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safe environment that would promote a positive attitude toward writing,
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self-monitor and evaluate, and a more positive attitude towards the writing
process. (Contains 31 references, and a figure and a table of data.
Appendixes contain student and teacher questionnaires, the writing rubric,
peer conferencing sheets for readers and for authors, and an editing
checklist.) (Author/RS)

CS

STRENGTHENING STUDENT WRITING SKILLS

Teresa M. Korbel

An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & Skylight Professional Development

Field-Based Masters Program

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This project was approved by

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Advisor

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Advisor

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Dead, School of Education

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DEDICATION

To my daughter, Jessica, may you always remember that I will never be too busy for you. To my husband, Brian, for his help and support when I was so desperately needed it. To my brother, John, your computer skills and time were appreciated more than you'll ever know. To my father, Robert, who is always willing to listen when I need an ear. To the memory of my mother, Lauren, whose unconditional love and support always inspired me to go after my dreams, this project is lovingly dedicated.

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This action research project describes a program to increase the basic writing ability and improve the attitude of sixth grade students. The targeted classroom was located in a unit district 45 miles northwest of a large metropolitan area. The district's population consists of a large amount of minority students and low-income families. Evidence of the problem was established through a student survey, teacher questionnaire, and student writing samples.

Analysis of probable cause indicated that there are three possible reasons for the lack of basic writing skills. The school environment lacked curriculum, time allotment, and sufficiently trained staff members. No parent model, increased technology and time constraints were daily influences. The students, themselves, contributed to the deficiency due to their lack of interest, low expectation, and fear of difficulty.

A review of the solution strategies, suggested by other experts in the field combined with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the development of a safe environment that would promote a positive attitude toward writing, devoting time daily to provide a multitude of writing experiences, and mini-lessons that would target specific writing weaknesses.

Post intervention data indicated positive gains in writing capabilities, increased ability to self-monitor and evaluate, and a more positive attitude towards the writing process.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students in the targeted sixth grade self-contained classroom exhibit deficiencies in their writing abilities. These deficiencies include organization, supporting details, and quantity of writing. Evidence for the existence of such weaknesses include student surveys, a teacher questionnaire, and a student writing sample.

Immediate Problem Context

The research site is one of five neighborhood elementary buildings that make up the unit district. It houses a total of 898 students, grades first through sixth. All statistics are from either the 1998-1999 report card or principal's secretary interview.

The site employs forty-one certified, self-contained classroom teachers and seventeen additional support staff. The ethnic make up of the staff, in the district, is 94% Caucasian, 5% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. The average teaching experience is 15 years and 45% of the staff members have earned their master's degree. A new principal began managing the site at the beginning of this year.

The building houses the following number of sections per grade level: four first, two and a half bilingual first, four second, one and a half second-third grade split, one first-second grade self-contained learning disabled (LD) class, four third, one and a half bilingual third, four fourth, two fourth grade bilingual, four fifth, two bilingual fifth, one intermediate self-contained LD classrooms and four sixth grades. There are approximately twenty-six students per classroom, with the exception of the special education rooms that have a cap of fifteen.

Space is an ongoing problem. Even though the district converted half of the school's cafeteria into two sixth grade classrooms, the four sixth grade classes have reached their maximum of twenty-nine. Special education rooms have a cap of fifteen and are close to reaching their limit. Students that move into the area are forced to bus to another school in the district because of the overcrowding.

The music room holds twenty-minute general music classes and chorus rehearsals before school. Band rehearsals and sectionals take place in one of the locker rooms, which is also used for storage. The current music teacher resigned two weeks into the school year due to the cramped quarters and lack of ventilation. The school has been unable to hire someone to fill the position.

This site houses the largest number of bilingual classrooms in the district. Two self-contained learning-disabled classrooms exist. Children with diagnosed needs either see an appropriate resource teacher or mainstreaming is facilitated according to their Individual Education Plan (IEP). Social work is provided on an individual and group basis. A speech teacher services students with language and speech problems.

A school health clerk keeps hours between 11:00 and 2:00. She takes care of students that are injured at recess and supervises the taking of medication by those students that require it. The principal and other staff members must act accordingly, when the health clerk is not available. Some responsibilities would be: checking for lice and nits when the problem arises, supervising medication and phoning home when a student is sick or injured.

The site does not employ an art teacher or computer teacher. Classroom teachers are expected to teach these skills, even though they are not provided with a set curriculum or the resources to do so.

The student population is comprised of the following ethnic characteristics: 52.9% Caucasian, 42.8% Hispanic, 3.5% African-American, 0.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.6% Native American. Low-income students account for 44.9% of the population and receive either free or reduced lunch from the state. Limited English Proficiency comprises 30.2% of the population, which is considerably higher than the state's average of 6.4%. The site battles with a truancy problem, often using the local police to ensure attendance. The attendance rate is 94.7%, higher than state figure of 93.6%. The learning environment is also disrupted by the high mobility rate of 21.0%, which is higher than the state's average of 18.1%. Multitudes of For Sale signs throughout the surrounding community reinforce the growing problem of high mobility.

