



# “It’s Like Your Life, But in Writing”: Experiences of Free Writing Within a Community

## “Es como tu vida, pero en escritura”: experiencias de escritura libre en comunidad

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### Abstract

This study explored the experiences of students in different school grades during a free writing<sup>1</sup> pedagogical intervention within a community. Semi-structured interviews were used to recall memories, spontaneous stories, and interpretations of the experience with 15 students from two different schools. Intersubjective and inductive analyses of all the interviews were conducted by the researchers and the results were constructed around three themes of the experience: the individual, the social, and the situated levels. Students are highly appreciative of personal life having a place in school as the expression and experience of emotions, venting of sadness and problems, writing about topics of interest, reflection on one’s own life, and exercise of identity. Also highlighted is the view that writing in the classroom does not have to be an exercise that is fake, structured, mundane, and punitive, which is often the case, and that there should be opportunities for free writing within a benevolent environment in which peers and teachers collaborate with authenticity around topics that are valuable for the community.

**Keywords:** free writing, school writing, writing motivation, writing experiences, writing community

1. Note of the editor: In this article, “free writing” refers to an unstructured writing activity, not assessed or graded; not to be confused with the freewriting technique (Elbow, 1973).

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## Resumen

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Se investigó la experiencia que vivieron estudiantes de distintos niveles escolares durante una intervención de escritura libre en comunidad. Se usaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con 15 estudiantes de dos escuelas para recoger recuerdos, relatos espontáneos e interpretaciones de la experiencia. Se realizaron análisis intersubjetivos e inductivos de todas las entrevistas y se construyeron resultados en torno a tres ejes de la experiencia: el plano individual, el social y el situado. Se evidencia una alta valoración de que la vida personal tenga lugar en la escritura escolar, como expresión y vivencia de emociones, desahogo de penas y problemas, escritura sobre temas de interés, reflexión sobre la propia vida y ejercicio de la identidad. Destaca también la postura de que escribir en el aula no tenga que ser un ejercicio impostado, estructurado, rutinario y punitivo, como suele ser, y que haya oportunidades para escribir libremente en un ambiente benévolo en el que pares y docentes colaboran con autenticidad y en torno a temas valiosos para la comunidad.

**Palabras clave:** escritura libre, escritura escolar, motivación hacia la escritura, experiencias de escritura, comunidad de escritura

## Introduction

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In 2019, the National Writing Plan (PNE, *Plan Nacional de Escritura*) was launched, a pedagogical policy intended to promote and improve writing in the Chilean school system, the first focus of which was defined as motivation for writing in the framework of communities in which writing is valued (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Based on that priority, a community-based free writing intervention was carried out in three schools in the Metropolitan Region in 2019. As reported in another study (Concha et al., 2022), this intervention led to a significant increase in the motivation to write among the students involved, compared with those in a control group. This paper presents the results of a qualitative study that analyzes the experience of students from two of the schools during that intervention.

With respect to free writing within a community, we explored the identity, motivation, and emotions involved in the students’ experience during the intervention. For this analysis, it is assumed that people shape, understand, and make sense of their experiences by relating them and that these are configured on three levels—individual, social, and situated—(Clandinin, 2006). The general objective was expressed in three research questions: How is the experience of free writing in a community shaped at the individual level? How is it shaped at the social level? And how is it shaped at the situated level? In each of these levels, results were produced referring to identity, motivation, and the emotions experienced during the experience of free writing within a community.

This study is underpinned by a sociocultural perspective of writing, which implies adhering to a theoretical tradition that explores human activity situated in real social interactions and mediated by artifacts in which history and culture are embedded, such as writing and the spoken word (Prior, 2006). Prior (2006) harkens back to Vygotsky when he states that human development consists both of the internalization of social patterns and the construction of a socially situated individuality. Writing as a social practice thus produces ways of being and interacting in a community, and opportunities to appropriate and reconstruct cultural tools. Coincidentally, theoretical descriptions of the writing process depict it as a cognitive and affective activity that is always situated and mediated by the social, cultural, and historical context, and linked to the identity that people assume in these contexts (Castelló et al., 2010). This understanding of the writing process is consistent with the pedagogical proposal of free writing within a community that underpins the PNE intervention.

