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The Use of Responses to Reading as a Vehicle to Opinion Writing in the Primary Grades

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Introduction

"*The growth on my part has been tremendous. Just the idea that students should have an opening sentence and their opinion and their reason and not always use the word "because." […] So I think, I don't know, that piece was just huge in developing the teacher's ability, and therefore, was good for the students*."

Margaret is a kindergarten teacher who participated in a project that developed and evaluated the feasibility and effectiveness of an approach to opinion writing with primary grade students. Margaret's comments reflect her positive experience with the instruction and the effects on her students' performance. Unfortunately, American students' writing performance has not improved over recent years; according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), students' writing performance in grades 8 and 12 has not shown a statistically significant change across time (NCES, 2012; 2014). Writing, though, is an essential literacy task that is important for success in learners' academic lives and in their later careers.

Despite the efforts that educational policies and reforms have made to improve literacy, they have not emphasized writing (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2002). However, recently the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI, 2010) resurfaced the neglected R (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003) and also addressed the need for reading and writing connections (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Based on the Common Core State Standards, students should learn to write for three broad purposes—to persuade, to inform, and to entertain. Within each of these purposes, there are multiple genres and subgenres, and students should develop a good understanding of their expectations and criteria. Further, students should learn how to respond to the demands of the different audiences and tasks. To respond appropriately, they also need to learn to carefully analyze written

assignments for audience, purpose, linguistic and content expectations. Finally, students are expected to write in response to information they read and apply their knowledge of genre and purpose in the organization of their work as they incorporate text-based information as evidence. The current instructional approach supports reading and writing connections at pragmatic, cognitive, and rhetorical levels (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000); developing an understanding of these connections at an early age can support and expand students' reading comprehension (Abbott, Berninger, & Fayol, 2010).

One genre that challenges young and developing writers is opinion writing, or persuasion in general. Persuasive writing requires both social and cognitive processes. Pragmatic social considerations are essential because persuasion involves attempts to convince a reader, who is not present at the moment of the argument. Cognitive processes are critical for planning (generating, selecting, and organizing reasons and evidence) and revising (evaluating the effectiveness of the message). The challenges or persuasion are partly due to developmental reasons (Coirier, 1996; Coirier & Golder, 1993; Goldier & Coirier, 1994). Young learners may not be ready to develop claims and support them with convincing evidence (Goldier & Coirier, 1994). Also, learners may not be able to view the argument as a communicative process and may avoid involvement because of worries that it might affect their social relationships with others (Kuhn, Wang, & Li, 2011). Further, persuasive writing addresses the questions of an invisible audience and reader. Young learners may have difficulty taking the perspective of others to imagine the reaction of the intended audience (Golder & Coirier, 1994) as they select and develop convincing reasons. Therefore, their writing may be egocentric and fail to develop reasons that are convincing in their content. Persuasive writing may also be challenging to young learners due to its limited presence in their academic lives. Young learners may not receive as

much exposure to persuasive text as to other genres like stories (Pouit & Golder, 1996); consequently, they may not have had opportunities to develop a schema for this genre and its demands.

The purpose of this article is to explain an approach to opinion writing for primary grades that has been found to show positive effects on students' writing quality, inclusion of genre elements, and length. Specifically, the approach and its feasibility were evaluated across two cycles of implementation. The first cycle included 168 student participants (across grades K-1) and 10 teachers, and the second cycle included 229 participants (across grades K-2) and 12 teachers. Across both cycles results showed large (d >.80) statistically significant growth on quality of students' papers (p < .001) (Philippakos, 2016; Philippakos, MacArthur, & Munsell, under review; Philippakos, MacArthur, & Munsell, 2016).

The following section explains the principles of the approach, and the procedures that teachers could use to bring this approach to life in their classrooms.

Components of the Approach

The instructional approach integrates cognitive strategy instruction with self-regulation (Graham, 2006; Graham, Harris, Chambers, 2016; Harris & Graham, 2009) to develop cognitive processes for planning, drafting, and revising, with *collaborative reasoning* (Anderson et al., 2001) to develop understanding of argument as a dialogic, social process.

Strategy instruction has been found to yield strong effects on writing quality across grades and types of writing (Graham, 2006; Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007). Strategy instruction includes three critical components (MacArthur, 2011): 1) strategies for the cognitive processes that writers need to complete in order to

effectively compose (e.g., planning, revising), 2) instructional methods to support the development and mastery of those strategies including think-aloud modeling, collaborative practice, and gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), and 3) ways to promote the independent use of the self-regulation processes that promote independence (Harris & Graham, 2009). In the current approach, students learned genre-based strategies for planning, drafting, and evaluating/revising. More information on the strategies is presented below.