The district adopted a reading series five years ago. The publishers promoted it as a whole language philosophy series, even though it really wasn't. Instead of having one basal for the year, there are five different books that have a theme. Students read and reread one story per week and take a multiple-choice test on Friday. Skill pages

are scattered throughout numerous teaching manuals and there is no scope and sequence of skills. Each story provides the teacher with three journal related topics that may be used. One writing workshop per book, a total of five, is supposed to be ample to teach the students to become fluent writers.

The Surrounding Community

The district is located in a suburban community, 45 miles northwest of a large metropolitan area. The community was originally a summer vacation area. Over the years, it has become an ideal area for those just starting out or with little money to invest in a home. Several new subdivisions have been added within the past five years and future construction will have a largely negative impact on the already overcrowded district.

The community covers a nine square mile area and has a total population of 31,000 residents. The per capita income is $11,677 and the median household income is $33,026. The median property value is $72,300. New home construction is expected to drastically increase the district's enrollment. Two referendums were proposed at the March 2000 election. The district received $27 million in building bonds due to the citizens support. That money is being used for several projects. Eight new classrooms will be added to the Early Education Center by January of 2001. The middle school had a new roof applied over the summer. The district hopes to be awarded with a state construction grant, which will enable them to begin construction on a much needed addition for the high school and middle school.

The district is a unit district that contains a kindergarten center, five neighborhood elementary buildings (1st-6th), a middle school (7th and 8th), and a high school. The district serves approximately 5,400 students. The ethnic characteristics of the district population are as follows: 57.4% Caucasian, 36.8% Hispanic, 4.3% African-American, 1.0% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.5% Native American.

A superintendent, appointed by the School Board eight years ago after serving as the assistant superintendent, manages the unit district. She has an assistant that over-sees curriculum and instruction and a business manager. The School Board is elected by members of the community and experienced great difficulties with contract negotiations and union grievances. The district added an attorney, public relations person, and several assistant principals two years ago, even though the district was financially strapped. The instructional expenditure per pupil is $3,308 and the operating expenditure is $5,612. The district remains on the state's financial watch list due to years of overspending and financial mismanagement.

Since technology is a growing trend in the educational field, the district had a phone system installed in every room that included a voice mail account and a message system that the teachers are suppose to record student assignments. The system is having severe difficulties and many staff members are still unable to record and retrieve messages.

The district also had computers and the internet wired throughout. The administration planned to use the computers for attendance purposes and to record report card grades. Due to the large number of problems with the system, insufficient

staff training, and the lack of support personnel, this plan had to be abandoned. Some rooms in the district still have not been outfitted with this equipment.

The 1998-1999 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) scores fell below the state's average in all areas. The local achievement tests have been discontinued and the district has chosen to administer CBM's (curriculum-based measurements) to evaluate how students are progressing. These were given in the fall of 2000 by support staff to establish a baseline and re-administered in the spring. Results were shared with staff members at the end of the year. The district plans to continue this form of assessment with a small group that will represent each grade level.

Exit criteria tests were developed in 1999 for each grade level. Students must receive a score of 60% or higher in the areas of math, reading and writing in order to pass to the next grade. Those that do not meet this requirement must attend summer school. If the student successfully completes summer school, they will be allowed to pass to the next grade.

In order to prepare for the state's upcoming review process, the district has arranged for each building to form an internal review team to identify and collect data of deficiencies that can be removed before the states arrival. Members of the team visit each classroom with a predetermined checklist and records if the qualifiers were observed or not. After gathering data, the team will determine whether the desired behavior is being met and report to the staff with their findings. Names are not used in the final report, so the process is non-threatening. The final results will determine what items will need to be worked on the following year and new items will be added to replace the goals that are being met.

Each school also consists of a School Improvement Team. It is made up of teachers, the building principal, and parents. It's main objective is to improve instructional methods and to create programs that will raise student achievement. Some of it's successful programs include: School Tutoring Volunteers, monthly spirit assemblies, Eagle Awards, Student of the Month and D.A.R.E. (a drug awareness resistance program that is taught by a local law enforcement officer).

National Context of the Problem

Through the passage of time, man has wanted to better himself and the things around him. The education system is no exception. School reform has always been controversial and with the start of the new millennium, the educational well being of our children has become more imperative. Will they be able to compete with the rest of the world? Some experts think that we should be more technology oriented. Some feel we should be focusing on teaching students how to think creatively and be able to problem solve. Still others say that we should "get back to basics". One of the basics that students are lacking is the ability to write effectively.

Newspaper articles and television news reports inform the public that teachers are failing to educate students. "The press continually reminds us that students can no longer punctuate, use proper grammar, spell correctly or write legibly." (Graves, as cited in Raskin, 1979, p.81) The community gets upset when low test scores are published.

