Supporting Journal Writing in a First Grade Classroom

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Abstract: What is the nature of the disconnect between story-telling students and the products in which they produce in actual journal writing? How can teachers support students in producing quality, journal entries that they can be proud of? In my first grade classroom, I noticed some of my most able writers rushing through journal entries creating sparse, repetitive sentences with many errors. I also noticed that these same students would frequently tell elaborate stories with lots of detail and excitement. I decided to closely analyze four students and their work habits in an attempt to learn more about the work they produced. This paper discusses the variations of support and tools; I used, to aid these students in their journal writing. I found that these students produced the best work when we brainstormed ideas prior to actually writing. I also noticed that these students were most proud of the work they completed when the topic involved some sort of a choice for them to make. These students all improved with similar modifications in the journal writing station.

Description of Teaching Context and Rationale

I am currently an intern in the Professional Development School Program, a partnership that exists between Penn State University and the local State College Area School District. I am one of three adults in a self-contained first grade classroom.

Our class is made up a diverse group of students with differing learning abilities and backgrounds. Out of the twenty bright children in room 20, eleven are female and nine are male. The majority of our students are six years old, turning seven in 2008. We have six students that turned seven years old in 2007.

For reading and language arts, the students are broken up into five groups based on ability. We have five students in our highest group, three in our high average group, five in our
average group, five in our lower average group, and two students in our lowest group. The two students in our lowest group are currently receiving Title I support. In order to promote the most successful and productive learning environment, the students participate in whole-class writer’s workshop at least one time each week, with the remaining four days devoted to language workshop stations.

In the language workshop stations, the students filter through five different stations with their reading and language arts group. An adult always runs three of the five stations, with an occasional parent volunteer supporting the other two stations. Our paraprofessional is responsible for the word study station based on the *Words Our Way* text series. The head teacher facilitates the guided reading station and I, as the student teacher, work with the students at the writing station.

I have been working with the students at the writing station since the second week of school. I have noticed great improvements in the writing of all of the children in room 20, however their creativity and imagination within their writing has reached a plateau. When I speak in terms of creativity and imagination, I am referring to the students’ ability to take an event and expand upon it. The students use their journals as a way to discuss and share events that are occurring in their lives, however their writing seems to lack that spark. Their journals lack details, especially those important to the actual entry. The students state their awareness of stretching sentences and expanding ideas, however it seldomly transfers to their actual writing pieces. I constantly hear students yell out, “I’m done,” or “I only have one sentence left, then I will have three and be finished.” Sometimes these comments even come after only five minutes of writing. I am beginning to question whether the expectations that we set for our students are hindering their ability their ideas. Students seemed to be so focused on having three sentences that they will even write unrelated sentences just to be “done.”
We have also have specific days of language workshop solely based on stretching sentences. We have completed “stretch it” tasks in groups and also individually. The students are really great at recognizing a sentence that needs to be stretched out, and they also have interesting details to add. Again, however, I do not see this transfer into their individual writing tasks.

I find myself brainstorming several ways to remind students of these expectations. I have tried questioning their editing by using both specific points and general ideas, however it can be difficult to do this with each individual student on a daily basis. I have also tried making a checklist for students to use before they say that they are done. The checklist can be effective, however the students do not always utilize it. These strategies work in the moment, but there are few instances where I see the students remembering the ideas on their own.

I also decided to take a look at the benchmarks for writing in first grade. A majority of the benchmarks are based around building content. For the district-wide writing assessments that are conducted twice during the school year, a large portion of the score is based on content, while the other small portion is based on mechanics. I worry that my students will not see the importance of content in writing if I did not support and emphasize the writing process, especially when provided with an opportunity to work with students of like-abilities.

**Wonderings and Sub-questions**

**Main Wonderings:**

- What is the nature of the disconnect between what my “storytelling” students will offer verbally (e.g., elaborate and detailed narratives) and what they produce in journal writing (e.g., bare minimum, often repetitive scraps of sentences)?

**Sub-questions:**
What role can I, as a teacher, play in helping to bring the two worlds (oral and written) together?

How can I create an environment where students maintain pride and ownership over their journal entries, yet still increase the content level?

What increases or decreases the students’ motivation to write and become thoughtful writers?

