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A Kindergarten Writing Workshop: How Kindergarten Students Grow as Writers

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Abstract

The emergence of process writing and the advent of whole language during the 1980's challenged the 50 year practice of focusing on reading before teaching writing to young children. Today, writing as well as reading is clearly of great interest from the earliest stages of literacy development.



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Kindergarten children are clearly ready to benefit from a program that builds on their emerging language abilities (Calkins, 1994). Studies have investigated short intervals of writing in kindergarten (Teale and Martinez, 1986), the development and impact of invented spelling (Gentry, 1987; Temple, Nathan, Burris and Temple, 1988) and such perceptual issues as phonemic awareness (Adams, 1990; Griffith and Olson, 1992), all vital concerns in the kindergarten classroom.

Absent, however, have been investigations of systematic instruction at the kindergarten level which embody extended treatment times and instructional paradigms such as writing workshop (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983). This study focuses on the performance, processes and attitudes of kindergarten students who participated in one semester of

process writing instructional activities and addresses the following questions. Can kindergarten students effectively engage in a writing workshop on a sustained basis? How do kindergarten children grow as writers when they are given the opportunity to participate in regularly scheduled process writing activities? Do these kindergarten children maintain favorable attitudes about writing and school? What effects does long term process writing instruction have on reading readiness test scores?

Operationally defined, process writing is an approach to teaching writing that encourages students to view themselves as "real" writers who follow the same process as professional writers. Students participate in one or more of the following activities: prewriting, writing, responding, revising, editing, and publishing. During this instructional period students take part in what is often referred to as a "writing workshop," a time in which they feel they are members of a community of writers.

Research method

Subjects: The study was conducted in a suburban-rural Pennsylvania school district of 5400 students located in the eastern part of the state. A half-day kindergarten class of 19 children participated in process writing activities during a 5 month time period. The students were from middle class families and represented a typical range of ability levels. The kindergarten teacher was a 15-year veteran whose exposure to process writing consisted of two years of involvement with the school district's process writing staff development program.

Qualitative Research: The first author was an observer in a kindergarten classroom during all process writing instructional activities. She triangulated her data (Lincoln and

Guba, 1985) and used multiple sources (subjects, parents and teacher) and methods (informal and formal assessments, observations of students' writing process behaviors, and parent, teacher, and student interviews) to obtain indicators of how students grew as writers. She maintained a field journal divided into two parts: a log of day to day activities and a personal log that contained introspective notations including ongoing hypotheses, questions and comments.

Quantitative Research: Using a pre-test post-test approach, students were measured on invented spelling, writing vocabulary, and characteristics of their writing. They were also assessed on readiness for reading instruction. A 14 word invented spelling test (Mann, Tobin and Wilson, 1987) was used to evaluate the students' spelling strategies. The scoring system evaluated phonetic-orthographic accuracy, assigning a point value to words that were spelled at different levels of accuracy. The Inventory of Writing Vocabulary for Rating Progress (Robinson, 1973) was used to measure writing vocabulary. The test was a simple measure of how many words children could spell correctly when asked to write all the words they knew. A modified version of Clay's (1979) Rating Technique for Observing Early Writing Progress was used to evaluate the students' writing according to language level, message quality and directional principles. Language level referred to the highest level of linguistic organization, ranging from the student's using no recognizable alphabet letters to writing a story of two or more sentences. Message quality referred to the student's understanding that he had written a meaningful message and knowing what that message said. Directional principles referred to the student's using correct directional patterns (e.g., writes from left to right) in his writing. The Metropolitan Readiness Tests Level II, Form P were used to assess the reading readiness of the process writers.

Results of the study

In reporting our results, we will first describe the writing program as observed, then summarize the quantitative findings, and move on to findings that emerged directly from the observations.

Description of the Writing Program: The kindergarten students participated in the writing workshop during regularly scheduled class periods held three times per week for approximately 45 minutes per session. The workshops adhered to the format of a mini-lesson, writing time and group sharing sessions. During these workshops the students chose their own topics, wrote stories and received feedback about their writing.

The mini-lessons of the writing workshops were generally restricted to no more than 15 minutes. During each mini-lesson (after a skill was introduced or a piece of literature was shared) the classroom teacher "modeled" invented spelling for words that students wanted to use in their stories. He asked students what letters were used to represent the sounds they heard in a particular word. As the teacher wrote the word on the chalkboard, he used the letters that the students suggested. When talking with the students the teacher was careful to differentiate between invented spelling and what he referred to as book spelling. He explained the concept of book spelling by saying, "If we were looking at words in published books they would be spelled this way."