This deficiency is not new, nor is it contained at the elementary level. In 1975, Newsweek ran an article called "Why Johnny Can't Write". It stated that, "If your

children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. And if they are attending elementary school, they are almost certainly not being given the kind of required reading material, much less the writing instruction, that might make it possible for them eventually to write comprehensible English." (Sheils, 1975, p.58)

Although the press continues to paint a dismal picture of students writing capabilities, there is hope for improvement.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The following information was gathered by the researcher documenting the lack

of writing skills at the targeted sixth grade site. This documentation was provided

through the use of student surveys, teacher questionnaires, and student writing

samples.

Student survey

The targeted sixth grade group received a student survey (see Appendix A) from

the researcher at the beginning of the school year. Students were encouraged to

answer honestly and not answer how they think that their teacher would want them to

respond. Out of the twenty-nine students in the class, only two students did not

complete the survey.

According to the survey, four of the twenty-seven students enjoyed writing,

twenty students liked writing occasionally, and three disliked writing. The results of the

survey also revealed that only five of the students felt that they were good writers. The

children were also asked about their prior writing experiences. Most were not required

to create a story for the district's Young Author Program and very few were required to

write daily in a class journal. The results of the survey also revealed that many students were not exposed to the modeling of writing in their homes. Four children remembered seeing a member of their household write. When asked what was written, only one student could recall.

Staff questionnaire

Evidence of the problem was further supported by the results of the staff questionnaire (see Appendix B). The classroom teachers at the targeted site were given the questionnaire in September. A total of forty questionnaires were distributed. Participants were asked to fill in all sections of the survey and to return it to the researcher by the end of the week. The results of the survey revealed that 82% of the teachers felt that their students exhibited deficiencies in writing abilities. 73% of the staff indicated that the writing curriculum provided by the district was inadequate to provide students with the necessary writing skills. Supplemental materials were reportedly used by 91% of the teachers.

Teachers at the targeted site indicated the use of various types of teaching strategies and activities to promote writing skills. The following are the ones that were most frequently utilized:

1. Story starters.

2. Picture cues

3. Brainstorming

4. Story maps

5. Grammar lessons

When asked about their ability to teach writing, 73% of the participants felt comfortable with this area of the curriculum. The staff participants were also asked about their educational background in the area of writing. Only two classroom teachers had taken a course in writing instruction as an undergraduate and four had taken a graduate level course. The survey results indicated that the district provided a small number of staff, four, with a workshop in power writing several years ago. Many of the staff exhibited an interest in receiving training in Power Writing, according to the comment section that was provided.

It appears that at the targeted site the predominant causes for the students' lack of writing skills were an inadequate writing curriculum, insufficient teacher training and a lack of time devoted to this subject.

Student writing sample

Students were provided with a fictitious character and instructed to create a story using it as the main character. Class time was given and a final copy of the story was collected at the end of the week. Samples of the students work suggests that the problem of inadequate writing skills do exist. Poor spelling, simple sentences, and lack of details are only a few of the problems that were evident. (see Figure 1)

Pre-intervention Rubric Scores
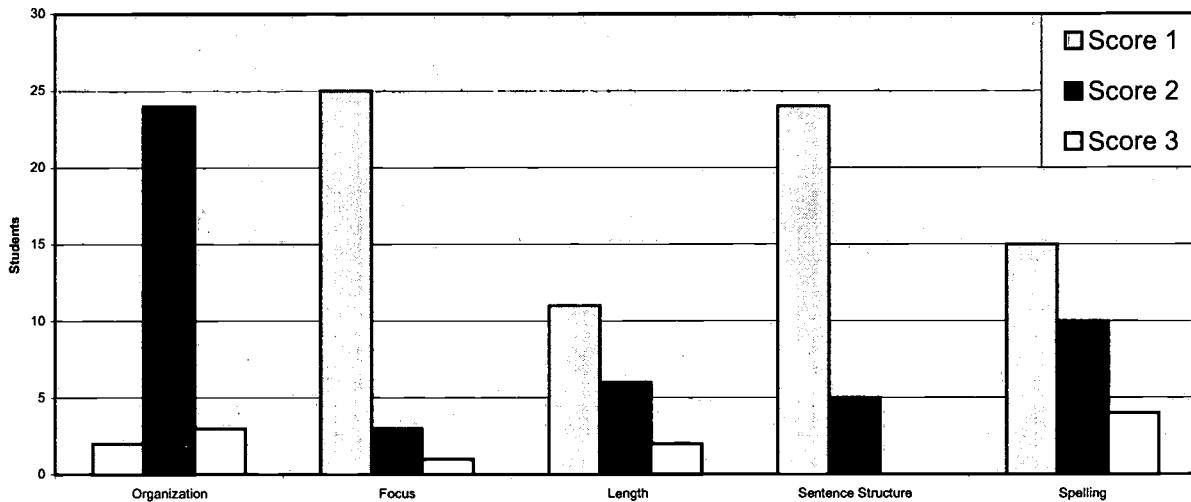
Figure 1. Rubric criteria and breakdown scores of the targeted class in September

