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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program designed to improve students' expressive writing in a midwestern elementary school classroom. The targeted third and fourth grade students demonstrated inconsistencies in the quality of their writing which interfered with their success in the classroom. Evidence for the existence of the problem included district formal writing assessments, journal writing scales, and teacher observations. Analysis of probable cause data revealed that writing process strategies were not consistently modeled by teachers or effectively used by students. Students reported displeasure and dissatisfaction with the rigorous writing tasks. Knowledgeable sources suggested that students did not connect reading and writing as closely related language processes and did not find writing relevant to their daily lives. Additional evidence suggested that many students' lack of prior knowledge may inhibit writing fluency and development. A review of solution strategies suggested by cited authors, combined with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the selection of three major categories of intervention: explicit instruction and modeling of the writing process stages; writing in informal reader response journals; and participation in student-teacher writing conferences and peer collaboration. Post-intervention data indicated a moderate increase in students' use of the writing process strategies in formal tasks and a modest increase in students' writing fluency in informal journal writing activities. Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of the writing process, educators and researchers are encouraged to continue their quest for effective, efficient, and appealing strategies to improve underachieving students' writing performance. (Contains 31 references and 5 tables of data. Appendixes contain a school district writing rubric; writing process teacher observation form; an informal journal writing scale; a student writing survey instrument; and sample journal entries.) (Author/RS)

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IMPROVING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' WRITING USING READING AND WRITING INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This report describes a program designed to improve students' expressive writing in an Midwestern elementary school classroom. The targeted third-fourth grade students demonstrated inconsistencies in the quality of their writing which interfered with their success in the classroom. Evidence for the existence of the problem included district formal writing assessments, journal writing scales, and teacher observations.

Analysis of probable causes data revealed that writing process strategies were not consistently modeled by teachers or effectively used by students. Students reported displeasure and dissatisfaction with the rigorous writing tasks. Knowledgeable sources suggested that students did not connect reading and writing as closely related language processed and do not find writing relevant to their daily lives. Additional evidence suggested that many students' lack of prior knowledge may inhibit writing fluency and development.

A review of solution strategies suggested by cited authors, combined with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the selection of three major categories of intervention: Explicit instruction and modeling of the writing process stages; writing in informal reader response journals; and participation in student-teacher writing conferences and peer collaboration.

Post-intervention data indicated a moderate increase in students' use of the writing process strategies in formal tasks and a modest increase in students' writing fluency in informal journal writing activities. Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of the writing process, educators and researchers are encouraged to continue their quest for effective, efficient,and appealing strategies to improve underachieving students writing performance.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

Students in the targeted third/fourth grade classroom in an urban Midwestern elementary school demonstrated inconsistencies in the quality of their expressive writing which interfered with their success in the classroom. Evidence for the existence of the problem included district assessments, student journal writing, and teacher observation.

Immediate Problem Context

The school's enrollment of 257 students was equally distributed between the primary and intermediate grades. The major racial/ethnic groups in the school were 61% White, 29% Black, 9% Hispanic, and 1% other ethnic groups. Attendance was reported at 94%, with 14 students identified as chronic truants. A small percentage of children were bused daily to and from school. The building's 38 special education students received services and instruction in the regular education classrooms. Students from low income families comprised 62% of the total school population. Approximately 30% of the eligible students participated in a free or reduced-price breakfast program. The school's mobility rate was 21%. According to School Report Card and School Improvement

documents from the past three years, the school's enrollment had gradually declined in the primary grades at 10 to 15 students per year. Another identified trend was the increased number of low-income families in the school.

School employees consisted of 16 full-time certified teachers and 4 part-time specialists. Among the specialists were a physical education instructor, a speech pathologist, a school nurse, and an elementary school counselor. The range of teaching experience among the certified staff was from 2 years to 40 years with an average of twenty-one years of experience. Educational levels attained by the certified staff varied from bachelor's degrees to master's degrees plus an additional 45 semester hours. Of the certified part-time and full-time staff, 63% held masters's degrees.

The building's part-time classified personnel supervised the lunchroom and playground and performed various clerical duties. The school's six paraprofessional staff assisted in the special education inclusion classrooms. The paraprofessional staff had received training in inclusion methodology and participated in weekly staff development meetings. According to certified staff members, paraprofessionals were considered an integral element of the school's instructional program.

The school celebrated its 70th anniversary in 1999. The traditionally designed two-story brick building contained 17 classrooms. Headstart and prekindergarten programs occupied two of the classrooms, and three others were shared by specialist

staff. A large playground and fenced play area were adjacent to the building. Installation of a climate control system provided air conditioning to the school and fueled speculation among staff members and parents about the eventuality of a year-round school schedule.

The school was located in a very busy business district which contributed to building security concerns. The district administrators implemented policies limiting building access through one outside door, registering all visitors to the building, and installing two-way classroom door locks. the city police department assisted the school staff address concerns about traffic congestion and safety.

The school's instructional programs included a special education inclusion program and eight multi-age classrooms. Multi-age students remained with the same teacher for two consecutive years. The school qualified for school-wide Title I services which financed a school reading center and staff development training. The Title I reading center contained a language arts professional library and extensive collection of classroom trade books. Staff development activities included ongoing training in the four-block literacy model. Primary and intermediate teachers met in collaborative teams every Friday. Theme and special classroom projects were supported with a fine arts program that replaced the building's traditional music class. Students operated a school postal system that delivered student letters to each classroom.

The district provided four Internet-connected computers to each classroom. The building's mainframe computer provided staff with a limited software selection. A staff survey completed in 1999 indicated that many faculty members were dissatisfied with the level of technical support provided to the school and suggested a need to include technology integration training into the staff development program.

The school's library housed a small television production room. Students created and produced a daily news program that was broadcast through the closed-network televisions located in each room. The news program provided students with opportunities to share class and individual projects with the entire school.

The Surrounding Community

The targeted community was located between the confluence of a smaller river and the Mississippi River. This historical community was bordered by 12 other contiguous cities that comprised a larger metropolitan area of nearly 400,000 people. The community was once the site of the largest American Indian settlements in North America and held the distinction of being the oldest city in the area. It was the site of the first rail crossing of the river and home to the state's first official free public library. Early industries in the community included lumbering, railroading, and farm implement manufacturing. One of the city's historic neighborhoods was located within the school's attendance boundaries.

Recognized for its industry and manufacturing, the city was

home to 11 of the largest employers in the region. Parents at the school were employed in a range of occupations from unskilled labor positions to small business owners. Tourism to the community and area rapidly increased after the inception of riverboat gambling along the river. New businesses were attracted to the community by its low lease rates and reasonable land costs. Restoration and renovation of the community's existing businesses and neighborhoods was a major goal of city leaders.

A wide variety of organized family activities were available throughout the city and metropolitan area. The city's parks and recreation department offered year-round sports, hobby classes, and activities for school-aged children. A community fitness center provided families and individuals with fitness and recreation opportunities. A second community center provided students summer camping experiences, recreational field-trips, and mentoring programs. A large marina afforded citizens access to the riverways and served as the trail-head for a bike path that extended for miles along the river.

According to reports and speeches delivered by city officials at city council and school board meetings, the community suffered from a "public image" problem. Results from a joint community-school district survey indicated that the district parents were satisfied with the quality of school and city services. The perception in the cities bordering the school district was that the targeted community was not a safe place to live or raise children. Bordering residents cited criminal gang

activity, drug-related social problems, and a substandard school system as reasons for their perception. Statistics over a three year period indicated that the city's efforts at reducing crime were successful, because three bordering cities had higher crime rates than the targeted community. School district officials implemented student conduct and building security policies and instituted plans to improve public relations.

The school district consisted of 12 elementary schools, two junior high schools, an alternative school,a high school, and an administrative center. The district's student population was 60% White, 33% Black, and 6% Hispanic. Classroom teachers in the district were 90% White, 8% Black, and 1% Hispanic. District officials indicated minority teacher recruiting efforts had been less than successful. Low-income families comprised 48% of the district's student population.

District administrators were involved in resolving two major issues. The first issue was the district's consideration of implementing a year-round school calendar. Through surveys and public meetings the district sought feedback from the community, parents, students, and school personnel before making a decision. Another concern was the development of a district retention policy. The proposed policy would specify what students must achieve to be promoted to the next grade. Evidence to be used for promotion to the next grade included standardized test scores, classroom performance, attendance, discipline records, and report card documentation.

National Context of the Problem

For many years, American educators have recognized that learning to read and write is a complex, multifaceted process. Expressive writing descriptions include writing for a variety of purposes, on a variety of tasks, and for many different audiences. Effective writing demonstrate students' willingness to generate, draft, revise, and edit their ideas and forms of expression. Inconsistent writing skills are a reflection of the value students place on writing as a communicative activity.

In the winter of 1998, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tested the writing skills of students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. The assessment included about 160,000 students at the national and state levels. The findings were considered important because they were an indicator of how well students communicated and reasoned.

