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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policy makers as well as teachers, this digest explores the components common to effective writing programs. The digest first discusses activities at the classroom level as the foundation of a successful writing program and elements that should be included in classroom instruction, such as the process approach to composing and writing assessment techniques. Next, the digest discusses how writing teachers' skills can be improved (particularly through inservice education), then explores the value of a schoolwide emphasis on writing instruction and ways to orient content area faculty to such a program. Finally, the digest examines the ways in which administrators can contribute to the success of the writing curriculum. (HTH)

ERIC Digest

QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE WRITING PROGRAMS

Hilary Taylor Holbrook

Teachers and administrators involved in developing writing curricula face a complex task in reconciling public demands for educational improvement and accountability with research into the nature of composition and its effective instruction. This digest explores the components common to effective writing programs: emphasis on practice and process in writing, inservice programs, school-wide emphasis, and administrative support.

WHAT ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF A SUCCESSFUL WRITING PROGRAM?

Activities at the classroom level are the basis of any writing program. While most authorities of writing instruction agree that children learn to write by writing (Haley-James 1981), Graves (1979) and Applebee (1981) have observed a distressing lack of classroom time devoted to extended periods of writing. At the elementary level, Graves notes that skill drills are predominant in many classrooms, and that opportunities to write complete pieces are often marred by excessive concern with mechanical "correctness." At the secondary level, Applebee reports that most writing activity is of a mechanical nature, such as "fill in the blanks" or "short answer." It is likely that any writing program will be successful only if students are given ample opportunity to perform significant writing tasks. In his description of the Vermont Writing Program, Paul Eschholz (Neill 1982) notes that students in the program's six model schools write an average of 45 to 90 minutes daily.

WHAT ELEMENTS SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN CLASSROOM WRITING INSTRUCTION?

In many programs that have grown from the Bay Area Writing Project, the emphasis is on the total process of writing, that is, on the prewriting, drafting, and revising that lead to the final product. Neill (1982) lists a core of concerns that teachers in the Bay Area Writing Project (now the National Writing Project) have cited as important to successful writing instruction: Composing Process (from prewriting activities through revision); Syntax (including sentence combining, examination of common errors, and Francis Christensen's rhetoric); Sequence (moving from personal to analytical writing, from thesis to logical arguments); Small Group Technique (peer criticism, writing for real audiences within the classroom, reading aloud in small groups); and Writing Assessment (holistic evaluation, systematic school-wide assessment). The programs encourage teachers to be writers and to model writing behavior in the classroom.

In a meta-analysis of 72 experimental studies, George Hillocks (1983) found that an environmental mode of instruction was the most effective. In this mode, the teacher uses activities that involve high levels of student interaction, with writing activities which parallel the writing that students will encounter outside the classroom. The teachers in Applebee's 1981 study also point out that an effective writing lesson includes an active role for students, minimal teacher domninance, and natural emergence of writing out of other activities.

In summary, classroom characteristics for an effective writing program include the following:

*opportunity for students to write frequently,

even in the primary grades, with delayed or "as needed" instruction in grammar;

*teachers writing with students;

*students learning to write for many audiences and in many modes, including those required in content area classrooms; and

*nonthreatening evaluation of student writing with emphasis on revision rather than correction.

(Goldberg, 1983; Graves, 1978; Howard, 1984)

HOW CAN THE WRITING TEACHER'S SKILL BE IMPROVED?

Teachers and administrators in Neill's survey cited inservice training with periodic updates as important ingredients in successful writing programs. Inservice is most effective if it is an ongoing program rather than a "one-shot" session, and if it is on a voluntary basis. Inservice trainers should be a combination of people from inside and outside the school or the district. Neill observes that teachers have more credibility as inservice instructors than do "nonteaching experts." Enthusiasm, knowledge of current theory on the writing process, and a focus on practical application of techniques are also essential qualities for inservice trainers.

In addition, Neill's subjects advised using recognized program models with good track records. In the National Writing Project, which appears to be the most far-reaching program model, teachers attend workshops to improve their own writing skills and their teaching of writing. Participants may then act as consultants for school or district inservice sessions, so

reinforcement occurs naturally. In summary, the most successful inservice programs

*are ongoing and voluntary;

*make teachers aware of the theory and research in the teaching of writing, with sessions focusing on practical applications of theory and research;

*give attention to specific skills in which teachers may be weak;

*give teachers time and opportunity to gain confidence in their ability to teach composition, allowing for structured feedback about their use of new skills;

*provide opportunities for observation in other classrooms;

*address issues that concern teachers, such as paperwork, evaluation, diagnosis, remediation, and explaining the writing program to parents; and

*involve administrators in both program and session activities.

