

# Writer-Based and Reader-Based Prose in the Author's Development as a Newspaper Columnist

Mallika Vasugi Govindarajoo<sup>1</sup>, Shorouk Aboudahr<sup>2</sup>, & Jayakaran Mukundan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup> Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> Taylors University, Malaysia

Correspondence: Mallika Vasugi Govindarajoo, Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Malaysia.

Received: June 22, 2023

Accepted: July 29, 2023

Online Published: September 4, 2023

doi:10.5430/wjel.v13n8p63

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n8p63>

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the researcher's development as a columnist, particularly from the perspectives of Writer-Based and Reader-Based prose, and to identify the topics that have been recurrent themes during the 20-year period of education column writing. An in-depth examination of the researcher's 210 published column articles (Teacher Talk, The Star. 2002-2021) was carried out with an analysis of content to compare the extent of Reader-Based Prose and Writer-Based Prose as well as topics or issues pertaining to teachers that have been consistently featured throughout the 20 years.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants for the purpose of triangulation. The study revealed that over the period of 20 years, there was a gradual but definite shift towards greater Reader-Based Prose and stronger writer's 'presence' in the column articles. Although elements of Writer-Based Prose were present in particular instances, there was a stronger pattern of Reader-Based Prose in the researcher's writing, especially in articles written after 2005. Readers could identify with the characters and settings and draw personal meanings from the issues highlighted in the articles thus providing credence to Reader Response Theory. The issues or topics that featured most in the articles and that were most often repeated throughout the 20-year period were teachers' perceptions of policies and professional issues and special school events. The same topics were the main emerging themes during the interviews thus providing confirmation that most issues experienced by Malaysian school teachers have remained the same over the past twenty years.

**Keywords:** writer-based prose, reader-based prose, columnist, reader's response

## 1. Introduction

The term Writer-Based Prose (WBP) and its counterpart Reader-Based Prose (RBP) were coined by composition researcher Flower (1979) who defines Writer-Based Prose as the narrative path of the writer's own confrontation with her subject.' Flower also links WBP with ineffective writing or writing that is concerned only with the way a writer reaches his own understanding, and not with the reader's understanding of what is written. Other theorists Elbow (2000) and Nordquist (2021) have argued against this stating that even when the writing is intended for an external audience, there is often the need for the writer to first explore his own ideas and be able to write without fear of censorship and restriction from 'imaginary critics' (Elbow, 2000; Murray, 1980; Nelson; 2021). Flower (1981), however, states that "effective writers do not simply express thought but transform it into certain complex but describable ways for the need of the reader." The product of this transformation would be Reader-Based Prose which in contrast is related to effective writers, who create a shared language and context between writer and reader in a deliberate attempt to communicate something to them. (Flower, 1979) In short, while WBP reflects the process of a writer's thoughts, RBP reflects its purpose.

In Reader Response theory (Fish, 1980; Holland, 1968; Rosenblatt, 1976) which emphasizes the role of the reader in interpreting and creating meaning from a text, readers are believed to bring their own experiences, beliefs, and values to a text, which shapes their understanding of it. Through the lens of Reader-response theory, Reader-based prose is seen as more effective, as it takes into account the reader's perspective and seeks to engage and connect with them. On the other hand, theories around expressionism (Murphy, 1991) see WBP as being more relevant because it allows the writer to fully express themselves and their unique perspective on the world. Other theories around reader-based and writer-based prose, which provide insight into how writers approach their craft and how readers engage with text include the rhetorical theory (Foss, 2002; Waterfield, 2018). which emphasizes the role of the text itself in shaping the reader's response.

Despite the relative negativity attached to Writer-Based prose in comparison to Reader-Based prose, it is nevertheless the first record of the writer's verbal thought. Writers often testify that primarily, they write for themselves. (Anderson, 2018; Elbow, 2000; Graves, 2018) Many writers have also testified that they are their own first audience or that it was important to ignore the audience during the first part of the writing in order to be able to get the writer's strong focus of attention that will give the reader an authentic voice in writing.

The intrinsic factor of Writer-Based prose is also sometimes undervalued by writing researchers who feel that writing must always be

addressed to readers (Burgoon, 1989; Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Holton, 2020). This is especially true in newspaper-column writing which has the definite purpose of being written for an ‘audience’ or readership. Writing an effective column also requires more than just the ability to articulate an opinion (Rickel et al., 2022). The columnist has to be constantly aware of his readership and their sensitivities and be able to maintain the interest and attention of his readers with a style of writing that is effective, stimulating, and entertaining at the same time. The question however arises as to whether keeping this purpose constantly in mind and modulating one’s writing to suit the reader actually makes for more effective writing or whether the writer by writing for himself as his own first reader is, wholly responsible for the success of both the process and product of his writing. Should the newspaper columnist write first for himself and only then for his audience or should it be the other way round? Questions also arise as to whether the development of the writer proceeds simultaneously with the transformation from Writer-Based to Reader-Based prose or whether Reader-Based and Writer Based elements exist in a continuum throughout the writing.