Are students’ expectations of journal writing the same as the expectations my mentor and I possess?

**Data Collection**

*Station Observations*

Throughout my inquiry, I recorded basic observations of the writing station during daily language workshop. I recorded the questions the students asked, statements made, and time taken before beginning writing. These observations helped me to understand the thought process of the students while they were writing in their journals. I was able to ask immediate questions and focus on specific writers.

*Parent Questionnaire*

In order to find out what kind of writing my students were doing at home, I sent home a questionnaire to all twenty of my students. In this questionnaire I asked about the frequency of writing at home, how writing at home is established, and also a little about how the parent thought their child felt about writing. I used this information to learn more about my students’ desires to write and also to see what kind of writing they do outside the classroom (See Appendix A).
After each journaling session I always take time examine the students’ entries. For my inquiry, I used a checklist to evaluate the overall content of the journal. Through these frequent checks, I decided that the most optimal data collection for my inquiry would be from students that were clearly capable of creating wholesome journal entries. I was exploring a specific disconnect, so I truly felt that it would be both inconclusive and unfair to look at children that struggle with writing. I organized a subgroup for this specific study that consisted of four students.

Of these four students, one is in our highest reading group, one is in our high average and two are in our average group. Student K is a very verbal storyteller, constantly coming to school with an elaborate story to tell. She is very capable of writing and demonstrates her abilities consistently over a wide variety of written tasks. Student G is also a verbal storyteller who is also an excellent writer overall. Prior to first grade, he completed a series of stories about similar characters. Student P is a very interesting student that has a constant spark for learning. He is a very active participant in the daily classroom and although he sometimes struggles with beginning writing tasks, his verbal stories were always extremely detailed. Student A is a student that really loves to talk and share information about her personal life. She is a capable writer and detailed storyteller, however I never saw this detail echo into her writing tasks. I feel that each of these students brought something different to the table, however they all have one thing in common; they were all capable of writing and detail oriented in verbal storytelling. This specific data from my subgroup, allowed me to compare the support that I gave my students to the outcomes of that particular journaling day. I also interviewed students using specific evidence from their personal work.

**Student Interviews**

In order to see what my students thought of their journal writing, I recorded interviews using Garage Band. I interviewed the students in my subgroup to really draw out their feelings
on journaling. I was able to find out which journal entry my students chose as their best work, as well as find out what it meant to the students for something to be the absolute best. I also asked the students about their preferences of directions prior to journaling. These interviews also allowed me to clear up any confusion I had with particular students. I conducted the interviews immediately after or as closed to immediately after the journal writing session took place.

**Data Analysis**

*Station Observations*

Prior to beginning my inquiry, I sat down and observed my students as they worked on their journals. Time and time again, we would ask students to sit down and write about something that happened in their life recently, in the past, or in the future. I gave the children these very same instructions on February 19th (See Appendix B). I noticed that many children rushed through the writing process. Twelve out of twenty students made comments about being done, especially emphasizing the fact that they had three sentences or needed one more sentence to have three total. One of the members of my subgroup was actually “finished” with their journal after just four minutes passed by. The remaining three students in my subgroup all claimed to be finished once they had three sentences. I also noticed that five of the students in room 20 took at least five minutes to just attempt to begin their journal. Several children complained that they did not know what else to write. When I asked the children if they felt that they had details in their sentences, most of them either shrugged or answered with an unsteady yes.

In the beginning of the school year my mentor and I informed the students to of our expectations that they needed to have at least three sentences in every journal entry. The data above really drove me to question whether these restrictions hindered their journals. When I began to look at the students’ work I noticed many instances of times where students seemed to
put a sentence in to just reach the minimum of three. I worried that the students did not really take the time to think through their journals in an effort to display their best work. I wondered if students were rushing, just so that they could begin their picture.

**Parent Questionnaire**

Prior to selecting my subgroup, I sent a survey home about my students’ writing habits at home. Out of twenty surveys, thirteen were returned (See Appendix C). Many parents felt that there child’s writing behavior is situational, so many of the questions had more than one answer circled. Overall, in room 20, I found that a majority of children write once or more per day. This writing is primarily associated with homework, however a little less than half of the children surveyed choose to write on their own. Out of the thirteen children, ten seem to either really enjoy writing or sometimes enjoy writing.

