Cognitive egocentrism and audience awareness: A developmental exploration of the eighth grader as writer

Karen Michelle Calkins

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COGNITIVE EGOCENTRISM AND AUDIENCE AWARENESS:
A DEVELOPMENTAL EXPLORATION OF THE EIGHTH GRADER AS WRITER

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Karen Michelle Calkins
November 1990
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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to show a relationship between cognitive egocentrism and audience awareness and does so through a developmental "exploration" of the eighth grader as writer. Five questions are asked and answered: First, how do eighth graders view their audiences and how do we determine these views? Second, are these ways of viewing audience different for the eighth grade writer than they are for the adult writer? Third, if the views are different, what role does egocentrism play in the writer's awareness of audience, and how does egocentrism affect the eighth grade writer's relationship to audience? Finally, what are the implications of the eighth grade writer's conception of audience for the teacher of composition?

Studies such as James Britton's The Development of Writing Abilities show that eighth graders almost always compose for their teacher, if indeed, they are composing for anyone at all. Adults, because they are removed from the school situation, have a much greater sense of audience awareness. Eighth graders' lack of audience awareness is natural because of their cognitive developmental stage and even though they display much egocentricity in their writing, this is not to be taken as an inability to develop audience awareness, but instead, taken as natural according to such writing researchers as John Bushman. As composition
teachers, we should realize that it is important, however, to help eighth graders develop a greater sense of audience awareness in order to help prepare them for high school writing and "real world" writing situations. We can do so by utilizing a number of methods such as ones suggested in the three underlying themes of Piagetian educational theory. We can bear in mind the central role that students play in their own learning. We can help students become aware of conflicts in their beliefs, and we can teach students to use their peers as "teachers in their own right" (Brainerd 279).
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*******

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*******

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Introduction

At a middle school writing conference two years ago, a teacher sitting at a neighboring table remarked, "I wanted to be an English teacher so that I could teach them to love literature. I didn't realize how difficult it would be to teach them to write as well."

The "them" in her sentences referred to the people who had been the focus of our conference for the past week: adolescents. Of particular concern to most of us attending was helping our students to become better writers, or indeed, writers at all. Most of us believed that we could adequately impart our knowledge of literature to our middle school students, and most of us believed that we could even help our students enjoy literature. We felt fairly confident that we could give our students a solid base in literature that would see them through the first scary weeks of high school English classes. What we were scared of ourselves, however, was the increasing realization that our students' writing scores and daily writing assignments were not progressing along as well as the rest of their work in our English classes.

On our way to solving some of our concerns about the teaching of writing in middle schools, we spent an afternoon with writers and lecturers, discussing a topic that most of us had grappled with since our first semester of teaching:
does an awareness of audience greatly help middle school students become better writers, and indeed, can middle school students even grasp the concept of writing for an audience?

An afternoon spent on the topic of audience awareness for the middle school writer was too short a time to answer all of our questions, but one of the questions asked during that afternoon stayed with me. The question asked concerned the egocentricity of middle school students and their apparent lack of ability to "decenter" and consider an audience when writing. As I worked with my eighth graders who were preparing to take the writing competency tests over the next few quarters, I formulated several questions of my own which became the basis for this exploration.

This thesis will attempt to show the relationship between cognitive egocentrism and audience awareness and will do so through a developmental "exploration" of the eighth grader as writer. To show this relationship, several questions must be asked and answered. First, how do eighth graders view their audiences and how do we determine these views? Second, are these ways of viewing audience different for the eighth grade writer than they are for the adult writer? Third, if the views are different, what role does cognitive development play in affecting the writing of the adolescent? Fourth, what role does egocentrism play in the writer's awareness of audience, and how does egocentrism
affect the eighth grade writer's relationship to audience? Finally, what are the implications of the eighth grade writer's conception of audience for the teacher of composition?
CHAPTER I

A View from Middle School: How Eighth Grade Writers View Their Audiences and How These Views are Determined

Lucy McCormick Calkins has observed that "our instinct, I think, is to shy away from the volatile combination of adolescents and writing" (105). Many times, if we are honest, this is indeed the way we feel when attempting to help our middle school students become better writers. Perhaps one of the most difficult areas in writing instruction for the middle school teacher is helping our students understand what it means to write for an audience. How do eighth grade writers view their audiences, and how do we determine these views?

In their study The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), James Britton and his British colleagues repeatedly point out that the audience for which middle school students compose is almost exclusively the teacher. Britton writes that the teacher,

... not only [defines] the task [of writing] but also nominates himself as audience. He is not, however, simply a one-man audience but also the sole arbiter, appraiser, grader, and judge of the performance. He becomes an audience on which pupils must focus a special kind of scrutiny in order to detect what they must do to satisfy him. (63)

Chris Anson, director of the University of Minnesota's Program in Composition and Communication, remarks that "some
theorists suggest that we abandon the concept of audience altogether and admit to ourselves (and our students) that as teachers we are their primary audience" (19). Ample evidence shows that by the time most students reach college, they have produced most of their writing in the classroom, "and precious little of it has ever been read by people other than their teacher" (Anson 19). Alan Purves argues that the teacher represents a "rational reader" for the adolescent writer (43). Purves believes that as teachers, we are a "surrogate for the world of neatness, accuracy, and organization" and that as such, we are the primary audience for our middle school students (Anson 19).

One of the major responsibilities for middle school composition teachers is to prepare their students for the demands of high school writing. During the two or three years of middle school, we must transform elementary writers into writers who are ready to conquer high school composition assignments in their English classes. We are, then, our eighth graders' sole audience because as "surrogates" for a world of other readers, we demand that they write to please us in the classroom.

Other writers at different grade levels must also write for the teacher due to the demands of school; however, during the middle school years, writing to an audience of one, the teacher, is perhaps especially common. During the
middle school years, students have the seemingly poorest motivation to write, and often will write only because the teacher is demanding they do so. In elementary school, students are frequently motivated to write through puppet shows, chalkboard drawings, and other such forms of educational entertainment. Elementary school students are treated to such forms of motivation in order to catch their attention. The teacher must catch their attention long enough to communicate how to go about completing a writing assignment. Furthermore, writing for many elementary school students is considered "fun." When students write in elementary school, they are writing Christmas stories, cards for Mom, or writing to learn cursive, and in their efforts to complete the task, little thought is given to pleasing the teacher. The writing task is enjoyable in itself.

By the time students are in high school they are often aware that they are writing primarily for the classroom teacher. In college, students are able to chart their own class courses and the motivation to produce good writing is higher than in secondary school.

How do we determine that the audience for whom eighth graders compose is the teacher? We can determine that eighth graders compose generally for the teacher by: studying their actual writing assignments, by comparing their speech habits to those of their writing, by conferencing or other forms of communication that allow us
as teachers to discuss our students' writing with them, and by observing and understanding the very nature of adolescence itself.