While some of these questions can be partially answered by studying the writings of particular writers over a period of time it would not be able to reveal the private thoughts, the unseen personal deliberations, and ‘the writing that existed before the writing’ unless the researcher had access to the mind of the writer for the duration of that period. However, if the writer himself could take several steps back from his own writing to study the breadth of it objectively and critically, he would perhaps be the best person to look for patterns of his own development as a writer and to establish the extent of Writer or Reader Based Prose in it. Although multiple studies have been done on discourse analysis involving newspaper media columns both in print and online, (Iqbal, 2019, Prawoto, 2022; Wan et al., 2022) none have been able to capture the longitudinal writing development of the author, the extent of the writing that was RBP and WBP and depth of the writer’s thought processes.

**2. Literature Review**

The present study therefore aims to address these gaps and provide the information needed on the development of a newspaper columnist and writer with a focus on elements of WBP and RBP. For this purpose, the study seeks to explore the researcher’s own writing in a newspaper column over a period of 20 years and looks for patterns of development from the perspectives of Writer-Based and Reader-Based prose. The study also seeks to examine readers’ perspectives on the main or recurring issues highlighted in the column over the same span of time.

*2.1 Differences between Writer-Based Prose and Reader-Based Prose*

Writer-Based prose also described as an ‘under-transformed mode of verbal expression associated with ineffective writers’ (Flowers, 1979) is generally characterized as prose that occurs in the prewriting stage being written by the writer, for the writer and is not unduly concerned with the reader’s understanding or how its points and ideas relate to one another. Other terms used as synonyms for Writer Based Prose include free-writing, raw writing, exploratory writing, and first-draft writing, (Badley, 2019; Robbins, 2022; Irwin, 2022).

Effective writers, according to Flower (1979), do not simply express thought but transform it into Reader-Based prose where a common ‘language’ and context is shared between reader and writer leaving little room for misinterpretation. Reader-Based prose offers an issue-cantered rhetorical structure rather than the beginning of the writer’s discovery process.

Writer-Based prose, nevertheless, is considered a natural and important part of the writing process, and all writers whether established or not, produce Writer-Based prose at one time or another (Barthes, 1973; Divya, 2019; Myhill, 2023). It allows the writer to express himself freely without fear of censure or criticism. In writing for himself the writer has the security of exploring his own ideas and the freedom to reach within his whole emotional range, without repression. Writer-Based prose is also credited with being able to allow the writer the freedom of not having to accommodate the reader in the writing process (Hyland, 2021; Suhendra, 2022; Poudel, 2023).

The differences between WBP ad RBP are further outlined in Table 1

Table 1. Differences between Writer based Prose and Reader Based Prose

Aspect	Reader Based Prose	Writer based Prose
Association	Usually associated with effective writers with writer creating shared context with the reader.	Mostly associated with ineffective writers Usually occurs in pre-writing phase as raw or exploratory writing
Thought process	Information is manipulated for the audience and both writer and reader share a ‘common’ language	Reflects the narrative thought processes of the writer.
Structure	Has issue-centered rhetorical structure Relationship between facts is developed	Presence of under-processed thoughts, Absence of causal relationships. Linking of thoughts without apparent association
Point of View	Usually uses 2 <sup>nd</sup> or 3 <sup>rd</sup> person point of view to include the reader	Usually uses first person point of view to share writer’s thoughts
Focus	Focuses on reader’s experience and understanding and aims to connect with reader	Centers on writer’s independent expression, perspectives and individual voice
Style	Adapted to suit the needs of the reader.	More artistic and experimental style.
Language Use	Uses simpler language and avoids being unnecessarily complex	Language may be varied to focus on writer’s creative expression. Contains language that is ‘private’ to the writer
Narrative approach	Focuses on reader’s interest and reader engagement	Prioritizes writer’s own vision or ideas
Goal	Aims to leave reader with satisfied reading experience and meaningful takeaway	Seeks to fulfill writer’s satisfaction in having expressed thoughts and emotions

## 2.2 *The Need for Self-expression and Emotion in Writing*

Studies by Mhilli (2023) have pointed out the need for the writer's presence in the writing and referred to the writer's 'voice' as being the main source of power in the writing. It is the quality of the 'voice' that makes the writing sound as if a unique person had written it and not a computer or bureaucrat. Although strong feelings should not interfere with clarity, it was important for writers to write through an emotion rather than trying to censor it (Baddeley and Lewis, 2017; Colmer, 2021). Rodenburg, (2018) and Coddington, (2021) also agree that it was natural to allow strong emotions into earlier drafts as this did not mean that the article could not develop into a more balanced piece of professional writing.

Pinnegar et al., (2021) describe this as the transformation of WBP, which served the writer's needs into RBP, which took into account the needs of the audience. This points towards the idea that in the attempt to move from Writer-Based to Reader-Based Prose, the writer, rather than suppressing emotion in his writing, needs to use it in its fullness but in a form that is restructured or reconstructed in order for the full intended effect on the reader.

