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ABSTRACT

This action research study investigated a model of professional development designed to encourage elementary language arts teachers to adopt a more reflective approach to literacy instruction. The model consisted of monthly negotiated-topic study group sessions, theoretically-based reading, and dialogue journal writing. This paper focuses on the unexpected outcomes that occurred as a result of teachers keeping professional journals. The informants in this year-long study were K-5 elementary school teachers (N=13), the school's principal, and the researcher. The inquiry method used was situated on a continuum between traditional qualitative and critical narrative research models. The major findings related to journal writing this study included: (1) writing proved to be the least preferred and most problematic part of the intervention for teachers; (2) participants reacted with much greater emotionality to journal writing than to the other interventions; (3) prior negative experiences with writing or journals had an effect on how teachers related to the project; and (4) there was a high level of reflective thought in the journal entries of most of the teachers. The findings point to the importance of defining the personal and social contexts in which journal writing takes place and the effect different contexts have on the event. (Contains 24 references.) (Author)

Writing Became a Chore Like the Laundry: The Realities of Using Journals to Encourage a Reflective Approach to Practice

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Abstract

This action research study investigated a model of professional development designed to encourage elementary language arts teachers to adopt a more more reflective approach to literacy instruction. The model consisted of monthly negotiated-topic study group sessions, theoretically-based reading, and dialogue journal writing. This paper focuses on the unexpected outcomes that occurred as a result of teachers keeping professional journals. While there have been a number of studies that have shown writing to be an effective tool in encouraging a reflective stance toward practice, nearly all previous studies were conducted with preservice teachers or teachers enrolled university classes. The informants in this year-long study were thirteen K-5 elementary school teachers, the school's principal, and the researcher. The inquiry method is situated on a continuum between traditional qualitative and critical narrative research models. The major findings related to journal writing this study included: (1) writing proved to be the least preferred and most problematic part of the intervention for teachers; (2) participants reacted with much greater emotionality to journal writing than to the other interventions; (3) prior negative experiences with writing or journals had an effect on how teachers related to the project; and (4) there was a high level of reflective thought in the journal entries of most of the teachers. The findings point to the importance of defining the personal and social contexts in which journal writing takes place and the effect different contexts have on the event.

Writing became a chore like the laundry: The Realities of Using Journals to Encourage a Reflective Approach to Practice

This paper describes an action research study investigating a model of professional development designed to encourage elementary language arts teachers to adopt a more more reflective approach to literacy instruction. The model consisted of monthly study group sessions, theoretically-based reading, and dialogue journal writing. This paper focuses on the unexpected outcomes that occurred as a result of teachers keeping professional journals during the 1991-92 school year. While there have been a number of studies that have shown writing to be an effective tool in encouraging a reflective stance toward practice (Eisner,1982; Kottkamp, 1990; Lester & Onore, 1986; Newman, 1988; Smyth, 1989; Yinger & Clark, 1981), nearly all of these studies were conducted with preservice teachers or with practicing teachers enrolled in university classes. One goal of this study was to find out what would happen if "average" inservice teachers were invited to keep voluntary journals. Would they write in journals, and if they did, would their writing help them view their practice from new perspectives?

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, authors of numerous articles and books in the field of teacher education and literacy education have advocated teachers taking a reflective approach to professional practice. This literature is based on a body of research that describes how many of the theories that teachers hold about learning and teaching are implicit, unconscious, and not readily open to examination (Lester & Mayher, 1987; Lester & Onore, 1986; Peterson & Clark, 1986; Schon, 1987; Smyth, 1989; Tom, 1985; Zeichner, 1983). The authors of these studies argue that helping teachers become aware of their implicit assumptions about life in the classroom will enable them to perceive

and examine their beliefs about learning and teaching, and that these acts of reflection will enable them to become more skilled and effective educators. Reflection (or inquiry-oriented teaching as it is often called) is generally described as distancing oneself from an engagement, taking a new perspective, seeing alternatives, and developing new understandings (Short & Burke, 1989). Little (1993) argues that ". . . the most promising forms of professional development engage teachers in the pursuit of genuine questions, problems, and curiosities over time . . . (p. 6).