Approximately one year later, The NAEP 1998 Writing Report Card for the Nation and the States was released (NAEP, 1999). The results indicated that more than three-fourths of the nation's students demonstrated a "basic" ability to write. A basic achievement level indicated at least a partial mastery of writing skills. About one-fourth of students performed at the "proficient" achievement level of writing. The proficient level represented solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter. The proficient level was identified as the standard all students should reach. Only one percent of students achieved the "advanced" level of superior performance.

Educators have debated, defined, redefined, and expanded the concept of literacy for nearly one hundred years. There remains a lack of consensus on many issues concerning literacy at the end of the twentieth century, but there were some widely accepted assumptions. One assumption was that learning to read and write is essential to a child's success in school. The Joint Position Statement from the International Reading Association (IRA)/National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) asserted that one of the predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and society was the level to which that child progressed in reading and writing (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp,2000).

Another assumption was that society will require that virtually everyone will need to function beyond basic literacy skills in the future. Rafferty(1999) discussed the need for school districts to define what literacy for the information age means. The district's exploration of meaning included discussing traditional text literacies, visual and media information literacies, and technology literacies.

Allington and Cunningham(1996) suggested a refocusing of national attention from the pursuit of a single best approach to teaching reading and writing toward an assurance that all children acquire proficiency in a balanced instructional setting. A balanced instructional effort included taking advantage of the strengths of traditional models and the recent knowledge of how children learn.

Allington and Walmsley(1995) explained that many of the students with poor literacy skills were exposed to a very narrow sampling of the broad range of materials and activities that should make up a quality language arts program. A quality literacy curriculum included not only editing skills but opportunities for students to communicate their ideas in written form on a variety of topics, for a variety of purposes, and to a variety of audiences. Reflecting on three recurring ideas to improve writing, Fletcher(1999) proposed that a partial explanation for poor writing was that parents and teachers did not take the time to read, talk, and write with their children. Students improved their writing when they observed adult models writing for authentic purposes and talked with children about their thinking while writing.

The NAEP Writing Report Card (1999) findings also indicated home and school factors that were positively associated with writing performance. Certain elements of process writing were directly related to performance. These included teachers conferencing with students, saving students work in folders, and requiring students to write more than one draft. Students needed to plan their writing, use computers for writing, and talk with peers about their writing. Other factors that influenced performance were parents having reading materials in the home and talking with students about their school studies. The findings indicated that there were interventions that could improve student writing.

American students' lack of writing proficiencies are well documented. Evidence indicates the existence of efficient, effective, and appealing interventions to improve writing skills. The selection of appropriate, research-based models becomes the responsibility of individual school districts and schools. Although the review and selection process may appear to be time-consuming and imposing, the goal of improving student writing justifies the effort.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

Students in the identified elementary school were experiencing difficulty meeting grade level expectations in writing as measured by journal writing scales, teacher observations, and local school district assessments. As indicated in the 1998 NAEP Writing Report Card results over half of the nation's fourth grade students wrote at the "basic" level of performance. Allington and Walmsley (1995) suggested, however, the communication demands of the information age will necessitate a higher level of literacy than a "basic" knowledge of reading and writing.

In order to document the extent of student underachievement in expressive writing in the targeted classroom, local school district writing assessment scores were noted. The scoring rubric for the district assessments was identical to the rubric used in the state standards achievement tests.(Appendix A) Writing sample results indicated that 15 out of the 16 students in the class were not meeting expectations for their grade level. In the rubric's performance level score ranges, six students were in the academic warning range, nine in the below standards range, one in the

meeting standards range, and zero in the exceeds standards range. Performance standards reflected students focus, elaboration, organization, and integration during formal writing prompts.

Additional documentation during a three week period consisted of an anecdotal teacher observation checklist (Appendix B). The observation instrument developed by the researcher recorded students' use of the five stages of the writing process during formal writing prompts. Students were given adequate time periods to engage in each stage of the writing process. The writing samples were scored using the previously noted school district scoring rubric. Table 1 summarizes the number of students engaged in the writing process stages and the number of students at the corresponding performance levels on the formal writing assessment.

Table 1

Number of Students Engaged in Writing Process Stages and Corresponding Performance Levels Sept. 2000

Writing Process Stages	Number of Students	Number of Students at Performance Levels		
		AW	BS	MS
Planning	11	1	9	1
Drafting	13	3	9	1
Editing	2	0	1	1
Revision	3	0	2	1
Sharing/publishing	5	0	4	1

AW= academic warning BS= below standards MS= meeting standards

n= 16

Results of the teacher observation checklist suggested that the one student that met the performance standards utilized all five of the writing process steps. As indicated in table 1, over two-thirds of the students engaged in the planning and drafting activities but were not meeting the desired performance levels. It appeared that although students may have engaged in one or two of the writing process steps, it did not ensure improvement in their total writing performance. Table 1 also indicated that when the critical steps of editing and revision are omitted, students writing performance may have suffered. The omission of the editing and revising steps suggested that many of the students were not rereading their original drafts. Teacher observations suggested that students may have possessed at least minimal skills and knowledge of the writing process, but were not transferring that knowledge to the writing task.

For three weeks the teacher recorded the results of an informal writing scale for each student in the targeted classroom (Appendix C). Three or four student writing journals were randomly selected each week and evaluated using the scale. The assessment criteria and number of pupils in each score category are displayed in Table 2. Each student was evaluated two times during the recording period for a total of 32 scores possible in each category.

Table 2

Journal Writing Scale Scores during September 2000

Scale Criteria	Number of Students at Scale Scores		
	Definitely	Partially	Minimally
Written sufficient amount	4	12	16
Written to topic	8	12	12
Acceptable conventions	0	4	28
Within time limit	18	4	10
Took chances	0	12	20
Personally engaged	2	18	12

n= 32

Informal journal writing scale scores from table 2 documented that over three-fourths of the students were partially or minimally writing a sufficient amount for the assignment. Over 85% of the students were not using appropriate standard English conventions in their writing. further evidence from the table suggested that the pupils were only partially engaged in writing to the topic or personally engaged in the writing process. Consistent with the teacher observation results, it appeared that students may have possessed some of the required knowledge or skills but were having difficulty translating those skills into writing practice. Considering that the informal writing assignments were less structured and intended to increase fluency, it appeared that students may not have understood the purpose or the audience for their writing assignments.

Probable Causes

Numerous underlying causes may have contributed to student underachievement in expressive writing in the targeted classroom. One of these causes may have been the lack of adult writing role models in the school and demonstrations of writing. Classroom observations conducted by school administrators and language arts specialists indicated that less than half of the teachers were integrating writing into their daily instructional activities. As noted in Chapter 1, the faculty had adopted a building-wide literacy model, and within the framework of that model was a daily thirty minute writing component. School Improvement minutes addressed the committee's concern and frustration with the inconsistent application of the literacy model. One focus of the discussions was the limited number of opportunities students had to observe adults modeling the writing process. Committee discussions and observation evidence suggested that many teachers were not providing sufficient direct writing instruction and frequently failed to model themselves as writers. Inconsistent instructional practices appeared to influence the inconsistent writing performance of the students.

Another fundamental factor which may have contributed to a lack of writing proficiency was many students' perceptions that they were not successful at writing. A writing survey of the targeted third and fourth graders indicated that over 75% of the students did not like to write (Appendix D). By a similar majority, survey results indicated that pupils were "not sure" if

they were real authors or if they liked publishing their writing. Over 90% of the students indicated they disliked sharing their writing products in front of the whole class while an even larger percentage of students indicated that they preferred writing with a partner.

Post-survey interviews suggested that students often disliked writing because it was difficult and time consuming. Many students indicated that they were embarrassed to share their writing with peers and that the teacher was their only audience. Students suggested that writing would be more enjoyable if they were allowed to choose their own topics, use the computer to write, and have shorter assignments. One student summarized the survey results very succinctly, "Writing is too hard and takes too long."

Many third and fourth grade students were deficient in either their knowledge or application of writing process strategies. According to staff development reports, the majority of the school's teachers were teaching the stages of the writing process as isolated skill subjects. The editing elements of spelling, grammar, and standard English conventions were frequently taught as independent drill and practice exercises and rarely integrated into students written drafts. Teacher self-reports indicated that many of the faculty felt that students were not "ready" to use the writing process stages because they could not spell, use capital letters correctly, or write a complete sentence.

Primary grade teachers cited that many younger students were

now coming to school without basic literacy skills such as, letter or number recognition, exposure to print materials, or fine motor experiences. Intermediate grade teachers similarly stated that students frequently lacked the prerequisite skills necessary to acquire writing process strategies. These teachers supported their viewpoint with evidence from standardized test scores in spelling, punctuation, and grammar usage. Many of the school's teachers viewed direct skills instruction as a higher priority than process writing instruction.

The literature suggested several possible causes for students' underachievement in expressive writing. One recurrent theme addressed the importance of teachers talking to students and students talking to each other about their writing. Sperling (1998) discussed two contrasting modes teachers use as readers of students' writing. In the first traditional red-pen mode, the teacher's role included writing comments on students' papers, providing prescriptive solutions to errors, and evaluating the final written product. The author described this mode as an example of the writing teacher's "search and destroy" mentality.