## Writing within a community: motivation, identity, and emotions

Using activity theory as a basis, as well as the notion of discursive genre and previous cognitive models, Graham (2018) proposes a model of writing within a community that recognizes that the writing process is both shaped and constrained by the contexts, abilities, and perceptions of the writers and their collaborators, as well as by the interactions between them. In a community of writers, individuals share social practices and goals that they perform in writing, a certain assessment of the writing they produce, a defined audience, agreed discursive norms, and an identity they wish to project to their audience. As Swales (2016) proposed in a homologous model, the goals and assessment of the community and its practices may be more or less shared among the members. This means, therefore, that they may participate with different levels of commitment and some may even fake their adherence or instrumentalize discursive conventions in order to secure their place in the community. The distribution of power influences the motivation to achieve writing goals. Moreover, if the emotional climate is negative or if the writing produced is considered to have little significance or relevance, motivation will be low and disconnection and the perceived lack of value of the written tasks will grow (Graham, 2018). This is of key importance, as motivation involves affective aspects—such as emotional willingness to engage in writing—and cognitive aspects, such as attention, persistence, and effort. It therefore predicts performance as much as the cognitive dimension (Graham et al., 2017), and emerges in experiences in which writing is meaningful to a community (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Lipstein & Renninger, 2006).

Identity in relation to writing has been addressed by a range of different sociocultural theoretical traditions, such as the *New Literacy Studies* (Gee, 2002) and academic literacies (Ivanic, 1998). In this paper we follow the general idea of a social and individual construct that is created interactively, as people select from the social environment certain elements that they identify with and differentiate themselves from those that they do not. Identity is constructed in relation to different contexts, communities, and experiences (Hyland, 2018) and can be transformed (Ivanic, 1998). People demand recognition, acceptance, and appreciation of their identity, especially when it differs from institutional and dominant identities (Gee, 2002), so they can accept, resist, or negotiate imposed identities if they have the opportunity (Zavala, 2020).

Writing not only mediates social activities, but also the identities that people construct within them (Gee, 2002). The possibility for writing to be an act through which an identity and social position are constructed (Ávila-Reyes et al., 2020; Hyland, 2018) can be restricted in formal education, since traditionally academic, public, and standardized practices are prioritized to the detriment of others that are more personal or more closely related to the students (Ivanic, 1998; Smagorinsky et al., 2012). Literacy practices—understood as ways of using writing and reading to serve specific social purposes (Zavala, 2009)—are associated with ways of thinking, knowledge, meaning, and cultural values, so when schools omit more personal practices, they marginalize and devalue domains that give students meaning and identity.

Smagorinsky and Daigle (2012) discuss how research and teaching tend to ignore how students feel while they write. They argue that, since experience is processed and lived through emotions and cognition, isolating emotions ignores the complexity of human psychology. With respect to creative writing, it has been proposed that externalizing the internal by writing makes it possible to provide it with a more benevolent form and to use it as an object of reflection (Hermann, in Hansen et al., 2019). Writing is therefore also an exercise in identity, as it enables one to reflect on who one is and to seek the meaning of one’s existence in relation to the events and experiences lived (Ivanic, 1998). Verbalizing emotions has effects on psychological and physical well-being (Costa & Abreu, 2018; Hansen et al., 2019; Kupeli et al., 2019; Nesby & Salamonsen, 2016), and writing can be a means of processing, organizing, and understanding experiences and memories (Pennebaker, 1997; Johnson, 2018). This therapeutic value can derive from writing about an experience to analyze it and from reliving it by recounting it (Hansen et al., 2019). However, these functions of writing are often excluded from the school experience (Johnson, 2018).

## The basis of the intervention: didactics of free writing in a community

In the pedagogical intervention carried out in 2019, each student received a journal for free writing and each teacher was given a short document of recommendations for its implementation<sup>1</sup>. Both materials are based on the notion of free writing included in the current Chilean curriculum, which promotes the motivation to write. It was proposed to ensure a positive emotional environment to encourage risk-taking without fear of being graded (Mineduc, 2012, 2016), writing frequently, offering spaces for discussion, promoting collaborative writing, allowing free choice, and giving positive feedback (Englert et al., 2006; Graham & Perin, 2007). The creation of writing communities was promoted (Graham, 2018) in which the members of those communities can carry out discursive practices that are consistent with their interests, knowledge, and cultural habits (Graham & Harris, 2019), along with voluntary reading of texts in the classroom, considering that individual interest in writing may emerge if writing has value for social participation in the community (Hidi et al., 2002; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Lipstein & Renninger, 2006).