During the mini-lesson the teacher sometimes led a "warm-up" activity to help students brainstorm ideas. During this group discussion he showed the students a variety of ways to plan their stories by drawing or writing their ideas on a "think note." The students were given several questions they could ask each other to help generate ideas.

During other mini-lesson sessions the students learned ways to respond to each other's stories. For example, students were shown how to "receive" (Graves, 1983) each other's writing by listening carefully and repeating what they just heard. Students were also shown how to use the phrases, "I liked the part where ..." and "I don't understand ...".

As the students gained skill in responding to each other's writing, they learned how to participate in short peer conferences. The conferences proceeded as follows: When two students finished their stories they requested a "talk sign" from their teacher; then they had a short conference in which they reacted to each other's story by using the techniques that they had practiced during earlier mini-lessons.

Toward the end of the experimental semester some students began to engage in rudimentary revision and editing of their writing. During the mini-lessons the teacher had explained these concepts and had shown the student how to use "fix notes" to help with the revision and editing processes. On side 1 of the fix note the students indicated what words or pictures they wanted to add or delete. The students also learned how to "fix" the mechanical errors in their stories by using side 2 of the fix note to check that they had included their name, date, pictures and words.

The group sharing sessions at the end of the writing workshop provided an opportunity to reinforce the mini-lesson skill as well as to give selected students the chance to sit in the "author's chair" (Graves and Hansen, 1983) and share their stories with the class. On occasion all students were directed to sit in a circle and read a short portion of their own story aloud. At times, the teacher asked students to find partners so they could share their stories in a more personal

manner. This allowed the teacher to circulate and monitor selected conferences.

The following areas of the kindergarten students' writing were evaluated: a) spelling strategies, b) written vocabulary, and c) language level, directional principles and message quality of their stories. Paired t tests were used at the beginning and end of the study to investigate whether there were significant differences (at the .05 level of significance) between the students' mean pre-test and post-test scores on the spelling and vocabulary assessments and on their writing samples. The study also compared the Metropolitan Readiness Test scores of the process writing kindergarten class to the scores of comparable groups of students taught several years later by the same teacher using a skill-oriented language curriculum.

Appreciable Writing Gains: The class of 19 kindergarten writers made appreciable gains in writing, demonstrating significant improvement at the .05 level in all writing skill areas. The Mann, Tobin and Wilson (1987) invented spelling test was used to evaluate the students' spelling strategies. By the end of the program the paired t test ($t = -5.51$, $p < 0.05$), revealed significant growth in students' spelling ability. All but one student could give at least two letters to capture part of each spelling word phonetically.

On the Inventory of Writing Vocabulary for Rating Progress (Robinson, 1973), the students showed significant improvement in their ability to write more words using the paired t test ($t = -5.17$, $p < 0.05$). The mean number of words written on the vocabulary pretest and posttest (Robinson, 1973) were 7.42 and 13.47, respectively. It is notable that students wrote more words than they were given credit for on

The Inventory of Writing Vocabulary for Rating Progress. This test demanded conventional spelling to award credit.

On the modified version of Clay's (1979) Rating Technique for Observing Early Writing Progress, there was significant growth in the students' ability to use written language, to express a meaningful message and to write stories in correct directional form. (Language Level: $t = -7.71$, $p < 0.05$; Message Quality: $t = -8.99$, $p < 0.05$; Directional Principles: $t = -6.96$, $p < 0.05$). By the end of the five month treatment, more than three-fourths of the students were able to write stories using at least two-word phrases and explain their written messages. Furthermore, 13 of the 19 students were able to write at least two lines of print using correct directional patterns.

Readiness Scores Hold Steady: The Metropolitan Readiness Tests Level II, Form P were used to assess the reading readiness of the process writers. Upon completion of the five month treatment the tests were administered to all students in the class. A one-way analysis of variance was also used to determine whether there were significant differences in the mean prereading skills composite test scores received by comparable control groups of kindergarten students. While the process writing kindergarten students had not participated in a traditional skill-focused reading readiness program, they performed as well on the Metropolitan Readiness Tests as the earlier control classes. No statistically significant differences were found in their Metropolitan Readiness Test mean skills composite scores using a one-way analysis of variance: $F = .4144$, $p > 0.05$.

Qualitative Observations: Although we had some trepidation about the maturity of kindergarten children to function in structured writing situations, by the conclusion of the

treatment interval we could see that these students benefited by participating in regularly scheduled writing workshops. Their academic progress and their zeal for writing were apparent. The teacher acknowledged that kindergarten students should have time to socialize. He stated, "Frankly, during the first few weeks I was slightly concerned as to whether we were putting too much pressure on the students." However, while reflecting at the end of the year, the teacher felt that the writing workshop had allowed him to provide a challenge to every child regardless of his initial skills. He stated, "I've not had any program in my 10 years of teaching kindergarten that has done that."