The second mode, a cognitive process perspective, focused on the teacher as facilitator of students' writing. As facilitator, the teacher interacts with student writers by reading, talking, thinking, and writing with them on a regular basis. As a component of this interaction, student-teacher writing conferences immediately involved the student in the teacher's response to their writing and often promoted future conversations. Sperling

suggested that written comments could become interactive when they were used as the basis for teacher-student conferences or peer group discussions. Reluctant writers appeared to be more willing to attempt writing tasks when they were provided an opportunity to share their frustrations and anxieties with peers in a "risk-free" environment.

According to Parry and Hornsby (1985,), writing conferences provide all students opportunities for total language development. During student-teacher and peer conferences, students are reading, listening, speaking, and writing in meaningful ways. Conferences also afford teachers the opportunity to effectively model and demonstrate these communication skills.

Another issue addressed in the research indicated the value and importance of linking reading and writing experiences together in the classroom. Tierney and Shanahan (1996) suggested that when children write about what they have read, engagement with text is enhanced, recall of key ideas improves, and thinking deepens.

Moss, Leone, and Dipillo (1997) suggested that American educators were missing an opportunity to improve students' reading and writing proficiencies. By having children respond to interesting and up-to-date non-fiction trade books, students may expand their understanding on a wide variety of topics. Because nonfiction texts are less prior-knowledge dependent, students who regularly read and respond to information trade books begin to develop the ability to read as writers. Students begin to develop essential problem-solving and critical thinking skills as they

respond to the factual information they are reading.

When teachers focus on pronouncing or spelling words correctly and fail to emphasize thoughtful applications, strategies, and purposefulness, children, not surprisingly, become "basic" readers and writers and seldom display much thoughtfulness (Allington & Cunnningham, 1996). When reading and writing activities diminish thinking, children cannot be expected to view reading and writing as thinking processes.

Reflecting on historical trends in education, Nelson and Cafee (1998) discussed the recent accountability movement and its influence on reading and writing. One of the major influences of this movement is the proliferation of state assessments that measure reading and writing knowledge. These high-stakes tests can profoundly impact the curriculum of a school as teachers attempt to align curricula to the test instrument. Typically, the assessments measure reading and writing as totally separate kinds of knowledge. If teachers follow the test format they also will design reading and writing instructional activities as completely independent subjects. Perhaps unknowingly, teachers may be denying themselves and students of instructional activities that take advantage of the reading-writing connection.

Home factors related to student achievement have garnered interest from researchers in recent studies. Consistent with previous results of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, the 1999 NAEP Writing Report Card documented that the more types of reading materials reported to be in the

home, the higher the average writing scores. Students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades self-reported on the presence of newspapers, magazines, encyclopedias, and numbers of books in the home. Thirty-eight percent of fourth graders reported having all four types of reading material in their homes. Thirty-three percent of these students performed at the proficient or above level on the writing assessments. Concurrently, the 62% of students who reported fewer types of reading materials in the home scored at the "basic" level or below on the assessments. The NAEP Writing Report results tend to support Shanahan's (1990)contention that there is a well-established relationship between student's reading and writing abilities.

Another home factor considered in the 1999 NAEP Report was how often students discussed their school studies with someone at home. Also consistent with past NAEP results, there was a positive relationship between students discussing their school work at home and achievement. At all three grades, the more frequently students talked about their studies, the better their writing scores. The NAEP results suggested the impact that parents and significant adults in the home can have on students' academic achievement.

Many factors appeared to contribute to student underachievement in writing. Considering the national and local context of the problem, it is incumbent upon individual schools to evaluate possible solutions, design effective interventions, and implement appropriate action plans.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

As the title of Allington and Walmsley's book, No Quick Fix: Rethinking Literacy Programs in America's Elementary Schools asserted there are no instant or prescriptive solutions to improve literacy instruction for all children. Reforming literacy programs that deal effectively with underachieving students requires a clear focus on the quality of the literacy activities. Many of the pupils with poor literacy skills often receive a narrow range of activities and materials that compose a quality language arts curriculum. Students with reading and writing difficulties benefit the most from high-quality instruction offered by teachers who are both knowledgeable in how literacy develops and expert in facilitating literacy development (Allington & Walmsley, 1995).

Consistently referred to in the research as characteristic of quality literacy programs was teachers and students engaging in meaningful conversations during writing activities. Although referenced diversely in the literature as writing conferences, sharing, collaborating, interactive writing, or writing workshops, the common element in each approach was teachers and students talking together about their writing.

In an apprenticeship approach to writing, teachers collaborate with children with similar needs in assisted writing activities. This approach assumes that children acquire important writing concepts and problem-solving strategies during collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable persons (Dorn, French, & Jones, (1998). Another critical principle of the apprenticeship approach is Vygotsky's (1978) concept that the writing assistance should take place in the child's zone of proximal development.

Another type of assisted writing, known as interactive writing, addresses struggling writers reluctance to take risks with their writing. Interactive writing is a shared writing experience between the teacher and a small group of students who write a common text together (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). During the writing, the teacher provides students with specific and explicit feedback about their writing and includes teacher demonstrations and modeling of writing process strategies.

In another type of assisted writing, the teacher vocalizes his/her thoughts and processes during the composition of a text. During this "writing aloud" demonstration, the teacher's goal is to verbally share his/her thinking while constructing a meaningful message for a particular audience. Teachers are encouraged to openly share their frustrations and writing problems, and then model the problem-solving strategies they would use in a particular situation. The teacher elicits student questions and responses at selected points throughout the process. Through

guided participation in demonstrations, students have strategy models to apply in their own writing. The "writing aloud" approach is easily adapted to small group or whole class instruction (Routman, 1994,).

Writing workshop activities afford students and teachers many opportunities to interact with each other. Components of this approach include the author's chair or author's seat and small group reading of each writer's work. Workshops provide authentic audiences for student writing, and for some students, comments and suggestions from their peers are more closely attended to than a teacher's. Teachers often report that they are surprised at the quality and thoughtfulness of the feedback students give each other (Essex, 1996).

Essex cautions teachers to carefully monitor and model the feedback that occurs during the writing workshop. Younger children tend to succumb to peer and social pressure in their evaluation of opposite gender writers, and the unspoken hierarchies of influence within a given classroom.

Historically, the writing conference has been one of the most effective and efficient methods of improving underachieving students' writing. Many teachers and researchers suggest that the conference should be the focus of the entire writing process. The conference affords the student and adult the means to clarify, refine, and evaluate the message the student wants to express.

Writing conferences take on different forms depending on the intended purpose and stage of the writing process. According to

Parry and Hornsby (1985) the types of conferences include: individual student-teacher conferences, small group conferences, special issue groups, and publishing conferences. One of the teacher's most important responsibilities in conferencing is matching individual student needs with the appropriate type of writing conference.

The teacher's role in the actual writing conference is to guide and facilitate the child's decisions in their writing. Graves (1983) suggested a regime of questions to guide the interaction of students and teachers in conferences. Teachers should begin conferences with open-ended questions about the writer's topic and initial reactions to the text. Additional questions should actually be phrased as restatements that give the teacher more information about the writer's strengths and weaknesses. The final set of process questions should guide student's thinking about what they have accomplished and facilitate what they need to do next.

Teachers are cautioned that there is research evidence to suggest that discrepancies exist in the ways that conferences are conducted in classrooms and with individual students. Sperling (1998) noted that knowledgeable others have suggested student-teacher conferences are noticeably different among students with differing writing and verbal abilities, and with students with different ethnic backgrounds than the teacher. Less interactive and shorter conferences tended to occur with lower achieving students and with students whose cultural background

differed from the teacher's. These findings suggest that the role teachers assume in conferences can be just as static as the "red pen" correction marks they place on student papers, while for other students, the conference can be a rich reader-writer conversation.

Knowledgeable teachers in quality language arts classrooms understand the recursive nature of the writing process. These teachers recognize that the process is not a neat, sequential or predictable activity. Planning, drafting, editing, and sharing do not always follow a linear, lock-step pattern. Writers understand that writing is a bit messy (Lenski & Johns, 2000, Routman, 1994). Underachieving children need many opportunities to write meaningful, authentic texts so they experience the writing process as an active, social, and meaning-making activity (Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1990). The challenge for educators is to design effective, efficient, and appealing lessons that teach the structure of the writing process.

Less experienced writers need explicit instruction in the ways different types of text are organized, and they need multiple opportunities to practice these different types of writings (Downing, 1995). Specifically, students learn process writing strategies through many narrative, expository, and persuasive writing experiences, and through modeling, collaborative demonstrations, and direct instruction sessions.

Narratives or personal experience stories are among the easiest types of text for students to write. The general

organizational pattern of beginning, middle, and ending is usually familiar to most students from their reading, listening, and viewing of stories. There are multiple graphic organizers and story webs to assist writers and teachers in the planning of personal experience writing. Within the context of this genre teachers are presented many opportunities to directly instruct students in grammar and standard English usage conventions. Students must also consider their intended audience when writing personal experience text.