All of the children in my subgroup returned a survey. Interestingly, three out of the four write once or more per day at home, while Student P writes once per week. Student P’s father also recorded that his son does not enjoy writing and that he usually only writes for his homework.

**Student Work Samples**

In order to find a baseline for my subgroup, I provided students with fifteen minutes where they were to write in their journal, without any of my support. As I moved forward with my inquiry, I began to test out different levels of teacher support during journal writing. I then compared this support to the content of the student’s journal entry. I began by introducing questioning, where I asked the students questions to help them expand their journal entry. From there I used one of the most interesting levels of support, prompting. I used prompting in three different fashions. The first time, I provided students with one prompt that they were required to write about. The second time I provided students with two different prompts and allowed them to choose which to write about. The third and fourth time, I provided students with three
prompts and continued to give them the ability to choose. In all four prompting situations, we brainstormed possible contents as a leveled reading group.

I found that the students produced more quality writing when a topic was provided for them. When the students were provided topics, yet had a choice between what to write about, they produce even higher quality journal entries (See Appendix D).

**Student Interviews**

After looking at all of the entries and exploring the growth that I was beginning to see, I realized that I still had a lot of questions. I knew what I had thought of the student's work, however I still did not know what they thought of their work. I conducted a lengthy interview with each individual student.

When asked to choose their best work, all four students chose one of the entries that was created out of a possible three prompts and involved a student choice to determine the topic (See Appendix E). Student P stated, “I chose this piece because I have capitals, periods, my neatest handwriting and at least three sentences.” I asked all four students why they chose the particular entry as their best work and every single child recited the expectations that my mentor and I provided in the beginning of the school year. Not a single student addressed the idea of stretching out sentences or even their entry in and of itself. This data showed me that the students were solely basing their success on mechanical issues.

I was also able to ask the students about their preferences in beginning their journal entries. Three out of the four students said they use the ideas that we brainstorm to make their writing better or to think of more sentences. Student G stated that it is sometimes challenging for him to get started, so he “likes the ideas for writing better” (referring to the prompts). The children all said they prefer to have a choice of ideas (prompts) versus having one prompt that all children must write about.
Student A willingly shared that she wants to write more when she likes the topic that she is writing about.

**Claims and Evidence**

**Claim 1:**

*First graders create more content rich journal entries when provided with a place to begin.*

*Teachers can effectively provide this place to begin by using prompts.*

**Evidence:**

Journal writing is a very valuable tool in all classrooms, however it can be frustrating if children are not putting their best work into their entries. I knew that certain students in my class were perfectly capable of creating content rich journal entries, yet I did not see those expectations met in their journals. When I sat down to examine the children while at the writing station, I noticed that quite a few of them had difficulty beginning their journal entry. I took this observation and decided to experiment with the use of prompts. I started small by just using one prompt, and then I moved onto the idea of providing three prompts and allowing the children to choose one to write about.

As I began to integrate prompting into journals, I noticed great improvement in my student’s writing samples. Looking at the data I collected, I began to notice how all of the children in my subgroup began to shift. The children shifted from having a dire need to add more for the reader to get the point, to a group of well thought out sentences that shared more than enough about the topic (See Appendix E). The most telling part of the chart I used to analyze, was the section where I filled in whether or not I felt the students stretched out the sentences and whether or not I felt they needed to add more sentences or clarification.

The prompting that I used with the children still allowed for children to have ownership over their journal and their journal entries. In the most successful cases (See Appendix F), the
children were able to choose their writing topic for the day, based on the three provided. The children began to write in their journal immediately and they produced entries in which they could definitely be proud of.

**Claim 2:**

*Children’s motivation to write increases when they feel as though they have a choice in writing.*

**Evidence:**

Based on the results of the parent survey, I directly saw that one of the members of my subgroup, Student P, did not enjoy writing. He would only write once per week while at home, and it typically only wrote for his homework. Student P’s work in his journal began as disappointing as the other children’s work in my subgroup. The work was quickly rushed through, with little detail, and errors throughout. As we stepped back and looked at his journal today, I am pleased to say that I believe he is on the right track for success in writing (See Appendix F). I noticed greater details and excitement within his journal. During the interview that I had with Student P, I learned that all of the pieces he was choosing between as his best work, were all pieces that had three choices of prompts. Student P shared his love for the topic, along with the motivation to succeed strongly based on choice. Motivation plays an important role within the writing process. As a teacher it is important to find a variety of topics and hand over the reigns to the students to decide.

