**Publication within a Writing Workshop as an Effective Strategy to Increase Student Motivation, Engagement and Achievement in Primary Education**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of giving students a purpose for writing by publishing their work and utilizing the writing workshop strategy to determine if this has a positive effect on student motivation, engagement and quality. Common core standards are being implemented across the country in the next several years, and the emphasis on writing is essential for young students in primary grades. Writing is a daunting task for many students; this study analyzes the relationship between publication and students’ motivation to engage in the writing process again. A sub group of twelve students were selected from all academic levels to analyze motivation and engagement, a writing rubric was used to score all published work for quality. The results showed an increase in positive attitude towards writing overall. Surprisingly, struggling students showed more significant positive gains in attitude and motivation. The quality of all students’ writing increased but could not be credited solely to publication; but may be accounted for by the normal development growth of second grade students. Further research into publication in the primary grades is needed to determine the effects publishing has on quality.

**INTRODUCTION TO STUDY**

As a young student, I was extremely introverted and rarely participated in classroom activities. I was motivated to complete my work and looked towards achievement to measure my success, but I didn’t find my voice in an educational setting until middle-school. It was during middle-school that a seventh grade professional educator guided me through the writing process and helped give my introverted personality a voice with expression and ideas. Looking back, I felt alone and afraid of expressing myself verbally amongst my peers because my teachers had not worked to build a community within the walls of my classrooms and lacked the ability to relate to my personality. Writing not only helped me find my identity, but writing also became the driving force behind my academic success.

Now as a novice teacher learning to guide myself through teaching elementary students, I find students are not embracing writing as I once had. They struggle through the process with a lack of motivation and engagement in their own learning, which saddened me. This sparked my interest in giving young students a voice and sense of authorship, but it was within the context of my classroom that I developed the inspiration to make writing for publication through a writer’s workshop environment the center of my action research. Shagoury and Powers (2012) relate teacher research as a learning tool for growth of students in all capacities as well as the teacher researcher. Being a teacher researcher has given me the opportunity to observe and reflect on students’ needs. Upon reflection, I saw a significant need to help my students become comfortable with the writing process, and gain much needed writing skills in a engaging environment.

After conducting some observations of students in the writing process, I noticed students were struggling to stay engaged in the writing process and lost motivation to complete the activities. One of the standards for second grade is letter writing. We conducted a mini lesson on writing a letter, and gave students lined paper in the format of a letter and let them independently write. The quality of the writing was poor and students were not engaged in the process. My mentor teacher did some research and found an address to Walt Disney World where the students could write letters to their favorite characters and receive an autographed signed portrait in return. The students were excited about the opportunity to write and I saw an intrinsic motivation to revise and edit their work that I hadn’t previously seen. By giving the students a meaningful purpose for writing, we also saw engagement in the form of consistent focus, verbal participation in editing and revising, and excitement to complete the task. At the start of the school year, my mentor teacher and I had good intentions and developed a plan to implement a writer’s workshop in our second grade classroom; however a key component was missing. We were not giving the students a chance to share and publish their work on a regular basis. During previous writing workshop tasks, the students would willingly write but grumbled through process and needed constant encouragement to edit and revise their work. After doing some research, I realized there was no clear goal or objective for the students to envision which made their writing meaningless and poor in quality.

**Demographics**

This study takes place in a general education second grade classroom in a small town, rural school in Northern California. The school was built in 1939 and was one of the first schools built in the area (California Department of Education, 2013). The area continues to grow rapidly with families living in poverty. In fact 94.1% of the student body population is considered socioeconomically disadvantaged with 97% of the students being on a free and reduced lunch program according to the school accountability report card(CDE, 2013). Fifty-seven point five percent of the school’s population is considered Hispanic/Latino and 55.5 % are English language learners (CDE, 2013). In the general education second grade classroom where this action research takes place there are 24 students; 14 female and 10 male. Fourteen of the 24 students are English language learners with a variety of CELDT scores. CELDT scores range from 1-5 in four different categories: Listening, speaking, reading and writing. The overall span across all of the CELDT categories within the classroom is as follows:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **# of Students at Each CELDT Level in Different Modalities** | | | | | |
| **Score Level** | **Listening** | **Speaking** | **Reading** | **Writing** | **Overall** |
| Beginning | 2 |  | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Early Intermediate | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Intermediate | 2 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 4 |
| Early Advanced | 4 | 8 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Advanced | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |

Out of the 14 English language learners writing was the weak point for eight of the students. Six of the 24 students are on an SST or IEP, with 2 of those students repeating second grade this year. In addition two of the six participate in class intervention time with a special education professional. The variety of students within this classroom poses a challenge that may require supplementary instructional scaffolding.