Personal experience writing is an opportunity for some students to share what is real in their lives and affords teachers an opportunity to engage students in a dialogue that transcends socioeconomic and cultural boundaries (Wortham, 1999). Teachers, however, should recognize that some students may be reluctant to share their personal feelings, reactions, and experiences in a written story form with their peers.

The structures and patterns of expository writing make it one of the most widely written and read forms of text. Learning to read and write types of expository writing such as step-by step directions, owners manuals, and food labels have become a large part of our daily lives. More sophisticated forms of expository writing include explaining and summarizing, comparing and contrasting, and cause and effect writing (Lenski & Johns, 2000).

The typical four or five paragraph organizational pattern follows a strict form that teachers should frequently model and demonstrate for elementary students. Again, there is a wide

variety of outlines and graphic organizers to assist teachers and students in their planning. Within the context of this genre, teachers may directly instruct students in appropriate vocabulary and transition words specific to this type of writing. There is an increasing number of quality nonfiction trade books that students may model, retell or respond to in expository form (Moss, Leone, & Dipollo, 1997).

Expository text relies heavily upon factual and current information on a given topic. If students lack the prior knowledge to write effectively on a topic they have to find the information from other sources and engage in research (Harvey, 1998). Because research follows sequential, spiral, and recursive patterns, students make meaningful decisions while searching for information and translating this information into written text (Lenski & Johns, 1997).

Many proficient students have little or no experience reading or writing persuasive text. Although they have been assaulted with visual, auditory, and print media advertising messages, most students do not connect the persuasive message or text with the images. Because students lack meaningful experiences with formal text, teachers should allot extra instructional time for students to read, write, and practice the patterns of persuasive writing. There is a limited number of quality persuasive texts for elementary students to model or respond to, and teachers may have to create collaborative models using fairy tales or fables as frameworks (Lenski & Johns, 2000).

Inexperienced writers acquiring persuasive writing skills mistakingly think that this genre of writing is simply talk in written form. Through careful planning and modeling teachers can facilitate students' logical thinking and reasoning abilities that are requisite to persuasive text.

Routman (1994) suggested that many educators erroneously believe that students must be taught the process of writing using specific, linear instructional approaches, while in fact, writing is a "process." There is sufficient evidence to suggest that students can learn the planning, drafting, editing, revising, and sharing stages of writing within the context of authentic writing experiences. Quality teaching methods that balance collaborative demonstrations, concrete models, direct instruction activities, and relevant writing tasks provide the opportunities that underachieving students need to improve their writing. By reading and writing narrative, expository, and persuasive texts students become more prepared to meet the communication demands of a technological society.

Graves (1994) suggested that students' writing does not always have to go through the editing and revision process. If students write every day for a variety of purposes and audiences, they will not have time to refine each piece of writing. Less structured and patterned writing experiences provide less proficient writers the chance to develop writing fluency. Frequently referenced in the literature as informal writing, the most common formats for informal writing are journal writing,

responding to literature, and content area writing. The teacher's role in teaching all forms of writing is to encourage students to write, reflect, and learn in order to increase their writing fluency (International Reading Assoc. & National Council of Teachers of English, 1994).

Taberski (2000) proposed that teachers get students in the habit of reading independently and processing what they've read before asking them to write individual responses. Teachers need to model the type of responses they desire and carefully match them with the students' abilities. The author used response sheets with younger students to provide a framework for summary, comparison, and reaction responses. As students' writing evolved, they began to combine and synthesize their responses.

Disappointed with the quality of her students reader response journal entries, Berger (1996) designed a series of four open-ended questions to guide students'' writing. After every two chapters of a self-chosen book, pupils were directed to write about what they noticed, questioned, felt, and related to in their novels. The questions were selected after the students and teacher collaboratively field-tested several possible response formats. Burgers results indicated that the questioning model was effective with a wide variety of reading abilities and genres, and provided opportunities for flexible writing and sharing groups. As students became familiar with the response format, their reading and writing reflected deeper thinking and meaning-making.

Another type of reader response is text reconstruction or

retelling. Reconstruction activities help readers and writers develop reading flexibility, knowledge of text forms and conventions, and an awareness of the complexities of text construction. When students share written retellings of books, they engage with text much more intensely than at other times (Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997).

Reader response activities are designed to increase students understanding of a text as well as increase the depth and scope of student responses. Wham (1996) suggested seven strategies for responding to literature.

In literary letters, children write letters to one of the characters in a book or story. In another letter format named "Dear Abby" the teacher assumes the role of one of the book's characters and writes a letter to the students about a problem she/he is having. The students write return letters to the character suggesting possible solutions. Beyond developing writing fluency, students develop authentic letter writing skills.

A third strategy suggests the teacher construct a "story ladder" by writing partial sentences related to a story. Students collaborate about possible endings for the sentences using their knowledge of the story. During the "hot seat" reader response activity, the teacher assumes the role of one of a book's characters and is interviewed by the students. This activity is usually preceded by a mini-lesson on quality questioning techniques. The "personality plot" response chart is created by children graphing the personality traits of a story's characters.

A by-product of this activity is the potential discussion of descriptive adjectives and vocabulary development of the words used to describe the character.

Wham further suggested the use of a literary journal that has students write about a day in the life of one of a book's characters. In the final "group mapping" strategy, students draw or construct story maps of their reactions to the literature selection. The author concluded that the seven response activities encouraged students to refine and articulate their personal interpretations of a literature text.

Unsatisfied with the singular and mechanical retelling of plot repeatedly used by her students in response to books, Ollmann (1996) investigated seven reader response formats based on the theories of Rosenblatt (1938). Every five weeks the author asked her seventh grade students to write a different type of response to their self-selected novels. She examined the student responses for evidence of different types of higher level thinking.

The response formats included the previously noted literary letter. Ollmann's strategy included a teacher's written response to the letter to extend student thinking. Another activity format, "the character journal," had students assume the role of one of the characters and write a first person diary entry in response to an event in the text. The journal entries provided students opportunity to reflect on a character's emotions and reactions in comparison to their own emerging identities.

The most popular format with the students was the "buddy

journal" reader response format. Students reading the same novel wrote three journal entries and responded to three of their buddy's journal entries. Pupils were supplied with a list of starter phrases to guide their journal writing and thinking. A variation of the same activity directed students to write responses to questions. The questions guided students to record their immediate reactions to the text, carefully analyze the text, and consider the text in relation to the reader's personal experiences.

Ollmann described the next response strategy as the "two-column" response format that gave students the opportunity to interpret self-chosen quotes from a text. On one side of the paper were the quotations and on the other side students responded by stating an opinion, raising questions, evaluating style, and discussing character relationships. In another response format, students write letters to a living author. Students read a book or story by the author and research information on the author's life and compose questions to ask the author in a letter.

The highest scoring format in Ollmann's study was the hexagonal essay. The students were directed to compile successive responses following the steps in Bloom's taxonomy. Pupils were asked to summarize the plot, make a personal connection with the text, analyze the theme and literary techniques, compare and contrast texts, and evaluate the work as a total text.

Results from the seven response strategies investigation suggested that open-ended prompts designed to stimulate a specific

kind of thinking received the best student performance. Further findings suggested that teachers select a reading response format to match a particular type of problem-solving or critical thinking skill that students are less confident in using. The study provided evidence that students produced more thoughtful and meaningful responses when their audience was their peers rather than the teacher. The author concluded that if she wanted a certain type of thinking from her students she needed to ask for it.

A determining factor in how much readers comprehend and how well writers communicate is their level of knowledge about a topic. Because comprehension and communication are so prior-knowledge dependent, students with limited backgrounds on a variety of topics have problems comprehending much of what they read and have difficulty communicating in writing. These children need substantial amounts of truly high quality teaching to learn reading and writing. The teaching elements of modeling,explaining, and demonstrating are essential for students acquisition of communication skills (Allington & Cunningham, 1996).

According to Taberski (2000, p.176), "There is a synergy between reading and writing." Reading has the potential to inspire children about the possibilities awaiting them as writers and informs them about the structures and patterns of written language. Because of their reading experiences and written responses, students approach writing with an increased awareness of print, text, and genre.

When students engage in informal writing activities students deepen their thinking while improving their writing fluency. Through journal writing activities, responding to literature, and writing in response to content learning students have many opportunities to practice the craft of writing in authentic and motivating ways. In order to enhance writing fluency, teachers need to create a risk-free classroom environment where pupils have the chance to to experiment and create with written language without fear of judgment (Lenski & Johns, 2000).

Creating a writing community within a classroom involves teachers as well as students taking chances. A teacher who writes with students not only provides an adult role model, but also allows students to witness the complexity of the composing process. The writing teacher must risk using valuable instructional time to talk with and listen to students. It is vital that teachers believe that talking or conferencing is paramount to the success of an effective writing classroom (Parry & Hornsby, 1985).

