might be touching on something that goes back to an ancient understanding of the importance of practicing writing and becoming a proficient writer through fiction, imagination, and story.

### **Post-academic writing?**

I will finish this article by going back to Badley and his encouragement to immerse ourselves and enjoy writing more as academics. To be more creative and less disembodied. In this regard, the first thing we can learn from the children in my study is that a strong sense of community in writing can affect the way we see ourselves as writers and how much we enjoy writing. Consequently, how much we enjoy writing might determine how good writers we can become, how much we dare write creatively and freely. This I believe to be fundamental. From my study (both reading of previous research and in my current empirical field work) I see, however, that writing enjoyment is like a slippery piece of soap. It’s continually difficult to grasp and define what it is and how to study it. So far, however, I am convinced that there is an important relation to the sense of belonging to a community. As Graham writes *“The social environment can further promote or suppress a sense of motivation within the writing community* (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007). *If the community views its writing as meaningful, addressing important issues or problems and involving the collective efforts of the community, this will likely create a heightened and shared sense of motivation within the organization versus a*

*social milieu where community members feel disconnected and do not value the writing that is done.*” (Graham, 2018, p. 262).

Building on my own experience with being a writing teacher and learning from my current research, I have the following thoughts on the idea and ambition of Badley’s post-academic writing: **1) *We need to create local and global communities of writers who are willing to be vulnerable:*** To become more “human” writers in academia, I believe we need a stronger sense of community – among colleagues and among students. We need to be OK with vulnerability and doubt. We need to embrace the affective domain in writing and address more openly the emotions, feelings, attitudes, anxieties and (a)motivations that we all experience (Laugesen, 2021; McLeod, 1991), realizing maybe that people who never share and always look like they’re in complete control – that they are probably very lonely (Murray, 1986). **2) *We should not expect ourselves (or our students!) to be able to do things that we haven’t learned or that we have never had time to practice.*** We should be mindful that being able to write more creatively, arguing with clear voice and storytelling, as Badley suggests we do, is not so easy. As much as I admire the ambition (and agree with the call for prose that isn’t impersonal and impenetrable) I also know this: It takes practice, time, effort and patience (or blood, sweat, and tears as we might say). As far as our students, we should not spend energy being dissatisfied with the students that we have, but instead we should find out what they need to learn to become, and think of themselves as, writers. **3) *We might think about what comes before academic writing.*** What should be taught in the schools? Learning from the children in my study, I would say that we need to take a closer look at the role of *writing as craft* and *creative writing*, and the power of imagination and story in the writing classroom. Perhaps, overall, a more playful approach to writing and the teaching of writing. Cremin and Myhill pose a similar argument (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 33), and the notion also corresponds with the classical rhetorical teaching tradition (see Fleming, 2016). In Denmark, for a number of years now (first in 2016), the option to write a story or another fictional assignment has been removed from the final written L1 exam in 9th grade. This has led to discussions about the role of fiction writing in schools. From my perspective this discussion is vital. There is a strong tradition for reading and teaching with literature in the Danish L1 education, but in writing instruction the dominant focus has in recent years been on writing in “authentic genres” meaning mainly situated, communicative

(journalistic) genres that exist in the world outside of the school context. There is nothing wrong with that as such; but in this perspective, what do we do with fiction writing? If we are to learn something from the children in my study and if we were to draw on the knowledge of the ancient teachings of the “Progymnasmata,” we might explore the notion that fiction writing is important for the development of learning to write successfully in the more informative, rational, argumentative (and, ultimately, academic) text genres.

I would like to think more about not so much what a *post-academic* writing program would look like, but perhaps what a *pre-academic* writing teaching could consist of. Most academic writers will need to master the conventions before we can learn how to break them. We need to master the craft of writing to be able to work creatively and play with it. If we want strong writers at our universities, writers who are capable of variation, creativity and both convention and innovation, we might start thinking about how we create writers throughout the school system. I think we should consider for instance how we can create strong communities of writers in classrooms, and how we can make every student feel like a writer. It might be that in the Danish language we have the fundamental issue that we don't really speak of “writers” in the normal classroom because we don't have the right word for someone who isn't a professional. The Danish word “skriver” or “elevskriver” is used by researchers (e.g. Krogh and others), but we don't see it used in classrooms or with children calling themselves that. In the author schools, all the children are writers – or “authors” (“forfattere” in Danish) – and from what I see, just being able to use that word about themselves has a fundamental impact on their beliefs about themselves as “someone who writes”.

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