The writing journals were prepared by grouping school levels (D1 for first and second grade, D2 for third to sixth grade, D3 for seventh and eighth grade, and D4 for ninth to 12th grade) and contained exercises to stimulate free writing. They include various discourse genres, personal, social, and fictional topics, and a variety of purposes for writing (opinion, memory, reflection, etc.). It was recommended that students could freely choose from a range of authentic writing tasks closely related to their reality (De Caso-Fuertes & García Sánchez, 2006).

## Methodology

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This qualitative research ascribes to an interpretive epistemological tradition (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), as it seeks to interpret and understand the experience of free writing within a community as reported by the participants, considering the subjectivity and reflexivity of the researchers.

### Participants

Fifteen students were interviewed from two subsidized schools in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago who had participated in the PNE intervention. The group included students from first grade to 11th grade. There were six males and nine females, 14 of the students were Chilean and one was an immigrant, while five of them had some temporary special need. The sample was selected based on criteria of accessibility. To ensure variability in the cases, the teachers were asked to indicate students who could participate in the interview considering the aforementioned characteristics.

All of the participants and their parents or guardians signed informed consents, approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Diego Portales, and no incentives were provided for participation. The interviews were conducted by previously trained research assistants.

### Collection of data

Following Clandinin (2006), it is assumed that experience has a narrative nature and that people make sense of experiences by narrating them. A semi-structured interview guideline was used to retrieve memories about an experience in the form of spontaneous accounts and interpretations of what was recalled. This involves considering everything that the writer brings to writing: their attitudes, experiences, and the institutional and social context in which they are inserted, consistent with a sociocultural and situated perspective of writing (Prior, 2006).

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1. <https://plandeescritura.mineduc.cl/>

The research assistants conducted the interviews, which lasted about 30 minutes, at the school. Each participant came with his or her writing journal to be able to return to their experience in a more tangible manner, rather than simply recalling it. Questions were included that referred to specific experiences (When was the last time you wrote in the journal? What was it like that day? What were your classmates doing? What was your teacher doing?) and others that were intended to provoke an interpretation of the experience (What would you say writing journals are? Show me a journal activity that you liked and tell me why).

## Analysis of the data

In line with the research questions and following Clandinin (2006), the analysis considered three levels of experience: individual, social (peers and teachers), and situated in the school context.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The two researchers intersubjectively conducted a process of inductive analysis with the assistance of qualitative software. First, both of them read and collaboratively analyzed three interviews until the saturation of the data allowed four axial categories to be identified:

- A. Affective dimension: feelings and interests of the participants with respect to the journals and their use.
- B. Thoughts: opinions and ideas of the participants about the purpose and use of the journals.
- C. Experiences: how the journals were used in the classroom at the personal and group level.
- D. School writing: what it is normally like to write in school, as opposed to the experience of writing in the journals.

The researchers subsequently analyzed all of the interviews by applying these categories together in a dialogic coding process that assumed the reflexive, interpretive, and subjective nature of research in the area of literacy (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Once the first round of coding was done, the two researchers conducted a thematic microanalysis of each category. Based on the recurrences, themes were identified and organized into thematic nuclei within the three levels of experience: individual, social, and situated (Clandinin, 2006) (see Table 1).