Similar to Allington and Walmsley's assertion, Fletcher (1999) suggested that there are no quick "shake 'n bake" recipes for making sure that students writing achievement improves. Fletcher continued as follows:

> The only way I know to improve the quality of student writing is to create classrooms where we can do what all writers do - apprentice ourselves to mentor writers, and engage in sustained writing for authentic purposes on a

regular basis. (p.42)

Project Objectives and Processes

Taking into consideration the many strategies available from which to design an effective plan of action to promote change among third and fourth grade language arts underachievers, the researcher concluded the approach would encompass a combination of diverse strategies. The teacher would instruct and engage students in each of the following: writing responses to reading, using the writing process effectively, and collaborating with classmates and the teacher in writing conferences.

> As a result of the use of reader response writing strategies and activities taught by the teacher during the period from September through December 2000, the targeted third and fourth grade students will increase their comprehension of written texts and develop writing fluency by responding to literature in reading-writing journals as measured by a journal writing scale.

In order to accomplish this objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Utilize stories with characters who write in journals and books written in diary or journal form

2. Select reader response journal writing activities.

3. Model and demonstrate each journal writing entry.

4. Select conferencing technique to match individual needs.

5. Collaborate with students on selection of informal writing topics.

6. Assess informal writing with journal writing scale.

> As a result of the use of writing process strategies taught by the teacher during the period from September through December 2000, the targeted third and fourth grade students will increase their ability to write to a formal writing prompt as measured by a local school district writing rubric and teacher observation.

In order to accomplish this objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Utilize books, articles, and stories that model specific writing style.

2. Develop a series of writing activities that match each stage of the writing process used in formal writing.

3. Directly instruct, demonstrate and model each writing activity.

4. Schedule appropriate writing conferences each week.

5. Create an easily read and understood student version of the district writing rubric.

6. Assess formal writing prompts using the district writing rubric.

As a result of the use of conferencing and sharing methods taught by the teacher during the period from September through December 2000, the targeted third and fourth grade students will increase their interest and motivation to complete writing assignments as measured by a student writing survey and student interviews.

In order to accomplish this objective the following processes are necessary:

1. Select and use appropriate writer's workshop, interactive writing, and sharing activities.

2. Create recording instrument to document and schedule conferences.

3. Create a student reading-writing folder to hold writing ideas, artifacts, journal entries, and conference plans.

4. Demonstrate and model appropriate peer conferencing.

5. Assess writing conference effectiveness with student interviews and student writing surveys.

Project Action Plan

SEPTEMBER I. Baseline data collection

A. Obtain parent permission for research

B. Review results of local writing assessments in

students cumulative folders

C. Write weekly entry in Implementation Journal

D. Teacher completes Writing Program Journal

II. Baseline reader response and informal writing

A. Construct student reading-writing portfolios

B. Select and introduce journal and diary books

C. Administer and compile results of journal writing scale assessment

D. Model and demonstrate reader response activities

E. Brainstorm writing topics with students

III. Baseline writing process activities

A. Administer and score formal writing prompt (pretest)

B. Complete Teacher Observation Checklist assessment (pretest)

C. Demonstrate and model planning stage of formal writing

D. Introduce and discuss student version of district writing rubric

IV. Baseline conferencing activities

A. Administer Student Writing Survey (pretest)

B. Complete reading/writing conference schedule and recording document

C. Introduce and conduct student-teacher conferences on reading/writing interests

OCTOBER I. Data collection

A. Review and record assessment results from Sept.

B. Write weekly entry in Implementation Journal

C. Teacher completes Writing Program Journal

II. Reader response and informal journal writing

A. Model and demonstrate buddy journal reader responses entries

B. Students read books and stories with characters who write in journals

C. Students write 3 reader response entries weekly

D. Assess reader response entries weekly with journal writing scale

III. Writing process activities

A. Model and demonstrate planning and drafting stages of formal writing

B. Conference with individual students about formal writing results

C. Students read persuasive writing models in books, articles, and stories

D. Collaboratively write formal essay in interactive writing group

E. Assess interactive writing essay with student version of writing rubric

IV. Conferencing activities

A. Model and demonstrate writer's workshop author's chair

B. Schedule and document weekly individual student-teacher conferences

C. Utilize special issue group conferences as needed

NOVEMBER I. Data Collection

A. Review and record assessment results from Oct.

B. Write weekly entry in Implementation Journal

C. Teacher completes Writing Role Model Survey

II. Reader response and informal journal writing

A. Students self-select nonfiction books

B. Model and demonstrate two-column reader response journal entries

C. Students write 3 reader response entries weekly

D. Assess reader response entries weekly with journal writing rubric

III. Writing process activities

A. Administer and score formal writing prompt

B. Complete Teacher Observation Checklist

C. Demonstrate and model editing stage of formal writing

D. Conference with students about formal writing prompt results

IV. Conferencing activities

A. Model and demonstrate peer group writer's workshop activities

B. Schedule peer group weekly conferences

C. Utilize special issue group conferences

D. Administer Student Writing Survey assessment

E. Interview students after Survey assessment

DECEMBER I. Data collection

A. Review and record assessment results from Nov.

B. Write weekly entry in Implementation Journal

C. Teacher completes Writing Program Journal

II. Reader response and informal writing activities

A. Demonstrate and model literary letter and letter to author reader response journal entries

B. Students sef-select fiction or nonfiction book

C. Students write 3 reader response entries weekly

D. Assess reader response entries with journal writing scale

III. Writing process activities

A. Model and demonstrate the publishing stage of formal writing

B. Collaboratively write formal essay in interactive writing group

C. Assess interactive writing essay with student version of writing rubric

D. Students select and prepare text for publication

IV. Conferenceing activities

A. Schedule individual student-teacher conferences

B. Utilize special issue conference groups

C. Students select writer's workshop strategy to

share published writing

JANUARY I. Data collection

A. Compile results of reader response scales

B. Compile results of formal writing rubrics

C. Compile results of Student Writing Surveys

D. Review entries in Writing Program Journal

E. Write weekly entry in Implementation Journal

II. Reader response and informal writing activities

A. Students self-select reader response entries

B. Assess final reader response entries with journal writing scale

C. Conclude reader response interventions

D. Students write plus/minus/interesting reflections on intervention activities

III. Writing process activities

A. Administer and score formal writing prompt (posttest)

B. Complete Teacher Observation Checklist

C. Conference with individual students about formal writing prompt results

IV. Conferencing activities

A. Administer and score Student Writing Survey

B. Interview students after Survey assessment

C. Conclude reader response student-teacher conferences

D. Conference with small groups on reactions to interventions

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the student writing process intervention, the school district writing rubric and teacher observation will document any measurable improvement in students' formal writing achievement. In addition, a reader response journal writing scale will identify any improvement in student writing fluency, reading comprehension, and assignment completion rates. Student-teacher conferences, student writing surveys, and informal student interviews will provide subjective evidence of the intervention's effectiveness in improving student interest and motivation during writing activities. Teacher's writing program and role model surveys will assist the teacher in monitoring instructional practices.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

Students in the targeted third/fourth grade classroom demonstrated inconsistencies in the quality of their expressive writing which interfered with their success in school. Evidence for the existence of the problem included student writing journals, district assessments, and teacher observations. An intervention plan designed to improve the quality of students' informal and formal writing products was developed and implemented to address the inconsistencies.

Prior to the intervention implementation, the writing process was frequently taught as segmented skills in language arts. Spelling, grammar, and English usage were often taught as separate, independent entities and rarely integrated into the composition process. With little evidence of explicit modeling instruction, many of the students appeared to struggle with the transfer of these skills into their writing tasks.

Pre-intervention writing assignments often seemed unrelated to reading themes or content area studies. Writing topics were usually teacher generated, graded with several cursory comments from the teacher, and returned to the student for revision and

preparation for publication. Feedback to students on their writing efforts often appeared incidental and usually was restricted to comments about English conventions and spelling errors. Seemingly unrelated to a curriculum context and administered as isolated writing events, students were required to complete several formal writing prompts throughout the school year. The results of these on-demand writing tasks were one section of a district competency promotion process.

Perhaps in response to the pressures of the district's "high-stakes" formal writing events, many of the building's teachers began teaching the writing process as a linear, formulated series of steps. The planning, drafting, editing, and revising steps of the writing process followed a mechanical, lock-step method of instruction. Students that mastered the formula frequently met the standards of the district writing rubric while those who had not yet mastered the skills performed below the standards.

Prior to the intervention, student survey results indicated that over three-fourths of the class did not like writing and were unsure about writing in journals or diaries. A large majority of students, however, did indicate that they wanted to choose what they wrote about, wanted to write with a partner, and wanted to use computers in their writing. Survey results also suggested that students did not like writing about the books they had read or sharing their writing in front of the whole class.

The focus of this project was to improve the quality and consistency of students' skill in formal and informal writing

activities. The teacher instructed and engaged students in writing responses to literature selections, using the writing process effectively, and collaborating with classmates and the teacher in writing conferences. The effects of the intervention were measured using a journal writing scale, teacher observations, and a school district writing rubric. Students' interest and motivation in completing composition assignments was evaluated using a student writing survey and individual interviews. The research project was conducted from September 2000 through January 2001.