Strategy instruction is far more effective when it is combined with self-regulation as it also attempts to promote students' independence (Harris & Graham, 2009; Harris, Graham & Mason, 2006; Harris, Graham, MacArthur, Reid, & Mason, 2011). In the current approach, self-regulation was addressed through goal setting. Students were taught how to set goals by carefully analyzing the writing task and identifying its demands. They also were guided to use the writing process which was taught as a strategy ladder to monitor their progress and determine what steps they needed to take in order to effectively complete a writing task.

Collaborative reasoning, developed by Anderson and colleagues (Anderson et al., 2001; Cazden, 2001; Rezintskaya et al., 2009), engages students in collaborative discussion of controversial questions about works of fiction. In the current approach, instruction began with read alouds of books that engaged the readers in a discussion/argument with the characters or about the characters. During the read aloud, the teacher engaged students in a dialogic discourse of argumentation in which they attempted to respond to the character's claims and/or form their own claims and support them with information from the text and their experiences. In the process of reading, students were introduced to the genre, its purpose, and its organizational elements. They practiced with the teacher retelling the contents of the argument using the genre elements and/or writing a summary using the genre elements. Overall, the approach promoted a *reading*

and writing connection through the use of read alouds of books that would be interesting to students. Then the teacher modeled how to develop an opinion response to the reading using the strategies for to planning, drafting, evaluating to revise and editing. Mini-lessons were also provided to support specific components of the genre (e.g., connection between reasons and evidence; development of convincing reasons).

After students learned to develop responses to reading using the basic elements of persuasion (Opinion, Reasons and Evidence/Explanations, and Restatement of Opinion), teachers transferred that knowledge to the writing of opinion essays on general topics (e.g., Shall we have field trips?). For written opinion essays, two elements were added—a hook or introduction to the topic and a final message to the reader. Instruction in both the strategy for writing responses to literature and writing opinion essays followed a Strategy for Teaching Strategies (modified from Philippakos, MacArthur, & Coker, 2015), which is explained in the next section.

How to Apply the Approach

Just as students were supported by a strategy for the processes of planning, drafting, and revising, teachers were supported with a systematic strategy for teaching persuasive writing. The initial version of the teaching strategy with read alouds was designed for instruction in grades 3 to 5. However, it was modified after two cycles of design research (Philippakos 2016; Philippakos, MacArthur, & Munsell, 2016) to integrate collaborative reasoning and to support instruction in the primary grades. The steps in this revised Strategy for Teaching Strategies are explained below.

Discussion about the genre and its elements. Instruction begins with a discussion and explanation of persuasion and its applications in real life. Teachers provide real-life examples so

students can better understand the "why" and "how" of this type of writing. For example, they discuss how students could persuade their parents to have a new toy or a pet. Then they include a chart with the elements of the genre and explain the function and importance of each. The basic elements include the writer's Opinion, Reasons and evidence, and a Restatement of the Opinion.

Read aloud. Teachers select a read aloud with the potential to promote argumentative discussion among the students. The principle of collaborative reasoning is a conversation based on a core controversial question posed by the teacher or the book; the teacher prompts students to give opinions and support them with reasons and evidence. Teachers mediate the discussion and support students' dialogic interactions (in small groups or as a whole group) as they develop their reasons to respond to a controversial question.

To begin, instruction uses children's books that explicitly present arguments. The series of Pigeon books by Mo Willems can provide strong support for argument because the Pigeon mischievously tries to do what is not allowed and then tries to persuade the reader that he should be allowed to do it (e.g., The Pigeon wants to drive the bus or the Pigeon doesn't want to take a bath). After the completion of the read aloud, teachers refer to the chart with the elements and, by eliciting students' responses, retell the information (from the perspective of the character) and/or write a summary using the information from the chart. Although instruction starts with books that present explicit arguments, later, many children's books can be used that provide opportunities for controversial questions through a dilemma for the character or questions about the character and its actions. (e.g., Do you think the character should have done that?).

Teacher explanation of the writing strategy ladder. Teachers explain the practices that good writers follow and invite students to follow this approach so they can sharpen their writing skills. Teachers explain that the writing strategy ladder becomes the guide for students' writing

and should be always followed. The Strategy Ladder includes the writing process (Planning, Drafting, Evaluation to Revise, Editing, and Sharing) (Philippakos, MacArthur & Coker, 2015); teachers explain the importance and function of each "step."