The conceptualization of reflective practice used to guide this study is grounded in an interpretive, socially constructed view of phenomena (Kemmis, 1985; Short & Burke, 1989; Tom, 1985; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Social contexts, moral issues, justice, interpersonal relationships, student needs, teaching process, teaching strategies, curriculum, and experience are all considered problematic and important topics for reflection. Kemmis (1985) labeled this the "practical-deliberative" paradigm of reflective practice. The goal of reflection in this paradigm is to appraise the teaching/learning situation as a whole so that one can make decisions in the classroom that are pedagogically appropriate, ethical, and just (Kemmis, 1985).

Keeping professional journals (or participating in on-going written assignments) has been advocated as a strategy to encourage teachers to take a more reflective approach to their teaching (Eisner,1982; Kottkamp, 1990; Lester & Onore, 1986; Newman, 1988; Smyth, 1989; Yinger & Clark, 1981). ". . . [J]ournals stand as a written record of practice, they provide teachers with a way to revisit, analyze, and evaluate their experiences over time and in relation to broader frames of reference" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

There are some contradictions in the literature on reflective practice

regarding the issue of what kind of structure, if any, facilitates raising a teacher's level of reflectiveness in writing. I found authors advocating approaches ranging from no structure in writing to approaches that are very formal, systematic, and controlled. In a 1989 study, Cook, Young, and Cutler found that groups of teachers who engaged either more structured writing (specific reflective assignments) or less structured writing (informal journals) had similar levels of pedagogical thinking, similar student teaching performance, and similar attitudes toward reflection. The authors recommended that the less structured journals be used because they suspect that this type of writing will be a more conducive tool for life long reflection. Because of this data, I chose to use less structured, informal journal entries for this study.

Background

The school where this study took place, Pine Hill School (fictitious name), is an urban K-5 elementary school in a middle class neighborhood in Southern California. It has a population of 700 students with 25% of the school's students speaking a language in addition to, or instead of, English, and 16% demonstrating limited English proficiency. Forrest School District (fictitious name) had shied away from instructional innovation and most of the 25 faculty members had been at Pine Hill for their entire teaching careers. Thirteen of the twenty five teachers at Pine Hill decided to participate in the study along with the principal (just starting her second year at the school and in the district) and myself (the researcher). The participating teachers had a wide range of teaching experience, from four first year teachers to one who had taught for 33 years. In this paper, the teachers are referred to as novices (0-2 years of experience), experienced teachers (7-11 years), and veterans (18-33 years).

There were three major kinds of organized activities that took place during this study: study group meetings, reading research or theoretically-based articles, and dialogue journal writing.

Study Groups

Participating teachers, the principal, and I met once a month after school for an hour during the 1991-92 school year. Topics for each session were negotiated by the teachers. At the first session, the teachers prioritized the most important issues in language arts that they wanted to discuss and "teaching writing" came out on top. Different aspects of this topic were pursued over the five study group sessions. At the end of each session, topics for the next meeting were negotiated.

Theoretically-Based Reading

Prior to each study group meeting, the teachers and principal received three to seven articles (based on research or a theoretical stance) that I selected related to the topic the teachers had negotiated for the upcoming meeting. I chose articles that I felt would bring new perspectives to the teachers and would encourage them to reflect on their current beliefs about teaching writing. The articles addressed: what is a writer's workshop, getting writer's workshop started, student topic choice, time for writing, inventive spelling for drafting, writing conferences, conventions, editing, author's chair, and publishing student writing.

Journal Writing

Dialogue journal writing was the final activity of the study and the focus of this article. Participating teachers wrote weekly journal entries in which they could reflect on study group meetings, the readings, what was happening in their classrooms, or any other professional issues they chose to write on. I collected copies of their entries and responded to them on a

monthly basis. The principal and I dialogued weekly with each other through fax journals and the principal published a weekly journal for all the staff as a way to let the staff get to know her better and to share her reactions to study group sessions, the readings, and other issues and events that were happening at the school.

Prior to this study, only one teacher kept a regular journal of any type (this one happened to be personal). The majority of teachers either had never kept any type of journal, kept one only when it was required for a class, or stopped journal writing in elementary or high school. Clearly, writing regularly in any type of journal was not a familiar behavior of these teachers.