In preparation for the implementation of the intervention plan, fictional and nonfictional reading texts were selected for the first eight weeks. Additionally, student writing samples from previous grades were reviewed in students' cumulative folders. Informal journal writing activities were selected and reviewed in preparation for baseline data collection, and a reading-writing conference schedule for individual pupils was developed.

Initial journal writing entries in the intervention were reader responses to a high-interest literature text. Responses were briefly modeled by the teacher and intentionally loosely structured to encourage students' fluency of ideas during the activity. The journal writing scale was introduced to the class and demonstrated by using a student's reader response from the previous week. In preparation for organizing their reading and writing products during the intervention, students constructed reading/writing portfolios.

A baseline formal expository writing prompt and a student

writing survey were administered during the beginning weeks of the intervention. The teacher conducted writing process observations during the formal writing activity. The district writing rubric was reviewed with the class, and a sample composition was evaluated with the rubric. Following the informal and formal writing assignments, individual writing conferences were conducted with each student. Conference discussions focused on student interests, journal entry scores, and formal writing results.

Preliminary direct instruction sessions included modeling and demonstrations of the planning step in the writing process. Multiple graphic organizers, story webs, and thinking maps were presented and practiced by the class.

The first structured reader response writing activity included students' reading diaries and journal-style books and responding to them in "buddy" journal entries.(Appendix E) In buddy journals, students chose a friend in the class and wrote reciprocally to each other on a given topic from the literature selection. Students completed three buddy journal entries each week for one month. Journal writing scale scores for the entries were reported to students each week.

Student-teacher writing conferences concentrated on the content of students' buddy journal entries. Two small group conferences were convened to discuss and demonstrate appropriate sentence grammar in pupils' journals. During the first month of the intervention plan, the teacher introduced and modeled a writer's workshop sharing activity called the author's chair.

Students were afforded many opportunities to share their writing in the author's chair in small groups on a volunteer basis.

In conjunction with their reading activity, students collaborated with the teacher in an interactive writing process lesson. Students viewed and read samples of high-scoring formal compositions prior to collaborating on the group essay. Students then contributed their ideas in the planning, drafting, and revising steps of a formal expository composition. After completing the essay, students and the teacher evaluated the final product using the district writing rubric.

Succeeding journal writing activities included students responding to self-selected nonfiction books in two-column journal entries.(Appendix F) Pupils selected and wrote short passages or specific quotations from their literature texts in the left column and wrote their reactions or thoughts regarding the passages in the right column. The two-column journal entries for the month were evaluated using the journal writing scale and the results were shared with individual students during student-teacher conferences.

In an effort to assess the effects of the writing process direct instruction sessions, a mid-project formal writing prompt was administered. As students composed their essays, the teacher completed a writing process observation checklist. Compilation of the writing prompt results provided evidence as to which steps in the process were being used effectively by the students and which steps demonstrated need of further instruction.

Successive explicit instruction and conference lessons concentrated on the editing step of the writing process. Students either participated in collaborative writing or peer group conference activities that focused on editing techniques. Both instructional activities were modeled and demonstrated prior to their implementation. Another mid-project task was the completion and compilation of the Student Writing Surveys.

During December, students self-selected either fiction or nonfiction trade books as sources for reader response journal entries. After modeling and demonstrating of the journal formats, pupils wrote literary letters and letters to the author. Companion instructional activities included explicit instruction in letter writing structures and conventions. Students completed a minimum of three letters and collaborated with peers on the selection of one letter for publication. Students continued revisions and refinements of their letters through peer review and individual conferences with the teacher.

Subsequent direct instruction tasks included students writing an interactive essay using all the steps in the writing process. Pupils prepared their essay for publication using computer software. Using the district writing rubric, students collaborated on the evaluation of their final product and selected the writer's workshop strategy they would use to share their writing.

Individual student-teacher conferences concentrated on students letter writing and publishing concerns. Students verbally reflected on their participation in the collaborative essay

writing activities and their roles in the peer group review process. The teacher reviewed their journal writing scale scores and writing rubric scores during the individual conferences.

During the final weeks of the intervention, students self-selected the literature and reader response formats they would use in their journals. The concluding journal entries included students' reflecting on what they liked, disliked, and found interesting during the intervention project. These journal entries were discussed during individual interviews and conference sessions. A posttest formal writing prompt was administered, and the teacher observation checklist was completed. The final student activity was the completion of the student writing survey.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Analysis of posttest formal writing results suggested moderate improvement in students' expressive writing performance. Pre-intervention score data indicated that one student was meeting district writing standards while posttest results indicated 6, or 38% per cent, of the 16 students were meeting the standards. Another indicator of the interventions' modest success was two students improving their performance level scores from the academic warning level to the below standards performance level.

Further data analysis revealed that 50%, or 8 students, remained in the same performance range as they did prior to the project's interventions. In some cases, students' scores improved by two or three points but were insufficient enough to elevate their scores to the next higher level. The effects of the

intervention strategies on these eight students' formal writing performance may be considered minimal.

Table 3

Number of Students Engaged in Writing Process Stages and Percent Change from Sept.'00 to Jan.'01

Writing Process Stages	Number of Students Sept.	Jan.	Percent Increase from Sept.to Jan.
Planning	11	12	6%
Drafting	13	16	19%
Editing	2	10	50%
Revision	3	8	31%
Sharing/publishing	5	12	44%

n= 16

As indicated in Table 3, data collected during the teacher's observations of formal writing events also suggested modest gains in students' use of the writing process steps. All of the students meeting the grade level expectations used all of the steps of the process. Although only one more pupil engaged in the planning step, it translated to three-fourths of the class using some form of the planning step. Additionally, all 16 observed students were engaged in writing or drafting about the assigned topic during the prompt. Although there was variance in writing sufficiency, all members of the class appeared to comprehend and address the writing task.

According to the teacher's observations, students demonstrated measurable improvement in the editing, revising, and

publishing steps of the writing process showed measurable improvements. Ten of the class' compositions showed evidence that students had made editorial changes in their posttest writing while only two students had attempted changes in the pretest prompt. Substitutions, deletions, and additions were evident in three students' papers during the pretest while eight members of the class made revisions in their posttest compositions. Three-fourths of the class was willing to share or publish their writing products during post intervention activities while five students were willing to share prior to the interventions. As a result of observations during the editing, revising, and sharing steps, the teacher noted that more students were rereading and making changes to their first drafts than they were prior to the interventions.

Results from the formal writing prompts and teacher observations suggested a positive correlation between the explicit instruction of the writing process steps and students' performance level scores. As previously noted, all the students meeting the standards utilized all the steps of the writing process. The two pupils who moved from the academic warning to below standards levels utilized parts of the writing process steps. Conversely, the majority, 63% of the class, were not meeting the district standards for basic grade level writing. The observations and performance data may indicate that many students were experiencing difficulty transferring the skills and knowledge of the writing process to actual writing events.

Informal journal writing scale scores displayed in Table 4

indicate an improvement in students' writing skills and fluency. Using the journal writing scale, 32 journal entries were evaluated prior to the project and 32 different entries were scored at the conclusion of the interventions. Scale data suggested that the criteria showing the most improvement were writing a sufficient amount, staying on the topic, and using appropriate conventions. The number of student journal entries that met the "Definitely" criteria in these three areas increased over 40% during the interventions. Explicit instruction, multiple opportunities to practice strategies, and the reader response formats may have contributed to the increases in these informal scale scores.

Table 4

Journal Writing Scale Scores from Sept.'00 and Jan.'01

Scale Criteria	Number of Students at Scale Scores					
	Definitely		Partially		Minimally	
	Sept.	Jan.	Sept.	Jan.	Sept.	Jan.
Written sufficient amount	4	22	12	3	16	8
Written to topic	8	22	12	3	12	6
Acceptable conventions	0	13	4	12	28	7
Within time limit	18	28	4	0	10	5
Took chances	0	11	12	12	20	12
Personally engaged	2	12	18	3	12	7

n= 32

Although the majority of journal entries were turned in on time, the scale scores indicated less improvement in students' taking chances or being personally engaged with their writing

assignments. The stringent structured format of some of the journal tasks and a lack of personal relevancy may have contributed to the modest growth in these journal criteria areas. Students confided during reading and writing conferences that about 10 weeks into the project they became tired of writing in their journals. Some students characterized the journal writing activities as "boring."

Table 5

Number of Students in Writing Survey Categories and Percent of Change from Sept.'00 to Jan.'01.

Categories	Students Sept.	Jan.	Increase/decrease Sept. to Jan.
Like to write	2	13	69%
Choice of topics	14	16	13%
Write with partner	15	13	-19%
Publish writing	1	9	50%
Real author	2	5	19%
Know audience	9	12	19%
Write in journals	0	11	69%
Write about books	3	9	38%
Share with whole class	1	4	19%
Use computer to write	16	14	-13%

n = 16

Post-intervention student survey results displayed in Table 5 suggested some shifts in pupils' attitudes and beliefs toward writing tasks. Among the most notable changes was the increased

number of students who expressed interest in completing various writing tasks. Students also appeared to understand the publishing process more thoroughly as demonstrated by the increased number of students in this category. Ironically, students expressed displeasure with the journal writing activities during the implementation period, while post-intervention surveys indicated the same majority of students stated they liked writing in journals. A possible cause for this reversal of attitudes may have been a two-week respite from the required journal entries. Although six more students indicated an interest in writing about the books they read, the increase translated into only 55% of the students expressing interest in this category.

