A Study on Social Writing and Zone of Proximal Development

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Abstract

The present study explored the impact of social writing on the participation of children in literacy activities in the classroom. Conducted on Class IV students from a rural government school in Kerala, this study adopted qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. Vygotsky's theoretical concepts, 'zone of proximal development' and 'collaborative learning' were used to design and experiment a new pedagogic approach called the 'social writing programme'. The findings of the study support a shift from the 'traditional, mechanical classroom writing activities' to a social writing activity, as it offers a space to children who can use writing as part of their social life. Participation in this social writing programme either individually, allowed the child to select his/her own text for writing, write at his/her own pace, write in small groups, where he/she could use writing as a tool for engaging with the self and negotiate her/his positions as well as identity. She/he is found to be benefitting from the reifications of his/her identity to write and what she/he finally writes. The social writing programme created a new set of semiotic and personal resources that motivated students more than the traditional writing activities.

Introduction

Writing received tremendous attention of the researchers and school education experts after the publication of Emig's Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders in 1971. His book brought the attention of researchers to writing, as a distinct social-cognitive activity, than reading. This increased attention to writing research led to the movement 'Writing to Learn (WTL)' in 1970s. It claimed that writing could serve

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more modest roles in learning, through articulating, understanding and rehearsing material to fix it in memory. The WTL literature produced only a micro theory of the writing process and lacked a macro picture. It had a predominantly cognitive orientation and failed to see writing as an emotional, social and cognitive activity.

The WTL literature ignored the writing that promoted critical thinking, the development of a positive identity among learners and motivated the learners to continue education for longer periods of time. Ball (2006) noted in one of his articles that, during the course of the development of WTL, there was an uprising feeling in the research community that most school curricula and research on teaching-writing continue to reinforce the values and interests of the middle-class European and American parents and their culture, and omit the experiences of the racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. These discomforts led writing research to turn to sociocultural theories and methods emerging from psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics and semiotics. The sociocultural approaches to writing reject the simple equation of writing with material texts or acts of inscription, and treating writing as chains of short and long term production, representation, reception and distribution. Writing, on the other hand, was seen as an activity that involves dialogic processes of invention. Texts, as artefacts in the writing activity, and the inscription of linguistic signs in some, are parts of streams of mediated, distributed and multimodal activity.

This approach asserts that writing is not something like tracing out letters and making words out of them; instead the writing pedagogy should be designed in a way that it can encompass the enormous role that writing plays in children's cultural development (Vygotsky 1978). When you write something, you are actively engaging in a semiotic system, and an important feature of this system is that it is second-order symbolism, which gradually becomes direct symbolism. This means that the written language consists of a system of signs that designate the sounds and words of the spoken language, which in turn are signs for real entities and relations. Gradually, spoken language—the intermediate link—disappears, and written language is converted to a system of signs that directly symbolise the entities. It is clear that mastery of such a complex sign system cannot be accomplished in a purely mechanical way; rather it is the culmination of a long process of the development of complex behavioural functions in the child. Rico's studies (1983) on cerebral hemispheric correlates of writing, comply with this argument. She refutes the established left brain focused literacy pedagogic approaches of our curricula by

arguing that children are inherently more right-brained, more creative, more imaginative, more curious, more concerned with connecting the wholes, more natural, visual and more emotional. Since the right hemisphere is more responsible for these things, our literacy activities, especially writing, should be designed in a way that it could be produced by right brain stimulation. Dehaene's (2010) studies on human interaction with written language and enhancement of brain functioning conclude that written language engagement is highly dependent upon neuronal recycling. It further enhances brain responses at least in three different ways. Firstly, it strengthens the organisation in visual cortices. Secondly, literacy allows the written language to activate spoken language network in the left hemisphere. Thirdly, literacy refines spoken language processing through enhancing a phonological region called *planum temporale,* and by making available an orthographic code in a top-down manner. This active dialectical relationship between the brain and written language largely contributes to the cultural development of an individual.