Table 1  
Results by dimension of the experience

Level of experience	Thematic nucleus	Themes
The individual	Emotions	Diversity of emotions
		Experience the relief
		Reliving experiences and interpreting them
		Expressing feelings
		Topics that I like
		Discovering yourself by writing
		Being yourself
	Interests	Activities that I like to do
		Writing my life
		Recording and registering life
		Reading to yourself
		Serious, sad, or difficult topics
		Current events
		Writing what I feel able to write
		Projecting yourself into the future
The social	Desires and benefits of sharing what is written	Writing collaboratively
		Helping others to feel good
		Seeking protection or help
	Risks of sharing what is written	Venting
		Expressing yourself without being judged
		Revealing intimate things
The situated	Free writing journals	Provoking teasing
		Understandable tasks
		Unstructured tasks
		Having your own journal
		Writing to learn
	Writing in a community	Writing to imagine
		Writing to create awareness and complain
		Writing about yourself
		Freedom of choice
		Collaborating teacher
		Respectful environment without pressure
		Relative silence
		Writing without a time limit
		Non-punitive writing
		Writing at your own speed
Sharing the process with others		
Writing at school before	Sharing the products only with those closest	
	Enthusiasm about writing in the journals	
	No room for personal and social issues	
	Imposed writing	
	Routinary writing	
	Structured writing	
	Punitive writing	
Writing focused on the formal		
Short texts		
Infrequent writing		
Imposed ideas		

Source: prepared by the authors.

## Results and Discussion

For this section, we interpreted the thematic nuclei and their themes in light of the theoretical framework. The description of this interpretation was organized around the three research questions.

### How is the experience of free writing in a community shaped at the individual level?

The two thematic nuclei in this level are oriented towards appreciation of the fact that there is room for the personal in the classroom. The thematic nucleus of emotions groups a diverse range of feelings mentioned by the interviewees to characterize their experience of free writing. Happiness, sadness, calm, fun, excitement, enthusiasm, anger, pride, nerves, are some of the feelings that the students said they experienced while writing in their journals and that they mention to support their positive view of this experience.

**Luisa:** The first time [I wrote in the journal] I felt kind of shy, because it was like something new, something for me, but then I felt happy because I was letting it out in a book that could get it off my chest.

(5th grade)

**Ignacia:** [By writing in the journal I felt] good, comfortable, free you could say, because there was no structure that told me what to do, but it was what I wanted to do.

(11th grade)

It is evident that there is a clear relationship between enjoying writing and experiencing emotions, which encourages us to observe the tendency of the research and the teaching to ignore how students feel when they are writing (Smagorinsky & Daigle, 2012). The results suggest that emotions influence the appreciation of writing tasks, which could affect motivation and performance. On the other hand, they allow the description of what the experience of feeling was like. The theme "reliving experiences and interpreting them" is reminiscent of the therapeutic potential of writing that derives from reliving past experiences by narrating them (Hansen et al. 2019). When students were asked about their thoughts while writing, their responses focused on the content of the writing and the emotions they experienced, not in the form of an analysis of the writing, but as an account of the process of feeling and an interpretation of those feelings.

**I:** Why did you choose this exercise?

**Carolina:** Because when my dad gets angry, he throws everything in your face, like the sugar, tea, the .... What do you call it? The water, the electricity bill, and he says that he paid for all that and my mom like she's trying hard to work a lot ....

**I:** How did you feel while you wrote that?

**Carolina:** Bad, because a mom can't ... she should be with her daughters.

(3rd grade)

A relationship between emotions and functions of writing also emerges in the results. The theme "experience the relief" represents the experience of letting go of negative emotions and problems by writing, which relates to evidence that verbalizing emotions can have effects on the psychological and physical well-being of those who write (Hansen et al., 2019; Costa & Abreu, 2018; Kupeli et al., 2019; Nesby & Salamonsen, 2016). In this case, free writing seems to have a function of detaching the student from the burden of sadness or problems.

**Rosa:** [When I write in the journal] I feel good, happy .... Because it cheers me up and I forget all the bad thoughts.

(3rd grade)

**Juana:** [I like the journals] because I relieve myself of things ... like what happens to me, or I forget about it and I can leave it here.

(4th grade)

The level of individual experience includes the nucleus of interests to which the students referred to justify why they enjoyed writing in the journals. Topics of personal interest are highlighted, such as family life, games, anecdotes, and current events, as well as activities of interest, such as writing with friends in the classroom. The interest in writing about serious, sad, or difficult topics stands out, which reaffirms what has been said about the value of being able to remember or relive personal problems in the classroom. Another group of themes refers to an experience of writing about one's own life and getting to know oneself by writing; the possibility of expressing feelings, of discovering oneself while writing, of recalling and recording one's life in writing, or of reading to oneself. All of these themes emphasize the relationship between writing and personal life, and approach the discovery or construction of an identity through writing.