**Relevance /Purpose**

The American education system has failed to reach its potential for growth and development because it has been unsuccessful in putting emphasis on language and communication in writing as a priority in the classroom (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Learning how to write well with value and purpose is not only essential for success in school but for effective participation in a professional environment and a rewarding social life (Graham, et al, 2012). Throughout a child’s academic years, students are expected to carry out a variety of classroom assignments and excel on standardize testing which incorporates open ended questions and essay (Jasmine& Weiner, 2007). The skills of writing are essential in order to be a functioning member of our society and academic endeavors; therefore, it is surprising that writing is not viewed as a necessary component of primary education particularly in kindergarten through third grade classroom environments. In Jasmine and Weiner’s (2007) research, they state elementary educators fall short on teaching writing skills because of the belief that lower primary aged students lack the ability to participate in the writing process. Therefore, by not instilling the belief in students at a young age that they can be successful at writing could be detrimental to their future confidence as writers (Graham, et al, 2012; Jasmine& Weiner, 2007).

As an examination of the effects of Kindergarten through third grade primary education, students participating in a writing workshop were assessed in order to determine whether the workshop was an effective strategy to increase student motivation and knowledge about the writing process. Educators in those early formative grades tend to remain at the drafting stage of the writing process with young students due to the fact that editing, revising, and conferences can be difficult to manage (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Graham, et al, 2012). However, with the implementation of common core standards, educators need to develop a technique for teaching the writing process from a young age. Due to this implementation, students will be expected to perform short answer responses on high stakes tests. Therefore, establishing foundational writing skills will be crucial for young students to acquire so they can complete assessments to the best of their abilities.

Research indicates that a classroom structured around the writing workshop model and that includes publication of the student’s work should allow the educator to effectively guide students’ motivation and engagement which will enhance their skills in writing(Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Graham, et al, 2012). A multitude of studies have been conducted on upper elementary and middle school middle class classrooms, but few studies have been conducted within populations with high representations of low socio-economic status student and English language learners. The purpose of this study is to analyze student motivation and engagement during writer's workshop sessions when students have a clear goal-oriented objective to publish their work for an audience of their peers, parents, and/or school faculty in the context of second grade classroom. This study will also evaluate whether or not giving students a purpose for their writing will increase students' writing as it pertains to the second grade common core standards.

**Question**

*What are the effects of publication on students’ motivation, engagement and achievement in writing?*

The study aligns with my personal philosophy on teaching because in my eyes, the purpose of education is to bring out each student’s physical, intellectual and social development by guiding students through hands-on activities that support higher order thinking so that all students gain confidence in their own potential. Through a combination of scaffolding students with the principles of Lev Vgotsky’s Socio-Cultural Theory and constructivism, students will work through activities of their choice that allow them to think critically in diverse groupings. This study provides insight for educators who value the principles of those theories and are interested in implementing a writer’s workshop into their primary education classroom.

The writing workshop atmosphere is based on constructivist ideals, where students create their own learning. Constructivism is an educational [learning theory](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Learning_theory_%28education%29) that is based on an approach to teaching that values student-initiated and student directed learning (Slavin, 2005). Throughout this process, the teacher plays a supporting role in student learning. It is built on the belief that when we encounter something new, we look to our past experiences to find meaning in the new material. Hence, we take these past experiences, and reflect on them in order to make connections. Then, they use these connections to solve more complex problems. Essentially, we are actively creating our own knowledge by participating in guided hands-on activities to find answers to more complex problems. Students in the general education classroom where this study takes place have been participating in a writer’s workshop time, where mini-lessons were conducted and journal writing took place. The students will be able to use those past experiences to make connections to the importance of writing quality, as we implement publication within the process.

Constructivism is closely tied to Vgotsky’s socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes that every individual learns first on a social level and then on an individual level. The interaction between the young learner and their cultural environment is largely responsible for their high order thinking (Gallagher, 1999). The writer’s workshop strategy provides a culturally rich environment for students to be fully focused on academic writing with support of peers and teachers. Vygotsky believed that not only do adults and peers greatly influence individual learning, but also, their cultural beliefs and attitudes affect the way we learn (Gallagher, 1999). By making writing and publication a central focus in the classroom community, students will be geared towards high order thinking as they make decisions about their writing. According to Vygotsky for the curriculum to be developmentally appropriate, the teacher must plan activities that encompass not only what children are capable of doing on their own, but what they can learn with the help of other (Slavin, 2005). By thoroughly planning mini-lessons and writing activities for the students based on common core standards, they will have access to developmentally appropriate skills in a social environment where interaction with their peers and teacher are strongly encouraged.