Probable Causes

Why are students not writing well? The reasons are endless according to

Wiener. Less writing is done at home, so the child in not experiencing this skill before

coming to school. Instead of mom writing a letter to a loved one, she picks up the

phone and calls them or electronically mails a note from the computer. Adults are so

busy with work and family obligations there is little, if any time to keep a journal. Thank

you cards seem to be a thing of the past. Students spend numerous hours watching

television and playing video games. (Wiener, 1990)

Education has also changed. Some schools have adopted a whole language

curriculum and little time is allotted for the learning of writing. Learning to write well

requires time (Arter, 2000). Students are not being given the opportunity to write. With

the resurgence of workbooks and worksheets as valuable learning tools, students are

only given a small blank to give an answer, which makes it very difficult to write an in-depth, creative answer (Lamme, 1987).

Insufficient teacher training plays a key role in the problem. Lucy Calkins researched the situation and found that the university "offered a total of 169 courses on reading, but no courses on teaching writing." (1997, p.167) Chapman also supports the lack of teacher preparation. "Elementary teachers for the most part, have never received instruction in teaching writing beyond grammar, spelling and the Palmer method of penmanship." (Chapman, 1990)

According to Shaughnessy (as cited in McAlexander, 1993) there are four interrelated reasons for student underachievement in writing:

1. A more universal kind of inexperience among students

2. Students' lack of interest in reading and writing

3. The influence of biochemical irregularities

4. The role of learning disabilities

Student perception and attitude have a big affect on their ability to write well also. Some students have had unpleasant writing experiences in the past and some "find the process too difficult". (Wiener, 1990, p.9) Other students lack the courage to try to write well because they are afraid that they will make a mistake (Minot, Gamble, 1991). Still others just lack the interest. (McAlexander, 1993) For several reasons, writing ability is on the decline.

As one of the basics, we should be concerned with the lack of ability to write clearly. Not only for it's own sake, but for the many benefits that writing provides. Writing helps a child communicate. Children are able to develop self-concept, through

journal writing. Writing provides a productive escape for emotions. Writing helps us to

sort our thoughts and be more effective decision makers. Not only does the process

require active participation, but it helps the writer develop a longer attention span

(Lamme, 1987).

In conclusion, there are several complex reasons for the decline in writing skills.

Fortunately, there are solutions to the problem.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed several solutions to improving the writing skills of the students. These solutions included: developing a positive attitude towards writing, providing multitudes of writing experiences, and developing lessons that will target specific writing weaknesses.

Creating a writing community within the classroom

Writing is a multi-faceted, complex activity that requires the participant to incorporate many levels of thinking and manipulation of information but children have an innate desire to do so. "Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, 'I am.'" (Graves, 1983, p.3)

When asked to write in school, Taylor (1970) observed young students to be enthusiastic and had no difficulty in selecting a topic to write about. Older students, on the other hand, struggled with the process and often felt that they had nothing to say. Why this change in attitude?

All teachers experience student apprehension to writing at one time or another. (Reeves, 1997) Motivation and success complement one another, according to Burns (1999). Whatever a student does poorly, or believes they do poorly, will be avoided. Thus, if students do not think they are good at writing, they will not choose to write, and become less capable because of avoiding the experience. "Poor writers fear making mistakes." (Temple, Gillet, 1984, p.295) What kind of program will give students the confidence and skill necessary to be successful?

"What constitutes a good writing program is a question that all teachers must consider." (Robb, 1994, p.118) There are many theories and techniques that have been developed over the years and are readily available, but the first thing that needs to be addressed is the students' attitude toward writing.

A safe place, for students to express themselves through writing, is the first thing teachers need to provide. The classroom should become a "community of authors, a supportive and cooperative relationship among students and teacher that occurs when writers explore possible topics, try out ideas, and struggle together to create." (Burns, Row, Ross, 1987 p.392)

Stewig (1990) described an approach that began in the 1920's, where the teacher's main objective was to draw out the child's writing ability. This philosophy's main tenants were: all children can write, teachers must supply a supportive atmosphere and topics, and mechanics and editing took a back seat to teacher approval and acceptance. To increase the students' comfort level in regards to writing and the amount that is generated, this approach is implemented in the form of journal writing.

The main focus is to get the ideas onto the paper. Students are not penalized for incorrect spelling, poor sentence structure, or lack of indentation.

Temple and Gillet also support the idea of concentration on what the reluctant writer is doing well. The teacher needs to "develop as sharp an eye for the positive as for the negative." (1984, p.295) Using a green marker to highlight well-written sentences, offering words of praise and encouragement and keeping suggestions to improve that which has been constructed to a minimum will foster self-confidence in the reluctant writer.