**Claim 3:**

*A supportive environment can lessen the gap that lies between verbal storytellers and their ability to express ideas in written format.*
Evidence:

As I saw directly within my subgroup, some children enjoy writing and some do not. The same applies to storytelling; some children enjoy and excel in verbal storytelling, while others struggle. My question lied deep within the idea of details. I found that the students that excelled in verbal storytelling seemed to struggle in their ability to share the same great details in their writing. As I searched through my toolbox of ideas to help these students transfer their ideas into writing, I was shocked to find out the ease in the answer.

I began to notice the positive results from my subgroup by simply looking at the support that I provided during journal writing (See Appendix D). I always knew that brainstorming was an important part of the writing process, however I did not realize how unable my students are to do this for themselves. As soon as we brainstormed on the board and listed possible student-generated ideas, my subgroups writing began to improve. Student P, even commented, in his interview on the frequency in which he glances back to the board when stuck (See Appendix E). I am not saying that my subgroups writing was now perfect, I am concluding that the content level went up a notch immediately following a pre-brainstorming session. Children have wonderful input and love to have it up on the board. Although it may take a few more minutes to help children pre-plan, it is definitely worth it in the long run.

Reflections and Future Practice

Journal writing is a very important tool in classrooms of all grade levels. It can be used in various formats and for different purposes. Journal writing can be used for all subjects and disciplines, in both a formal and informal way. It can be an excellent way to differentiate both instruction and assessment. All in all, it is extremely important to discover what the goals are for journal writing prior to beginning it. It is essential to set children up for success and provide a support system, however still creating a challenging environment.
With that said, I am so glad that I have had the opportunity to look at the aspects of journal writing in first grade. I feel like I have formed a perspective on this learning tool, and I will continue to develop that perspective as I go. I have learned about the abilities of students and how you can emphasize and nurture them through the act of journaling. I have had such a positive experience in my own school and now as a teacher that I am sure I will continue to use journaling in my career. I hope to continue to use journaling in a variety of ways, to promote an even more positive learning environment.

**New Wonderings**

Unfortunately, I could not answer all of the questions I picked up throughout my inquiry, however hopefully I will have time to address them in the future. Some of the questions that I continue to ponder are:

- Was this improvement that I saw just a developmental improvement, being that it spanned over several months?
- Could the journals that we use for journaling affect the products that we receive from the children?
- Could children come up with their own prompts to bring in front of the classroom?
- How could sharing journals increase content of journals?
- What is the most appropriate and effective way to respond to journal entries, for both teacher and student?
Appendix A

Name: ___________________________(optional)

Please circle the answer that best fits your child’s writing habits at home. If you have any further comments in regards to these statements, please feel free to write them next to the statement!

1. My child usually writes…
   once or more per day.  a few times per week.  once a week.  rarely.

2. When my child writes at home…
   it is usually because I ask them to.
   it is usually because he or she chooses on his or her own to write.
   it is usually associated with homework.
   it varies. Please explain: ___________________________________________________

3. I believe that my child…
   really enjoys writing.
   sometimes enjoys writing.
   is indifferent about writing.
   does not enjoy writing.

4. What topic(s) does your child seem the most interested in when it comes to writing?

5. Would you be willing to answer more questions based on your child’s writing at home?

Thank you so much for your time!
Appendix B

Excerpts from Observation of Writing Station
February 19, 2008
Journals

Directions: “Please open up to your next blank page in your journal. You need to write about something in your life. It could be something that happened this weekend or in the past or it could be something that you have planned.”