The most frequently cited study of actual writing samples of adolescents is James Britton's *Development of Writing Abilities*. Over a period of five years, Britton and his colleagues researched and studied the development of abilities in students ages eleven to eighteen. Their study consisted of 2,122 pieces of writing from sixty-five secondary schools and was collected from students in middle and high schools. Britton discovered, while compiling the writing samples, that much of what students wrote was dominated by the sole consideration of meeting requirements. In other words [a student's writing] may be shaped solely by the demands of his audience and not by the complementary pressure to formulate ideas in a way which satisfies the writer. The analogy here is hack-writing, and school becomes the writer's Grub Street. Readers will be aware that this sort of sense of audience can be finely tuned with arithmetic precision--the exact number of lines or pages. (64)

We can see evidence of how many of our middle school students view writing here, for many of our students write "for the grade," asking us, "How many pages do I have to have?" and "How many lines does my paragraph have to have?" Indeed, as teachers, we know this to be true without reviewing 2,122 pieces of writing. We see (and hear) ample evidence of this every time we ask our students to write. We know that eighth graders see their teachers as a primary
audience because, as Britton found, much of their writing is written in a formula fashion to please their teachers.

A second way we determine that eighth graders compose for a singular audience is by comparing their speech habits with those of their writing. Walter Petty in Research on Composing suggests that we can see a lack of audience awareness in the writing of adolescents because, when we observe their actions and conversations with us, their peers, and classmates, we see such a difference in their attention to audience. Petty observes:

Most individuals, in some situations at least, may not vocalize a well-organized, coherent message. The reasons for this failure may be the emotional setting, a lack of experience, disorganized thinking, and so on. But frequently, the difficulties of oral composition are overcome by repetitive statements, gestures, exchanges with the listener, and the like; thus, the concern about composing focuses mainly on writing. While written composition may be intimately related to oral composition—and I would argue that it is—it is also uniquely different and particularly tough. I simply want to stress that children struggle with the transition from the basically overt language of speech to the essentially covert activity of writing. We need to recognize these struggles, which are evident in children's behavior, as factors very strongly affecting composing. (75)

We can determine how eighth graders view their audiences when writing because their writing is so devoid of any kind of audience awareness, except perhaps of the teacher. Their speech, if we eavesdrop, seems to be full of the awareness of an audience. Ask eighth graders to tell of their
favorite movie and then ask them to write about it. Somewhere in the transition from speech to writing, the excitement is lost. This is natural, perhaps, when we compare speech to writing at any age, but it seems to be exaggerated in the speech and writing of the child and adolescent.

"Conferencing" can also be a way to determine how eighth graders view their audiences. Although the concept of meeting one-to-one or in small peer groups and to discuss students' papers with them has been used for some time now at the college level, only in the past few years has conferencing been used successfully in middle school composition classes, most notably since the publication of Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*. Surprisingly, eighth graders, as their other middle school peers do, enjoy the one-on-one or small group discussions of their papers with the teacher. During these conferences, when students are asked to explain a paragraph or particular portion of an essay, they will offer some insight into the way they see the audience for which they compose.

Conversations with eighth graders in peer groups can tell teachers much about the way students compose. Most of the time, when discussing audience, we find out that eighth graders are composing with the teacher in mind or almost worse, with no one in mind. The fact that many eighth graders compose with the teacher in mind as the only
audience became especially clear one afternoon in my class when several eighth graders were gathered in a corner of the classroom discussing one of the group member's papers. The student was asked to clarify a description of a family member. The student clearly and interestingly changed the description when asked about it, and then, in reference to what he had added orally to his description said, "... but I didn't think you [turning to the teacher] would like that."

A final way we can determine what eighth graders consider in dealing with audience is by observing and understanding the very nature of adolescence. Walter Ong, in his study of audience, "The Writer's Audience is Always Fiction," says that as teachers, we should know just how our adolescent students see the audiences for whom they write because we are the ones assigning that audience. Ong uses the example of a common writing assignment to explain more fully adolescents' problems with their audience:

Let us envision a class of students asked to write on the subject to which school teachers, jaded by summer, return compulsively every autumn: "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." The teacher makes the early assumption, inviting and plausible, but false, that the chief problem of a boy and a girl in writing is finding a subject actually part of his or her real life. In-close subject matter is supposed to solve the problem of invention. Of course it does not. The problem is not simply what to say but also whom to say it to. Say? The student is not talking. He is writing. No one is listening. There is no feedback. (8)

Ong suggests that students in middle schools question
assignments such as these because they know that no one really cares how their summer vacation was spent. Ong believes typical adolescents run through a series of unlikely audiences when assigned work such as this and eventually end up realizing that the only possible audience would be the teacher who assigned the essay in the first place. Prone to questioning the things they are taught, adolescents, Ong tells us, ask "Who wants to know?" when given assignments such as these. The adolescent's answer, says Ong, might run something like this:

Grandmother? He never tells grandmother. His father or mother? There's a lot he would not want to tell them, that's for sure. His classmates? Imagine the reception if he suggested they sit down and listen quietly while [he told them of his summer vacation]. He couldn't imagine telling his teacher how he spent his summer vacation other than in writing this paper. (8)

Ong believes that writing for the teacher does not solve the adolescent writer's problems, but only restates them. "In fact," says Ong, "most young people do not tell anybody how they spent their summer vacation, much less write down how they spent it. The subject may be in-close; the use it is to be put to remains unfamiliar, strained bizarre" (8).

It is also commonly thought that most adolescents do not enjoy writing in school. Perhaps one of the reasons this might be so is that "often the adolescent is so painfully self-aware that merely having to write a sentence on the chalkboard causes feelings of shame and inadequacy.
Writing is by definition, an act of self-exposure" (Calkins 106). Much of the time, our eighth grade writers are not concerned with considering an audience, but they are concerned instead with getting through the writing assignment.

Psychologist and author Charles J. Brainerd has said of adolescence:

The one conclusion that seems to follow inescapably from the trouble-and-turmoil position is that adolescence is just not a very pleasant phase to go through. Adolescents are pictured as being in a state of constant and unrelieved conflict. They seem to be torn between the desire to remain children and the need to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. In short, the traditional view of adolescence is somewhat gloomy. In fact, one wonders upon reading Erikson, Freud, and others how most of us managed to make it through with a whole skin. (202-03)

The fact that most of us made it through adolescence with "a whole skin" encourages us that our eighth graders will make it through this time as well. When we determine how eighth grade writers view audiences, it is helpful to understand the nature of the adolescent phase they are experiencing. Mostly, since adolescents are dealing with many more "real" problems than the problem of audience awareness, we know that this issue is a far smaller one for them than for us.
CHAPTER II

Two Views: Factors Which Create Differences in Audience Awareness for the Eighth Grade Writer and the Adult Writer

Since cognitive abilities (the abilities connected with how people think, learn, and remember) "like physical abilities, do not remain static across the life span" and since "different activities follow their own developmental course" (Halpern 23), looking at the factors which create differences in audience awareness for eighth grade writers and adult writers can be helpful. Four factors which influence how eighth grade writers see their audiences and how adult writers see theirs are: environment, purpose, experience, and what Margaret Martlew terms "the mature writer" (305).