Teacher modeling of how to write a response. Teachers think out loud how to plan, draft, evaluate to revise, and edit a written response. For instance, after reading the book "Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus" by Mo Willems, teachers may display the question "Do you think it would be appropriate for Pigeon to drive the bus?" Teachers model how to analyze the task, how to plan by developing ideas on both sides of the argument (Yes, it is appropriate vs. No, it is not appropriate), how to organize the ideas (using the elements of the genre that are part of the chart) and how to draft a response (See Figure 1 for Planning resources).

Figure 1
Planning Materials

PLANNING

Task Analysis
Form (e.g., essay, response):
Topic: Should _____?
Audience:
Author:
Purpose:

Brainstorm IDEAS

Beginning	Opinion	
Middle	Reason	
	Evidence	
End	Opinion	

Organize IDEAS

Beginning	Opinion	
Middle	Reason	R1: E1:
	Evidence	R2: E2: R3: E3:
End	Opinion	

Drafting can be challenging for students who need to negotiate the demands of handwriting and spelling at the same time that they negotiate the challenges of the discourse and of the cognitive tasks. Therefore, sentence starters and sentence frames are used to support students in expressing their ideas. In addition, those sentence frames can guide students' verbal responses throughout the school day. For instance, when students work on science and in social studies and they are asked to state their opinion on a question, they may use the same sentence frames to provide a response (e.g., The author states that _____ or I think that _____. One reason I think that _____ is _____.).

Evaluation of good and weak papers. Teachers display a good example of a response (or later of an opinion essay) and by using a think-aloud process they model how to evaluate the

paper. The evaluation rubric includes the elements of the genre (e.g., Is the opinion stated clearly?) and a scoring system (e.g., 0 = the element is absent, 1 = the element is present but not clear, 2 = the element is clear). (See Figure 2 for sample evaluation rubric of responses to reading; modified from Philippakos, et al., 2015).

Figure 2
Sample Evaluation Rubric for Responses to reading

Rubric to Evaluate Responses

Writer: _____ **Reviewer:** _____ **Date:** _____

			Score of 0, 1, or 2
Beginning	Opinion 	Is the writer's opinion clear?	
Middle	Reasons 	**R1:** Is the first reason connected to the opinion and is it clear and convincing?	
		E1: Do the examples and evidence connect to the reason and are they accurate?	
	AND	**R2**: Is the second reason connected to the opinion and is it clear and convincing?	
		E2: Do the examples and evidence connect to the reason and are they accurate?	
	Evidence 	**R3:** Is the third reason connected to the opinion and is it clear and convincing?	
		E3: Do the examples and evidence connect to the reason and are they accurate?	
End	Opinion 	Did the writer say again the opinion in a different way?	
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS		Is there a **title**?	
		Are **transition words and sentence frames** used correctly?	
		Is the writer's **tone** appropriate to the reader?	

Initially, a good example is used in order to show the expected outcome and then a weak example is used that allows the comparison with the initial good example. Finally, teachers and students evaluate a second weak example together (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016b). These

weak examples represent the challenges that students would face when they complete their work. For example, those samples may miss the opinion statement or they may miss a reason or an example. The process of evaluation can strengthen students' understanding about the expected outcome and support their own goals for effective writing (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016a; Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016b).

Collaborative writing. Teachers develop a new question about the same book or the group reads a new book and develops a new question (e.g., after reading the book "Pigeon needs a bath by Mo Willems, a question may be: Do you think Pigeon needs a bath?). Teachers facilitate the process of using the writing strategy and record the ideas students share. At the same time teachers also support students in the use of the writing strategy ladder as a guide for goal setting and progress monitoring. For instance, teachers may ask students, "Now that we completed brainstorming ideas, what would be the first thing that we should do as good writers?" After students respond (e.g., we need to plan), teachers work with students to select and organize ideas using a Graphic Organizer (GO) that includes the elements of the genre.

Guided practice. At this stage, teachers support students either as a group or in small groups as they respond to questions. For instance, teachers may display a new question, work with students to generate ideas in favor and against, and then ask the group to organize them. Teachers and student could next work on the selection of the side (in favor or against) that best responds to the argument, and ask the group to answer the question.

The goal is to gradually perform all those tasks at a faster pace so students will understand that planning and drafting are joined tasks. It is not advised for the brainstorming of ideas to take place on one day, for the GO to be completed at a different day, and for the drafting to take place in another day. The suggestion is for planning and drafting to happen in the same

day; however, if time does not allow for this, it is preferable at least for the planning and the statement of opinion to be completed on day 1. Alternatively, teachers may display a question and students may independently work using the writing strategy ladder; teachers may then work with groups of students who need additional support.