## 2.3 *The Audience*

The existence of an 'internal' audience is proposed by Daigon (1983) who says that writers internalize their audience and this conception acts as a 'visiting inner director' whom they consult throughout their writing. This is echoed by Williams (2019) who uses the term 'felt sense' to describe the focus of a writer's non-verbalized perceptions when he pauses to listen or react to what is within him throughout the writing. The external audience or the readers have to correspondingly fictionalize themselves, meaning that readers have to play the role in which the author has cast them or conform themselves to the projections of the writers they read (Ong, 1975) This view however is in sharp contrast to Reader-response theory (Fish, 1980, Rosenblatt, 1976) which emphasizes the role of the reader in interpreting and creating meaning from a text.

## 2.4 *Theoretical Framework*

The study is underpinned by several theories including the Reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1976) which focuses on the reader and their experience of the literary work and proposes that it is the reader who creates the meaning in the text. According to Rosenblatt, reading is an active and dynamic process in which the reader interacts with the text to create meaning. Reader response theory also posits the non-existence of a text until it is read.' (Miall, 2018; Milgate 2020; Pasaribu 2019).

Reader-response theorists also believe in certain temporary detachments from the real world in order to enter the secondary world mapped out by the literary text (Byrne 2017, Graves, 2018, Whiteley 2017). By bringing their own physical and psychological conditions into the reading experience, the readers' personal histories become inevitably intertwined in the creation and interpretation of the text (Holland, 1968; Rosenblatt, 2018).

Other theorists who partially subscribe to Reader Response include Stanley Fish (1980) who emphasizes the role of the reader's social and cultural context in shaping their interpretation of a text. According to Fish, readers are not passive recipients of meaning, but actively participate in the creation of meaning through their engagement with the text. (Harding, 2017; Milgate, 2020; Shafea, 2022) In referring to the "death of the author Roland Barthes (1973) highlights the importance of the reader in creating meaning from a text. (Binet, 2017; Seymour, 2018) According to Barthes, the author's intention is not the primary source of meaning in a text, but rather meaning is created through the reader's interpretation.

The importance of the reader's expectations and assumptions in shaping their understanding of a text is also emphasized by Iser (1972) who also argues that effective writing must take into account the reader's perspective and create a dialogue between the text and the reader. (Graves, 2018; Holton, 2020; Merkel, 2020) This however should not downplay the importance of the writer's personal voice and perspective in creating effective writing as mentioned in Elbow's theories of expressive writing.

## 2.5 *The Newspaper Columnist*

### 2.5.1 *Aims and Writing Style for a Newspaper Column*

By default, the newspaper column whether it is in print version or online version is meant for public reading, The discourse community for newspaper columns, unlike other forms of writing, usually includes dedicated readerships (Ferrer-Conill 2018; Holton, 2020) and this readership or audience will play a role in determining the content and at times the style of the writing. Column articles especially those that appear in commentary columns usually reveal the writer's insight and are basically perspectives of his opinions and views on an issue.

In meeting a readership's expectations which are directly linked to the expectations of the newspaper's commercial viability the writer needs to be constantly aware of who he is writing for, the sensitivities of his audience, and the political constraints or sentiments. Writing a good column also requires more than just the ability to articulate an opinion. The columnist's opinions have to make sense, provide insight, be convincing, and have the power to 'hold' the readers' attention. (Elvestad 2018; Farnia, 2018).

On many occasions, the columnist will have to combine personal experiences with the experiences of other individuals or representatives of larger realities. The columnist could therefore never claim that he writes only 'for the audience of me' because he knows that his words may be held up to public scrutiny, criticized, lauded, or condemned. Therefore, in a true sense, apart from his ability as a writer, the newspaper columnist needs to master the balance between RBP and WBP in his columns.

### 2.5.2 Teacher Talk Column in the Star

The Star is an English-language newspaper in Malaysia that was established in 1971. Teacher Talk is a column that is published in Star Educate in The Sunday Star which is a part of The Star (Malaysia). The column features issues pertaining to education and schools written from the viewpoint of the columnist. Each column article is between 1000-1500 words. The columns as part of The Star are published both in printed and online versions.

### 3. Objectives of the Study

The present study therefore aims to address these gaps and provide the information needed on the development of a newspaper columnist and writer with a focus on elements of WBP and RBP. For this purpose, the study seeks to explore the researcher's own writing in a newspaper column over a period of 20 years and look for patterns of development from the perspectives of Writer-Based and Reader-Based prose. The study also seeks to examine readers' perspectives on the main or recurring issues highlighted in the column over the same span of time.

### 4. Research Questions

In view of the objective mentioned above, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

With reference to the column Teacher Talk over the period from 2001-2021 in The Star newspaper;

1. To what extent is the writing of the columnist, writer or reader-based?
2. How do readers identify with the issues featured in the column over this period?