By taking the above mentioned concerns into account, the present study analyses the scope of a pedagogic approach, the social writing programme developed from collaborative learning principles. Adopting from Vygotsky (1962), the principles of collaborative learning widen the space for joint intellectual efforts among the students, and between the students and teachers through engaging individuals in interdependent learning activities, ensuring writing activities to take place within the zone of proximal development of students. When a teacher works on a student's zone of proximal development in writing, she/he gives a supportive hand to expand the student's actual level of development into potential level of development. In this process, the teacher considers the student as a social and cultural being and together, they engage in more challenging learning tasks designed for the cultural development of the student. It provides a learning atmosphere loaded with positive emotions and supportive peers. In traditional classrooms, the child is a lonely learner. These learning tasks bring various social contexts and cultural knowledge into the activities. For children, it should be a part of the most important social activities of their age, such as play, drawing and oral language activities. It requires a supportive social context and a supportive presence of adult members, whereas traditional classroom writing narrows down these possibilities. When traditional classroom writing views writing as mere text production to express what the children have been taught and

what they have learned, it denies the students the opportunities to master an important cognitive and cultural tool. It would not consider the idiosyncrasies of the individual members of a classroom, instead it applies a uniform model. It is mostly a silent and solitary activity. In the social writing programme, a mature, interactive adult group member replaces the role of a traditional teacher who holds a superior position in the power hierarchy in the classroom. The mediational process, set in by providing challenging tasks in the 'social writing programme' will be effective if the adult member has a clear understanding of the children's zones of development. In a regular classroom, a very small percentage of children may get special attention and care from the teacher. As a result, few children participate and enjoy the identity of a participant (which accords power to them), while others remain at the periphery of this activity and develop an identity of a non-participant, a slow learner, a non achiever. So, this study is based on the argument that we do not need to design writing pedagogies in view of stimulating both the hemispheres separately. What we need to do is to connect writing activities to their natural life and natural development through collaborative learning activities.

Methods

Sample

The sample of the present study consisted of 32 students (17 boys and 15 girls) from Class IV of the Government Senior Basic School, Pazhaya Lakkidi. For this study, Kerala was chosen because despite the state's high literacy rate, the rural government schools lag behind in developing literacy skills among the primary school children. Class IV was chosen because, it is the terminal stage of primary education and the children are expected to have gone through the necessary classroom interventions for developing adequate reading and writing skill. There was only one division of Class IV, and all 32 students were used for this study. The students were divided into experimental and control groups using the fish bowl random sampling method. The experimental group comprised eight girls and eight boys each. The control group consisted of seven girls and nine boys.

General Procedures

I had chosen three general methods for data collection using qualitative research techniques—the interview method, observation method and focused group discussion.

The whole process of data collection began with an attempt to understand the ongoing practices of classroom writing through reading of the textbook and handbook of

Class IV of SCERT syllabus, followed by classroom observation and intervention. The first week was spent in Class IV for classroom observation. Since my focus was to observe the classroom writing activities of Malayalam language, I attended the Malayalam class everyday. As a non participant observer, I sat in one corner of the classroom without making any deliberate interaction with the students and the teacher inside the classroom. After five days of classroom observation, in the second week, I divided the 32 students of Class IV into two groups— experimental group and control group. After the group formation, members of both the groups were subjected to a pretest. The pretest was an individual activity in which students were asked to write on two themes— (1) an unforgettable event or incident that happened in their life in the last month, (2) share the most memorable day you had in school in the last month. These same themes were given in the post test also.

The pretest was an individual test on writing activity. An analysis of the Malayalam textbook and hand book provided directions to design the pretest. An analysis of children's performance in the pretest was carried out with the help of a checklist framed according to the insights I gained through the classroom observation of children's writing activities. The aim of analysis of the pretest was to understand their actual level of development in relation with writing activities. After the evaluation pretest of both the groups, the intervention programme in social writing was carried out for the experimental group only. I, the researcher, took the role of the adult member in the intervention programme. The control group was not a part of the intervention programme. Hence, they did not get any special treatment in writing skills apart from the conventional classroom training. Both the groups were attending their regular school classes during the period of this study. Members of the control group named the intervention programme as *ezhuthu kalari*. There were seven writing activities in the programme module. The first activity was designed before entering into the field, with the help of the theoretical understanding received from the literature of previous researches and established theories that is, Vygotsky's theoretical concepts. The other six activities were evolved out of the classroom observation, my experiences with the first activity and a primary analysis of students' participation in the same.