**Blue Group**
- “I don’t know what to write about”
- “I just need one more sentence”
- Student took 5 minutes to begin
- One student reading another students entry over shoulder (added more to own after looking)

**Yellow Group**
- “Why are there more lines in the back of the journal than the front?”
- “I’m done” (after only 4 minutes into station!!)
- “I have 3 sentences already” (one student to another)
- “You only need three sentences” (one student to another)
- Student talking and not even beginning journal- 5 minutes have passed

**Orange Group**
- Took 7 minutes for one student to even think of what she could write about

**Green Group**
- “Can I start my picture, I have 3 sentences done?”
- Teacher asked: Are you sure you have everything you would like to include?
  Student: “Yes, see 1, 2, 3” (pointing to the three sentences, did not read them over…one was actually repeating the first sentence)

**Red Group**
- “Am I done?” (student asked teacher)
- Student looking around, not beginning work [Teacher redirects to begin work], student response: “but I don’t know what to do”

**Amount of children that said “I’m done”** (or something to that nature)
Abcdefghijkl => 12 children!
Appendix C

Name: ___________________________(optional)

Please circle the answer that best fits your child’s writing habits at home. If you have any further comments in regards to these statements, please feel free to write them next to the statement!

1. My child usually writes…

once or more per day. a few times per week. once a week. rarely.

9 2 2 0

2. When my child writes at home…

it is usually because I ask them to.

2

it is usually because he or she chooses on his or her own to write.

5

it is usually associated with homework.

3

it varies. Please explain: depending on situation- Homework, writing cards, on own

8

3

3. I believe that my child…

really enjoys writing.

5

sometimes enjoys writing.

5

is indifferent about writing.

1

does not enjoy writing.

2

4. What topic(s) does your child seem the most interested in when it comes to writing?

Varied greatly

5. Would you be willing to answer more questions based on your child’s writing at home?

Irrelevant

Thank you so much for your time!
## Appendix D

### Student Work Samples Data

**Teacher Support Key:**
- **Baseline:** No direct teacher support
- **Questioning:** Teacher support through clarifying questions after students wrote in journals

1. **Prompt:** Teacher/student/leveled reading group, group brainstorming BEFORE students began to write, ideas listed on white board
2. **Prompt:** Teacher/student/leveled reading group, group brainstorming BEFORE students began to write, ideas listed on white board
3. **Prompt(s):** Teacher/student/leveled reading group, group brainstorming BEFORE students began to write, ideas listed on white board

### Student A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline (02/20)</th>
<th>Questioning (02/27)</th>
<th>1 Prompt (03/04)</th>
<th>2 Prompt w/ Choice (03/08)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (03/25)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (04/01)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong># of Sentences</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 1/2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ability to Stretch</strong></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Need to add sentences</strong></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comments</strong></td>
<td>Never tells any details of party</td>
<td>“I was sick on the weekend.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Did not completely finish</td>
<td>Beginning to add details, not finished</td>
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### Student G

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<th>Baseline (02/20)</th>
<th>Questioning (02/27)</th>
<th>1 Prompt (03/04)</th>
<th>2 Prompt w/ Choice (03/08)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (03/25)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (04/01)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ability to Stretch</strong></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Need to add sentences</strong></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comments</strong></td>
<td>Does not tell much about lego set</td>
<td>Pretty detailed, B-M-E, no questions formed</td>
<td>Use of because, Great describing words</td>
<td>Never tells what you can do with toy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
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### Student K

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<th>2 Prompt w/ Choice (03/08)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (03/25)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (04/01)</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to Stretch</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to add sentences</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>Doesn’t tell anything about Tussey</td>
<td>Repetitive about going with family</td>
<td>Lots of details about elephants</td>
<td>Because in one sentence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Details being added, more stretching with because, did not finish</td>
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### Student P

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<th>Baseline (02/20)</th>
<th>Questioning (02/27)</th>
<th>1 Prompt (03/04)</th>
<th>2 Prompt w/ Choice (03/08)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (03/25)</th>
<th>3 Prompt w/ Choice (04/01)</th>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to add sentences</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>“It was fun playing.”</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Lots of details</td>
<td>Never tells what you can do with toy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>So much detail about Christmas, using because</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Appendix E

Excerpt from Transcript of Student Interviews
April 2, 2008

M= Me
SA= Student A
SP= Student P
SG= Student G

M: Today we are going to pick out your absolute best work in your journal. I would like you to look just at the recent work in our journals.
SA: I pick this one.
(Picks a choice piece, even it is not finished)
M: Why did you pick that piece?
SA: I don’t know I just like it.
M: What do you like about it?
SA: I don’t know.
M: When you came to table 3, did you like having your topic given to you, a few topics that you can choose from, or did you like to just freely write?
SA: What do you mean? Oh, I mean I like the choices.
M: Are you sure?
SA: Nodding head.
M: What do you like about having a choice? Why do you like it better?
SA: I just do. I like when I like the choices I am writing about.
M: What do you do when you are stuck?
SA: I stretch my sentences.