### 5. Methodology

#### 5.1 Research Design

The researcher's primary concern was to explore in-depth the content of the published column articles with regard to the research questions and attempt to identify parts of the writing that are either Writer-Based or Reader-Based prose. Based on this, the present study adopts a qualitative, naturalistic design and it is a case study on the researcher's published column articles with an analysis of content. In naturalistic research design as in the present study, researchers are the instruments of the research. (Creswell, 2016; Lodico, 2006)

In order to answer the research questions the study was carried out in two parts. The first part consisted of a content analysis of 210 published articles written by the researcher for the column, "Teacher Talk, The Star, Malaysia," dated from July 2002 to July 2021. The length of each article is between 1200-1800 words and themes revolve around issues related to school and education only. The choice of the author's own published articles was necessary due to the objective of the study which was to identify the extent of WBP and RBP. Therefore the data in the findings would need the reflective thoughts of the writer during the process of writing.

In keeping with the research objective to explore the extent to which the participant readers identified with the issues featured in the column, qualitative semi-structured interviews were used for the second part of the study.

#### 5.1.1 Part 1: Content Analysis

For the first part of the study, the researcher read the 210-column articles to identify the main theme and sub-theme in each article. The articles were then listed in order of publication together with their main theme or topic. The researcher then re-read all the articles and sub-categorized each article according to emerging sub-themes. The frequencies of occurrence for each theme and sub-theme were recorded and percentages were calculated. (Table 1). Significant changes or developments in the education system corresponding to the time of publication of the articles were also taken note of. During this part of the study, the researcher was also retrospective and explored her memories related to the writing of the particular text, recording these as written reflections. The researcher then explored all the written texts to determine which part/s were writer or reader based taking into consideration the transformation that may have occurred between the first drafts and the final published articles.

#### 5.1.2 Part 2: Semi-structured Interviews

Based on the main themes that emerged from the content analysis in Part 1, 12 articles were selected as representative samples from the 210 articles.

Purposive sampling was used to select 6 participants for the semi-structured interviews. Based on the need of the study for rich information which will be generated from the qualitative interviews and bearing in mind the length of time required for a detailed case-by-case analysis of individual participant's responses to the 12 articles that they had to read, the researcher decided on a sample size of six for the study.

All participants were Malaysian school teachers who were or had been in service throughout the 20-year period of the sampled texts. This was important as the participants needed to be familiar with the issues mentioned in the articles that were pertinent to schoolteachers and the development in the Malaysian education landscape throughout this period in order for their responses to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

An interview protocol was constructed which included a script for explaining the purpose of the interviews to each participant and for recording relevant demographic data. Three weeks before the interview was scheduled, the researcher submitted twelve articles to each participant. The three-week period was to allow enough time for reading.

At the end of the three-week period, the researcher began her interviews with the participants by reintroducing herself and reminding participants of the confidentiality of their responses. The goal of the questions was to elicit the participants' opinions on the articles they had read, the extent to which the writing related to them as teachers, and their reflections on the issues or events that were discussed. The researcher used probes when necessary to access deeper responses or further elaboration from participants. The researcher also took field notes during the course of the interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Related reflections of the researcher were added during the transcribing processes. Participants were given the transcriptions to read and verify before further analysis was done. Participants' responses were then collected and examined.

5.2 Data Analysis

The researcher referred to the results of all parts of the research and made comparisons. The emergence of specific units or segments of information was recorded and reduced to themes relevant to the research questions. The data were also examined for clustering of units. Analytic coding was used to develop themes as categories and subtopics emerged. The researcher then summarized the findings and explained themes and patterns in narrative form in the report on her findings which was written using rich descriptions. In her report, the researcher sought to answer the two main research questions.

Throughout the course of the research, the researcher has sought to be objective and accurately represent the findings in order to maintain credibility and dependability.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Research Question 1: To What Extent Is the Writing of the Columnist, Writer or Reader-Based

6.1.1 Main Themes and Sub-themes in Articles.

From the first part of the study, six major themes were identified. As shown in Table 1, 35.5% of the author's column articles are based on the theme 'Professional issues and Teachers' Perceptions. Under this main theme, the sub-theme of teachers' work ethics, attitudes, and commitment levels have the highest frequency of occurrence with 11.8 %. Teachers' perceptions of their roles is the sub-theme with the second highest frequency and an overall percentage of 8.2%. Special events on the academic calendar and policies are almost equally distributed with 23.6% and 20% respectively with Teacher's Day and Education policies ranking the highest in frequency. Incidents that were special only as far as the author's working situation was concerned, for instance, school burglaries and fire drills have also been placed in this category. Student-related issues and educational policies yield a percentage of 7.3% and 6.4% respectively and there are 13 articles under personal experiences which comprise 6.4 % of the total data. By the theme 'Special Dedications', the author is referring to articles that were written specifically as a tribute of sorts to certain individuals. There are two articles under this heading.

The data also shows that certain sub-themes have been repeated more than others over the 20-year period of the articles. Under the theme of Professional Issues/Teachers' Perceptions, the sub-themes of work-Ethics, commitment, and attitude are repeated 13 times. The deeper analysis of sub-themes also shows that issues that were featured every year are related to teachers' disgruntlement over increasing paperwork, shifting policies, and dissatisfaction over promotional prospects.