It took six weeks to complete the social writing programme. Each social writing activity developed in a way that it incorporated both individual and group activities.

Focused discussions with the class teacher were conducted throughout these seven weeks of data collection.

Parents' interview was scheduled in the last week of the programme. With the permission of the school head mistress, letters were sent to each parent through their children to inform them about an unofficial parents' meeting. Very few parents turned up for the meeting. Majority of them were mothers. In most of the cases, both the parents were going for manual labours. There was an annual cultural event organised by the school on the second last day of the social writing programme. The parents were invited for that. I utilised this opportunity to meet the parents of the children in the experimental group for the purpose of an interview. The approach of the parents was positive and they co-operated well with the interview. A post test was conducted on all 32 students and the performances were assessed using the same parameters. The findings of pre and post tests were compared. Among the various qualitative data analysis methods, content analysis is selected for the present study. The data generated through interviews, observations and focus group discussions were content analysed.

Example of Social Writing Activities

Chithra-natakam (Drama Evolved out of Children's Drawings)

This activity aims to establish a link between the children's drawing, with playing and writing. It comprises 10 steps. The design of this activity offers enough space for individual activities, group activities, sharing of knowledge and to scaffold the young group members' potential by the adult member.

Step 1. Providing a space for free drawing for children (individual activity)

Step 2. Discussion and interpretation of each individual's drawing (collective activity)

Step 3. Space to prepare a story out of these discussions or narrations

Step 4. Preparing a story out of the children's narratives by the adult member

Step 5. Making children write the story (individual activity)

Step 6. Discussion, so as to write a script from the story

Step 7. Preparing a script

Step 8. Making small groups and practising the play

Step 9. Enactment of the play by each group

Step 10. Evaluation of each group's play by other groups

Analysis

This table shows the linguistic analysis of the written scripts of control group and experimental group in pretest and post test.

Table 1

Linguistic Analysis of Written Scripts of Control and Experimental Groups in Pretest and Post Test

Control Group			Experimental Group	
Criteria	**Pretest**	**Post Test**	**Pretest**	**Post Test**
Spelling	Mistakes are very common	Improved to a minimal level	Mistakes are very common	Improved
Punctuation	Absent	No improvement	Absent	Using full stops
Paragraphing	Absent	No improvement	Absent	Absent
Ideas in a logical order	Less evident	No significant improvement	Less evident	Improved
Proper sentence structure	Mistakes are common	No significant improvement	Mistakes are common	Improved
Evidences of self-editing	No evidences Careless writing	No improvement	No evidences Careless writing	Evident with correcting pen marks and usage of eraser
Main idea carried through	Present	No changes	Present	Improved
Closing paragraph	Concluding sentences are present in very few students' scripts	No changes	Concluding sentences are present in very few students' scripts	Written in a lengthy, single paragraph; concluding sentences are present in almost all students' scripts
Use of dialogue or quotations	Absent	No changes	Absent	Present but limited
Number of words	Less	No improvement	Less	Increased but substantially
Number of sentences	Not following proper sentence structure	No improvements	Not following proper sentence structure	Improved substantially
Number of paragraphs	No paragraphs	No changes	No paragraphs	Written in a lengthy single paragraph
Number of sentences per paragraphs	Idea of paragraph is absent	No improvement	Idea of paragraph is absent	No improvement

Use of 'I'	Present	No changes	Present	Frequency has increased
Use of 'We'	Present	No changes	Present	Frequent and use in appropriate situations
Use of 'She' and 'He'	Absent	No changes	Absent	Present, but less frequent; mostly use names

Discussion

'School, a good school
Here I learn,
I play and eat my midday meal with curry
School, a good school.'