In addition to offering an academic challenge, the writing workshop provided an interactive environment for learning which enhanced the students' motivation to write. The short peer conferences provided students with a ready-made audience in the form of another student who appeared to be interested in what was being expressed. Indeed, what better testimony to motivation is there than the 393 multi-page stories produced by the students over the five month period?

The modeling of invented spelling by the teacher gave students the opportunity to apply the phonetic skills to which they had been introduced. We observed that the teacher found it necessary to go "one step" beyond modeling invented spelling in order to motivate his students to use this technique in their stories. As the students wrote he frequently stopped to read their pieces aloud. Then, speaking so that the others in the class could hear, the teacher praised them for writing stories that he was able to read. The teacher remarked, "The child suddenly realized, 'Somebody can read what I wrote!'"

We observed that students were able to carry out the writing workshop procedures. Most students were able to use think notes on their own. All enjoyed using the talk signs and conferencing with each other. However, their ability to give specific feedback to each other was limited. Nevertheless, we felt that, through conferencing, the students gained a greater awareness of the need to give and receive feedback. As the teacher pointed out, "When the children talk with each other they have the chance to step away from their actual writing. It gives them another purpose for writing."

The kindergarten students did not show interest in rewriting once they finished their stories. The teacher noted, "It would be nice to think that when the students are finished with a story we can get them to go back and reread it. Most simply don't have that level of interest in their own writing." While the students generally did not want to revise finished stories, we noted that many made revisions as they were writing their pieces. The teacher suggested that future kindergarten students be made more aware of the changes that students often make very naturally to their own writing.

While it was important to celebrate students as authors of the finished stories, we felt that publishing stories in the conventional sense would be too time consuming. The teacher employed such options as placing finished stories on a class bookshelf and having the entire class participate in a teacher-directed bookmaking activity. Throughout the writing workshops the classroom teacher conducted a number of activities that helped students make reading-writing connections and encouraged their sense of being authors. For example, students were recognized as "authors of the hour," allowing the opportunity to share their "story-in-progress." As students described their stories, the teacher pointed out features

of good writing by saying, "This is a good beginning. Authors try to write good beginnings in their stories."

The kindergarten teacher tried to help his students see relationships between the professional stories he read and stories they were writing. For example, after reading a particular story with a problem, he asked, "Do any of your stories have a problem? How did you fix it?" He wondered if more than a handful of students had used ideas from the professional literature that was read to them. Yet, he pointed out, "Everything in kindergarten is building an awareness and exposure." At the very least, all students in the class were made aware of a variety of ideas that they could write about.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the range of abilities of the kindergarten students, process writing instruction allowed them to show appreciable, measurable gains in their writing skills. Furthermore, since the students participated in regularly scheduled writing workshops, as opposed to more casual participation in a writing center, they gained a rich awareness of the steps involved in composing stories and were able to verbalize writing process procedures when questioned. The students clearly demonstrated the maturity needed to work within the writing workshop format. In addition, the writing workshop provided an interactive environment for learning. It appeared to be an effective means to develop the students' language skills. While not all students were developmentally ready to conference correctly, the peer sharing provided an opportunity for them to receive feedback, however general it may have been.

The interactive format, including comments from both peers and teacher, also appeared to enhance the students' motivation. When students viewed themselves as authors they

realized that what they had to say was important. Their self-concept as writers and as learners was undoubtedly enhanced.

The findings from this study support the following recommendations which will enhance the literacy environment in kindergarten classrooms:

1) Kindergarten students should be encouraged to write frequently as they engage in process writing activities. The classroom teacher should hold writing workshops on a regular basis, a minimum of twice weekly. At these times the teacher should model a variety of procedures that correspond to each stage of the writing process. He should provide students with alternatives (e.g., think notes) rather than expecting every writer to follow a set format.

2) Writing workshops in kindergarten should continue to emphasize reading-writing connections. An emphasis should be placed on helping kindergarten students to develop the content of their stories by using literature as a springboard for writing.

3) Kindergarten students can be encouraged to participate in such activities as peer conferences or revising.

4) School districts can replace traditional skill-oriented readiness programs with a writing workshop approach. Standardized readiness scores should remain favorable, despite the lack of content congruence between the writing workshop and the substance of readiness tests.

The kindergarten writing workshop has distinct advantages for early literacy development. Although the kindergarten writing workshop follows a structured format, it can remain open-ended in terms of the written product expected of the students. While the teacher we worked with hoped that students would use the skills to which they had been exposed during class mini-lessons, he accepted and celebrated all approximations of their written language. Thus he allowed

his students to progress at their own rate and to grow as true writers.

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