Although the data has been tabulated under the six themes stated above, the very nature of the articles themselves as dealing with issues pertaining to education cause some overlapping of themes and sub-themes. Therefore, the grouping of samples under the specific themes had to be done based on the most significant aspect of the sample and this could sometimes be different from the assigned titles.

Table 2. Classification of Themes and Sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	Frequency of sub-themes	Sub-Themes %	Frequency of Themes	Themes %	
Policies	English for Teaching Mathematics and Science	6	2.7	42	20.0%	
	Documentation/Paperwork	4	1.8			
	Promotions	8	3.6			
	Curriculum	5	2.7			
	Education policies	15	7.2			
	Professional Development	4	1.9			
	Special Events	Teacher's Day	13			6.4
		Sports Day	2			0.9
		Open Day	4			1.8
		Examinations (Administration)	4			1.8
Beginning/end of the school term		6	2.7			
Annual staff dinner		4	1.8			
'Merdeka' celebrations		6	2.7			
Professional Issues/Teachers' Perceptions	School Incidents	11	5.5	75	35.5%	
	Staff relations	7	3.5			
	Administration	7	3.5			
	Non-teaching staff	2	0.8			
	Teachers' perceptions	17	8.2			

	Work-Ethics/Commitment/Attitude	25	11.8		
	Staffroom incidents	8	3.6		
	School setting	2	0.8		
	Parents /Public	7	3.3		
Student Issues	Private Tuition	4	1.8		
	Examination	6	2.7		
	Results(Students perceptions)			29	13.6%
	Student Attitude/Discipline	15	7.3		
	Teacher-student rapport	4	1.8		
Special Dedications	In Appreciation	2	0.9	2	0.9%
	Changes in Professional Setting	8	3.7		
Personal Experiences	Reflections	5	2.7	13	6.4%
	TOTAL	210	100	210	100%

