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AUTHOR           Strech, Lorie L.  
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ABSTRACT

By the 1980s, the whole language philosophy (Goodman, 1986), based on the idea that reading and writing should be done for authentic purposes, gained credibility. As the movement gained momentum, more teachers began to adopt the student-centered writing workshop as a way of teaching writing. A study of a class of 27 culturally diverse third graders in a school in Downey, California, investigated the cognitive and affective implications of the student-centered writing workshop approach. The study, which took place over a 5-week period, used a one-group pretest-posttest design. Students completed the same questionnaire and a writing sample on two different occasions. Following the pretest measures, a writing workshop, based on models by Donald Graves (1983), Lucy Calkins (1986), and Nancie Atwell (1986), was conducted daily. Results showed that more students reported a positive attitude towards writing after the treatment. The percentage of students reporting that they liked to write increased from 48 to 78. Also, the percentage of students who preferred to choose their own topic increased from 52 to 63. Writing tests showed moderate improvement: 41% scored a three or four (four being the highest) on the posttest as opposed to 19% on the pretest. (Four tables of data are included. Appendixes contain affective and cognitive tests, scoring results, and selected student writing samples.) (TB)

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ED 380 798

# Action Research:

## The Implementation of

## Writing Workshop in the Third Grade

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California State University, Long Beach  
EDEL 540: Advanced Studies in Teaching Language Arts/Reading in  
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

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# Statement of the Problem

Writing instruction has traditionally been characterized by a reliance on skills worksheets and synthetic writing stimulants (Calkins, 1986). By the early 1980s, the failure of traditional skills-based schools in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students became apparent (Heath, 1983). Subsequently, the whole language philosophy (Goodman, 1986), based on the idea that reading and writing should be done for authentic purposes, gained credibility. As the whole language movement gained momentum in American classrooms, more teachers began to adopt the student-centered writing workshop as a way of teaching writing.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the **cognitive and affective** implications of the student-centered writing workshop approach in a third grade classroom.

## Method

### Description of the Subjects and School Setting

Twenty-seven subjects, ages eight years one month through nine years one month (mean = eight years six months), participated in this study. All of the students are in a third grade classroom at A.L. Gauldin Elementary School in Downey, California. Of the twenty-seven children, 11 are female and 16 are male.

Several ethnic groups are represented in this classroom. Table 1 shows the ethnic composition of the class.

Table 1 - Ethnic Composition of the Group of Subjects

Hispanic.....	60%
Caucasian.....	26%
African American .....	7%
Arabic.....	4%
Southeast Asian.....	4%

In addition to the diversity in cultural background, there is a range of levels of language proficiency. There are twelve students for whom English is the primary

language. One student speaks Vietnamese as a first language. One student speaks Arabic as a first language. Both are classified as fluent in oral English. Of the thirteen students who speak Spanish as the primary language, eight are classified as fluent in oral English. Five are classified as limited-English proficient. Table 2 shows language proficiencies by percentage of group.

**Table 2 - English-Language Proficiencies**

(L1 = primary language; FEP=fluent in English; LEP=limited-English proficient)

English as L1.....	44%
Spanish as L1 and FEP.....	30%
Spanish as L1 and LEP.....	18%
Arabic as L1 and FEP.....	4%
Vietnamese as L1 and FEP.....	4%

All language arts instruction is conducted in English. Students who are limited-English proficient are provided additional support through sheltered strategies and Spanish language by the teacher.

The ethnic composition of the group of subjects is very similar to the composition of the larger school setting. In addition, the range of English-language proficiencies is comparable to other non-bilingual classrooms in the school.

Several other characteristics of the school setting are pertinent to this study. Approximately 36% of Gauldin students receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). In addition, approximately 85% of students receive free or reduced-price lunches. Three of every four Gauldin students live in apartments. This contributes to the annual transiency rate exceeding 50%.

## Instruments

Two instruments were administered to each subject twice during the study. One instrument was the "Writing Workshop Questionnaire" (See Appendix A). This questionnaire was designed to elicit responses indicating the subject's attitude toward writing (affective measure). The second instrument was a writing prompt designed to obtain a writing sample (cognitive measure) from each student that could be compared in terms of content and mechanics. Both instruments were created by the teacher/researcher.

## Design and Treatment

This study used a one-group pretest-posttest design. Students completed the same questionnaire and writing sample on two different occasions (October 4, 1994 and November 15, 1994). After both pretest measures were administered, the writing workshop, based on models by Donald Graves (1983), Lucy Calkins (1986), and Nancie Atwell (1986), was conducted daily.

Each workshop session consisted of the following:

### **Mini-lesson (5-10 minutes)**

The teacher teaches strategies and skills for students to use in their writing.

### **Status of the Class (3-5 minutes)**

Students report their plans for writing time.

### **Writing Time (30 minutes or longer)**

Students write or conference with the teacher or other students.

### **Group Share (10 minutes)**

This is a time of whole group sharing and discussion of writing. Two to three students share each day.