(School nalla school
Padippund schoolil.
Kaliyund schoolil
Schoolil chorumund
Kootanumund schoolil
School nalla school)
(in Malayalam)

An eight-year-old student composed these lines as his contribution to the wall magazine. In these lines, he is trying to portray what the school meant for him. What turned this child who was sitting in a corner with little attentiveness to the classroom activities, (always engaging with only one of his classmates, drawing many pictures on small pieces of papers whenever I asked him to write) producing not more than one line in the initial stage of the writing programme, to become the one who writes freely with lots of emotion, without any external compulsions? In this section, I intend to present and theoretically interpret, the similar findings arrived at in the analysis of data, thematically.

Self and Writing—From a 'Non I' Activity to an 'I' activity

- *'We do not know writing…', 'we do not like writing, it is very difficult…', 'I do not like writing…, my hand pains while writing', 'do you have any plan to make us write? I will not come here then...'*

These were the responses of the children in the first focused group discussion conducted on the first day of the social writing programme. In contrast to this, the last focused group discussion revealed the following responses.

- *'Give us papers to write, than to draw…. we like to write…'*
- *'Why are you coming late for the class…give me stories to write… can I write my own story…'*

These responses indeed reflect a new attitude among children towards writing. They started using 'writing' to carve out a space for themselves in the act of writing. They showed increased willingness to spend time in school; the children started asserting, negotiating and defending their voice through writing. They often extended

the writing activities to home. A student's response, *'I pronounce it as "enthra"... So I am going to write it as "enthra", not as you said'* reveals the development of the autonomous self around writing. In another incident, a student demanded her autonomy as 'why do you want me to first write on this butterfly and draw later... actually I want to draw this beautiful butterfly's picture first and will be writing a poem on it later... I am going to do that'.

These observations show how the members of the social writing programme come closer to the act of writing—the act once they kept as an 'external' entity. We can understand this phenomenon by comparing with Boesch's (1993) explanation on the ontogeny and phylogeny of violin.

'As a boy, I used to tighten a blade of grass between my thumbs and by blowing into the gap formed in this way, produced a sharp, oboe like sound... each time doing so, I transformed nature into "culture", shaping natural raw materials into forms apt at producing sounds which did not occur in "pure" nature... it made me a creator. Making object's sound, thus is a bit like taming animals; it transforms a resistant non I into a compliant extension of the "I".'

In the case of learning a violin, once the individual is able to produce a sound that he is striving for, the artist and the violin form a symbiotic whole. In Boesch's (1993) words, 'the individual is blending into the object and the object is melting into the *"I"*.' If we replace 'writing' with violin, the writing activity becomes an object which was external to the self in traditional classrooms. Participation in a social writing programme created a new social space with a new set of rules for the child. The child here could select his own text for writing, write at his own pace and write in small groups. In this new space, it was considered normal to take the help of peers, raise questions and assert one's unique writing styles. The child could use the text from his own community without undermining the everyday knowledge, advance his own as well culturally rooted meanings and participate in the meaning negotiation process with the group members as well as the researcher from his own position. He did not have to reject his own idiosyncrasies except, that he had to allow it in a contester terrain he could produce something of his own where, writing becomes both a skill and a tool for self expression. He received appreciation for acquisition of the skill and was congratulated for the product. He could use writing as a tool for establishing a positive identity and for negotiating his positions. He gradually identifies with the writing activities and owns products. Such a process of engaging in the social writing activity reduced the 'I'-'non I' gap by making writing, which was once an external entity, to become writing a part of his self. He

starts to produce and realise his own voice through this object.

The scene of children engaged in self editing and self correction of their text was initially a surprise for me. They were doing it on their own without my instruction (observation note, 26 February 2013).

Careless writing and incomplete sentences were replaced by well organised text and complete sentences. Spelling mistakes gradually decreased. The marks of using eraser and, cutting pen marks told the effort children took to edit and correct their text. The willingness and interest they showed over my recommendation for peer reviews, self editing and peer editing also spoke about the children's strife for more 'perfect', 'beautiful' and 'appropriate' written work and it showed substantive involvement of children in every aspect of writing and also a desire to produce a good written piece. This tendency had grown in the group gradually as the programme proceeded. S1 was a very active boy inside and outside the classroom. But, he wrote slowly, and most of the time left his work incomplete. Close observation during intervention revealed that, he was highly confused with spelling and lacked confidence in spelling. He was told by the adult member, 'Do not worry about spelling. Whatever you are writing is not wrong. Finish your work first and later we can make your spellings perfect'. Subsequently, his writing speed increased. He could produce his ideas on paper and could complete his work. He was found enjoying writing activities. He started writing with pencil and corrected the mistakes with an eraser by taking help from his friends.