Mode of Participation

When I first discussed this project with the entire staff, I explained that participating in the study would involve: attending regular study group meetings, reading articles, and writing journal entries once a week. But, I also made it clear that it was acceptable if teachers decided not to participate in a particular activity, as long as they were willing to discuss the reasons for their lack of participation with me. So, in practice, the teachers had control over which parts of the project to participate in and what specific forms their participation would take.

Method

In attempting to match the methodology of this study with its goal of promoting reflective practice, I used an inquiry model that I placed on a continuum between the *traditional qualitative* and *critical narrative* research models. The goal of the traditional qualitative model is to understand teaching in the setting in which it occurs (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Clark, 1979; Zumwalt, 1982) with the researcher being the authority who is in

control of most aspects of the study (research questions, data sources, methodologies, data analysis, and written reports). The critical narrative research model seeks to interpret human experience by focusing on the narratives of teachers and researchers and to promote caring, connectedness, community, and a just society (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this model, the researcher collaborates with practitioners on most aspects of the study. Because the range of possible data sources for these two forms of interpretive inquiry are identical, the distinctive characteristic of "level of collaboration of informants" is the most sensitive criteria to use when placing a particular study on the continuum. This study is closer to the *traditional qualitative* model in terms of my level of collaboration with classroom teachers and closer to the *critical narrative* model with respect to my level of collaboration with the school principal.

Data Sources

Ten data sources were used in this study: pre and post-teacher questionnaires, pre and post-audio-taped teacher interviews, pre and post-*Literacy Beliefs Profiles* (Kucer,1991), audio-taped study group sessions, teacher/principal/researcher journal entries, classroom observations/photographs, principal interview, state program review findings, district writing test data, and group interview and discussion -- one year following the study.

Analysis

I analyzed the data in a three-stage process using qualitative, inductive, data driven methods. The first stage included the initial coding and categorization of data collected from all sources around six broad categories. Next the data was further coded into subcategories (supporting research stories). Finally, through collaborative analysis with the principal

and meeting with the teachers to get their feed back on my initial findings, I grouped the subcategories and created domains (significant research stories). Even though I did not collaborate with teachers on data analysis as much as I had originally anticipated, their voices are a prominent feature of this article.

Results

The major findings related to journal writing this study include issues around the following themes: (1) the lack of value teachers attributed to journal writing; (2) the benefits of journal writing; (3) the problems of journal writing; and (4) the level of reflective thought in journal entries.

The Lack of Value Teachers Attributed to Journal Writing

Writing in professional journals once a week proved to be the least valued and most problematic part of this study for the teachers at Pine Hill School. The teachers were asked to write as little or as much as they wanted to each week. Usual entries were from one to six pages in length and were either written by hand or computer. Seven of the thirteen participating teachers rated journal writing as the the "least valuable" part of the project. Only three teachers rated journals as one of the "most important" parts of the study. This is in contrast to twelve teachers who rated study group sessions and eight who rated reading articles as "most important" to furthering their growth as teachers of writing.

In addition, the teachers rated their level of participation in journal writing much lover than their participation in study group sessions and theoretically-based reading (see Table 1). This data was corroborated with attendance records from study group meetings, interviews, and the number of journal entries written.

Table 1
Self-Assessed Level of Participation

Self-Assessment of Participation	Study Group	Reading	Journals
low	0	3	8
low/medium	2	2	0
medium	2	4	1
medium/high	5	1	4
high	4	3	0

Another measure used to assess the value that the teachers placed on journal writing were their answers to the question: Do you want to continue with any part of the project next year? Only three of the teachers expressed an interest in continuing with journal writing, while eleven teachers wanted to continue with study group and five wanted to continue reading articles. During the post- study interviews, three additional teachers said they'd like to try journals again with the following changes: having a specific topic each month, using a tape recorder as a journal, and writing every day rather than once a week ("it was too big a task" once a week).