**I:** What are the journals?

**Luisa:** It's like your life, but in writing.

(5th grade)

**I:** What kind of exercises did you like the most?

**Ignacia:** For example, how I saw myself years from now, the environment, things I didn't like about myself, that is, what I could improve in the future. Mostly personal things.

**I:** And why did you like them the most?

**Ignacia:** Because they are like a way in which, that I can write down what I want for myself, in the future, what I'm planning or the goal that I want to achieve.

(3rd grade)

Free writing also appears in the results as a means of differentiating oneself from others within the framework of a school that tends toward uniformity. This other form of identity is reflected in themes such as the possibility of being oneself while writing and projecting oneself into the future.

**Carmen:** [The journal] is something that's yours, that only you have. It's not something that your classmate has or your other classmate has, no, it's something that's yours, your own.

(8th grade)

**Victoria:** If you're asked something about the language, if you ask 10 people what they can tell you what it means it's completely different, so with the journals you can write it and nobody will tell you it's wrong or place, impose an idea on you.

(10th grade)



This nucleus evokes the proposal that writing can be a possibility to reflect on who one is and to seek the meaning of one's existence (Ivanic, 1998; Johnson, 2018). The various accounts and memories collected manifest enjoyment and surprise at being able to have this identity experience and personal reflection in the classroom. This could be related to the evidence that formal education usually excludes literacy practices that are more personal or that relate more closely to the student's culture, as it prioritizes academic, public, and standardized practices (Ivanic, 1998; Smagorinsky et al., 2012) that would have a value for the student's academic and professional future. The interviewees' high opinion of this experience of self-knowledge and differentiation from others through free writing suggests a need for recognition and appreciation of an identity that is different from the one they are recognized as having in the classroom (Gee, 2002).

The results also highlight the fact that writing functions such as organizing and understanding one's own experience (Johnson, 2018; Pennebaker, 1997) are neglected in the classroom, and that this omission could contribute to a sense of meaninglessness of writing that occurs in school (Smagorinsky et al. 2012). In short, the results of the study suggest that what makes sense to students on an individual level are writing experiences that allow for expression and reflection about personal things.

### How is the experience of free writing in a community shaped at the social level?

At the social level, the results open a debate on the role of the reader in the writing experience. In first place, the experiences collected broaden the notion of authentic writing understood solely as writing that fulfills a communicative function.

**I:** Has your taste in writing changed since you started to write?

**Alfonso:** Yes, because I don't like writing very much, but if I'm asked questions, like about me or things like that, I like ... to be asked intimate questions, but I don't tell anyone about them.

(7th grade)

**Ignacia:** [The journal] is like a thing where you can express everything you feel or think or want to say, that you're embarrassed to say maybe, or talk about with other people. Something that might be intimate or private.

(3rd grade)

The results suggest a broader view of what is authentic that accommodates writing for oneself (Johnson, 2018). This involves considering that writing can have a sense of introspection and a sense of refuge or private space in the context of a community of writers in the classroom.

Secondly, although the exercises rarely identified a potential reader, several interviews inferred a clear desire to be read by another, specifically a teacher, parents, or peers. This may be related to four purposes that participants assign to the journals: to help others through writing, to seek protection or help, to vent, and to express oneself without being judged. These purposes resonate with the evidence about writing as a therapeutic tool (Hansen, 2019; Costa & Abreu, 2018; Kupeli et al., 2019; Nesby & Salamonsen, 2016), not only as the possibility of processing experiences while writing, but also as a search for an authentic reader who does something with the information they read, either benefiting from advice or comfort, or taking protective actions toward the author of the text.

**Luis:** [By writing this exercise] I can tell my parents that I'm scared of this so they know, so they don't leave me alone, maybe so we don't watch horror movies and stuff.

(3rd grade)

**I:** If you could decide what these writing journals should be like, what changes would you make to them?

**Rosa:** That it should talk a bit about the family, that bad thoughts could be let go and written down so that later a teacher, like you, could fix it, and so the children could let go of that dark thought.

(3rd grade)

However, conflicting with this, the therapeutic purpose of writing associated with the possibility and need to be read by others is contrasted with the fear of exposing one's most intimate life in writing. Writing as a document that endures thus poses a risk for writers.