M: Today we are going to pick out your absolute best work in your journal. I would like you to look just at the recent work in our journals.
SP: Hm, I think I like this one.
(Picks choice piece about Christmas)
M: Why is it the best? Why did you choose that piece over the others?
SP: Well, I chose it because I have capitals, periods, my neatest handwriting and at least three sentences.
M: Okay, any other reasons?
SP: No.
M: What do you do when you are stuck?
SP: I sound it out.
M: Does that help you with ideas?
SP: No I just look on the board if I need it.
M: Do you like it better when there is already a topic to write about when you get to the stations or do you like to write freely?
SP: I like a choice (?)
M: Why?
P: Shrugs shoulders.
M: Would you say that it is easy, medium, or challenging for you to get started with your journal?
SG: What?
M: When you come to station 3 and sit down is it usually easy for you to get started, somewhat easy and somewhat challenging for you to get started, or is it very challenging?
SG: Um, I think it is pretty challenging.
M: What do you think makes it challenging for you?
SG: Sometimes I can’t think of ideas. I like the ideas for writing better.
M: So you have liked the past few days when I give you options of what to write in your journal?
SG: Yes.
M: Do you like it better when there are a few options or do you like it better when there is just one option?
SG: A few, I think.
My favorite place is Lego Land.

Because it has lots of Legos. There are huge sections made out of Legos. Every thing is made out of Legos.
Holly Cedro  
Inquiry Brief  
Due: February 27, 2008

Inquiry Brief

Context:

I am currently an intern in the Professional Development School Program, a partnership that exists between Penn State University and the local State College Area School District. I am one of three adults in a self-contained first grade classroom.

Our class is made up a diverse group of students with differing learning abilities and backgrounds. Out of the twenty bright children in room 20, eleven are female and nine are male. The majority of our students are six years old, turning seven in 2008. We have six students that turned seven years old in 2007.

For reading and language arts, the students are broken up into five groups based on ability. We have five students in our highest group, three in our high average group, five in our average group, five in our lower average group, and two students in our lowest group. The two students in our lowest group are currently receiving Title I support. In order to promote the most successful and productive learning environment, the students participate in whole-class writer’s workshop at least one time each week, with the remaining four days devoted to language workshop stations.

In the language workshop stations, the students filter through five different stations with their reading and language arts group. An adult always runs three of the five stations, with an occasional parent volunteer supporting the other two stations. Our paraprofessional is responsible for the word study station based on the *Words Our Way* text series. The head teacher facilitates the guided reading station and I, as the student teacher, work with the students at the writing station.

Rationale:

I have been working with the students at the writing station since the second week of school. I have noticed great improvements in the writing of all of the children in room 20, however their creativity and imagination within their writing has reached a plateau. When I speak in terms of creativity and imagination, I am referring to the students’ ability to take an event and expand upon it. The students use their
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journals as a way to discuss and share events that are occurring in their lives, however their writing seems to lack that spark. Their journals lack details, especially those important to the actual entry. The students state their awareness of stretching sentences and expanding ideas, however it solemnly transfers to their actual writing pieces. I constantly hear students yell out, “I’m done,” or “I only have one sentence left, then I will have three and be finished.” Sometimes these comments even come after only five minutes of writing. I am beginning to question whether the expectations that we set for our students are hindering their ability their ideas. Students seemed to be so focused on having three sentences that they will even write unrelated sentences just to be “done.”

We have also had days of language workshop solely based on stretching sentences. We have completed stretch it tasks in groups and also individually. The students are really great at recognizing a sentence that needs to be stretched out, and they also have interesting details to add. Again, however, I do not see this transfer into their individual writing tasks.

As a result of my observations, I have found myself brainstorming several ways to remind students of these expectations. I have tried questioning their editing by using both specific points and general ideas, however it can be difficult to do this with each individual student on a daily basis. I have also tried making a checklist for students to use before they say that they are done. The checklist can be effective, however the students do not always utilize it. These strategies work in the moment, but there are little instances where I see the students remembering the ideas on their own.