According to post-intervention student survey data, there were marginal changes in students' attitudes about writing with partners, choosing their writing topics, and using computers to assist in the writing tasks. More than 80% of the students reported a positive interest in these three categories. Negative results were evident in students' attitudes concerning reading their writing products in front of the entire class. Post-intervention interviews revealed many students remained reluctant to share their writing with their peers because of the fear of embarrassment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal of implementing the action plan was the improvement of elementary school students' expressive writing skills and fluency. Based on the presentation and analysis of the data, the students in the targeted classroom showed modest improvement in formal and informal writing activities. The effects of the reader

response journal interventions appeared to have the most positive impact on the 16 students. The modeling and direct instruction of the writing process steps elicited the desired outcomes for three-fourths of the students but minimally impacted one-fourth of the students. Quantifying the effects of the student-teacher conferences was problematic, but students' self-reports and survey results suggested a positive relationship between conversations about writing and writing performance.

Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of the writing process, teachers and students are confronted with imposing decisions related to appropriate and effective instructional practices. Teachers need to acknowledge and recognize that no single instructional approach or method will provide or elicit the skills necessary for proficient writing. The research-based journal writing activities selected for this project appeared to meet the developmental needs of the majority of the students. Results of the journal interventions, however, demonstrated that inconsistencies existed in the responses of many students. When the students' concentration focused on the grammar and mechanical conventions in their writing assignments, their ability to attend and sufficiently address the topic appeared to suffer. Similar results were observed during the formal writing activities. When students concentrated on organizational strategies, such as planning or editing their compositions, they frequently failed to provide sufficient support or elaboration in their writing. Decisions regarding the selection of appropriate strategies and

the timing of their implementation appear to be influential factors in the development of successful writers.

Another element of the action plan that may have affected the success of the project was the relevancy of the tasks students completed. Conversations with underachieving students during student-teacher conferences suggested that they did not understand the purpose for their journal writing. The implication that students did not feel they were writing for authentic purposes or audiences may have impacted the eventual overall success of the project. Many students also complained that they were tired of writing in their journals by the tenth week of the project. The district formal writing prompts seemingly lacked relevancy for many of the pupils as well. As an example, one of the district writing prompts asked students to write about an interesting place they visited during a family vacation. Ten of the 16 interviewed students stated that they had not been out of the city for several years and found difficulty addressing the concepts and intentions of the prompt. The selection of motivating and appropriate writing topics appears to impact young, developing writers.

The context for the action plan's interventions was the connection and integration of reading and writing skills. Many of the project's activities included students responding to literature passages or trade books in writing. It is difficult to estimate or quantify the impact reading skills and comprehension had on students' written responses. Teacher observations and anecdotal records, however, suggested that many of the project's

most reluctant readers were also some of the project's weakest performing writers. Reading performance levels, however, may not have been a universal or absolute predictor of writing performance in this classroom. The best reader in this project obtained some of the lowest scale and rubric scores, while one of the more underachieving readers had some of the higher writing scores. According to anecdotal reports, both students were active and willing participants in the action plan's writing and reading activities.

Assessing the effects of the project's interventions included a review of the social and academic skills of the students. Cumulative records and standardized test results indicated a range of core academic skills of nearly 5 grade levels. Designing effective instructional strategies to meet this diverse range of abilities may have required more substantial adaptations and modifications than what was originally planned for the interventions. Without specific accommodations the higher and lower functioning students may have become frustrated, disinterested, and disillusioned by many of the project's activities.

The diversity of social skills in the student population was evident in the small group, partner, and whole class instructional sessions. Anecdotal records suggested the impact a core group of four students had on many of the action plan's objectives. This small group frequently resisted participating in journal and formal writing activities, and often disrupted direct instruction

sessions. These recalcitrant behaviors may have contributed to the inconsistent results of the project by focusing the teacher's and students' attentions on classroom management issues rather than instructional strategies to improve student writing.

Results of recent national writing tests and research studies have suggested that many of America's school children write at a "basic" level of performance. While the results are encouraging compared to past results, most educators acknowledge that basic skills may not be sufficient for the exchange of information in a technological age. Knowledgeable others suggest that American students can write at proficient levels with the implementation of research-based instructional practices.

The results of this project yielded similar recommendations and conclusions. While some of the students succeeded in meeting the school district's writing standards, none of the students exceeded the standards at a proficient level. Teachers would benefit from further research with larger populations on the effects of integrating reading and writing in elementary schools. The project's results suggested that researchers need to continue their quest for effective, efficient, and appealing instructional writing strategies for all children.

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Appendices

Appendix A
School District Writing Rubric

Focus

The Focus is more than a thesis statement and/or a listing of subordinate points. This feature examines whether the subject/issue is clear and whether the central purpose is maintained throughout the paper. Multiple positions are focused only if there is an umbrella statement. The writer must maintain a clear position/logic throughout with an effective conclusion. Titles are not considered part of the Focus.

3 - FOCUS p/e

6 * Sets purpose of paper in introduction through either a general thematic introduction or specific preview
* Maintains position/logic throughout
* If previewed, each point is addressed
* Effective closing (may be restatement of points in the introduction)

5 * Subject/position (or issue) is clear, identified by at least an opening statement
* Sufficient Support to maintain subject (cannot be a giant focus)**
* If previewed, each point is addressed
* Maintains position/logic throughout - separate ideas
* Has closing

4 * Subject may be prompt dependent (rely upon the reader's familiarity with the prompt): position (or issue) may require reader inference; writer launches into topic without providing an opening statement
* If previewed may develop fewer or more points than delineated in opening (over-promise or over-deliver)
* Minor Focus drift or lapse in logic (not really separate ideas - repetitious)
* May lack closing

3 * Subject/position (or issue) may lack clarity
* Multiple positions without a unifying umbrella statement
* Off-mode responses NOT serving persuasive/ expository (or issue) purpose
* Lacks sufficiency to demonstrate a developed Focus

2 * Subject/position (or issue) is vague
* Unrelated ideas or major drift from Focus
* May be insufficient writing to determine subject/position can be sustained

1 * Subject/ position (or issue) absent
* Insufficient writing to meet criteria

** Giant focus papers are specifically previewed papers that do not go beyond a 2 in support because they do little more that repeat the previewed points in the paper.

SUPPORT

This feature focuses on the quality of the detail or support illustrating or explaining the reasons and sub-points. The quality of Support depends on its sufficiency , specificity, depth, accuracy and credibility within the writer's framework. Depth can be detected by outlining or diagraming the supporting details. The more subtopics or branches, the greater the depth. There is no required number of supporting points; depth of detail is required for more developed papers. the most developed Support is even or balanced across all points. Word choice enhances specificity.

3 - SUPPORT p/e

6 * Most major points supported with specific detail; some may be developed with more detail than others (not balanced or even)
* Some development of depth
* Word choice may enhance specificity

5 * Some Support developed by specific details (i.e., second-order ideas beyond major point); some may be general
* Attempt to develop depth

4 * Most Support may be general
* May include list of specifics with some extensions
* Little depth

3 * Most Support is general or underdeveloped
* Consists of an unrelated list of specifics with few or no extensions
* Lacks sufficiency to demonstrate developed Support

2 * Attempt at Support is made
* May be confusing, unclear, or redundant/repetitious
* May be insufficient writing to determine that Support can be maintained

1 * Support is absent
* Insufficient writing to show that criteria are met

ORGANIZATION

This feature examines whether the composition exhibits a clear structure or plan of development (beginning, middle, and ending) and whether the points are logically related to each other. Organization has a "vertical" dimension (coherence) indicated by the use of paragraphing and transitions to signal the plan or text structure. Organization also has a "horizontal" dimension (cohesion) evidenced by the connection of one sentence to the next. The writer may employ varied methods to achieve coherence and cohesion (repetition, pronouns, synonyms, parallel structure, connective, and transitions). Sentence variety also contributes to cohesiveness.