Benefits of Keeping a Journal

Even though journals proved to be the least valuable part of this study in the eyes of a majority of the participants, seven teachers found positive aspects to journal writing. They found journal writing enjoyable, helpful in planning class activities, cathartic, a source of valuable information, and a way to understand how difficult an endeavor writing can actually be. Here is a typical positive response:

> I liked writing -- it was kind of cathartic after a bad day. Even though I didn't do it very much, when I did do it, I enjoyed it.
> (Novice Teacher, Post-Interview)

One teacher, who actually made more changes in her classroom writing program than any other participant, used her journal to help synthesize the professional articles she had been reading:

> By writing it down [notes from articles] I would kind of review in my mind the steps that I should follow after I did the reading. It made me think through what I was going to do in my classroom. In fact, some of my journal is a summary of what I had just read. And I was kind of thinking to myself as I wrote the steps that I would follow. So, I think the journal is more valuable than I realized. By writing it out [notes from the articles], it really made me think through what I was going to do.
>
> (Veteran Teacher, Post-Interview)

Another veteran teacher explains how her own difficulty keeping a journal had sensitized her to the problems her students face in the same situation:

> I had lots of ideas, lots of things to say. . . but it [journal writing] became a chore like the laundry. I'm not that big a writer . . . and I'll tell you I've become much more tolerant [of the students who have problems with writing]. A child in my classroom will say, "I don't really like writing in this journal," and I now look at them and in my mind I think I really understand that. I never really thought of that [kids not liking writing] before. I used to think, What's the big deal?" So now I tell them to do a picture first and I find when they do a picture first, they want to tell me about it. And I help them jot it [their story] down.
>
> (Veteran Teacher, Post-Interview)

This was the only teacher to make a connection between the problems she faced in her own writing with the difficulties her students experienced.

Problems with Journal Writing

All thirteen teachers reported problems with journal writing, which was a big contrast to the few problems identified with reading articles and even fewer associated with study group sessions. The problems were manifest in five main areas of concern including: prior negative experiences with journals, writing as a stressful and difficult endeavor, time, difficulty

writing after having skipped entries, and the reluctance to write after a trauma.

Prior Negative Experiences with Journals. Five teachers felt that journal writing wasn't their "style" of reflecting. Prior negative experiences seemed to play a big part in this perception. One first year teacher explored this issue very poignantly in her first journal entry:

> I think my whole life I've wanted to be an avid journal writer, but it never seemed to work out. I guess I go in spurts. I remember as a young girl apologizing to my diary for not writing to it for so long. So I'd try to catch up on my life in one or two entries. This never seemed to be effective. I've always had the philosophy that one never changes, and I guess this just reinforces my belief. (Novice Teacher, Journal Entry)

And another novice teacher tells a little different story about previous problems with journal writing:

> The journal was definitely the least valuable part [of the study] for me. I simply could not commit to writing in it. I don't know why. In order of priorities, there always seemed to be something more important to do. This isn't the first time I've had a difficult time keeping a journal. During my student teaching, I was expected to keep a journal. I never wrote in that either. (Novice Teacher, Post-Questionnaire)

Writing as a Stressful and Difficult Endeavor. Two teachers reported that not writing in their journals (even though they had permission not to) caused them stress and guilt:

> [Keeping a journal] didn't make me write any more, it just caused me the stress of knowing that I should have been writing. (Novice Teacher, Post-Interview)

> At first I didn't mind [keeping a journal], then I felt I had to do it. I felt guilty if I didn't do it, until you [the researcher] said I didn't have to do it. And then I thought I really should. I didn't write in the past month. I felt I had to do it and was resenting doing it. (Veteran Teacher, Post-Interview)

The Difficulty of Writing. Many of the responses that fit into this category of not liking journal writing were overlaid with the teachers dealing with some of the more global problems of writing (it's hard, it takes time, I don't know what to say). Here are a few samples of how they expressed these issues:

> I had a hard time when I sat down to write, but it was a release when I wrote. It was a burden to think about what to write. It turned into a chore. (Novice Teacher, Post-Interview)

> I guess it is difficult for me to sit down and reflect on how my teaching is going in writing. There's so much to say, and I don't know how to say it without being trite.
> (Novice Teacher, Journal Entry)

Time. Five of the thirteen teachers in this study identified finding time to write as one of the main problems in keeping a journal. It is interesting to note that although study groups, reading, and journal writing all required the teachers to spend time beyond their regular day, journal writing was identified as the only one of the three activities that was difficult to make time for. One veteran teacher sums up the sentiments of these teachers:

> I didn't make time [for journal writing]. Adding one more thing [to my day] was too much! Keeping a journal wasn't hard, finding the time at school was.
> (Veteran Teacher, Post-Interview)

Another veteran teacher, who actually was one of the most prolific writers in the group made these remarks about time in a post-interview:

> Time was a problem. There were times in the study group when I would bring my journal along, kind of wishing I would have had time to write right then. But I didn't have the nerve to [write] because nobody else did. And I figured, well, everybody else has written in their journal and I'm ashamed to get mine out and write.

In reviewing the responses of those teachers who didn't like journal

writing and those who had trouble finding the time to write, an underlying theme of wanting to be a "good student" emerges. These teachers were told from the beginning that if there was any part of the project that they didn't participate in, it was fine. The only thing I asked was that they be willing to discuss their reasons for non or partial participation with me at the end of the study. For some reason, writing was a much more "emotionally charged" activity than either attending study group meetings or reading theoretically-based materials. Although a few teachers seemed overly conscientious in thinking they should have read all of the articles, no one felt "guilty" or "ashamed" or "resentful" about their lack of participation in study group or in reading articles.

Difficulty Writing After Having Skipped Entries. Four of the thirteen teachers in the study reported having lots of trouble returning to journal writing after having skipped one or more weeks of writing. As one experienced teacher put it in her post-interview, "I got out of the habit."

Couldn't Write After Trauma. One teacher had a child in her class murdered during the school year, and she attributed writing about this event as the reason she gave up journal writing.

> I enjoyed doing it [writing in my journal] at the beginning when we first started it. And I did very faithfully and then we wrote on the day that I told the kids about C.'s death and I couldn't pick up the journal after that. I eventually threw the whole journal away. I didn't want to read that again and I never gave it to you [the researcher] to read that day. It was like personal. Every time I picked it up I thought I don't even want to turn back to that page. This happened two or three times and eventually I misplaced it [the journal]. I don't know whether I accidentally threw it away, but it's gone.
>
> (Experienced Teacher, Post-Interview)

Level of Reflective Thought in Journal Entries

In analyzing the journal entries of the teachers at Pine Hill School, I

used the *Reflective Thought and Behavior Profile* (Lewison 1994, 1995) to ascertain what types of writing could be coded as "reflective." It became apparent that although these teachers generally did not like journal writing, there writing was actually very reflective. Table 2 shows the amount of reflective thought that was found in the entries of the twelve teachers who turned in journals.

Table 2
Reflective Thought in Journal Entries

Amount of Reflective Thought	No. of Teachers
Low Level of Reflective Thought	3
Medium Level of Reflective Thought	1
High Level of Reflective Thought	8

Figure 1 below illustrates the different types of entries that were found in the Pine Hill journals. In Figure 1, the first three entry types (descriptions of classroom activities, expressing feelings, and notes about students) were classified as descriptive and not reflective. The final six entry types (assessing student progress, analyzing successes, self-talk, admitting problems, asking questions, expressing doubts) all displayed evidence of reflection.

The very act of writing seemed to encourage reflection since no formal reflective prompts were given to the teachers. In addition, I found many more instances of teachers being reflective in their journal entries than I did when analyzing their talk during study group sessions or in their discussions about reading theoretically-based articles. Kottkamp (1990) refers to the act of writing as a reflective process where "we often pause, cycle back, reread, and rethink. . ." This characterization seemed to be born out by the writing done by Pine Hill teachers.