Obviously, the environment in which eighth graders compose and those in which adults write are very different. The classroom is generally the setting for the adolescent writer and adult writers, unless they are students themselves, compose in a wide variety of settings. Carol Berkenkotter writes that audience awareness is "complicated by the highly limited context in which most school writing takes place" (396), and, unlike real world writing situations,

which confront the writer with a variety of rhetorical situations and audiences with differing needs, school writing demands that the student
Phillip Lopate, best known to composition teachers as a gifted lecturer on teaching creative writing to children, discusses in his workshops and essays the pressure students experience when they must compose in the classroom. In an essay for Cooper and Odell's *Research on Composing*, Lopate writes:

It always amazes me, after I have taught a creative writing lesson and handed out paper, that children write any poems at all. I could never write a poem in such a vulnerable, exposed situation. Yet they do write often fine poems, at gunpoint as it were. Maybe there is nothing so mysterious about this: they are reconciled to the rule of authority which continually expects production on the spot, in ways an adult would never dream of demanding of him or herself. (141)

The setting in which eighth graders must compose seems, then, to be a negative factor influencing an awareness of audience. Besides the noise around the classroom and other factors common to classroom writing, adolescents are left little time to deal with the problem of audience awareness because so often they must engage in on-the-spot writing. Lopate believes that writing is "a solitary and private" act. Yet, as he points out, most writing takes place in classrooms with groups as large as forty students: "There is an embarrassing contradiction between the public character of the classroom and the need that writing imposes for quiet introverted space" (141). Cynthia Watson calls
writing in the classroom the "artificial and frozen writer-audience relationship" (138). Indeed, adults are able to make choices about where and when they compose. Eighth graders usually must write in an environment that is not conducive to composing, let alone to considering an audience.

A second factor influencing the differences in the ways eighth grade and adult writers handle audience is purpose. Eighth grade writers almost always compose for a classroom assignment, a school task, or the teacher. Adult writers' purposes for writing are generally ones that they have chosen, and they are generally gratifying ones. Writers' audiences are greatly tied to their purposes in writing:

> Concepts of purpose and audience affect the composing process in significant ways. For writers of all ages, especially for older writers . . . the structure, tone, style, register, syntax, and lexical choices of their writing will change when their dominant purpose for writing shifts or when their audience changes. (Cooper and Matsuhashi 12)

Since adult writers usually have a purpose which is of their choosing, their writing will reflect more attention to audience. Eighth grade writers' compositions usually lack any attention to audience because frequently, they are removed or not involved with their writing in a "real way." Thus, as James Britton notes, school writing is often not a student's "own." Britton writes that when writers can compose to satisfy themselves, the writing is markedly
better:

When, and if, he makes [writing] his own it would appear not to differ from a self-imposed task, that is writing that is voluntarily undertaken. As we met the problem in the scripts it was the difference between writings which we distinguished as being involved or being perfunctory. When involved, the writer made the task his own and began to write to satisfy himself as well as his teacher; in perfunctory writing he seemed to satisfy only the minimum demands of the task. When a writer wrote to satisfy himself as well as to fulfill the task, he seemed better able to bring the full force of his knowledge, attitudes and language experience to bear on the writing, which was carried to a conclusion on some sort of "rising tide." (7)

In his study, Britton and his colleagues found that some secondary school students could, in fact, make the writing assignment their "own," but for most of the 2,122 writing samples studied, this was not the case.

Although it is obvious that adult writers have more experience to bring to the composing process than do eighth grade writers, this is one of the significant factors which create differences in the ways the two groups view the audiences for which they write. Andrea Lunsford says that "as they compose, writers must rely in large part upon their own vision of the reader, which they create, as readers do their vision of writers, according to their own experiences and expectations" (158). Since adult writers have a wider range of experiences from which to draw when composing, they are better equipped to have a "vision" of an audience in writing. Eighth graders, with their limited life
experiences, have narrow visions of audiences, if they have visions of readers at all.

Since adult writers have had more experience communicating with others in all aspects of life, they are also better able to communicate with an audience, real or imagined, in composition. Crowhurst and Piche maintain that "as writers mature . . . they are able to vary their discourse in noticeable ways for different audiences" (101-09). Barry Kroll, who has focused his work on audience awareness in very young writers, points out that "it seems reasonable that individuals who can think in more complex ways about how other people think ought to be better writers, producing texts better adapted to their readers' needs, interests, and likely responses" (304). Eighth grade writers are still operating from a small circle of school friends, and other than their immediate families, they do not have the wide circle of work and social contacts that adults have. Thus, eighth grade writers have fewer experiences in communication to bring to their writing. This in turn keeps them from realizing that other readers besides their teachers exist.

Park believes that adult writers work "on the basis of intuitions about the range of what most readers are likely to know" (251). Since eighth grade writers' experiences are limited, these intuitions are harder for them to understand. Beyond composing on the basis of intuitions about what their
peers or family members know, eighth graders have a difficult time developing intuitions about an audience. The adult writer has a better understanding and intuition about what any given reader, part of a general population of implied readers, might know because the adult writer has experienced far more than the eighth grade writer.

Pfister and Petrik also believe experience helps writers see a broader range of potential audiences, and they state that

... students, like all writers, must fictionalize their audience. But they must construct in the imagination an audience that is as nearly a replica as is possible of those many readers who actually exist in the world of reality and who are reading the writer's words. (213-14)

Is it possible for adolescent writers to imagine an audience other than their teachers? Unless directed by the teacher to "write a letter to the town newspaper editor" or "imagine you are writing a short story for your parents," imagining an audience isn't very likely on any given writing assignment. Adult writers, however, especially because they usually have an intended audience for the composing they do, are capable of constructing this replica of readers who actually exist.

Donald Murray says that good writing comes from an abundance of information: "The writer needs an inventory of facts, observations, details, images, quotations, statistics" (Calkins 284). Lucy Calkins suggests that out
of the "patterns, contradictions, and relationships among these specifics, writers make ideas." She further states that when writing from their own experiences, students need "the time and the resources to gather this abundance of information" (284). Although adult writers must still gather information and, at times, do research when they write, much of the "observations, details, images," that Murray speaks of are readily available in the adult writers' minds. Adult writers bring to paper a lifetime of experiences and knowledge that is at their immediate recall to use when composing. Eighth grade writers, however, being "writers" for perhaps only the last five of their thirteen or fourteen years, bring to paper limited experience. Much of what they know of the world has been learned at home, school, and on television. Most eighth grade writers have not had the adult writer's opportunities to travel, work, form relationships, and make decisions. So, through no fault of their own, eighth grade writers do not have this "inventory" from which to draw ideas of audience when they compose.

One last factor that creates differences in the way adults and eighth graders see their audiences is maturity in writing. It seems logical that as people mature in all areas of life, their writing matures as well. Margaret Martlew believes that as writers mature in their composing process, they are more free to deal with problems such as
audience. For the most part, adult writers have overcome the basic pitfalls of spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics. For eighth grade writers, however, these basic parts of understanding writing are still being learned. Martlew writes:

> when the majority of words used can be run off without having to focus on spelling, and clause boundaries are automatically demarcated by appropriate punctuation and capitalization, the writer is relieved from having to devote conscious attention to these operations. The writer can then focus on the higher-level operations needed to maintain an awareness of overall global aims, either in accordance with a prespecified plan or integrating new ideas which evolve in the course of composition. (305)

More than most eighth graders themselves, the teacher of middle school English is aware of the struggles the adolescent student still has with the basic rules of writing. Frequently, when mistakes are pointed out to them, students become so concerned with spelling or punctuation or capitalization that these mechanics of writing become the focus of the entire paper. Adult writers, for the most part, are able to consider mechanics and audience at the same time when writing since the mechanics of writing are better understood and have been used by these writers over and over again.