3 - ORGANIZATION p/e

6 * Structure is evident
  * Major points are appropriately paragraphed** (single-sentenced opening and closing are acceptable)
  * Coherence and cohesion demonstrated through some appropriate use of devices such as transitions, pronouns, causal linkage, parallel structure, etc.
  * Varied sentence structure produces some cohesion

5 * Structure is evident
  * Most major points are appropriately paragraphed
  * Coherence and some cohesion (sentence to sentence) evident, but may depend on formulaic structure
  * If present, most transitions are appropriate
  * May have minor digressions
  * Varied sentence structure produces some cohesion

4 * Structure is noticeable; the reader may still have to infer it
  * Some structure within paragraphs (i.e., some purposeful ordering of sentences)
  * Some major points are appropriately paragraphed
  * Has some evidence of coherence (paragraph to paragraph), but may depend on formuliac structure
  * If present, transitions may be simplistic or redundant, but not intrusive
  * May have minor digressions

3 * Structure is noticeable, but the reader must work hard to infer it
  * May have major digressions
  * May have inappropriate or intrusive transitions
  * May have little evidence of appropriate paragraphing
  * May have little structure within paragraphs (e.g., lacks purposeful ordering)
  * Lacks sufficiency to demonstrate developed Organization

2 * Confusing
  * Structure may be attempted, but with little success (random presentation of ideas)
  * May be insufficient writing to determine that Organization can be sustained

1 * Very confusing; little or no attempt to structure
* Insufficient writing to meet criteria

** A well-developed one-paragraph paper may receive a 4, 5, or 6

Conventions

Evaluation of the paper's use of conventions should take into account the following:
how seriously the errors interfere with communication, whether the student has control of sentence structure, and the number of errors in relation to how much is written (e.g., three major errors in three sentences is significantly different than three errors in three paragraphs). For the purpose of the ISAT, Conventions scores will be assigned on the basis of a 2 for a "developed" score and a 1 for an "underdeveloped" score. the evaluation of Conventions also takes into account the paper's proximity to a final draft in the writing process. For example, if a student had three weeks to do an assignment with multiple drafts, more stringent criteria may be used in assigning a Conventions score that for an on-demand writing or timed assessment. The ISAT writing sample is scored as a first draft; hence, the plus (2) or minus (1) designation.

3 - CONVENTIONS p/e

2 * Mastery of sentence construction
* Some invented spellings of uncommon words
* Some understanding of basic grammar; not all correct uses of verb/noun agreement
* Some major errors in proportion to the amount written

Major Errors:

Sentence Construction
Incorrect subject/verb agreement
Run-on(s)
Fragment(s)
Omitted words that interfere
Incorrect usage
Incorrect use of common words
Incorrect pronoun reference(s)
Confusing tense shifts

Punctuation/ Capitalization
Omission of initial capitals
Common proper nouns
Lack of or improper ending punctuation
Missing or misplaced apostrophes

Paragraph Format
Using titles to delineate paragraphs
Number paragraphs

Spelling
Misspelled common words (same word misspelled is considered only once)

Minor Errors:

Sentence Construction
Incorrect use of connectors between clauses
Omitted words that do not interfere

Usage
Commas in a series, for opening or clauses
Awkward or odd use of words/phrases but the meaning is still clear
Homonyms - its/it's, there/their, to/too/two

Punctuation/Capitalization
Periods for abbreviations

Paragraph Format
Inconsistent paragraph separation

Spelling
Inventive spellings for unusual or less frequently used words

INTEGRATION

The purpose of this rating is to provide a general evaluation of how clearly the paper achieves the assigned task for a specific grade level. The holistic rating assumes that the effectiveness of the paper depends upon the skill with which the student in a particular grade orchestrates the fundamental features to complete the assignment. The judgment is limited to the combination of features and does not include other factors such as humor, originality, style, or sophistication. It reflects the view that the paper is a total work; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The integration score is not an arithmetic average although it often resembles that. Papers at a 3 or below on Focus, Organization, or at a 1 in Conventions, are considered partially developed. These papers are scored a 3 or below in integration.

3 - INTEGRATION p/e

6 * Fully-developed for grade level
* Clear and purposeful Focus; in-depth Support; lines of reasoning identified and developed coherently and/or cohesively throughout the paper

5 * Developed for grade level
* All features are not equally well developed throughout the paper

4 * Barebones-developed paper for grade level
* Simple and clear, presents nothing more than the essentials
* Limited depth

3 * Partially developed
* Some (or one) of the features are not sufficiently formed, but all are present
* Inference is usually required

2 * Attempts to address the assignment, but only the rudiments of techniques for forming Focus, Support, and Organization can be detected
* Some confusion and/or disjointedness
* May use inappropriate text structure
* May be insufficient writing to determine that the features can be maintained

1 * Does not fulfill the assignment, barely deals with the topic, or does not present most or all of the features
* Insufficient writing to show that criteria are met

Appendix B
Writing Process Teacher Observation Form

Writing Process Observations

Prompt: _____ Date: _____

PLANNING

EVIDENCE	YES	NO	COMMENTS
graphic organizer			
story map			
story web			
outline form			
random notes			
drawing/ pictures			
other			

DRAFTING

EVIDENCE	YES	NO	COMMENTS
opening and closing			
sequential order			
stays on topic			
sufficient amount			
sentences/ paragraphs			
other			

EDITING

EVIDENCE	YES	NO	COMMENTS
reread first draft			
identified parts to change			
word choice / vocabulary			
conventions:			
grammar			
spelling			
mechanics			
other			

REVISION

EVIDENCE	YES	NO	COMMENTS
reread draft(s)			
rewording (substitutions)			
additions and deletions			

rearrangement
used peer/teacher comments
legible handwriting

SHARING / PUBLISHING

EVIDENCE	YES	NO	COMMENTS
read draft to peer / adult			
listened to suggestions			
talked about content first			
talked about conventions last			
prepared text for audience			
peer review of final draft			
other			

Appendix C
Informal Journal Writing Scale

JOURNAL WRITING SCALE

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. Student has written a sufficient amount.

3	2	1
Definitely	Partially	Minimally

2. Student has written about the topic or followed guidelines of assignment.

3	2	1
Definitely	Partially	Minimally

3. Student has used acceptable conventions for the assignment.

3	2	1
Definitely	Partially	Minimally

4. Student completed assignment within time limit.

3	2	1
Definitely	Partially	Minimally

5. Student knows the audience for his/her writing.

3	2	1
Definitely	Partially	Minimally

6. Student took chances. ie. "million dollar words," creative forms, unusual style, ect.

3	2	1
Definitely	Partially	Minimally

7. Student was personally engaged in the writing task.

3	2	1
Definitely	Partially	Minimally

Appendix D
Student Writing Survey

STUDENT WRITING SURVEY

1. I like to write.
   yes not sure no

2. I like to choose what I write about.
   yes not sure no

3. I like having a writing partner.
   yes not sure no

4. I like to publish my writing.
   yes not sure no

5. I am a real author.
   yes not sure no

6. My friends and family like reading my writing.
   yes not sure no

7. I like writing in journals and/or diaries.
   yes not sure no

8. I like to write about the books I've read.
   yes not sure no

9. I like to read my writing in front of the whole class.
   yes not sure no

10. I like using the computer to write.
    yes not sure no

Appendix E
Reader Response: "Buddy" Journal Entry

Book: *Stone Fox* by John Reynolds Gardiner Reynolds
Topic: Write your feelings about the following characters: Grandfather, Little Willy, and Searchlight

---

To: Cindy

How do you like grandfather?
I realy think he was funny.
Do you think he is gonna die?
I hope not.
The old dr. said his not going too.

From: Moriah

To: Moriah

I hope he doesn't die ether.
My mom died and I didn't like it.
It not funny when people die.
Grandfather should go to a hospital to beter.
Willy need to take grandfather to see docter.
Willy is dumb!

From: Cindy

To: Cindy

I don't think Willy is stupid.
He was doing it right for his grandpa
Willy is just a dumb boy!
I really like the dog Searchlight.
He is smart and strong cause he pulled the plowe when they got the potatos.

From: Moriah

Note: Transcribed, unedited, from original journal entries

Appendix F
Reader Response: Two-Column Journal Entry

Book: *Strega Nona's Magic Lesson* by Tommie de Paola
Topic: Write what you thought about when you read each of these passages.

PASSAGES	REACTIONS **
"Mamma mia!" said Big Anthony. I forgot to mix the dough. I won't rise in time. Ah! I know. The yeast makes the dough rise! I'll just put in a lot more of that , and the dough will rise much faster!"	I think Big Anthony will get in big trouble. The stuff he put in made a real big mess. i think his boss will fierd him cause he rwhened all the stuff they was baken.
"What's the matter, Big Anthony?" asked Signora Rosa. " The baker threw me out. Now I have no job," he answered. "And it's Stregna Nona's fault. I never would have left her house if she had let me learn to be a Srega." "Silly goose," said Signora Rosa. "Whoever heard of a man being a Strega?"	I thought he wood lose his job. He did some bad things at the store. He just blames everybody when he should mind his own busyness. I think his not smart enuf to learn magic. I think boys should do magic to cause Harry Potter can do good magic. Girls always git to do the fun stuff and get spesal stuff.
"Bambolona," said Strega Nona, "I think you are ready now to learn more powerful magic." This is a special book. It is very ancient and contains many magic secrets. Tomorrow we will begin with it." "Oh, Grazie, Strega Nona," said Bambolona. "Me too, Strega Nona?" asked Antonia. "Not yet, Antonia," said Strega Nona. "You have other things to learn."	Big Anthony is relly Antonia. You can see his yellow hair in pitchur. I think Strega Nona knows to cause she wont let him do real magic stuff. I think she knows he wood mess it up. I think Big anthony wants to learn magic so he can get cool stuff without doing no work. Hes lazy and dont want to work. If I could do magic I wood give everybody in my famly something.

** Transcribed, unedited, from original journal entries

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