Drawings-symbolic plays-writing

Once I inquired to know the children's interest in writing and other classroom activities. The responses were not very surprising as they were exactly proving the theoretical assumptions and the findings of other researches.

Children enjoy drawing and playing. Among other academic activities, they prefer reading first. Their least preference goes to writing. All the social writing activities were designed, based on this understanding and the theoretical findings such as the history of written language enters through the appearance of gestures as a visual sign in a child's developmental trajectory. 'Gestures are writings in air, and written signs frequently are simply gestures that have been fixed' (Vygotsky 1978).

The opening session of the social writing programme was designed with a free drawing session. Drawing and painting activities were included in the successive activities too. Drawing equipment was also made available to children. It created ample space for me to engage with children's favourable social activity. It also made a tension free atmosphere within the group. These drawing activities further led me to peep into children's

various zones of development. Later, the platform opened for 'make believe plays' and free play activities, which had a positive impact in creating collaborative social activities. I observed a replication of the theoretical conclusions and previous research findings in the field.

The curriculum design and the pedagogical practices of the contemporary Kerala education system are founded in Kerala Curriculum Framework (KCF) 2007, which is based on the NCF 2005. It is theoretically rooted in the social constructivist paradigm. The analysis of the handbook, other resource books and textbook showed that it gave very little attention to 'writing' by all means, as a literacy, a cultural and as a social activity. An analysis of the textbook for understanding the nature of writing activities shows that there was only one activity which connects writing with drawing. Other possibilities of encouraging free writing and social writing have not been taken into consideration. The curriculum, pedagogy, and the teacher who completely depends on textbook instructions, are together closing the opportunities to experience writing as an activity which can enhance children's social life.

Development of Linguistic Competence—A Close Textual Level Analysis

An analysis carried out to understand the effect of linguistic features of children's writings brought out by the experiences in the social writing programme steal our attention back to the implication of Vygotskian theories in the literacy development of children.

An improvement in spelling and punctuation can be interpreted as the influence of peer collaboration in learning literacy skills. I, as an adult did not prepare any instruction module to intervene in children's surface level linguistic skills. Correcting or pointing out the spelling mistake in children's note book, which is a common practice in classroom, was completely avoided in the intervention programme. Instead, I first observed children who are less confident in these linguistic features. I grouped those students who came to me for checking their spelling, with children who are more competitive in respective language skills, to create an environment for helping each other. This peer collaboration was very effective. Incidents of self-correction and self-checking were also observed in the intervention programme. The playful writing activities were helping children to develop these linguistic skills. These findings are supported by the arguments of Cazden (1976) on the development of metalinguistic awareness through playful language activities.

Cazden (1976) has argued that play with language helps children develop 'metalinguistic awareness'—the awareness and understanding that language is a system that can

be manipulated and exploited in a variety of different ways. It seems likely that play with written language can help children develop greater awareness and understanding of how it can be manipulated, of what can be done with it.

Feeling of an authority over one's own writing was observed when I avoided surveillance, and imposing the ideas of right and wrong in the activity they were exposed to. These strong feelings of connecting the 'self' with the activity, leads to a constant strife for improvement in the same activity. The amount of text produced by the children increased drastically as the social writing programme progressed. We can read this finding with the statement of a child during a discussion.

'Here, we write what we know and what we want to write. In classroom, writing is very difficult. The teacher asks us to write about things which we do not know'. (observation note, 6 March 2013)

Initially when they presented their self in writing, it was only 'I'. Gradually, when the sharing behaviours increased and children started engaging and enjoying group activities, they started using 'we', 'they', etc. The children rarely used the forms 'he' or 'she'. Instead, they used names.