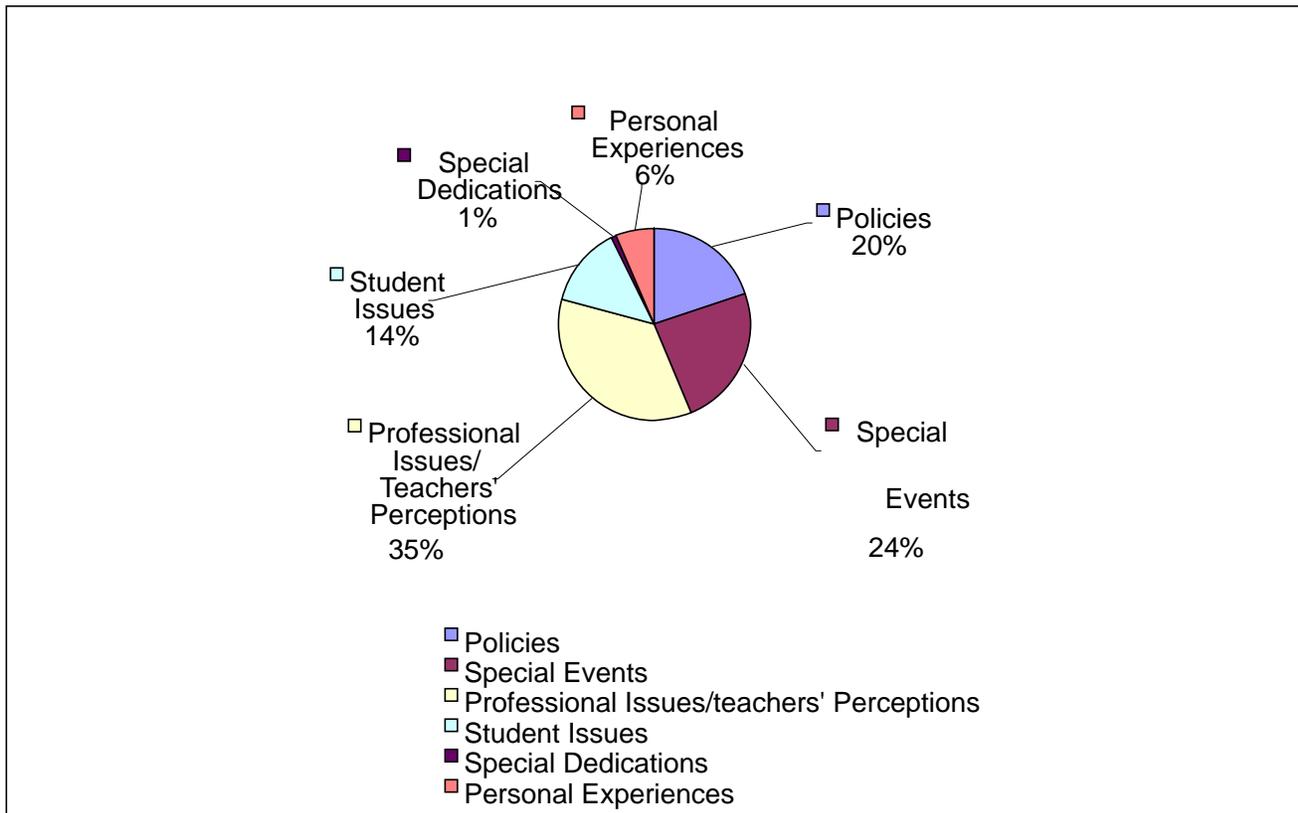


Figure 1. Frequency of Themes in Primary Samples

6.2 Development from Writer Based to Reader-based Prose

6.2.1 Initial Indistinct Voice of the Author

In the articles dated from 2001-2005, the first five years of writing, the voice of the author is indistinct, and the writing style is strongly suggestive of WBP with elements of unclear or underdeveloped thought processes. On many occasions, it seems as if the writer is ‘hiding’ behind her characters and allowing them to speak for her. Although many of them were ‘real’ people such as friends and colleagues of the author, in her reflective notes the author feels that they were in a sense like ‘ventriloquist’s puppets’ because her voice was ‘thrown’ and lacked the force and impact it might have otherwise had.

I remained an undefined and blurry presence in my own writing, functioning as a sequence connector or props manager for the drama that was staged out in front. It was a safe place. When I had to cast myself into my own writing it was in a self-deprecatory role or as someone who was aware of what was going on but had no personal opinion. I was so overly concerned about not appearing egocentric and afraid of self-projection that for a considerable portion of my initial writing I was invisible as myself.

(Author’s Reflective Notes)

There is however a progressive development into RBP in articles written after 2005, especially in the author’s use of characterization and dialogue in the text which she states ‘allowed me to say more than I could have otherwise said.’ (Reflective Notes) There is increased

awareness that the articles had to be explicitly written for the reader of the column and this therefore made it lean towards being RBP. The author had to be continually aware not only of her readers but also of the constraints that she was writing under. The newspaper itself also had its own code of ethics and legal restrictions. Presenting the articles as a narrative centering around one major issue, with characterization and dialogue between characters, allowed the author freedom to speak for or against certain issues and still maintain reader interest.

6.2.2 Characterization

Characterization is frequently used as a literary device in many of the articles and this serves to allow greater engagement of the column’s readers with the text. The characterization of familiar school figures and inclusion of recognizable paraphernalia in the articles enabled readers to gain easier access into the text itself thus confirming elements of RBP and pointing affirmation towards Reader Response Theory. These characters include typical schoolteachers and the people they work with or met every day. The inclusion of these characters in the articles and the presentation in anecdotal or narrative forms allow readers to identify with what was going on in the text and therefore become part of it. This was especially apparent in the articles which are themed around special school events and incidents such as Sports Day, Teachers’ Day, or Examinations.

“What was that,” growled Mrs Maniam. “Maintain last position? Are you saying that I, Manonmani Maniam, three times champion of the ‘Filling the bottle with coloured water’ event in primary school, state record holder for the ‘Blow the balloon till it bursts’ under 60 category and voted most promising sack race athlete in 1967, am not capable of leading my Green House to glory this year?”

“Well, let me forewarn you, Mister Yellow House Master, that this year we are going to shrivel everything yellow on the field come sports day.”

Mr Kang’s face turned reddish purple as he struggled to control himself. “Young lady,” he finally said, “you have failed to understand the significance of my contribution. These are not just any ordinary script handouts.

Battle on the Sports Field Teacher Talk, *The Star*, April 2002

Teaching scripts with a twist, *Teacher Talk, The Star*, January 2003

The author reflects on this in her written notes.

When readers wrote in to ask whether Mrs. Maniam or Mr.Kang in the stories was the same person who had been their colleague in another school, I felt that my audience had been reached. I had written for them, and they had received my writing.

(Author’s Reflective Notes).

6.2.4 Expressions of Emotion

The articles in which the author expresses strong opinions or emotions on an issue are centered mainly around the themes and sub-themes of policies or professional issues. In these articles, the author writes from a first-person point of view and there is no inclusion of anecdotes or characters. In these articles, elements of both RBP and WBP merge into each other.

I discovered that during the times I felt very strongly about something, I dispensed with characterization and wrote as ‘me’. Insular and prejudiced comments by non-teaching members of the public often sparked off a certain defensiveness and indignation that I expressed in my columns.

(Author’s Reflective Notes)

In another article, *Teacher’s Place on the Ladder of Success*. (Teacher Talk, *The Star*, October 2003.) the author reflects that she used her own column as a platform to think aloud. Although it has the main characteristics of RBP, according to the author, ‘it was intended for

‘the audience of me.’ If the ‘other self’ (Murray, 1979) had edited the text before it was written then again it had moved from being Writer-Based to Reader-Based Prose within the boundaries of the author’s own cognitive and affective domains.

Passion is like the wind, difficult to define, but it is that quality that will elevate the teacher from mundane mediocrity and enable her to soar above the others.  
Perhaps it is not always possible to be passionate about every aspect of your teaching duties.  
And perhaps there are times in your teaching career when the circumstances combine to make you feel apathetic or even resentful.  
Perhaps you are not allowed to teach the subjects of your choice.