Providing students with various writing experiences

Writing experts like Judith Newman (1984) believe that learning written language is similar to children's acquisition of oral language. It is crucial for the writer to learn by doing, to interact with the printed word, and "to explore ideas and the writing process without restriction." (p.70)

Because poor writers do their best to avoid writing, the teacher needs to make writing "so necessary and so ordinary a process that the influent writer can't avoid it." (p.297) This includes making it a part of the entire curriculum. Student learning in science, social studies, and even math can benefit from the inclusion of writing.

Another prevalent belief is that teachers should focus on the mechanics of writing: spelling, punctuation and sentence structure, to create good writers. This method has recently increased in popularity due to pressures of concentrating on the three R's. (Stewig, 1990)

Many schools depend on a language arts text to produce competent writers but this isn't enough. According to Isaccson (1987) most language arts text books do not

focus on the entire writing process. They often leave out activities on reviewing and revising altogether, which takes away some fundamental steps of the writing experience.

Burns believes that "the teacher who has a wide repertoire of strategies can coordinate and intermingle modes of instruction to teach students to enjoy being authors and produce coherent pieces of writing." (Burns, 1999, p.232)

Primary teachers make it a practice to surround their students with a print rich environment. Items are labeled, the class creates stories together, and books are available to the students. This practice is beneficial to older students also. Combourne (1988) supports this practice by suggesting that teachers flood the walls with useful charts that can be used frequently by the students. Charts, word walls, and posters provide visual stimulation and may inspire students with topics to write about, styles they may want to experiment with or an idea when they have reached an impasse.

Another beneficial practice is to include children's literature and read aloud to the curriculum. Reading, whether by the student or by the teacher provides vicarious learning, according to Katie Wood Ray (1999). It helps students learn new vocabulary, spelling, and author style. Reading also gives students a wider knowledge base to draw upon when they are required to write something of their own. Read aloud provides students with a framework of story, allows them to experience the emotion an author brings to their audience, and can provide motivation to create.

Even if a teacher doesn't feel that they are writing experts, teachers still need to model, according to Graves (1983). Cullinan (1993) and Gunning (1998) also address

the importance of modeling. Modeling demonstrates the commonalties of all writers and helps teachers understand their own writing.

Regie Routman (1991) refers to this technique as writing aloud. She states that it is a "powerful modeling technique at any grade level for getting students' attention and demonstrating various aspects of writing." (p.51) It also allows the writer/teacher to verbalize what is being thought while writing occurs and about the technical aspects of writing such as format, word choice, and spacing. Some believe that modeling is a one-time occurrence. But this is far from the truth. Demonstration or modeling needs to occur repetitively. Students need to see the process first hand and know the struggle that occurs while drafting a piece of writing.

Daily writing in a "non-threatening, practice-like atmosphere" (Reeves, 1997, p.60) allows students to comprehend that writing is a process that requires time and practice. (Robb, 1994) (Reeves, 1997) "By involving your students in authentic communication situations, you will teach them to value writing as an important communication tool..." (Sunflower, 1993, p.7)

In order to provide a multitude of writing experiences other approaches must also be used. Story starters or leads supply students with a focus when writing. Graves (1983) advocates the use of self selected topics for student writers. His rationale being that research shows that significant growth occurs when writers learn to choose topics for themselves due to the sense of ownership that occurs. Again, one must not neglect the opportunity to write in other areas of the curriculum. Most students attend school and learn to write, but teachers would do them a disservice if they did not teach them to

write to learn. In whatever scenario teachers must make time daily, in order to give students the opportunity they need to practice the craft of writing.

"One global grade is rarely useful for responding to the various aspects of content and mechanics in a paper." (Temple, Gillet, 1984, p.294) In order to stay focused on the process and how the writer is growing, teachers need to use alternative forms of assessment, such as portfolios and rubrics.

Portfolios have been used for many years in various fields to show a holistic picture of growth but many teachers still resist using them due to lack of training and knowledge of their purpose.

D'Aoust, as cited in Yancey (1992), discusses the use of both process and exemplary portfolios in the classroom. Everything that students write are housed in a manila folder. When a student chooses a piece to reflect on, that work is moved to a colored folder that is contained within the manila folder. The process portfolios will provide various samples and products produced throughout the intervention, while the exemplary portfolio will provide the students an opportunity to judge, choose and reflect on what they think are their best pieces of work.

Kay Burke (1999) also advocates the use of portfolios, but reminds the reader that, "A portfolio without reflection is a notebook of stuff!" (p.70) Reflection is not an easy process for most students.

Burke suggests three different strategies that will promote meta-cognitive thinking about student work:

1. Labeling by simply attaching a sticky note with a label on a selected pieces of work.

2. Stem questions provide a prompt or a direction for the student to work towards, i.e.. This piece was a huge stretch for me because. . .

3. Mirror pages are set up so that the chosen artifact is on one side and a description/reflection is on the other. (1999)

D'Aoust believes that the use of reflection "enables a writer to celebrate her or his strengths as well as identify areas to be developed." (as cited in Yancey, 1992, p.43) Eventually its usage will lead students to become self-evaluators and, ultimately, more responsible for their own learning.