Children's Autonomy

All the individual members who were included in the social writing programme were given pretest to understand their actual level of development in the domain of writing, by the adult member. Each child was provided with various degrees of support and multidimensional facilitation to stretch their actual level of development to their potential level of development in writing activities.

To work on each member's zone of development, the social writing programme created a context—a space created for collaboration with peers and adult. It developed and implemented an instruction model, where the adult's instructions merge with the collaborative action, and children and the adult can engage in dialogues which open possibilities for even negotiations and debates. It avoids a correction process of children's writing and other activities by the adult, which is a common and normal practice in formal classrooms. It creates a platform for self-correction, self editing, and correction and editing with the help of peers. Throughout this process, the adult provided an assistive and facilitative support. Therefore, along with learning the adult's meanings, behaviours and technologies in the process of collaboration, the role that children played in the interaction also gets recognised and emphasised. Rogoff and her colleagues gave attention to this phenomenon of the ways in which young children influence the adults who try to intervene in their zones of development (Rogoff, Malkin & Gilbride 1984). Here, it is not a mechanical process of

socialising children to the cultural norms of the society and adult's meanings; rather it aims at the stimulation of development of critical consciousness of children to learn about the society, culture and meanings through dialogues.

The intervention programme gradually worked, and each child's development in using 'writing' as a tool for learning bloomed within their zones of development. When the children started enjoying the writing activity as any other socially-celebrated activity, they could extend 'writing' automatically into other social environments. At home, they themselves reached out to collaborate with parents (especially the mother) and the siblings. They extended this collaboration their classmates and friends. The two excerpts from the dialogues between the adult member and the students given below exemplify it.

Excerpt 1

(Dialogues with students during the second activity—Daily Diary Writing)

Me: Okay… S1, why didn't you write?

S1: (did not say anything for a while and later when I probed, he said) I don't like this activity.

Me: Why?

S1: I do not want to write anything at home. I will write here with my friends. I will not get anything to write at home. I rarely remember things you said, at home.

Me: Okay…fine…you write it from here. No problem. Does everyone want to write it here?

Students (together): We will write it at home, but we like to sit and write here together.

Me: Why do you like to write it here?

S2: Then we can clear our doubts with you…we can ask our friends also.

Me: So, did you try to write at home?

S1, S2, S3, and S4: Yes, we tried. But we forgot many things.

Me: Why didn't you take help from your parents or other family members?

S3: They don't have time for this.

S4: They don't know how to do this.

S2: Uh…our teachers always scold us if we take help from others in our homework.

Me: Okay, no issues…You can write from wherever you are comfortable.

This shows students' reluctance in seeking help from their family members. They seldom shared their school experiences with their parents and siblings. These dialogues reflect the role of school in disconnecting their classroom from home.

Excerpt 2

(Dialogues with students towards the end of the second activity)

Me: Very good S1, usually you write very less. But how could you write this much yesterday?

S1: I wrote it at home and my mother helped me.

Me: Do you like taking help from your mother now?

S1: Yes, that is why I could write more and my mother also liked it. She asked about you and our *ezhuthu kalari* (a Malayalam term for old, traditional village schools in Kerala).

I congratulated him for taking help from his mother and for writing it at home. It had a serious impact on others. In the following days, I could observe that most of them discussed their diary notes with their family members and wrote the diary at home.

The fifth activity, storytelling (*katha kathanam*), had a great impact on connecting the school work with the home. This activity consisted of storytelling sessions by each member of the group. After every storytelling session, the members decided to write that particular story in their notebooks. Each of the members was expected to narrate these stories to at least one person at home and to note down the listener's responses. On the third day of this activity, I observed in S1's notebook that she narrated some stories to her younger sister other than the ones we discussed in *ezhuthu kalari*. I noticed in S2's and S3's book that they have made some changes in the story when they wrote it down. It not only shows their increased involvement in the activity but the growing connectedness between their school activities and home. Children's willingness and increased initiative taking behaviour in writing activities proclaimed that they were able to consider the writing activity as a part of their social life and as something meaningful. This finding is being supported by the observation made by Mc Lane (1990) in a small community of an after-school programme in Chicago, their children discovered playful and communicative uses of writing, which they found interesting and personally meaningful. He said, 'Children attained this achievement in a supportive social context in which children can obtain the kinds of assistance they need to learn to communicate with writing'.