**I:** How does it make you feel [the writing journal]?

**Juana:** So-so, so-so .... What happens is that some of my classmates make fun of everything, because someone's fat, because another one is skinny, because someone has cool hair or whatever.

**I:** So, you're worried that someone might see it or read it?

**Juana:** What happens is that they could get in and rob the school and they could read everything.

(4th grade)

These results are connected with the need to put into practice a pedagogy of writing that gives space to broader and more varied purposes in the classroom than typical school didactics: a pedagogy that actualizes the power of writing as a tool to (re)model the human experience (Johnson, 2018).

### How is the experience of free writing in a community shaped at the situated level?

With respect to the context in which the writing experiences took place, the results allow us to organize them into three thematic nuclei: the journals and stimuli for free writing; school writing prior to the arrival of the diaries, as an account that serves as a contrast to the free writing experience; and the classroom as a social and physical environment for community writing experiences. With regard to writing journals, the interviewees perceive them as relatable instruments (understandable tasks, having one's own journal), as an opportunity to write for different reasons (writing to learn, to imagine, to create awareness, to complain), and for free expression (writing about oneself, unstructured tasks).

**I:** What is a writing journal?

**Alejandro:** Writing everything you feel.

(4th grade)

**Ignacia:** It's something that maybe has made many people feel free, writing what they wanted, choosing what they wanted, which isn't the same as being in school, where you have to have a structure, you have to follow steps. It's something freer, that's what I think many people liked or were attracted to.

(11th grade)

The results underline the notion of a community of writers, understood as a context in which its members can carry out discursive practices that are consistent with their beliefs, interests, knowledge, and habits (Graham & Harris, 2019), rather than tasks perceived as irrelevant or meaningless, that could negatively affect motivation and the commitment to participate (Graham, 2018), or induce the imposture of participation in the community (Swales, 2016). Indeed, the interviewees commonly tended to contrast the journals with the writing to which they were accustomed in their classrooms. This comparison helped them to make sense of their new experience. For example, in contrast to what was said about the journals, traditional school assignments were said to ignore personal and social issues, were structured and formally focused, as well as routine, infrequent, and brief.

**Rosa:** When we used to write, we just wrote, and I don't know, afterward we did workshops and we couldn't express our feelings and stuff like that, and then when the teachers came, they gave us this book and we started to do it and we all had a lot of fun.

(3rd grade)

**Carmen:** It's like something, a free moment when you write the way you write, not the way you pretend when you write in school

(8th grade)

**Victoria:** It is like a time where you can also be like yourself, you can write about different topics that perhaps aren't touched in language classes or others .... For example, what would you write to the president, what things would you change in the history of Chile, or write in your own way freely whatever you want, write poetry.

(2nd grade)

The nucleus of themes describing the experience of writing in a community complements this interpretation. There are repeated references to a flexible type of teacher, an active member of the community, who allows free choice and collaborates with their students' writing, in contrast to the idea of a punitive and instituted traditional writing.

**Rosa:** The teacher helps us more, because if we make a mistake it doesn't matter, because we can try again and learn from our mistakes.

(3rd grade)

**Alfonso:** We saw [the teacher, completing his own writing journal], and it's like a lesson for us, because there are teachers who maybe don't want to look at the book and they leave it aside, and they can get onto their cell phones and stuff like that.

(7th grade)

**Carmen:** At the beginning, the teacher just told you, I don't know, 'do page 2, 3, 4, and 5, for example', and after a moment they started to say 'why do I have to say it, if it's the page they want to do', then they gave us the freedom to choose the activity you wanted to do.

(8th grade)

The distribution of power in a community could influence the motivation of its members to realize the writing goals (Graham, 2018). In this respect, the results suggest horizontal, non-oppressive experiences and an appreciation of flexibility and freedom. School writing prior to the journals is characterized as fake, inauthentic,

a phenomenon that has been reported for the university environment (Kalman & Street, 2009; Ávila-Reyes et al., 2020) and which in this study is associated with the problem of power (punitive writing, lack of freedom) and with the restriction of the type of writing tasks (lack of variety, imposition of topics and structures).