Mini-lessons. Mini-lessons are drawn from students' needs. For instance, when students find it challenging to develop explanations or evidence to support specific reasons, teachers may provide a mini-lesson on this topic. Overall, for a mini-lesson to take place, teachers evaluate a weak paper, identify the need for this mini-lesson, model the task, then collaboratively work with students and then give students' opportunities to practice the correction of that specific task. Finally, students work independently and apply that new knowledge and skill in their paper.

Preparation for peer review, reviewing, and self-evaluation. In order for students to review their own work and the work of their peers, it is important that they receive specific instruction on the process they will follow (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016a). The use of specific evaluation criteria on reviewing could guide students' attention and effort and lead to revisions that significantly affect writing quality (Philippakos, in press; Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016a; 2016b). Teachers model the evaluation process and collaboratively practice with students how to evaluate papers and give feedback using a rubric that includes criteria based on the elements of the genre (e.g., Is the opinion clear? Is the first reason connected to the opinion? Is the reason supported with an example?) and a scoring system that is easy for students to apply on their own (See Figure 2). Next, students self-evaluate their own papers and set goals for improvement, and finally they work with one or more partners to evaluate each other's work.

Editing. The teacher also works with students on editing. A mnemonic called SCIPS (Spelling, Capitalization, Indentation, Punctuation, Sentences; Philippakos et al., 2015) could be

used as an overall focus of the editing process. However, specific challenges can be identified within students' work (e.g., capitalization and punctuation) and become mini-lessons.

Introduction to opinion writing. Once students have practiced how to develop a response using information from a text they have read, teachers introduce two additional elements: A Hook/Topic that attracts the reader and appears at the *Beginning* of the paper and a Message to the Reader that appears at the *End* of a paper. The teacher then models how to plan, draft, evaluate to revise, edit and share the paper using the same Strategy for Teaching Strategies process.

Assessments. It is advised to include a reassessment and a post assessment so instructionally teachers can draw conclusions about students' performance and progress. Of course after the completion of each paper during guided practice, teachers and students can examine progress (formative assessment) using the evaluation rubric, but it is also valuable to include an unassisted, summative post assessment to examine how students perform at the conclusion of the unit.

Technology. In the process of working with students, teachers are encouraged to engage students in the use of approaches that can motivate their engagement and participation. For instance, teachers can use Voicethread and engage students in audio recordings and video recordings of their responses. Other classmates may also listen to those responses and respond to the reasons and evidence that peers provide. This process can help students better understand that writing serves a communicative purpose.

Foci To Address Instructionally

This approach is based on and emphasizes specific instructional and theoretical components. First, this approach to teaching persuasion combines collaborative reasoning (Anderson et al., 2001; Rezintskaya et al., 2009) and dialogic argumentation with the explicit instruction of cognitive strategies under the umbrella of cognitive strategy instruction with self-regulation (Harris & Graham, 2009; MacArthur, 2011). During the read aloud, it is imperative that conversations address the elements of an argument and that students are supported to state their opinions, reasons, and evidence.

Second, in this approach there is a strong emphasis on expressive language and on the need for students to orally participate in the argumentative discussion. The oral, argumentative discourse plays an important role in supporting students' writing, reading, and language development (Shanahan, 2006). Students learn the language of persuasion through oral practice and opportunities to apply the new vocabulary of persuasion across the instructional day (Beck & McKeown, 2007). For this purpose, sentence starters and frames are used so students can have a point of reference. Teachers could also develop posters of those frames and refer to them throughout the day when they ask students to provide their opinion on a topic.

Third, there is a strong emphasis on writing stamina. According to the Common Core State Standards, students should write for short and longer periods of time. This writing frequency is a recommendation that is emphasized in research reviews and instructional recommendations (Graham, Bolinger et al., 2010; Graham, Harris, & Chambers, 2016). When students write daily, they apply skills in context and this application makes their learning authentic and meaningful. For instance, students are able to practice handwriting, spelling, and idea development within the context of composition. This is a far different practice than the

completion of worksheets. Further, this meaningful practice can affect students' motivation to write. As one teacher shared (Philippakos, MacArthur & Munsel, 2016),

> *I think in the beginning it was hard for them. They didn't have that writing stamina. But I kept doing it over and over again and now when we do writing, they cheer. In the beginning, there were groans, but now that they've built writing stamina, they're happy to do it. And even from when I started when I'd give them all the writing parts…I do all the parts at one time. Their ability to do that process from beginning to end is much faster. The brainstorming we spend the most time on, because that's where they're really getting their good ideas. So I think I have to give them more time for that part, but once they're developed, they know what do to do with that graphic organizer. It used to take an hour and a half from beginning to end, but now it's like 45 minutes."*