Social Writing and Emotions

Activities of the intervention programme were designed and carried out by taking specific care to create positive affective plane in the instructional practices. Relating Vygotsky's understanding of the importance of collaboration in education, we can see that a successful teacher-student relation that serves as a solid platform for successful learning begins when teachers exhibit a sense of emotional openness, especially at the initial stage of teaching. The rapport building session of this intervention programme was an icebreaking session for the students and the adult member. One week was spent to develop a positive relationship and connectedness between the adult member and the students in the experimental group as well as among the students. The gender-based role divisions and the hierarchy formed

on the basis of 'good student-bad student' concept in their classroom were the obstacles in developing an atmosphere of positive emotions, sharing behaviour and mutual respect in the programme. Those who were considered as the 'good students' were trying to be authoritative at the initial stage. They were trying to control those who were in the lower strata of this hierarchy. Since the power distribution in the intervention programme was different from that of the classroom, initially the students seemed a little confused in performing their new roles in the intervention programme. Those who were getting less attention in the classroom looked puzzled when they were expected to come to the forefront of the activities, even if they wished to. A gradual shift was observed in students' overt emotional expressions and sharing mentalities as the intervention progressed. Students started sharing their personal experiences with me and with their group members. A trust was built gradually among the members. Boys and girls participated in the activities with increased feelings of togetherness and mutual respect. Incidents of throwing abusive words with gender connotations were negligible towards the end of the intervention sessions.

These findings of this study reiterate that effective Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) can be established and maintained through culturally developed emotions. These emotions act as motivators and lead to the child's higher mental functions and to cultural development, as a whole. A mastery of learning activities (tools) leads to a mastery of environment, while the mastery of environment, in turn, leads to the mastery of one's own behaviour. That is, whatever was experienced by the group is later experienced by the individual. Similarly, in the words of Vygotsky (1982), 'what the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow.' From these findings it can be said that the collaborative instruction model and approach of ZPD opened enormous possibilities for enhancing the students' overall development. An observation from the parents' interview given below shows the way in which students' critical thinking developed that they can analyse the concrete conditions to raise the voice for their rights.

A student's mother said, 'He gets a storybook from the madrasa every week which includes some moral and religious content. Now he is demanding us to get other children's magazines to read'. She added that, they can not afford these expenses (this student is the boy who always asks for children's magazines we keep in *ezhuthu kalari,* to take home). Once his mother scolded him for his disturbing persistence for getting child magazines which were provided in the training programme. He argued by saying, '*Here father gets a newspaper daily, then why can't you get me at least one storybook that I love to read*'. It proves that participation

in a collaborative learning system enhanced the students' self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and critical thinking.

Vygotsky was always a strong opponent of treating the intellectual and affective aspects of human life as separate. In his view, emotions play an important role not only in the process of students' learning, but also in the process of teaching (Vygotsky 1982). Hence, the educational advantage of facilitating appropriate culturally developed emotions during the process of teaching and learning is not limited to students. The increased friendliness and positive emotional bondage with the students elated my own motivation level and helped me to play the role of the adult member more effectively. My daily diary notes show that the closeness and the increased willingness of the students led me to explore more about various developmental aspects other than literacy skills. This exploration further helped me in designing the rest of the activities in the intervention programme more effectively.

Emergence of a Community of Readers

Since reading and writing are considered as two interdependent literacy skills, it is important to check the impact of the social writing programme on the reading behaviour of children.

The reading corner *(vayana vedi*) arranged in one corner of the room was always found crowded with children. Changes in the reading behaviour were observed not only in their increased willingness to read but also in the selection of books and text content. For example, during the first week of the social writing programme, children showed interest in reading children's magazines and storybooks that were provided in the programme. They were eager to read the stories with lots of pictures and very little text (*chithra kathakal*). When the training programme progressed, children also changed their reading habits. They started reading long stories and initiating discussions with other children and the adult member; started asking the meaning of words, clarifying doubts, etc. Their curiosity in reading was aroused. For instance, a student came with the book he got to read. He was reading about the different varieties of tortoise in the world. He showed me the different varieties and started talking about them. After sometime, the other children gathered around and everybody wanted to know about the different varieties of tortoise. That student explained to everyone by reading the content.