**Literature Review**

The purpose of the study is to analyze whether the writing workshop strategy is an effective technique in primary education to increase student motivation and knowledge of the writing process. The writing workshop is an interactive approach to writing instruction, which takes students through the significance of drafting, revising, editing, sharing and publication (Calkins, 1994). Common core standards will be implemented across the country in the next several years, and the emphasis on writing is essential to young students in primary grades. Initially this literature review takes you through the writing workshop components. Then, it looks at the importance of student engagement on present and future learning. It also addresses how self-determination theory relates to the workshop strategy to increase motivation seen by researchers who implemented the writer’s workshop into a classroom setting. Then this literature review speaks to why publication of student work is essential and becomes the vehicle for which motivation and engagement in writing is obtained. Lastly, it takes you through the positive results seen by shifting to a writer’s workshop within the classroom. Overall, all research studies examined showed a positive effect on student knowledge and motivation to write after being engaged in the writer’s workshop technique.

**Components of the Writing Workshop**

The three major factors of a writing workshop are a mini-lesson, independent writing, and publication/sharing time (Calkins, 1994). When teachers and students work together to implement elements of a writer’s workshop into the classroom, then they are essentially building a writing community (Ray, 2001; Myers & Pough, 2002; Calkins, 1994).Mini-lessons focus on teaching the students one aspect of writing. They are usually 20 minutes in nature and go over the skills with which students tend to struggle. Examples of mini-lessons in primary grades(i.e. Kindergarten through third grade) may include capitalization, correct punctuation, and the rules of grammar (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). Another important aspect of the mini-lesson is modeling the attributes of an author and the thinking process that goes into writing. The teacher could draft a letter to a friend in front of the students and think aloud, so the students understand what normally occurs internally for experienced writers (Graham, et al, 2012).

The final process of the writer’s workshop is giving students time to share and publish their work, which gives the young students a purpose and meaning to their writing. Students who are published authors will regard themselves in a new light and this will give them a perspective and energy to move through the writing process again (Calkins, 1994). Their work needs to hold value and self ownership; publication is the key to obtaining those values. In order to develop students’ self-confidence many teachers in primary education have a time for sharing called an author’s chair. During the author’s chair, teachers encourage students to practice giving kind but constructive feedback about their peers writing (Graham, et al, 2012; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007;Nolen, 2007;Myers & Pough, 2002). While the students are collaborating and sharing ideas, there are opportunities for the teacher to conduct individual conferences and participate in the feedback process. The National Center for Evaluation and Regional Assistance found that when students provide constructive feedback and assess the writing of their peers they begin to understand their own writing skills (Graham, et al, 2012). This is an essential component of learning how to write in lower primary grades.

**Student Engagement**

Motivation and engagement are often used interchangeably in research studies; however for the purpose of this study they are not synonymous. Motivation is the driving force behind the intentions to complete the work. In elementary education, motivation often comes from the teacher directing students’ attitudes and implementing time limits in which to complete the work. Engagement on the other hand dives deeper and looks at students’ behavioral involvements within the structure of the academic activity (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2009). There are many definitions of engagement throughout education research, but the realm of engagement encompasses the student’s behavioral actions, effort and persistence to complete academic activities as well as their emotional status during these activities (Skinner, Wellborn, Connell, 1990). The characteristics of engagement are often describes as positive body language, constant focus, active participation, student confidence, and enthusiasm about activity (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004). Decades of researchers looking at student engagement have made extensive connections between student engagement and student achievement. They found that student engagement is a strong predictor of academic achievement throughout their educational career, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or gender (Klem& Connell, 2004). In fact, J.D Finn(1993) studied 8th grade students who were deemed at-risk for ending their academic endeavors and discovered that at risk behaviors have links to their elementary education.

The first steps to building an engaged student body within your classroom is for the teacher to demonstrate a deeper ability to care and be involved in their everyday activities (Klem & Connell, 2004). Relating to your students impacts their daily lives and enhances not only their engagement but motivation as well. Students also require a sense of ownership with the work assigned and have a deeper understanding of its relevance (Klem and Connell, 2004). A writer’s workshop atmosphere allows the teacher to build an engaged student body because it is a socially interactive process between the teacher and the student as well as the student and his/her peers. By incorporating a mode of publication and giving students time to work through the writing process in a safe environment, students feel a sense of ownership over their work. When students have an awareness of the writing process with publication in mind, they feel empowered. This empowerment gives them motivation to move forward through the process (Martin, Segraves, Thacker, Young, 2005).