Loren Barritt and Barry Kroll suggest that in order for writers to effectively compose for their readers, they must engage in some degree of role taking. To do so, say the authors, a significant degree of writing maturity is needed.
Basing their terminology on Flavell's work in cognitive psychology (1974), the two authors believe that writers must work through four component processes that enable writers to see their audiences. Writers must first be aware of the existence of various points of view and "be aware that others can have a different perspective than his or her own" (55). Eighth grade writers are just beginning to understand that others have different points of view.

Next, say Barritt and Kroll, writers must recognize that a particular writing situation calls for role taking. For eighth grade writers, the "need" for role taking is unimportant because eighth graders most likely see a piece of writing as something to be completed for their teacher and give little thought to taking someone else's point of view.

Mature writers will make inferences about another's cognitive activity and then maintain that inference over a period of time. Finally, mature writers must apply that inference in a particular communication situation. In oral communication, adolescents engage in role taking: interpreting facial expressions of their peers to understand reactions, understanding the point of view of unhappy parents, and so forth. In writing situations, there seems to be little reason for adolescent writers to consider these four components of role taking.

James Britton found that one of the marks of the mature
writer is indeed, an understanding of writing for an audience. Britton maintains:

One important dimension of development in writing ability is the growth of a sense of audience, the growth of the ability to make adjustments and choices in writing which take account of the audience for whom the writing is intended. This accommodation may be coarse or fine, highly calculated or totally intuitive, diffused through the text or explicit at particular points in it; but, whatever the form of its realization, a highly developed sense of audience must be one of the marks of the competent mature writer, for it is concerned with nothing less than the implementation of his concern to maintain or establish an appropriate relationship with his reader in order to achieve his full intent. (58)

A "highly developed" sense of audience is not likely to be seen in the writing of the eighth grader, and, although Britton considers this trait necessary for having the "marks of the competent mature writer" (58), the middle school writer is neither fully competent in writing nor fully mature. An awareness of audience occurs more naturally in the writing of adults than it does in the writing of eighth graders, and "naturally" may be a significant term. Thomas Newkirk and Nancie Atwell in their article "The Competence of Young Writers" caution that although maturity in writing seems to follow as people become older, this is not to say that younger writers are incompetent. They point out that competence is acquired as children and adolescents develop, and because of this, younger writers, although they may lack the marks of mature writing, are competent for their level
of sophistication in writing (187).

Although these factors seem to determine the way eighth grade writers and adult writers view their audiences, these same factors excuse, to an extent, the limited audience awareness that most eighth grade writers possess. Chris Anson suggests that writers do not risk being "wrong with respect to their audience, only myopic, insensitive or misguided." Anson further points out that "this depends largely on the situation surrounding the writing and reading events" (18). Because the "situation" surrounding eighth grade writers as they compose and read is school based, they are more insensitive to audience, naturally, than adult writers.
CHAPTER III

Step by Step: The Role of Cognitive Development in the Writing of the Adolescent

The school situation seems to determine eighth graders' potential for developing a sense of audience when they compose. Adult writers have an advantage when composing because they are removed from that setting. But what role does cognitive development play in affecting the writing of adolescents? Are adult writers better able to see their audiences because of the stages they have passed through in the developmental process of cognition? Is audience awareness something that is affected by cognitive development?

Cognitive developmental psychology is a branch of social science that concerns two areas of study. This psychology is cognitive because it focuses on the way a person knows the world, on "mind," rather than on behavior (Barritt and Kroll 50). Piaget believes that humans actively construct knowledge through interaction with the world. As do other biological systems, humans share the twin adaptive functions of assimilation and accommodation. Human adaptation is unique, however, because the interaction of assimilation and accommodation result in a system of understanding as knowledge is required. The developmental understanding of this psychology emphasizes the sequence of

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Barritt and Kroll observe that one of Piaget's most fundamental insights was that "children's thinking is not simply quantitatively different from adult thinking (children know less), but that it is qualitatively different (children reason in alternative modes)" (50). Adolescents are neither adults nor children. They are not thinking as either one would, and consequently, their writing reflects this in-between stage.

Walter Petty's studies of children's writing and composing processes have led him to conclude that composing is "inherent in using language." Petty believes that when children utter sentences, they are composing. He states that children have a natural ability to compose, but that "not everyone's composing ability is equal . . . and the major problems seem to appear in written composition" (75). Cooper, Odell, and Courts state that "because of the work of Kellogg Hunt (1965,1977) and our own experience, [we are] persuaded that writing performance differs greatly according to age level" (10). We know that eighth graders have the ability to compose, but to what extent is this ability determined by the cognitive stage they are in as adolescents?

Carl Bereiter argues that there is no natural order of writing development in the sense of a fixed sequence that
all writers must go through. He believes, however, that thinking of writing development in terms of "discrete stages, each characterized by conscious focus on a particular aspect of writing" is necessary (89). He points out that the stages may be ordered differently by different educational approaches, but that the stages do not "simply run together into amorphous growth" (89).

The term "cognitive" concerns a broad range of mental activities such as perceiving, thinking, and knowing. During adolescence there are both quantitative and qualitative changes in development. Eastwood Atwater in his definitive study of youth, titled simply Adolescence, states that quantitative changes include an increase in mental ability as measured by intelligence tests and school requirements. He says that qualitative changes refer to the different ways adolescents think at various stages of their development. The qualitative changes are commonly interpreted in terms of Jean Piaget's cognitive development (63).

Piaget's four stages of cognitive development are the sensori-motor stage, usually classified during the ages of birth to two years old; the pre-operational stage, classified during ages two to six years old; the concrete-operational stage, which occurs when a child is seven to eleven years old; and the formal-operational stage from eleven years old onward. Although each of these stages has
bearing on the development of the adolescent, the formal-operational stage is the concern of this study. Charles Brainerd states that "the first glimmers" of the formal-operational stage of development can be seen during ages eleven and twelve. In the United States public school system, any given classroom of eighth graders will contain students ages twelve to fourteen with age thirteen as the average age for the population. Most eighth graders are beginning, then, to experience the development that occurs during the formal-operational stage. Piaget's studies, however, led him to conclude that, although the formal-operational stage in cognitive development begins about age eleven or twelve, it is not solidly established until around age fifteen. Piaget believes that a lengthy transition or "preparation" phase precludes the formal-operational stage. Further, he states that adolescents between eleven and fifteen will tend to behave and think as though they are formal-operational in some situations and as though they are still concrete-operational in other situations. Piaget writes that after age fifteen, the formal-operational stage is in full control and that the behavior and thinking of the adolescent should become more consistent (Brainerd 204).