Developing the necessary skills

Creating a conducive environment and giving varied assignments is not enough. "The greatest writing growth happens when students write frequently, and a writing convention is taught when a specific need for it arises." (Hughes, 1994, p.39)

Students are not born with the necessary skills to become good writers. They need to develop them to grow as writers and as learners. Teachers need to "demonstrate and discuss these strategies that can help writers break the 'blank paper barrier' and get started with first drafts" (Robb, 1994, p.114)

Mini-lessons on various writing skills give struggling writers more tools and strategies to help them through the process. Lessons need to focus on where the students are as writers. Robb suggests keeping an error list. "Error lists are a treasure box of possible mini-lessons that reflect children's development and experiences of language." (Robb, 1994, p.117) Routman supports the need for teaching skills but reminds teachers that the skills need to taught in authentic context. For example, if the use of quotation marks is a problem, create an overhead from one of the willing students who exhibit this deficiency and demonstrate where, why, and how to use quotation marks. Students may then return to their paper and correct what needs to be corrected. (1996)

Because poor writers have a tendency not to plan, focusing on prewriting strategies such as, brainstorming, graphic organizers, and story maps would be highly beneficial.

O'Brien-Palmer discusses several helpful prewriting activities. Having students keep an idea list and learning how to brainstorm increases their ability to focus on a topic when given time to write. Also preplanning with O'Brien-Palmer's 4 Square W's allows the writer to focus on the who, what, where, and when of their story and allows less chance of forgetting one of those important aspects. Writers can either use words or illustrations to organize their thoughts before drafting. (1992)

Teachers also need to give students ample opportunity to practice the art of writing. Issacson (1987) discussed a study that was conducted between British children and children in the United States. The researcher found that British children spent 9.5

hours per week writing. American students only averaged 1.5 hours per week, while some classes were composing as little as 1.5 hours per month.

Time must be made daily for children to write because writing takes time and longer pieces require even more time. According to Cunningham and Allington, "The opportunity to write daily is especially critical for children who come from homes where they have few opportunities to see adults write or to actually write themselves." (1999, p.86)

Graham and Harris also support the use of daily writing. They suggest that children spend forty-five to sixty minutes per day either planning, drafting, or revising what they are writing. (1997) Graves recommends allowing sixty minutes per day. (1991)

Sharing is an essential part of the writing program. Hughes (1994) suggests that it affirms the writer. It also "demonstrates and improves the writer's ability to talk about language." (p.50) Routman also supports the use of sharing, believing that it promotes self-esteem and allows the child a chance to show off what they have created. (1991)

Revision is the most neglected step in the writing process but it remains one of the most important. "Revision clarifies and refines, and during that process the writer assumes the dual role of writer and reader. Tedium and frustration often accompany revision, yet shaping also brings great rewards as the words and images coalesce with the writer's inner vision." (Robb, 1994, p.114)

In order to promote self-confidence and reliance while revising, Cullinan (1993) encourages students to work together in peer conferences. "Editing checklists for peer conferences can be provided as guides to the types of non-judgmental questions and

prompts students should ask themselves and one another." (p.57) Cooperative

activities, such as peer conferencing, is a necessity. Working with other students allows

the writer to get immediate feedback from an audience and supports the reading/writing

connection.

The editing process focuses on the mechanical errors. Some experts believe

that this is an overwhelming step in the writing process and students should be required

to focus on particular aspects at first. Cullinan (1993) suggests providing students with

a checklist as a reminder of what they should be looking for. (see Appendix F)

Gunning (1998) recommends using a nuemonic -SCOPE. The letters stand for:

Spelling
Capitalization
Order
Punctuation
Express complete thought

Traditionally rubrics are used as an evaluative tool. Using it before and after the

implementation of the intervention will show the amount of student progress that has

occurred and how successful the plan was for improving writing skills.

Some experts, such as Mary Rose (2000), believe that rubrics can serve another

purpose, motivation. Because a rubric clearly shows how student work is being

assessed, giving the rubric to the students in advance would allow them to self-assess

their work and focus on the areas that they are having difficulties with.

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of the implemented activities to create more proficient writers, during

the period of September 2000 to December 2000, the targeted sixth graders will

improve their fluency, mechanics, and attitude towards writing. Their progress will be measured by a review of student portfolios, a teacher-constructed writing rubric, and a post student survey.

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

1. Allot twenty to sixty minutes per day for writing.

2. Gather a wide variety of topics for students to write about.

3. Develop lesson plans that will provide students with the skill to improve their writing.

4. Decide what type of container portfolios will be kept in and how pieces will be selected.

5. Finalize the exact criteria for the writing rubric.

6. Administer the student survey at the beginning and end of the process.

Action Plan for Intervention

The following steps will be taken to implement the intervention:

WEEK ONE

Administer survey - Writing survey will be given to students in the class in order to gain knowledge of prior writing experiences and attitudes. Results of the survey will be tallied on a tally sheet by the researcher.