Teacher’s place on the ladder of success. *Teacher Talk, The Star*, October 2003.

The author’s disillusionment with certain policies in the education system emerges significantly in 15 articles under this theme. The policy of over-emphasis on examination results, particularly the acquisition of ‘A’s in the public examination is one of the themes that is discussed frequently throughout the 20-year period of the columns.

How can the SPM results of today be measured against its examination equivalent of before?  
And how equal is equivalent anyway

There are many questions on our lips regarding the grading system itself that we are afraid to vocalise.

The worth of an ‘A’. *Teacher Talk, The Star*, December 2004.

#### 6.2.5 Saturated Words

There is also a significant presence of the use of ‘code words’ (Flowers, 1979) such as ‘unjust’ or ‘discontentment’ in the articles. These words represent a much larger reality, but they are vague and conventional words and as Flowers says, ‘saturated’. The author acknowledges the deeper meanings behind these code words, stating in reflection that;

In my writing, I had left it to the reader to decode the words for themselves. I had transferred the responsibility that was mine as a writer onto the reader and the reader would now have to do the work for me that of pushing the language to give up its hidden meaning.

(Author’s Reflective Notes)

In this case, however, the shifting of the responsibility to the reader does not necessarily make it Reader-Based prose. To the author, it seemed like an ‘abdication of responsibility’ because she was unprepared to truly connect with her audience on these topics. And so, she states that these words remain, ‘looming and precarious, still on my side, still Writer-Based.’ (Author’s reflection notes).

#### 6.3 Research Question 2: How Do Readers Identify with the Issues Featured in the Column?

For this part of the study, the six participants have been assigned pseudonyms PA, PB, PC, PD, PE, and PF

##### 6.3.1 Identification with Context

All six participants in the interviews could identify with the context of the articles as they had all experienced the same settings and issues at varied points in their lives. All of them indicated that the descriptions of the schools in some of the articles were very similar to their current schools or those they had taught in previously. Participants also found the minor details which were sometimes featured in the articles to be very easily identifiable due to the way they were described. They felt that the settings in the articles could have been descriptions of their own school or staff rooms

The canteen cats. I laughed when I read that because it is exactly the same in my school. We have one resident canteen cat who behaves just the way described in the article. It is true of the staff room cat too. Makes you wonder why schools have become like foster homes to all these cats.

PC

The depiction of scenes that were familiar to the participants was also highlighted in their interviews. School events such as staff dinners and fire drills and Teacher’s Day events were particularly talked about by all the participants. They felt that the inclusion of smaller details in the descriptions captured the essence of the events exactly as they would have been. Thus, by this, there is great evidence that the articles were very much leaning towards WBP and also subscribed to Readers’ Response theory where readers interpreted the events and made the connections to their own settings.

### 6.3.2 Identification with Characters

All of the participants said that they could identify with almost all of the characters depicted in the articles. Most of the participants also enjoyed the characterization as it made them feel that they 'belonged' inside the story.

Some of the characters are mentioned frequently, like Dilla and Mr.Kang. This gives me a unique feeling of belonging to the community of teachers. I feel like they are my colleagues as well.

#### PE

This feeling was echoed in the responses of other participants who said that the characters in the articles actually reminded them of colleagues they had either worked with in the past or who were currently working with. Two of them said that it was after reading the articles that they realized he had worked with these typical school characters several times in different schools but never really sat down to think about the similarities until now.

Reading about Mrs Maniam and Puan Aidah made me remember my former colleagues yes there were at least three different teachers who resembled Puan Aidah in the schools I have been in.

#### PA

While the use of characterization as intended by the researcher, allows the opportunity for a greater level of shared context between reader and writer, there may have been instances where the writer has gone a little overboard and therefore detracted from authenticity in her writing. What was meant to be satirical was sometimes misconstrued or taken at face value by the reader. Where confusion is raised in the mind of the reader regarding particular aspects of the text, the question of adequate transformation from Writer-Based to Reader-Based prose arises.

I can't tell if these characters are real, sometimes I find it hard to believe some of their lines. Maybe the writer was trying to get his or her point across without being direct.

#### PC

### 6.3.3 Identification with Issues

Every participant felt strongly about professional issues including those related to promotions, policies that keep changing, and the redundancy of documentation required by the education authorities. In the article More Reports, More Points (Teacher Talk, 2011) among the comments received were;

I have been teaching for twenty years in five different schools and it is the same thing. Files, files, and more files. Multiple reports for the same thing. They said that after digitalization things would improve, but it's the same. I find myself keying in the same data multiple times. What is the efficiency of that?

#### PB

At times the participants' reactions bordered on frustration, anger, and a feeling of hopelessness.