Most eighth grade writers, then, share both of Piaget's later two cognitive stages. Atwater writes that cognitive development consists of a "progressive reorganization of mental processes as a result of maturation and experience"
Thus, eighth grade writers are constantly reorganizing their thoughts and reasoning to accommodate what they have experienced as they mature. Atwater states that as soon as children or adolescents construct a "meaningful understanding of reality," they begin experiencing discrepancies between what they know and what their environment is presenting to them. During adolescence children begin to question discrepancies, and the continuing process of resolving these discrepancies transforms the child's intelligence into "the more mature understanding of the adolescent and the adult" (64). This theory helps explain why the adolescent displays characteristics of both the concrete-operational stage and the formal-operational stage in cognitive development.

Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist whose primary research concerned the acquisition of language and speech in the child, found that even after adolescents have learned to produce concepts, they do not abandon elementary forms. Vygotsky called this the "transitional character of adolescent thinking" (59-60). One reason adolescents' thought processes are so transitional is because of the variation of their experiences during these years. One of Piaget's crucial points in his cognitive process theory is that experience does not leave cognition unaffected. He believes that our cognitive processes change and develop through our contacts with reality. Further, the manner
in which our intelligence sets about interpreting reality leaves reality forever altered (Brainerd 23).

While the cognitive processes during adolescence are transitional, they also occur during a time in which Piaget believes intelligence is highest. Piaget has written that the thinking and reasoning of adolescents are praiseworthy and he believes, in fact, that between the ages of eleven and fifteen intelligence reaches its peak (Brainerd 203).

How do these changes during cognitive development affect the writing of the eighth grader? The word adolescence translates from the Latin Ad meaning "to" and Alescere meaning "to grow" (Atwater 1). At no other time does the child experience such rapid physical, mental, and social growth. One of Piaget's greatest concerns was that information transmitted to the child should be "tailored" to the child's stage of intellectual development if the child is to benefit from it (Butterworth 26). In order to determine how the eighth grade writer can benefit from such a developmental study, exploration of the relationship between cognition and writing is necessary.

Calkins believes in the necessity of correlating development in writing with cognitive skills. She feels that when teachers of composition have a prior knowledge of writing development, "it is easier for them to pay attention to what [their students] show them" (32). John Bushman, who has conducted extensive research in middle school
composition at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, believes that one of the most neglected topics in the research and literature on middle school composition is the sequencing of writing for adolescents. Bushman states that adolescents at the middle school grades should not be expected to complete the same writing tasks that adolescents in high school are asked to complete. He states that while he believes teachers of composition intellectually know that these two sets of students are not at the same level of skill development, and, therefore, should not be expected to do the same tasks, something "breaks down between the 'knowing' and the 'doing'" (3). We need to be aware of the changes young writers' compositions go through in order to guide them to become better writers. The implications of this for the teacher of composition will be discussed in Chapter five.

One interpretation of writing development is that it consists of "the gradual elaboration and refinement of relevant schemes at different processing levels" (Bereiter 79). Bereiter feels that most school writing is based upon this idea, since children in most levels "do pretty much the same thing" in writing. They write stories, poems, essays, and the teacher guides the students along and tries to help them in all aspects of writing at once (79). In the middle school grades, then, there is not one lesson to be learned in writing during a particular year, but writing is nurtured
along, and takes students from where their writing left off in the previous year or semester to, one hopes, a greater awareness of new writing skills and possibilities within writing.

Bereiter believes that unlike the Piagetian stages of cognitive development, stages in writing do not have distinct characteristics, but that they have a "natural order to them." He states that writing stages can vary from child to child and that depending on the educational experience of each child, these stages in writing can change (82). Bereiter goes so far as to say that by the time children have acquired the basic mechanics of writing, they "probably have available the whole hierarchy of processing levels that adults have, even though the schemes or mechanisms at each level may be undeveloped and little differentiated" (78). In his studies with language development, Loban has asked a question regarding oral language development, "Can definite stages of language development be identified?" Through much research over a period of a decade, Loban found that he was able to provide distinct descriptions of the language of children at different ages, but that these descriptions generally add up to the gradual acquisition of mature characteristics (2). Loban has further observed that although his data showed a "steady nondramatic chronological development" that indicated to him that "linguistic stages are no more
discrete, no more sudden" than physical and cognitive stages of growth, there is, nonetheless, progressively sophisticated language development as a child becomes older. Although Loban focused his studies on language development in general, he, as most theorists, believes that the development of the two abilities are related. Loban found a plateau in oral language development sometime between grade seven and grade ten, and he further posits that this plateau comes a year later in written language.

We know that complex syntax develops gradually in young writers. How is this a result of the cognitive stages through which children and adolescents must pass? Martlew has found that as children move from the concrete-operational level to the "logical awareness" associated with formal-operations, their use of variations of syntax grows. Martlew suggests written language development parallels cognitive progression. As children become adolescents, they are better able to turn knowledge and experience into more sophisticated writing. Martlew also notes a plateau in complexity of oral language a year later (306). It seems logical, then, that as eighth graders pass from the concrete-operational stage to the formal-operational stages, their writing ability also increases in sophistication. Although many more studies have been conducted on the relationship between speech and cognitive development than on the relationship between writing and cognitive
development, we can concur that writing development matures to some extent as the writer matures. Compared with speech, however, the acquisition of writing is "slow and more effortful, removed from immediate communicative purposes" (Martlew 298). Barritt and Kroll point out that although cognitive developmental research has been influential in language development, they know of "no systematic delineation of its implications for research in written composition" (49), and because of this need for research, Barry Kroll began his work with very young children and writing. In particular, Kroll's work has focused on how cognitive development in young children affects awareness of audience in written composition. Kroll suggests that cognitive development affects the writing of older children and adolescents both.

In an article for Research and the Teaching of English, Kroll writes that mature audience awareness "does not emerge full-blown" (Ede 147). Audience awareness probably develops as a writer passes through the stages of cognitive development. Lisa Ede states that "We can hardly help our students improve their ability to analyze an audience ... unless we have some understanding of the nature and development of audience awareness as a cognitive skill" (147). Kroll suggests that an awareness of audience is closely related to children's egocentricity, a characteristic found in all levels of Piaget's stages of
development. Egocentricity as a separate characteristic will be discussed in Chapter four; however, it is important to note that egocentricity is directly related to the stages of cognitive growth. Robinson and Robinson point out that Piaget draws a distinction between older children who are aware of problems involved in attaining successful communication and younger children who are not aware (101). Piaget believes that the age at which children are able to communicate their thought is somewhere between seven and eight. From this age on, children try to improve upon their methods of "interchanging ideas" and upon their "mutual understanding of one another" (Robinson and Robinson 101). Since children are able to improve upon their communicative abilities from at least age eight, perhaps they are also able to improve upon their writing abilities. Robinson and Robinson point out that before adolescence, children are able to understand communication problems. Children are able to realize that what they say may not be understood, and that what is said to them "may not be an unambiguous and clear basis for [their] own action or understanding." This realization is usually accompanied by a "knowledge of various ways of improving the situation when communication fails" (101). Adolescent writers of grade eight, then, should be aware of some communication problems in writing by this stage of development, even if they have not left the concrete-operational stage entirely. In fact, within any
one writer, development does not seem to consist of constant forward-moving progress. One day a writer's work may be good and another day poor. Often, what seem at first to be regressions turn out to be "moments of imbalance" through which new levels of writing are reached (Calkins 33). So the writing of adolescents, like the cognitive stages they pass through, is ever-changing; some days there may be great progress, and other days, regression.