Collect writing sample - Students will be provided with a writing stem and will be required to turn in a completed story. Stories will be graded using a researcher-made

rubric in order to establish a baseline to measure growth. The criteria includes: organization, focus, length, sentence structure, and spelling.

WEEK TWO THROUGH TWELVE

Daily Journaling - Students will be provided with twenty to thirty minutes of uninterrupted time in order to write in their journals. These journals will not be corrected or given a grade. They will be strictly used to encourage students to write freely and to get their ideas down on paper. Fluency is the main objective. Students will be given a daily writing topic for the first week. Then students will be responsible for writing about whatever topic they choose. The teacher will occasionally assign the class a topic because writing on assigned topics will be a skill that the students will need in the future.

Sharing time - Students will be asked to share their journal entry daily. They may choose to read the entry in its entirety or to share a specific section that they particularly enjoyed. The number of students that are allowed to share will be limited to between four and six. On occasion, when there are numerous students that want to share what they have written, students will participate in a pair share. This is when students pair up and read to each other, instead of aloud to the entire class.

Read aloud - Teacher will read aloud to the targeted sixth grade class on a daily basis. A variety of materials will be used to provide experiences in different genres and exposure to varied vocabulary. Picture books will be used frequently because they can be completed in a single sitting and demonstrate a sense of story in a short amount of time.

Skill days - Will occur twice per week. From the results of the writing rubric and an error list that is kept from student writing assignments, mini-lessons will focus on the aspects that the targeted group is deficient in. Some planned skills activities are: identifying and replacing overused words, sentence combination, showing-not telling, and indenting paragraphs.

Modeling - Teacher/researcher will demonstrate or model various aspects of writing for the targeted group. Some examples are:

1. How to brainstorm.

2. Journaling

3. How to organize using a web.

4. What to do when you are revising.

5. How to use peer conferencing sheets. (see Appendices D and E)

6. Using a rubric to write better.

7. Editing checklists as reminders. (see Appendix F)

8. Writing a reflection.

Portfolios - All of the students' work will be kept in an individual writing portfolio. This manila folder will be housed in an empty file cabinet. Students will decorate a red folder made from construction paper to keep within the working portfolio. This red folder will be the student's exemplary folder. Two pieces of written work will be selected by the student once a month. At this time, a reflection will be written, stapled to the selected piece and placed in the red folder.

WEEK THIRTEEN

Final writing sample - A final writing sample will be collected from the students. They will be instructed to create a rough draft that will be presented at a peer conference, revised, and edited and a final copy will be turned in. Score writing sample using the researcher made rubric, the writing samples will be scored by the researcher and recorded. The results will be compared with the set of baseline scores to ascertain the effectiveness of the intervention.

Student survey - A final survey will be administered to the students in the targeted sixth grade group. They will be encouraged to answer honestly and not to answer how they think the teacher would want them to. When finished, the surveys will be collected and used to determine whether the intervention was successful at promoting a positive attitude about writing.

In order to assess the effects of the intervention a portfolio will be kept throughout the intervention for each student and reviewed at the end of the process for signs of growth in fluency. In addition, a teacher-made rubric will be utilized and student survey will be administered to monitor change of attitude. (see Appendix C)

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The goals of this action research project were to promote a positive attitude toward writing and increase basic writing skills in the targeted sixth grade class. To achieve these goals numerous strategies were used, such as: fostering a writing community, read aloud, modeling, daily journal writing, content area writing, and peer conferencing. Other components of the project included pre- and post student surveys, a teacher questionnaire, and a pre- and post writing rubric.

The action plan that was outlined in Chapter 3 was followed with the exception of three deviations. The implementation of peer conferencing was delayed due to the lack of written product that was being produced by the students at the beginning of the school year. Students were to begin choosing their own topic to write about, during journal time, the second week of the intervention however this didn't occur until week six due to poor student response. Writing in all the content areas had to be abandoned. The school principal mandated switching to prepare the sixth grade students for a junior high setting and the researcher was required to teach language arts and science instead of all subject areas. Science logs were used to stress the importance of writing.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess the effectiveness of the intervention student writing samples were collected prior to the intervention and evaluated using a rubric that was created by the researcher. These scores gave a baseline of the students' abilities in five areas that were of concern. After the completion of the intervention, a student writing sample was collected from each member of the class and evaluated using the same rubric that had been used earlier.

Table 1 - Comparative Sample of Student Writing Rubric Results

Student	Pre-intervention Score	Post-intervention Score
A	5	10
B	7	9
C	5	11
D	5	12
E	6	10
F	7	15
G	9	14
H	6	14
I	5	12
J	8	15

The results are that the intervention appears to have had a positive effect on all of the criteria in the rubric.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many view writing as a mystique, something only professional writers do. This attitude is far from the truth. Everyone benefits from writing and this researcher believes that the intervention was beneficial to the targeted sixth grade students. However sixth grade is not the ideal starting point for the chosen intervention To be most effective this process should begin in second grade and continue throughout eighth grade. The rationale for starting earlier would be to capture the enthusiasm that young students possess and to foster the creation of ideas and working cooperatively. This researcher also believes that using the intervention would help young students to better develop their skills.