Many of the mini-lessons focused on procedures necessary for the functionality of the workshop. Other mini-lessons during the study include: choosing a topic, using detail

in writing, piggybacking the work of other authors, revising, conferencing skills, run-on sentences, punctuation, and spelling.

The following goals and objectives for the workshop were made by the teacher/researcher preceding the implementation of the workshop. The two goals coincide with the intent of the study. The six objectives focus on teacher and student behavior during the treatment (implementation of the workshop).

### Goals

1. Students will improve as writers (cognitive).
2. Students will exhibit a positive attitude towards writing (affective).

### Objectives

1. Writing workshop will take place daily from 11:00 - 12:00 (except on days school events prevent it).
2. Students will choose their own topics.
3. Students will use the steps of the writing process to publish original pieces.
4. Direct instruction of writing skills will take place during the mini-lesson and be based on observed needs of the class.
5. Students will share published writing with an audience.
6. All published work will be recognized and celebrated.

## Results

The questionnaire and writing prompt administered on November 15, 1994 served as posttest measures. The data from both the questionnaire and prompt indicated positive affective and cognitive effects of the writing workshop approach.

The data collected from the affective measure was more significant. Responses to the questionnaire showed that more students reported a positive attitude towards writing after the treatment. The number of students who reported that they like to write increased from 48% pretest to 78% posttest. Twenty-two percent more students described themselves as being "great" writers on the posttest than on the pretest. In addition, the number of students who reported preferring to choose their own topic over a teacher-given

topic increased from 52% pretest to 63% posttest. Appendix C shows the complete results of the questionnaire pretest and posttest.

The writing samples (pretest and posttest) were scored using a 4-point rubric designed by the teacher (See Appendix D). Content was the primary focus when scoring, but mechanical errors which interfered with reading the sample counted significantly.

Posttest rubric scores indicated a moderate increase in the quality of student writing. 41% of students scored a three or four (four being the highest) on the posttest as opposed to 19% on the pretest. Table 4 shows the complete results of this measure. Appendix E contains examples of student work representing each possible score on the rubric.

**Table 4 - Writing Sample Scores (percentage of subjects)**

	<b><u>Pretest</u></b>	<b><u>Posttest</u></b>
<b><u>Score</u></b>		
<b><u>4</u></b>	4%	4%
<b><u>3</u></b>	15%	37%
<b><u>2</u></b>	44%	33%
<b><u>1</u></b>	37%	26%

## **Discussion and Evaluation**

There are several implications of the results of this study. The measured increase in positive attitude towards writing is significant at this grade level! This researcher believes that a positive attitude towards writing in the early grades can lay a strong foundation for writing performance in later years. This increase in positive attitude could have been due in part to the implementation of the writing workshop format, the excitement of the teacher towards writing, or a combination of both. There are other factors which may have influenced the responses on the questionnaires. These include testing conditions, experimenter effects, and response set.

The increase in writing quality shown by the writing sample was moderate. The content improved for many students. Many students narrowed their topic and used more detail. However, the posttest samples showed a need for more direct instruction in



mechanics and spelling. The lack of improvement in this area of writing could have been due to the fact that the focus of the majority of the mini-lessons was workshop procedures and the steps of the writing process. The foundation of a positive attitude (shown by the questionnaire) may encourage a higher mastery of mechanical skills and spelling learned from mini-lessons in future workshops.

There were many behaviors observed during the treatment that deserve mention. This researcher observed an increase in confidence and self-reliance during writing. During the administration of the pretest, many students asked for help. During the posttest, however, all students worked confidently and independently. This confidence alone is a worthwhile effect for conducting this study. In addition, the students became very excited about writing workshop. Students would often confirm that we would be having writing workshop that day. On days when school events prevented the workshop from taking place, students would moan and groan. This was an exciting switch from the moans and groans when the class was required to write before the implementation of writing workshop. Students began to talk about writing during other parts of the day. One student asked the new classroom aide if she had ever published a book. Other students shared with the researcher that they wanted to become professional authors.

During the workshop time, an increase in writing vocabulary was observed. Students responded to others using terms such as piggybacking, plagiarism, writer's block, copyright, publish, edit, revise, brainstorm, prewrite, draft, and illustrate. When poetry was shared during one mini-lesson, students became excited about writing poetry. As this passion for poetry spread through the class, students began writing poems at home and bringing in books of poetry to read. The feeling tone in the classroom during writing time is reflective, investigative, and serious.

Both goals for the treatment were met to some degree. The affective goal was met to a greater extent than the cognitive goal. Since the treatment will continue for this group until June, 1995, the extent to which the cognitive goal is met can be assessed through

further treatment. Each of the six objectives for teacher and student behavior were met during the implementation of the writing workshop. Areas targeted for improvement include mini-lessons on skills and spelling, more efficient status of the class, assessment of writing, revision techniques, and optimal use of the instructional aide.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made. These are aimed at the teacher of the subjects, other teachers, administrators, and future researchers.

It is recommended that this research continue with this group of subjects. Students should be given the questionnaire and prompt again in February, 1995 and May, 1995 in order to further assess the effects of the writing workshop on student writing and attitude.