TYPE OF ENTRY	EXAMPLES FROM TEACHERS' JOURNALS
Descriptive	
Descriptions of Classroom Activities	We designed Valentines and the children wrote who they would give it to and why. Before writing I passed out their writing dictionaries. Some had no idea what to do with them but most used them and wrote terrific essays. (Experienced Teacher, 2/8/92)
Expressing Feelings	Today during SSW time, I had to separate some girls for talking. It made me really angry. I like this time. It allows me to escape from being a teacher. I participate as a student. I was very annoyed that these girls talked. (Novice Teacher, 1/13/92)
Notes About Students	A- Talks all the time, but does no reading or writing. L- Wrote one sentence by herself for the 1st time. (Veteran Teacher, 1/9/92)
Reflective	
Assessing Student Progress	S- who never says her own idea when responding to questions, gave her own ideas. She's learning English and just repeats what others have said. Today she came up with her own answer which leads me to think that she's starting to understand.Yeah! (NT1/92)
Analyzing Successes	As I look back over what I just wrote, I think the reason my week was so good is because the kids were really involved in so many activities. I know I should do more of this type of teaching. (Veteran Teacher 2/6/92)
Self-Talk	I give directions and still some papers are all wrong. What do I have to do to get these kids to hear me? I will not yell, no I cannot let them know they get to me. But I will be consistent, fair and straight forward with all of them. (N.T., 2/25/92)
Admitting Problems	One of my biggest problems lately seems to be communicating with my kids who do not speak English. I have to admit that I do not always remember that these kids do not understand what I say, in fact I rarely remember. (Novice Teacher, 2/92)
Asking Questions	What's the best way to begin journal writing with K students? Should I do pictures and labels? Just inventive spelling? . . . What's the best approach? (Veteran Teacher, 1/29/92)
Expressing Doubts	It gets so frustrating. At the beginning of the year, I promised that I was going to teach social studies and science every single day. What a joke. I feel so overwhelmed that I wonder if the kids are really learning anything. (Novice Teacher 2/20/92)

Figure 1. Types of Journal Entries

Significance

This study documents both the problems and benefits of having "average" inservice teachers (who were not "writers" to begin with) keep professional journals. Based on the many articles and book chapters I reviewed on reflective writing prior to conducting his study, I was totally unprepared for the intensity with which the majority of the informants in this study disliked journal writing. There were studies that documented how teachers' writing was often guarded, cautious, and uninsightful before they started dialoguing with the researchers (Lester & Onore, 1986; Newman, 1988), but there was no mention of the daily problems of keeping a journal I found at Pine Hill School. Issues of dealing with writer's block, concerns about "saying it right," and dealing with past unpleasant experiences with writing were absent from the reflective practice literature.

I started reflecting on why none of the problems I found, especially the fact that most teachers at Pine Hill hated journal writing, were discussed in this literature. This caused me to revisit the articles I read and explore possible explanations as to why my findings were so different from what I found in the literature.

As it turned out, all of the studies I reviewed on reflective writing, except for one, were conducted in university class settings. In the one study where journal writing didn't take place in an academic setting, two researchers were working with one teacher, a situation where there was a great deal of support for the teacher and her writing endeavors (Lester & Onore, 1986). Since reflective writing was a mandatory part of the university courses in the studies I reviewed, I assume in many cases, that this writing was connected in one way or another to course grades. I suspect that in the university class setting, even if students disliked journal

writing, they would not be as likely to complain to their professors since writing is an expected part of what one does as a student.

In the Pine Hill study, I found the writing of teachers just as reflective as what was described in the studies I reviewed. But these teachers did not like journals writing and most will not continue it. These teachers were not a "captive audience" as is found in most university classes and they didn't view reflective writing as part of the role of a teacher.

I find it interesting to note that journal writing was the one part of this project that was relatively private. Study group was a very social situation, and teachers' responses to the theoretically-based articles were shared in study group. Journal writing in this project had very little face-to-face interaction attached to it. The teachers may have needed more support than my monthly dialogue responses to their journal entries in order to engage more enthusiastically in this portion of the study.

The teachers at Pine Hill resonated with the portions of this project where there was more intense social interaction. It could be that sharing journal entries in study group sessions, like we did with theoretically-based reading, may have made a more satisfying experience for the teachers. Also, writing at the beginning of each study group session may have the potential of making the discussions more thoughtful, since so much of the journal writing was reflective. Writing first, and then discussing could have a significant impact on the content and focus of the meetings.

While the results of this study show the potential journals hold as a tool for encouraging inservice teachers to become more reflective, it is also highlight some serious problems these teachers face in keeping journals. It is evident that there is a need for continued study on reflective writing with teachers who are not "natural writers" and who aren't taking courses where

reflective writing is a requirement.

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