After continuing to brainstorm ideas, I have come to an idea that I really feel my students, as well as myself, will enjoy. Our students seem to really enjoy sharing with their peers and their teachers. I see this frequently with our daily news sign up. Students get very upset when they forget to sign up for news or if we, as the teachers, forget to put a sign up sheet on the board. After a student shares news, a significant amount of our students seem interested. Their interest is clearly evident through the presence of hands eagerly waving in the air with a related question.

In looking at the benchmarks for first grade, I have found that many benchmarks are based around building content. For writing assessments, a large portion of the score is based on content, while the other small portion is designated to mechanics.

Taking the benchmarks, my attempts at getting students to stretch out writing, and the students’ delight in sharing with one another, I have formed my wondering. Can the questioning that we use during sharing of news be used in language
workshop? Can this questioning help my students expand the content in their journals?

I believe that this can benefit my students because it is more of a peer-to-peer interaction than a teacher-to-student. I think this interaction continues to grow as students get into higher grades. I wonder if it will set my students up for success in giving feedback in the future. I am also wondering if this will help children to question their own work as they write.

Overall, this can really help my students to begin to analyze their writing and the writing of others. As a teacher I can benefit from this increased independence.

**Wondering:**

How can I improve the overall content of journal writing that occurs in my first grade classroom?

**Sub-questions:**

- What changes will I see in my student’s writing with the implementation of an “Author’s Chair?”
- Will students benefit from giving other students feedback?
- Will peer sharing increase overall motivation to write?
- Can first graders give thoughtful feedback?
- How can students format their feedback so that it does not hurt the author’s feelings?

**Timeline:**

*February*
(weeks 3 and 4)
- Find out how students feel about writing at station 3, writing in their journals, and writer’s workshop
- Look through journals and writing activities-> make observations of quality and patterns
- Inquire parent’s input on their child’s interest in writing
- Find time for “Author’s Chair” and peer sharing
- Introduce “Author’s Chair”

*March*
- Continue looking at journals-> any improvements?
- Continue “Author’s Chair” and peer sharing
- Again, find out how students feel about writing at station 3, writing in their journals and writer’s workshop (week 2 and 3)
- Begin analyzing data

April
- Inquire parent’s input, again, on child’s interest in writing (week 1)
- Prepare paper (week 2 and 3)
- Work on presentation
- Continue “Author’s Chair” and peer sharing (through the end of the school year)

Data Collection Ideas:

- What changes will I see in my student’s writing with the implementation of an “Author’s Chair?”
  - Look at student writing samples (journals, writer’s workshop stories, spelling work)-> look for patterns and improvements
- Will students benefit from giving other students feedback?
  - Garfield survey for students (2-3 times)
  - Interview children
- Will peer sharing increase overall motivation to write?
  - Survey for parents (at least 2 times)
  - Interview children
  - Overall observation of station
- Can first graders give thoughtful feedback?
  - Overall observation of station
- How can students format their feedback so that it does not hurt the author’s feelings?
  - Overall observation of station
  - Garfield survey
Appendix H

Holly Cedro
Annotated Bibliography
Due: February 13, 2008

Annotated Bibliography


This webpage is very interesting and insightful. It is actually geared toward using peer review at a collegiate level, however I found of valuable information that could be reworked for primary grade levels. This webpage really lays out the importance of peer review, as well as ways in which feedback forms can be developed. I was really drawn in to this website’s idea of setting down ground rules for feedback. It suggested that teachers sit down and talk to students about what kind of feedback they would like to receive and how. This idea seemed really relevant to my classroom and the Responsive Classroom outlook that both my teacher and I take on. I think this is a very interesting suggestion and I would definitely consider using this in my inquiry.


This book introduces teachers to the idea of an “Author’s Chair.” It further explains that this is a chance for children’s work to be celebrated. An important aspect that this book brings up is that the “Author’s Chair” should be used for finished or published work that has been rehearsed. It also introduces the idea of having this activity at a specific time each day, in which students sign up for slots. This book shares that this is a great way to encourage students to write and revise. Another idea that this book brings up is “Authors Circle.” This activity is somewhat like peer conferences. An interesting aspect of this activity, however, is that students would come with specific questions of how to improve their work. I really love the idea of an “Author’s Chair.” I think that this source brings up great considerations when using this activity. I like the name “Author’s Circle,” however I am not sure that my students would be able to come up with their own questions for improvement.