In commenting about the challenges teachers sometimes face, one of the participants quoted a line from Don't let go of your dreams. Teacher Talk, The Star, April 2005

It is as you have written. The battle does not belong to the swift. But then why not. Why aren't promotions and placements based on performance and merit not about who you know or other 'hidden factors'

#### PF

One frequent response from the readers was about how they found themselves as part of the text either in sharing the opinions of the interlocutors or having the feeling of being present during the whole scene. In sharing the context of the writing with her readers, the author found that she was essentially writing for them. Her readers in turn were 'fictionalizing' themselves in the roles she had created.

## 7. Discussion

As the newspaper column is intended for an audience of readers, the author's writing has been by necessity largely Reader-Based. Significant elements of Reader-Based prose in the writing are perceived in the author's use of imagery associated with the school or educational setting which has created a shared context with the readers. By recreating typical school situations and 'characters' the author has also demonstrated that she is aware of her audience and shares a 'common' language with them. Issues that are pertinent to her readership or discourse community are constantly highlighted and the author has also manipulated information for the benefit of her readership.

However, the study reveals that there are instances when the author's writing leans towards being Writer-Based. This is made clearer through the responses of the readers to meanings that were not intended by the author. This implies a possible miscommunication between the writer and the reader where the reader understood a different meaning than the writer had intended. The study also reveals that in the initial part of the author's writing, her own 'voice' did not come across clearly but was masked or submerged beneath the many voices of the characters in her text.

The characterization and imagery allowed readers further access into the text and the mind of the writer although there may have been

instances when the writer's meaning may have been misinterpreted due to incomplete transformation from Writer to Reader-Based Prose. However, the fact that most of the readers could identify themselves in the articles and could easily share the context with the author provides affirmation to the Reader-response theory and supports the idea that these articles lean towards being Readers Based (Barros, 2018)

Examination of the samples also reveal instances when the author had used 'saturated words' or not thoroughly 'pushed through' the meaning of the words. However, the author has sustained focus in her writing and although parts of the writing reflect the narrative path of the author's own confrontation with her subjects, she has striven to include the reader in the thinking process thus indicating a Reader-Based approach.

The memories of the writer as a supplementary text and reflections of the author during the writing also confirm that much of the editing or transformation from Writer-Based to Reader-Based prose has occurred within the author herself. In this she agrees with the 'imagined audience' of Nelson (2021) and Murray's 'other self' (1980) who is the writer's first reader and reads the copy as it is being written and knows the decisions that were made to produce the draft.

## 8. Implications

The study has definite implications for the teaching of writing where the importance of Writer-Based prose as groundwork for Reader-Based prose or a halfway place for the writing process could be emphasized. Instead of the traditional approach to teaching writing that follows a structured and thought-out plan, or outline, students could be encouraged to write in an initial free and exploratory manner without being overly concerned about 'chaos and disorientation'. (Burroway 2019, Carroll, 2018, Olson, 2023). Even digressions that find their way into the writing could be creatively used. (Elbow, 1987) Students can be told that it is possible to end up somewhere different than when they began writing and that "meaning" as stated by Elbow (1987), "is not what you start out with but what you end up with." Writing instructors should be wary of an overemphasis on Reader-Based prose at the beginning stages of student writing as this could retard the effectiveness of the writing by premature editing and suppression of the voice of the writer. Inexperienced writers, including students in schools, could also be taught to recognize the elements of Writer-Based prose in their writing and be motivated to go through the necessary stages of transformation into Reader-Based Prose. (Alt, 2022, Badley, 2019, Burroway, 2019)

Writing instruction should not be failure centered or focus on errors but train the writer to discover what is working and extend that element in the writing. (Carroll, 2018; Cremin, 2006, Murray, 1980). The Writer-Based prose produced by students should not be treated as a composite of errors that should be canceled but used by the student's other self as his own foundation which he edits and transforms into Reader-Based prose.

The analysis of themes and sub-themes in the researcher's writing also shed light on the nature of issues that have been of primary concern to teachers in the past twenty years and can help direct future education policies especially those related to teachers' professional concerns.

## 9. Conclusion

In summary, the findings from the study suggest that there has been a definite shift from WBP to RBP in the writer's column articles, especially after the first five years of writing and the identification of readers with the articles happened most when the issues were relevant and when there were strong elements of RBP. Readers tended to identify with characters whom they empathized with and with whom they shared common challenges. The study also showed that issues that have been ongoing concerns and most relevant to teachers throughout the 20-year period were centered around teachers' discontent with education policies and professional issues.

## 10. Recommendations

Future research could be conducted on similar work of other newspaper columnists in both online and print versions. Readers' comments towards newspaper articles on social media platforms could also provide a strong source of data and feedback for the nation's policymakers as well as the writers themselves as to what works best in their writing. This in turn could also be a valuable source of information to the publishers on the kind of material that readers relate to and thus provide a wider readership. Research can also be conducted on comparisons between writing produced by artificial intelligence or language generated models and by purely human authors to find the extent of the writer's 'voice' in the writing. For active newspaper columnists or writers with a readership on any media platform, a study which is of a similar introspective and reflective nature will be beneficial to aid in their professional development.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank UNITAR International University for the publication of this research.

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