Bereiter has identified six different systems of knowledge or skill that mark mature writing: fluency in producing written language, fluency in generating ideas, mastery of writing conventions, social cognition (appearing as ability to take account of the reader), literary appreciation and discrimination, and reflective thought. Social cognition is the system that concerns us. Bereiter points out that each of these skill systems can develop independently of the others to a greater or lesser extent, and that simultaneous development in all of them is "to be expected across the span of school years" (82). So as adolescents mature in school writing, social cognition, or the ability to take account of the reader, would seemingly also mature. Bereiter is quick to say, however, that writing development is the result of other "more basic kinds of development" in the child (74).

Burleson and Rowan define social cognition as the "ability to acquire knowledge about the characteristics and
qualities of an audience" or the "psychological mechanisms for obtaining knowledge about others" (39-40). Eighth graders have little reason to "acquire knowledge" about their audience's characteristics since most of eighth grade writing is conducted in a school setting and, indeed, is written for the teacher. Although their desire to investigate and obtain "knowledge about others" when writing is not strong, eighth grade writers probably have the ability to do so, given that, during the concrete-operational and formal-operational stages, social awareness and the ability to take another's point of view are possible. Marlene Scardamalia and Barry Kroll have both found that one characteristic of cognitive maturation is the ability of writers to "decenter" from their own perceptions of reality to consider the needs of the reader. Kroll concludes that "the crucial factors in an investigation of audience awareness are not the salient characteristics of audiences, but the constructive processes operative in the mind of the writers" (Berkenkotter 388). Whether or not eighth graders can "decenter" and consider the needs of their audience is hard to determine since most writing is completed for the teacher in middle school writing. However, perhaps middle school writers do indeed have this ability because they can successfully consider the needs of others when they communicate in speech. Bushman points out that "learning to write does not have to be completed by
grade nine, seven, or six; but it occurs step by step in a process that takes many years with each grade level making very important contributions to that process" (9). Writing ability, like other abilities, is affected by cognitive development. As children become adolescents, they mature in many areas, and this can be seen in their writing as well. As Bushman has pointed out, learning to write takes many years and each grade level children pass through contributes to the maturation of skills. So, too, as influenced by their experiences from the concrete-operational stage to the formal-operational stage, eighth graders' awareness of audience matures. As eighth grade writers begin to make sense of reality around them, the possibilities for accommodating audience will seem more likely.
CHAPTER IV

Looking Inward: The Role of Egocentrism in the Writer's Awareness of Audience

A major theme in Piaget's stages of cognitive development is the study of egocentricity. Because eighth grade writers' understanding of audience is influenced by their cognitive development, their potential for recognizing audience is also affected by egocentricity. What role does egocentrism play in the writer's awareness of audience, and how does egocentrism affect the eighth grade writer's relationship to audience?

Briefly, egocentrism is defined as a state of "undifferentiation between self and environment manifest in different ways at various stages of development" (Butterworth 23). Infants do not differentiate between the effects of their actions and independent events. During the preoperational period, young children can perceive reality to be independent of action and children can perceive that they are one object among many. During the concrete-operational stage, children are able to take on the "property of reversibility" and understand different points of view as long as their thinking occurs with respect to concrete problems. As formal-operations begin to appear, children and adolescents are able to "think about thinking" and are better able to see viewpoints other than their own.
Most psychologists reason that egocentrism can be observed throughout adult life, however, and that during the progression from the concrete-operational stage to the formal-operational stage, egocentricity is sometimes easily recognizable in the adolescent or hardly apparent at all (Butterworth 23).

The concept of egocentrism was introduced early in Piaget's first book, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1926). His early work centered on egocentrism in the young child, but later Piaget included adolescent egocentrism and adult egocentrism. Piaget's most basic definition of egocentrism was, simply, that children remain unaware that their own experiences of the world and those of others may differ (Cox 7). Piaget and his students are quick to point out that egocentrism does not imply selfishness or a refusal to see the viewpoints of others. Ede calls egocentrism "a natural stage in a child's acquisition of communication skills" (145). Kroll warns that "egocentrism has often been misunderstood to mean a selfish attitude" and points out that, on the contrary, Piaget's theory "egocentrism" is a technical term that denotes a cognitive state in which children see the world in their own terms (271). John Flavell, one of the foremost students of the writings of Piaget, posits that egocentrism is a state in which the "cognizer sees the world from a single point of view only--his own--but without the knowledge of the existence of
other viewpoints or perspectives and without awareness that he is the prisoner of his own" (60).

How significant is egocentrism in the cognitive stages of adolescents' lives? Butterworth points out that describing another person's point of view requires a "certain effort of the imagination" and believes that Piaget was correct to argue that the ability to understand another person's point of view does not develop until children have acquired concrete-operational reasoning (about eight to twelve years old) (Butterworth 37). David Elkind suggests that the egocentrism of early childhood gives way to socialized speech and thought at the end of the elementary school years, but that it reappears as "adolescent egocentrism." This, says Elkind, is when students turn newly acquired powers of thought upon themselves and become introspective. A strong tendency to analyze self, projected upon others, helps explain why "adolescents are so self-conscious: they assume their thoughts and actions are as interesting to others as to themselves" (85). The difference between egocentricity in childhood and in adolescence, then, is that children are unable to take another person's point of view while the adolescent "takes the other person's point of view to an extreme degree" (85).

During the formal-operational stage, adolescents are able to conceptualize their thoughts as well as the thoughts of others. The capacity to take account of other people's
thoughts "is the crux of adolescent egocentrism" (Elkind 85). Adolescent egocentrism emerges because, even though adolescents can now understand thoughts of others, they fail to differentiate between the objects toward which these thoughts are directed and the objects that are the focus of their own concern. Commonly, it is thought that adolescents are concerned with self due to the "physiological metamorphosis" they are experiencing. Since adolescents fail to differentiate between what others are thinking about and their own "mental preoccupation," they assume that other people are as "obsessed" with their behavior and appearance as they are themselves. Elkind says this belief constitutes the egocentrism of the adolescent (85).

One concept of adolescent egocentrism of particular interest in this study is David Elkind's theory of the "imaginary audience." Elkind explains that one consequence of adolescent egocentrism is that in actual or up-coming social situations, adolescents anticipate the reactions of other people to themselves. The anticipations, says Elkind, are "based on the premise that others are as admiring or as critical of [adolescents] as [they] are of [themselves]" (86). Elkind states that, in a sense, adolescents are continually constructing or reacting to an "imaginary audience." Elkind explains that this is an audience because the adolescent believes that he will be the focus of attention; and it is imaginary because, in actual social situations, this is not usually
Eighth graders, then, seem to have the tendency at times, to construct this imaginary audience as part of their naturally occurring egocentrism. At the same time, constructing an imaginary audience could hinder seeing a "real" audience in a writing task. We know that eighth graders would most likely experience the imaginary audience tendencies at times because it isn't until about age fifteen or sixteen that adolescents tend to modify their imaginary audience in the direction of the real audience. This occurs by the increasing recognition of the difference between an adolescent's own thoughts and the thoughts and reactions of others (Atwater 74-75). The rate at which adolescent egocentrism is outgrown varies from person to person. Adolescent egocentrism begins to diminish around age fifteen, depending on an individual's experience and maturity (Atwater 75).