The situated level of the experience characterizes a climate of trust in the classroom in which students may be willing to take risks without fear of being graded (Mineduc, 2012, 2016). The interviewees describe a respectful environment, without pressure, without time limits, in which everyone can write at their own pace, and the experience of sharing the process and the product with peers occurs spontaneously. There were recurrent descriptions of relative silence in the classroom. This is important because it shows that the recommendations for implementation permeated the belief that absolute silence is the only context that ensures good work. The experience of writing in the journals allowed spontaneity in the form of dialogues and collaboration between students interested in the same exercises.

**Carmen:** That [exercise] was shared with your partner beside you. For example, he would have an idea, I would write down the idea, and I would give an idea and he would write it down, and that's how we went along.

(8th grade)

**I:** What things were you talking about?

**Ignacia:** For example, the first part that said 'what is my weakness' and things like that. It was like you asked your friend and they could tell you what it was or give you an idea of what you could do.

(11th grade)

This latter result suggests the development of a collective interest, in such a way that writing became valuable in the culture of the community and people can relate to each other through writing.

**I:** Do you think your classmates liked the journal?

**Luisa:** Yes, because there are lots of people who like it, because when the teacher says 'ok, read the book', and we all prefer ... and then we ask 'teacher, can we write in the writing book?' and we all go to.... with the writing book.

(5th grade)

**Victoria:** I think they liked that they came as questions or that they were given the topic .... They liked it because there were some who said 'ok, how can I put this now', and they wrote and wrote and wrote, and that wasn't very common because it wasn't like a habit to be able to write. There were maybe a few classmates who wrote, so, there were ... it was surprising to see some who maybe said 'no, how are they going to write something', they would get completely into the journal and write.

(10th grade)

Statements like the ones above suggest that there were opportunities for individual interest in writing to emerge, insofar as the students recognize the emergence of a social interest in writing in their classrooms (Hidi et al., 2002).

## Conclusions

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This paper has used the individual, social, and situated levels to explore the emotions, motivation, and identity that shape the experience of students of different ages and contexts in a community-based free writing intervention. The results show a positive experience at all three levels. With respect to the first level, students value that free writing offers the possibility for personal life to have a role in school writing, in the form of expressing and reliving emotions, venting sadness and problems, writing about topics of interest, reflecting on one's own life, and exercising one's identity. With regard to the social level, the notion of authentic writing is extended to an activity that, in addition to fulfilling communicative purposes, allows for personal writing as a way of venting and reflecting. As for the situated level, the data demonstrates enthusiasm and relief that writing in the classroom does not have to be a fake, structured, routine, and punitive exercise, and that it is possible to write freely in a benevolent environment in which classmates and teachers collaborate with authenticity around topics that become valuable for the community.

Regarding the motivation to write, the findings indicate that it may be related offers the possibility for personal life to have a role in school writing and that this, in turn, is related to the possibility of expressing emotions and constructing identity through writing. Getting excited while writing about topics that are personal and relevant to students, writing with various functions that are usually kept outside the classroom—such as freeing oneself from problems or reflecting on oneself—gives meaning to writing in the community. It is therefore not necessary to participate in it because of obligation or with a forced interest. In the sphere of identity, the results confirm a sociocultural perspective of writing: the mediation of the written word produces forms of participation, as well as opportunities to appropriate and reconstruct cultural practices. The students' critical comments about traditional school writing thus reflect a resistance to the identities they have had to assume in school and a need for recognition of the person they feel they are.

In the future, it would be important to explore whether the restrictions on expression that the students complain about regarding school writing—about their sorrows, concerns, interests and opinions—could permeate the meaning that school generally has to them, considering that, according to Smagorinsky et al., traditional writing practices in the school environment tend to prioritize writing that excludes students, demotivates them, and denies them possibilities for expression and identity, which accentuates a general feeling of disaffection for formal education. The experiences of free writing examined in this study suggest that the meaning of school writing cannot be found only outside the school (in future academic or work activities), since an experience of meaning in the classroom motivates and promotes personal growth and individual and collective well-being in school communities.

The sample and the qualitative nature of this study do not enable us to offer conclusions that can be generalized to the population regarding the experience of writing freely in a community at school. However, the results do allow us to observe the pedagogical possibilities of free writing in the classroom, particularly with respect to its mediating effect on the development of motivation and identity. Further research is needed to explore how these positive effects could permeate other functions of writing that are relevant to the school context, such as the epistemic function or the certification of learning.

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