This researcher recommends that other teachers implement writing workshop in their classrooms. School administrators should facilitate this implementation by providing inservice training, visitations, and support.

Additional research needs to be conducted in order to further establish the effectiveness of writing workshop as an instructional practice. Different student populations should be studied to assess the generalizability of the procedures and techniques in the approach.

Appendix A - Affective Pretest and Posttest

Writing Workshop Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. How do you feel when your teacher says that it is writing time?

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2. Do you like to write? (Circle your answer.)

YES                      NO                      SOMETIMES

Why or why not?

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3. Do you like the teacher to give you a topic or do you like to decide on a topic yourself? (Circle your answer.)

TEACHER GIVES TOPIC                      I DECIDE ON TOPIC

Why?

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4. How would you describe yourself as a writer? (Circle your answer.)

GREAT                      GOOD                      OK                      NOT GOOD

Appendix B - Cognitive Pretest and Posttest

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Writing Assessment

Everyone has special days that he or she will always remember. For some people it is a birthday. Others may have a special day because something good happened to them. Write about a special day you will always remember. Describe that day in enough detail so that the reader can picture him or herself there.

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You may continue on another piece of paper.

## Appendix C - Complete Questionnaire Results

### 1. How do you feel when your teacher says that it is writing time?

	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Change</u>
Positive	63%	82%	18% increase
Negative	22%	11%	11% decrease
Neutral or Both	15%	7%	8% decrease

Student responses used words such as: happy, glad, good, excited, nervous, lazy, sad

### 2. Do you like to write?

	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Change</u>
Yes	48%	78%	30% increase
No	4%	0%	4% decrease
Sometimes	48%	22%	26% decrease

Selected reasons given: "Because I like to write." "It is my best thing to do." "I like to write a little bit so I can stay sharp." "Because it is fun to do a book." "It makes me feel good and I get to write out my feelings." "Because I do not write good." "Because my hand gets tired and sleepy." "Because sometimes I don't know what to write."

### 3. Do you like the teacher to give you a topic or do you like to decide on a topic yourself?

	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Change</u>
Teacher-given	48%	37%	11% decrease
Student-selected	52%	63%	11% increase

Selected reasons given: Teacher-given - "Because I can't decide." "Because the teacher is the boss." "Because the teacher is the one who thinks it." Student-selected - "Because I like to do my stuff." "Because I like to write whatever I want." "Because it is fun to decide on my own. It is so fun to decide." "Because I like what I think." "Because I have cool topics." "Because I like my ideas."

4. How would you describe yourself as a writer?

	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Change</u>
Great	19%	41%	22% increase
Good	22%	19%	3% decrease
OK	48%	33%	15% decrease
Not Good	11%	7%	4% decrease

## Appendix D - Scoring Rubric

**4**

A "4" paper goes beyond the requirements of the assignment. It has clear ideas, complete sentences, proper grammar, and correct spelling throughout the paper (when appropriate).

**3**

A "3" paper meets the requirements of the assignment. It has clear ideas, complete sentences, proper grammar, and correct spelling most of the time (when appropriate).

**2**

A "2" paper falls short of meeting the requirements of the assignment in a few areas. The ideas are clear enough so that most of the message of the paper is understandable to the reader. The paper may be lacking in focus, complete sentences, proper grammar, and correct spelling.

**1**

A "1" paper falls short of meeting most of the requirements of the assignment. There are so many mistakes that they interfere with the reader's understanding of the paper. There may be many unclear ideas, incomplete sentences, improper grammar, and incorrect spelling.

**Appendix E**  
**Selected Student Writing Samples**



Rubric Score: 4

The day I will always remember was the day my baby brother Joshua was born. I was at my house on my couch eating pizza. Then I heard a very loud voice scream. I got scared. It was my mom she was starting to have contractions. Then my dad told me and my brother Robert to get in the car. We did we were going to the hospital as fast as we could. Then we got there. Me and my brother had

You may continue on another piece of paper.

to wait in the waiting room. I was so scared. Then the doctor let us in the room my mom was in. I saw my baby brother. I was so happy I could scream. My mom had to stay in the hospital for three whole days. Then she came home. I love my baby brother to this day.

Rubric Score: 3



Christmas is my special  
day because I get presents for  
Christmas I have fun in Christmas  
with my family we play and talk  
then we go to bed and in the  
morning I go to other house and  
open other presents then we go  
home to play with my toys then I  
just wait for it could be Chri-  
stmas again.

You may continue on another piece of paper.

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Rubric Score: 2

My first Birthday  
I got a Barbie for my  
Birthday and got some Claws I  
said for me to my mom  
and she said yes thank  
you. mom and I gave her  
a kiss.

You may continue on another piece of paper.

Rubric Score: 1

I lik to Play wit MY frin  
becy: it fun to ried MY BIK  
W in School finh dm gow to siwrd w rod  
it gwin to be fun to go siwrd wit MY famli.  
I gow to get wat I gow to see the De fin  
I like to go see D: i i  
I like to go to the matin  
I gow in to mika show man  
I gin to run w in the matin

You may continue on another piece of paper.

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