These are the evidence for the natural development of a community of readers. When the social writing training programme is designed, even though it wanted to test the impact of the writing programme on the reading and other learning activities of children, it did not frame a well-structured instruction module for reading activities throughout

the training programme. Reading activities were subsumed to each writing activity. Indirectly, these children were exposed to the act of reading. Once they found it as enjoyable and serving the needs of their social activities, they started participating more and were able to engage spontaneously. They could break the barrier between the activity and the self.

Children's increased reading interest was reflected in their writing. They used different characters from the stories they read, in their writings. They could expand and write different versions of the story they read.

The interdependence of two literary activities can be found here. Apart from this, in a daily activity—'reading in groups', children are asked to read aloud what they have written, in the whole group and to the small group in order to create a collaborative learning programme. I, the adult member of the group, also read my writings for the groups and in turn read out children's writings for the others in the group. I utilised children's relatively increased interest in reading than writing, to form a community of readers. I designed this aspect of social writing from the findings of an empirical study conducted by Graves. Graves and his colleagues (1999) have developed a collaborative approach to teaching-writing. The teachers implementing Graves' approach emphasise writing as a complex process. Graves urges teachers to 'publish' what children write, in order to make it available to the classmates, so that children can write with the expectation that they will be read by their peers.

There were similar research conclusions. Gundlach (1983) stated, that children like to read each other's writing, and they are likely to write with more purpose, and try to write more effectively, if they know their writing will be shared. Children, like most writers, need some kind of interested audience to read and respond to what they write; they need as Gundlach (1983) has put it, to be part of a 'community of readers and writers'. Here, the present study proved it again.

Major Findings of the Study and Conclusion

A noticeable increase was found in the quantity of the written text produced and in the willingness to spend time on writing activities. Significant improvements at the surface level linguistic characteristics, such as 'spelling' and 'punctuation', improvements in the inner layer linguistic characteristics, such as 'presentation of ideas in a logical order', 'following proper sentence structure', 'evidence of self-editing', 'carrying main ideas throughout the scripts', 'writing concluding sentences' were found to be some of the signs of positive impacts of the social writing pedagogy on children's writing skills. The way the children, of the experimental group engaged in writing activities changed, as

they were more responsive, reactive, interactive and spontaneous in seeking help from the adults as well as peers in the writing activities. It was found that students were ready to spend their scheduled playtime in the social writing programme. Another phenomenon observed in this study was, that when the children started enjoying the activity of writing as any other social activity, they extended this activity to other social environments, like home and classroom. Moreover, children started asserting, negotiating and defending their voices through writing. They could use writing as a tool for establishing a positive identity and for negotiating their positions. The gradual development of positive emotional plane in the intervention programme further opened many possibilities for the overall development of the students. A community of readers had emerged within the experimental group.

The overall results of the study recommend that social writing activity, grounded in collaborative learning principles, has a potential to approximate the formal learning to the culturally situated learning styles and processes. Unlike those learning activities which are based in conventional learning styles where children are expected to attain equal level of skills in writing from the beginning of the academic year and they are exposed to uniform sets of instructions, the social writing approach began with an understanding of each student's unique developmental zone in writing skills. A positive and dynamic relationship developed between the adult member and children, while exploring the possibilities of 'scaffolding' in social writing, led the children to engage in writing activities in novel ways. It creates fearless, self-engaging learning spaces. It provides adequate space to children, their voice and creativity. The seven major activities used in the study which evolved through a constant interaction between the students and adult members helped the children to expand their writing skills from their actual level to the potential level. Exposure to a set of self-evaluation methods, devoid of rigid concepts—right and wrong, conventional exams, dictation and rote learning—helped many children to accept their less developed actual level in writing without any inferior feelings and further helped them to move towards the potential level in a self-motivated way. Inclusion of 'teacher's version presentation' not only helped to break the teacher-student hierarchies but reduced children's inhibitions as a learner.

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