Fourth, there is a strong emphasis in the instruction of the writing process as a writing strategy (Philippakos, MacArthur, & Coker, 2015). It is important for students to see the connections between planning, drafting, and evaluation to revise. In this approach, these processes are modeled as a whole, and there is a clear explanation of the importance of following the writing process across all writing tasks. Even though the writing process may be a general instructional expectation, teachers often find it challenging to teach the process of writing. This challenge can be due to instructional expectations (within a given program) or due to time constraints. However, it is necessary for students to understand that it is the writing purpose that guides the planning and that planning is important prior to drafting. Using the words of one teacher,

> "*I always knew there was a process. But I love that it's already broken down. Just like when you teach someone how to read, it takes a lot of effort to break it down and teach*

> *someone how to read. So you've broken a lot of that writing down so thank you because it's hard to know what to do when you break it down for little kids. I always knew the process of coming up with ideas and using a graphic organizer, but I always feel like the pressure's there, so this helps me because I don't have to cut corners. I have time for everything now. I know it'll be harder in the beginning, but it gets easier and faster. In the end, it's going to pay off and make it so much easier for me that I don't have to worry about it*.

Fifth, there is a strong emphasis on evaluation to revise (Philippakos, in press). Revision is a challenging task for young writers, and students often avoid it (Fitzgerald & Markham, 1987; MacArthur, 2012). Also, students often view revision as editing and as a result only make surface-level changes (e.g., spelling, word substitution). In this approach students are introduced early on to the process of evaluation and are taught that the elements of the genre can become evaluation criteria to guide their attention and revision (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016b). Of course a paper of good quality does not only have the elements of a genre, but also includes linguistic and syntactic features that enhance it and showcase the writer's voice. This is the reason that specific mini-lessons are necessary to develop students' linguistic repertoire as this relates to a genre (e.g., types of reasons). As one teacher shared,

> *"And for the revising, I'd say the biggest impact I had was with the revision. Because trying to tell someone how to revise, I was making it so much more complex than what it needed to be. So to me, I think that was the biggest 'aha' was that it didn't need to be complicated.*

Finally, editing is not completed in isolation, but it is addressed as part of the writing process, and editing topics are discussed and explained in context. Students use the mnemonic

SCIPS and with teachers' guidance and modeling examine their papers and make revisions. Mini-lessons are also provided according to students' needs. A first grade teacher shared,

> *And the flexibility with the editing. In first grade they still don't capitalize. So I'll focus on a few things at a time next year. I don't expect them to spell words correctly, I want to be able to tell what it is. But having capital letters and periods is reasonable for them to master by first grade. Before, I couldn't tackle that, but they can do that now."*

Discussion

Writing in general is a challenging cognitive and social task (Graham, 2006), and opinion writing is a demanding type of writing for young learners (Coirier, 1996; Coirier & Golder, 1993; Kuhn, Wang, & Li, 2011). If the goal of instruction is for students to become college and career ready (CCSSI, 2010), instruction on such challenging genres should begin early. However, instruction does not need to be boring and tedious. On the contrary, it can be engaging through the use of oral language and interesting read alouds; it can be specific through the use of strategy instruction; and it can be motivating as students learn that writing is a flexible process that they can successfully complete. The approach explained in this article supports teachers' instruction and gives them the tools to develop more effective writing and also the opportunity to expand that instruction and address challenges that students face through the use of mini-lessons. As Julie, a Veteran First Grade teacher said,

> "*I'm not a scripted teacher and was worried I would get cookie-cutter writing. But the strategy really improved my kids' writing and gave the necessary structure for everyone and helped them get the essay together. Some teachers looked at my kids' writing and*

said they couldn't get their 4th or 5th graders to do that. I feel like, obviously it works. It was a very short period of time and not a whole lot of effort!"

Academic growth and increasing student independence should be the essence of instruction. The comments that Margaret shared at the beginning of the paper indicate growth both for students and for teachers. That growth in students' performance that teachers like Margaret recognized was motivating for the teachers, too. Teachers like Margaret experienced growth professionally and instructionally, and teachers like Julie recognized the flexibility that the approach gave to them as well as to their students. If the goal of the CCSSI (2010) is college and career readiness, innovation in approaches as well as use of evidence-based practices could be the reality of instruction from as early as kindergarten.

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