Besides increasing the students' actual writing capabilities, this researcher has seen some interesting residual effects of the intervention. Prior to the intervention, numerous off task behaviors would occur during journal time. These rarely take place now because students know what is expected of them and do not fear being wrong. Also, it was very frustrating to hear students groan and complain whenever a writing assignment was given. Negative vocalizations no longer occur. Students now request read aloud instead of complaining that it is for primary students. Instead of having a long line of students waiting for the teacher to "fix" their stories, students seek each other out for help.

Students have displayed transfer of their peer conferencing skills by requesting its use during testing situations and with other teachers. Students have become more independent and responsible for their own learning, which is the ultimate goal of

teaching. The implementation of this intervention has increased the confidence and

ability level of all who were involved, including the researcher.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT SURVEY

Student Survey

1. Do you like to write? YES_____ NO_____ SOMETIMES___

2. Do you think that you are a good writer? YES_____ NO_____

3. Have you ever written a letter? YES_____ NO_____

4. Did you write a story for Young Author's? YES_____ NO____

5. Were you required to write in a journal everyday last year?
   YES_____ NO_____

6. Did last year's teacher ever give you an assignment to write a story at home? YES_____ NO_____

7. Tell about one of your favorite things that you have written.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

8. Have you seen anyone at your house write? YES____ NO____

   _____
   _____
   _____

9. Do you keep a journal or diary? YES_____ NO_____

10. What kind of writing materials do you have at home? Please list.

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

APPENDIX B

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Staff Survey-Writing Skills

Name (optional) _____

Grade: 1 2 3 4 5 6

Years of experience: 0-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 more than 20

1. Do you feel there is evidence of a lack of basic writing skill in your students?
YES_____ NO_____

If yes, please explain.

_____

_____

_____

2. Are you satisfied with the amount of writing curriculum that the reading series
provides? YES_____ NO_____

3. Do you use supplemental materials? YES_____ NO_____

If yes, please list the most beneficial sources .

_____

_____

_____

4. Does your class write on a daily basis? YES_____ NO_____

5. How much time is allocated to the teaching of writing per week? _____

6. Have you used any of the following to teach writing?
Circle Y for yes and N for no.

Journal Writing	Y or N
Writer's Workshop	Y or N
Language Experience Approach	Y or N
Power Writing	Y or N
Individual Writing Conferences	Y or N
Peer Writing Conferences	Y or N
Teacher-Student Dialogs	Y or N
Story Starters	Y or N
Picture Cues	Y or N
Brainstorming	Y or N
Story Maps	Y or N
Grammar	Y or N
Pen Pals	Y or N
Young Author's	Y or N

7. Do you feel comfortable teaching writing? YES_____ NO_____ SOMETIMES_____

8. Did you have a course on how to teach writing as an undergrad? YES_____NO_____

9. Have you taken one at the graduate level? YES_____ NO_____

10. Has the district provided any additional training or inservice in the area of writing?

                                              YES_____ NO_____

If yes, please indicate what type _____

_____

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Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Please feel free to write down any additional comments you may have on the subject:

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APPENDIX C

WRITING RUBRIC

Criteria/Marker	1	2	3
Organization • Beginning • Middle • End	Writing contains only one of the organization criteria.	Sample contains two of the three criteria.	All three elements are present.
Focus • Problem • Solution	Piece rambles and does not Contain a problem or a solution.	Example has one of the stated criteria.	Narrative contains both, a problem and a solution.
Length	Less than one page.	One page.	More than one page.
Sentence structure • Run-ons • Fragments	5 or more of the criteria exist within the sample.	1-4 run-ons and/or fragments are present.	Sample does not contain any run-on or fragmented sentences.
Spelling	8 or more words are spelled incorrectly in the work.	Piece contains 3-7 errors in spelling.	No more than two spelling errors are found.

APPENDIX D

PEER CONFERENCING SHEET-READER

Peer Conference
(Reader Response)

This is what I liked/enjoyed about your story:

This is what confused me:

I'd like to know more about...

Comments:

APPENDIX E

PEER CONFERENCING SHEET-AUTHOR

Peer Conference
(Author Response)

After reading and reflecting on my peer conference, I am going to:

APPENDIX F

EDITING CHECKLIST

Editing Checklist

Punctuation:	-Do I need a period, comma, or a question mark?
Capitalization:	-1st word in the sentence
	-Names
	-The word "I"
Spelling:	-Are all words spelled correctly?
Grammar:	-Complete sentences
	-Run-on sentences
	-Paragraphs indented
	-Interesting words
Handwriting:	-Neatness

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