SHOULD WRITING INSTRUCTION BE CONFINED TO THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM?

In effective writing programs, writing is viewed as an integral part of all subjects. Such a schoolwide emphasis is desirable because students will improve their understanding of the disciplines that emphasize writing; their writing ability will improve with opportunity for guided writing practice in several classrooms; students will grasp the importance of writing outside the English classroom; and effective schoolwide emphasis fosters interdepartmental cooperation (Glatthorn 1981).

Interest in the idea of writing across the curriculum was fostered by the British Schools Council Project in Writing Across the Curriculum, which from the mid-1960s onward studied how writing (and talking) were learned and used in schools throughout the United Kingdom. James Britton and others found that in language-rich classrooms--such as science labs where teams of students freely conversed in order to solve problems raised by an experiment--transcripts of student conversations showed that the interaction sparked varied language uses, including speculation and argument, which might not have occurred in more restrained classrooms. Further research on written composition by James Britton and James Moffett found that in classrooms in which cultivation of many forms of discourse led to writing, the final products showed greater fluency and awareness of audience (Thaiss 1983).

To orient the entire faculty to the general purposes of a curriculum-wide program, Glatthorn suggests making it clear that no blame will be placed for student writing problems. The program's emphasis will reflect teachers' needs and concerns, and will not restrict any teacher's professional autonomy in matters of student evaluation. Individual departments will determine the extent of their participation.

A curriculum-wide program can take on many forms. It can involve direct intervention by the English department in content area assignments, similar to the program at Boston University's College of Basic Studies, or it can operate informally as English teachers provide instructional materials to content area teachers, offering assistance to interested students with content area writing assignments (Lohr 1982).

Whatever the tone or extent of the curriculum-wide emphasis, the program will best succeed when administrators

*acquire interdepartmental cooperation by ascertaining needs and perceptions of content area teachers;

*develop program objectives for both students and teachers; and

*include the elementary level, even as early as kindergarten or first grade, rather than focusing on the secondary level.

WHAT ROLE DO ADMINISTRATORS HAVE IN A SUCCESSFUL WRITING PROGRAM?

Administrators at the school and district levels should make teachers aware of their strong support and commitment to writing programs. One sign of support is awareness of the status of the writing program in the school. Applebee (Neill 1982) lists five danger signals for which principals should watch in a writing program: low or failing scores on writing tests, widespread use of objective tests, omission of writing samples from writing assessments, lack of help for students with writing problems, and complaints about declining achievement.

A second sign of commitment is support for the staff development program. Glatthorn (1981) cites studies concluding that the most successful inservice projects were jointly managed by teachers and administrators. Allowing released time or other options--such as team teaching, repeated half-day sessions so one substitute can cover the classes of two teachers, or a reduced school day--will encourage participation in inservice. Furthermore, principals and other administrators should attend and participate in training sessions to improve their own writing. Such participation also gives administrators an opportunity to evaluate the inservice meetings and to identify and reward excellent teachers as well as those striving to improve their teaching (Neill 1982).

Finally, meeting with parents will demonstrate to the public as well as to teachers a commitment to writing improvement. Administrators can keep parents informed of student progress, suggest how they can help improve their children's writing at home, and provide assistance to parents who want to improve their own writing. Identifying and using parent talents for tutoring or inservice consulting can also be beneficial (Glatthorn 1981).

Thus principals, superintendents, and other administrators can demonstrate essential support for writing programs by

*monitoring the writing program and the quality of its evaluation,

*actively participating in development of inservice programs,

*allowing released time or other arrangements to facilitate inservice participation,

*attending inservice sessions as participants, and

*working with parents.

CONCLUSION

Since components of a good writing program vary from school to school and district to district, even the finest program in the nation--if one could be identified--would not necessarily work well in a different school. However, those programs that effectively meet the instructional needs of both students and teachers as well as public demands have the above features in common. Carefully adapted to individual schools or districts, any one or all of these features can go a long way toward improving the quality of composition instruction.

Hilary Taylor Holbrook, ERIC/RCS

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