(C. Isola, personal communication, February 2008)

Cheryl Isola is a kindergarten teacher at Radio Park Elementary School. In her classroom she facilitates a sharing time, where students can share their work with their peers. She also has a system of feedback for her kindergartners to use. I am interesting in learning
more about her feedback system. I would like to find out how she introduced this system, as well as the positive and negative effects that she has observed as a result of this feedback system.


This is a study completed by a Professor of Language Education at the University of Georgia. This study is aimed at looking at the social world’s importance in a child’s writing, more specifically their peers. This study also examines a free sharing, with little feedback and structure. It is very interesting to see the outcomes of a sharing like in the study. I think it is helpful for me to consider the social context in my classroom, especially if I consider using the sharing in a whole-class format.


A teacher wrote this particular journal. She wrote this journal because started to notice that her children did not like writing. She thought that she needed to start to move them from emergent writing to conventional writing. Maria began to implement this idea into her classroom and came up with the activity of sending Babar, a stuffed elephant, home with a student. The student would then be required to write about their experiences with Babar. She also created a dialogue journal for the students to write back and forth with their parents. Maria would provide her students with ideas as to what they could write to their parents. The students were then able to share the dialogue that was written between them and their parents. She created an “Author’s Chair” for her students to use when sharing. This journal really interested me at first because of the idea of the “Author’s Chair.” I was also interested because I realized that Maria’s idea with Babar is similar to something that we do in room 20 with “Little Bear.” This journal helped me to begin thinking about other ways to integrate the “Author’s Chair.”

Please reread this paragraph.


This is actually an online book through Google. This book is a great resource for really laying out the idea of “Author’s Chair.” There is strong emphasis on the modeling that
must take place prior to allowing the children to participate. This book also tells of what works when using an “Author’s Chair” in the classroom. There are many strategies for the teacher, the author, and the audience. I really liked the bulleted list that lists the positive results of using the “Author’s Chair.” I felt that this source was very in-depth with actual dialogue woven throughout the strategies. This book really boosted my confidence in bringing this activity into our classroom.


This journal really stressed the importance of sharing even at a first grade level. It presents sharing as introducing children to the beginning ideas of an audience. This journal also shares that this is not only a time for the students to listen to others, but also a time in which students can participate in purposeful dialogue with one another. Both the author and the audience can benefit from this dialogue. I really liked this portion of this journal because I think it does a great job emphasizing the importance of sharing. I immediately thought of future experiences that students might have with exchanging dialogue in regards to literature. I think that this is a very valuable place to start. I also really liked how this article created an “Author’s Day” for students to share pieces. I could definitely see this as an extension to my inquiry that could really involve the parents and the greater community.


This is actually a paper that was written by a 3rd grade teacher-researcher, who was looking at the effects of having peers as an audience for writer’s workshop. Tim Lensmire wrote and presented this paper at the National Reading Conference in San Antonio, TX in 1992. Interestingly, he found two very differing responses to peer audiences. He found a very positive ‘social energy’ as he called it, however he also found that a peer audience sometimes amounted to teasing and conflict within the classroom. This paper really opened up my eyes to the negative aspects of my inquiry. I think that this paper could really help me to set expectations for sharing writing, as well as developing a system of feedback that will ensure positive energy.


This book provides insight into a writing activity called whole-class share. Whole-class share is a conferencing technique that can be used between teacher and child, while the other students look on and eventually give feedback. Routman explains that she uses this
technique, where only she will give feedback to begin with, until students are ready to productively give feedback. She also stresses the importance of being heavy on praise especially with beginning writers. I really like this writing activity. I feel that it would be a great way to model giving feedback prior to children engaging in peer-to-peer feedback. This idea reminded me a lot of a fishbowl that is geared towards giving feedback.


This book provides teachers with an understanding of where to expect students to be at specific ages. There is a whole section devoted to reading and writing, as well as thematic units. Another section is included on social-emotional behavior. It is interesting and helpful to see the progression of areas from six years old to seven years old. This resource will help me to assess whether or not my expectations and activities are feasible for my first graders’ developmental level.