Most pertinent in the study of the relationship between egocentrism and audience awareness is the concept of role taking. Andrea Lunsford has written that part of the maturation process in writing involves "de-centering." Lee Odell describes this process as "getting outside one's own frame of reference, understanding the thoughts, values, feelings of another person; ... projecting oneself into
unfamiliar circumstances, whether factual or hypothetical, learning to understand why one reacts as he does to experience" (455). Lunsford writes that although a child begins to "de-center" as early as the preoperational stage, egocentricity is still strong in the concrete stage, and, apparently, we continue the process of "de-centering" throughout our lives as we "move into unfamiliar tasks and environments" (147-48). In order to see others' points of views, "de-centering" is a necessary process in role taking. Flavell describes role taking as "the act of inferring the internal attributes of others: their abilities, interests, needs, or perspectives" (60). Flavell found that role taking follows a developmental, age-related pattern and that the ability to take another's point of view develops gradually from preschool age through adolescence (60). Selman describes role taking as "the tendency to perceive and conceptualize the interaction between oneself and another as seen through the other's eyes" (Light 3). This process of role taking, then, involves putting oneself in the place of another person and making inferences about his or her "capabilities, attributes, expectations, feelings, and potential reactions" (Light 127). Role taking is part of the adolescent's emergence from egocentricity. We are probably safe in assuming that, at times, eighth grade writers can "de-center" enough to assume role taking tasks, but that at other times they cannot.
How does the egocentricity of eighth grade writers affect their relationship to audience? As adolescents reach high school and college, they are usually quite adept communicators in face-to-face social situations, "picking up subtle cues from their listeners and adjusting their speech accordingly" (Anson 18). As many composition researchers have shown, however, developing this audience sensitivity "seems to lag behind in most students' writing" (Anson 18). As eighth graders become less egocentric as they mature, so does their writing. The ability to "de-center" and engage in role taking consistently does not develop until about age fifteen. So eighth grade writers are still inconsistent in their role taking abilities. While eighth grade writers are experiencing some sophistication in writing ability, they are still at the peak of adolescent egocentricity, and audience awareness is likely quite undefined. Bereiter says that this lack of audience awareness in middle school arises from an "incapacity to take account of the reader and cope with all the other demands of writing at the same time" (86). Because the demands of writing, such as mechanics, spelling, genre recognition, and even handwriting, are so great on the eighth grade writer, audience awareness simply gets left out.

Vygotsky argues that the egocentric speech of the child "continues in the adolescent and adult as inner speech which might best be characterized as internal, private, often
alogical, verbal thought" (Kroll 272). Kroll notes a relationship between "inner speech" and writing:

The transition from "inner speech" to external speech is relatively easy; translation into written language involves abstraction and a major elaboration of "inner speech." This involves more complex psychological operations and causes major pitfalls for the young person learning written language. (272-73)

Eighth grade writers are bound to struggle with translating their "inner speech," part of the decision making process, into external speech. Further, eighth grade writers have more difficulty recognizing some of their "verbal thoughts" as guidance in the area of audience awareness. In a social situation calling for speaking, eighth graders can pick up cues from the people around them. In writing, eighth graders must rely on their teacher for feedback.

James Moffett says that as writers mature, they are able to move from egocentered writing to decentered writing. Egocentric writing, he says, is characterized by "a speaker talking to him—or herself—or an immediate audience—a friend, say—about phenomena that presently exist" (Cooper, Odell, Courts 5). As writers become more decentered, they are able to "address remote audiences about subjects that are not part of one's present, firsthand experience" (Cooper, Odell, Courts 5). Moffett points out that his interest is not "solely in preparing students to write highly decentered discourse," but also in enabling students to move easily along the "egocentered-decentered continuum"
and to know where they are at any one point along the continuum" (Cooper, Odell, Courts 5).

Most eighth grade writers spend much time on the continuum of egocentered writing because most of what they write is "present, firsthand experience." Moffett would not balk at the egocentered writing of eighth graders, but would instead, help them recognize where along the continuum they are writing. Like Moffett, Gibson and Kinneay, and other researchers in the field of composition, believe this recognition is important (Cooper, Odell, Courts 4). Further, they believe that recognizing the relationship of speaker, subject, and audience in writing is not only important for persuasive writing, but also for all types of discourse (Cooper, Odell, Courts 4). While we may not be able to completely change eighth grade writers' abilities to be aware of their audience, we can at least guide them in recognizing greater possibilities for role taking and "de-centering."

Thomas Newkirk writes of reading many student papers that lack detail and an awareness of audience. He writes that his students

... left out detail because they were only seeing the subject from their own point of view, and consequently, they left out details that they knew but that their readers did not. I found that papers which to me seemed threadbare, were often quite interesting to the writer's peers. Clearly we were looking for different things when we read. In fact, we were finding different ways of satisfying our need for information. We were
elaborating in different ways. I was expecting much of the elaboration to be done by the writer where students were doing much of the elaboration as readers. Both ways of reading are plausible. (52)

Newkirk explains that he has learned much from the way his student writers see their audiences. Because eighth grade writers see their audience through glasses of adolescent egocentrism, our task is a bit harder in guiding them along Moffett's "egocentered-decentered continuum." Because we can learn, as Newkirk has, from the way our middle school students see their audiences, our task can be rewarding.
A Road Taken: Implications of the Eighth Grade Writer's Conception of Audience for the Teacher of Composition

In this final chapter, I will discuss the significance of knowing how eighth graders see their audience and then posit three suggestions for the teacher of composition when dealing with eighth graders and the topic of audience awareness.

James Britton's research team reported that ninety-five percent of all the scripts analyzed in their secondary school study were written for the teacher (Slattery 47). This percentage is significant in itself. The writing that any given eighth grade composition teacher can expect to read over a year will be aimed at him or her alone, and only five percent of what the teacher will read will be written for other audiences. Although seeing a singular audience seems to be natural for the eighth grade writer due to the demands of school, the knowledge that we must prepare our students for high school writing should make us concerned enough to want to lower the occurrence of teacher-based writing in our classrooms. Students must pay careful attention to their audiences when composing in high school and beyond, and so we should be inspired to want to begin preparing our eighth graders for writing for a broader range of audiences.
James Moffett once wrote that "if anybody is going to do anything about the teaching of writing, the first priority is going to have to be the rekindling of the sense of audience. Until that's done, nothing else is going to happen" (298). Audience awareness may not be the most significant factor when considering the instructional needs of eighth grade writers, but we know that audience awareness will help them become better writers.

Although eighth graders often have a difficult time seeing others' points of view because of the egocentricity that naturally occurs during this period in adolescence, does this mean that we should not expect them to be able to write for a broader range of audiences? Andrea Lunsford has written that if we are to broaden our secondary students' education, we must give "the kind of instruction that marches slightly ahead' of the student, thus allowing that student's reach only slightly to exceed his or her grasp" (157). Writing for the teacher comes quite naturally for eighth graders. If we are going to challenge our writers and give the kind of instruction that "marches slightly ahead" of them, we must challenge their limited awareness of audience.

Peter Elbow similarly urges teachers to challenge what their secondary writing students can accomplish. In one of his essays on teaching composition to younger writers, Elbow tells of teachers he has overheard bemoan the trials of
instructing adolescent students to write: "Adolescents have nothing to write about. They are too young. They haven't had significant experience" (57). Elbow argues that "in truth, adolescents don't lack experience or material, no matter how 'sheltered' their lives. What they lack is practice and help" (57). Indeed, the research is significant enough to tell us we need to help our eighth graders write for other audiences. How can we, then, best help our eighth graders see these audiences?

I would like to suggest three ways the teacher of composition can help his or her eighth grade writers develop a sense of audience awareness. These suggestions are based upon Charles Brainerd's interpretation of the underlying themes in Piagetian educational applications. Since the battle we are up against is helping our eighth graders write in spite of cognitive egocentrism, it seems natural that we should use principals of learning which are related to cognitive studies. Brainerd has narrowed down the underlying themes in Piagetian educational theories to three. First, the teacher is asked to bear in mind the central role that students play in their own learning. Second, the teacher is "encouraged to adopt pedagogical strategies designed to make [students] aware of conflicts and inconsistencies in their beliefs." Last, teachers are urged to "make use of the [student's] peers as teachers in their own right" (279).
If we help our eighth graders write for broader audiences by allowing them to play a role in their own learning, we need to make sure that they are actively involved in making decisions about what they write. Too often, middle school writing teachers are tempted to assign topics found in textbooks and topics that are connected with worksheets. These topics are "ready made," time worn, and easier to correct than ones that must be creatively researched or ones that students themselves might suggest. Worse, these writing topics often have little to do with what eighth graders actually care or know about. Terri Baker writes that "if a student has little knowledge or interest in a topic, his/her success is doubtful" (73).

Lucy Calkins believes that since "teaching writing begins with the recognition that each individual comes to . . . writing with concerns, ideas, memories, and feelings," we need to ask our students, "What are the things you know and care about?" (33). If our students are to have a role in their own learning, we should aim to create assignments, or let them create assignments, that have meaning for them in the context of their own world and experiences.

Since most middle school teachers have had a considerable amount of instruction in adolescent psychology and developmental educational practices, John Bushman's idea of "sequencing" in writing programs is a practice that
teachers should find important enough to incorporate in the writing classroom. This is yet another way in which eighth graders can take part in their own learning of audience awareness. Bushman feels that teachers should be able to "take what they know about the writing process and to provide experiences that are based on what young people can learn and do at any given age" (4). Bushman believes that concepts in writing need to be geared to the things that students are currently experiencing when the concept is taught. We need, then, to allow students to tell us what they are experiencing, and we need to observe closely the stages our eighth graders pass through in this grade. We need to base much of what we ask them to write on things they already know so that they can feel they are actively involved with the pieces of writing we assign.

D. P. Ausubel writes that "the most important single fact influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly" (34).

The second suggestion for helping eighth graders develop audience awareness is based on making students "aware of the conflicts and inconsistencies in their beliefs" (Calkins 105). First, we need to show our eighth graders that much of what they write is naturally composed for the teacher. We need to help them see that while it may be natural for them to write for us in the classroom, it will be different when they begin to write in "the real
world" and even in high school. We can also help them develop a better awareness of audience by showing our eighth graders that they can write for themselves; they should feel that they can write for the fun of writing, and they should feel that they can write to please themselves. Calkins states that it is during adolescence that we have a "special need to understand our lives, to find a plot line in the complexity of events, to see coordinates of continuity in the midst of all the discontinuity. Writing can play a crucial part in the task of identity formation" (105). Since many students have conflicts about writing, we should be able to show them that writing can be a way of understanding experiences and events that occur in life. We need to help our eighth graders see that "writing allows us to turn the chaos into something beautiful [and that] we need to write because writing allows us to understand our lives" (105).

Perhaps one of the greatest misconceptions we can help our eighth graders become aware of when they write is the idea that the teacher is "out to get" their writing mistakes. Peter Elbow writes that "no one can be good at ... writing without some confidence and trust in self. When I had a teacher who believed in me, who was interested in me, and interested in what I had to say, I wrote well" (65). We can encourage a sense of audience awareness in our eighth graders by showing them that we and others are
interested in what they have to say. Elbow writes that "when I had a teacher who thought I was naive, dumb, silly, and in need of being 'straightened out,' I wrote badly and sometimes couldn't write at all" (65).

Finally, we can help students develop a sense of audience by "making use of the [students'] peers as teachers in their own right." Bushman has pointed out that the research on adolescents "clearly reflects the need for peer approval" (7). The fact that most adolescents want their peers to approve of their thoughts and actions gives us a forum in which to help foster audience awareness in the writing of the eighth grader. Bushman suggests that teachers of composition utilize in writing classes small "support groups" that are made up of adolescents' classmates and peers. The group, writes Bushman, can "provide an audience for students' writing, a source for generating ideas, a support team to aid in revision, and a place for critical thinking" (7). As middle school teachers, I sometimes think we are reluctant to let students guide each other. We worry about the classroom noise of group work; we worry about where our eighth graders will lead each other in writing. We really shouldn't worry, however, for peer work provides our students with other audiences for which to write.

Bereiter urges us that as teachers, we must show our students that "writing can be used to affect the reader--
that it can direct, inform, amuse, move emotionally, and so on" (89). Since our eighth graders are not physically in front of us when we grade and comment on their papers, they are not able to receive the immediate feedback that they can experience in peer working groups. Sharing writing in classroom groups can allow students to see immediately the effects of what they have written. Once students start writing for readers, says Bereiter, "it becomes a natural next step for them to start reading their own writing, which sets in motion the writing-reading feedback loop on which the stage of unified writing depends" (89).

Piaget "believed strongly that for intellectual development, the cooperation among children is as important as the child's cooperation with adults" (Brainerd 283). Kamii states that without the perspectives of his or her peers,

the child remains prisoner of his own naturally egocentric point of view. A clash of convictions among children can readily cause an awareness of different points of view. Other children at similar cognitive levels can often help the child more than the adult can to move out of his egocentricity. (Brainerd 283)

Allowing our eighth graders to edit and encourage each others' writing provides a new audience and helps our students develop better awareness that they must compose for a wide variety of readers.

Because eighth graders are egocentric during this time in adolescence, their writing will display what at first
might seem an inability to take others' points of view. By bearing in mind the role that students can play in their own learning, by helping them become aware of conflicts and inconsistencies in their beliefs, and by making use of peer work in the writing classroom, the teacher of composition can help eighth grade writers develop skills which will allow them to compose with the realization that there exist many readers for which one can write. By understanding the relationship between cognitive egocentrism and audience awareness, the teacher of composition can help eighth grade writers develop an understanding of what it means to write for an audience.
Works Cited