**Motivation to Write**

By the time students are in upper elementary and middle school years, they often resent the writing process. Teachers will hear generalized comments like “I don’t know what to do or write about” and “I don’t like writing” (Myers & Pough, 2002; Jasmine& Weiner, 2007). These comments suggest that students lack the motivation to write because writing was not a purposeful engaging activity where meaning was given to the writing process. In the past, writing was not taught and modeled for students but assigned and corrected (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). Above all, reading and writing are powerful subjects to enhance motivation because the content and activities of literacy are social in nature (Nolen, 2007). Motivation to perform an activity in an educational setting can produce growth and development within the subject area when it is administered within a social context. The social atmosphere allows students the chance to fulfill their basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy, which are all components of Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan’s self-determination theory

( 2000).

The writing workshop focuses on three major components which build up these psychological needs in order to enhance student motivation towards the activities. These three components are: Competence, Relatedness, and Autonomy. Competence involves understanding how to apply knowledge of the material being presented and putting it into action, which would entail applying the technique from the mini-lesson of the writing workshop into a more concrete form. Relatedness involves making the connections between the material and the outcome in a social context (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 2000). Sharing your work as part of an author’s chair will help develop this aspect of the self determination theory. The final piece of the self determination theory on student motivation is autonomy. Autonomy refers to the student being able to self regulate their own actions after gaining competence and relatedness (Deci, et al, 2000). According to the research these processes produce a higher quality of knowledge and comprehension of the material, as well as an improved sense of personal growth ( Deci, et al,2000).

**Publication**

Authors go through the writing process with the end goal of publication. It is the most productive driving force for motivation and engagement in the writing process (Calkins, 1994; Angeletti, 1993). Students struggling to learn how to read and write need to be provided with opportunities to write for a purpose and an authentic audience in order to gain skills and fluency in both academic areas (Nolen, 2007). In a classroom atmosphere where a writer’s workshop is implemented, young students have those opportunities to gain fluency because they are developing the skills necessary to become fluent by engaging in the writing process. The writing workshop environment allows the students to work through the entire writing process with their own words and this creates a sense of ownership. In order to engage in the process, students must take ownership of their words, and know the process is meaningful (Kieczkowski, 1996). This shows that sharing and publication become the central motivating elements within the writer’s workshop.

All authors labor through the writing process for the end gratification of publication and seeing their words in print. However, publication is not the culminating project at the end of challenging process but the beginning of a love affair that instills the belief and self awareness that we are authors (Calkins, 1994). In fact, Lucy Calkins recalls in her book “The Art of Teaching Writing” that it was not the writing process that made her feel like a writer but the moment that her writing was published which made her feel like an inside into authorship (Calkins, 1994). Young students need to feel valued in all aspect of academics and writing is no different. Publication is the first step toward creating a student with automaticity, self- determination and confidence in their own abilities (Calkins, 1994; Deci, et al, 2000). Publishing students’ work creates a deeper motivation to accept the challenge of laboring through the writing process and it enhances their basic language arts skill (Chikah, 1999).

**The Results of Using the Writing Workshop in the Classroom**

An educational setting is set up as an opportunistic way for students to interact within the decision process and actively inquire in educational activities. When it comes to writing, it is essential to work towards creating a community within your classroom in which writing is seen as an important social act, and being a writer is a vital characteristic to possess (Nolen, 2007). In order to obtain quality results from implementing a writer’s workshop format into your classroom, students should understand the vision of the writing community and have access to opportunities in which all students can become proficient writers (Nolen, 2007; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007).

The writer’s workshop model provides the structure necessary to create a community by generating a shared understanding of the writing process and the social roles within the writing community (Nolen, 2007; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Myers & Pough, 2002). Nolen (2007) noted in her three year longitudinal mixed method study of 67 children in primary grades 1-3 that students needed to be provided with elements of support, voice and a purpose in order to develop their identity as a writer (2007). In the longitudinal 3 year study by Nolan, there were two teachers of the same grade level who taught writing differently. Although both were fairly effective in structure, the attitudes and motivation in the students desire to write were very different. One teacher implemented the writer’s workshop model, and the other incorporated strong elements of the writing process into her writing instruction. The teacher who implemented a writer’s workshop model had a significant increase in motivation attributed to the fact that students were writing for the purpose of publication to share with peers, family, as well as their teacher (Nolen, 2007). For struggling writers, the teachers needed to go further and provide authentic real world reasons to write, as well as to provide the encouraging and supportive social structure within which they could work (Nolen, 2007). She also attributed the writer’s workshop strategies used in heightening the awareness of writing as an important part of social life and gave the students opportunities to improve their competence, self determination, self-expression and intrinsic motivation ( Deci, et al, 2000) (Nolen, 2007).

Although Jasmine and Weiner (2007) saw a significant increase in student motivation and confidence when using the writing workshop model in the classroom, their study focused on improving the students’ skills and ability to become independent writers. Their research showed that after the students had participated in the writer’s workshop for 3 months they felt more comfortable and familiar with the writing process and could independently work on developing their ideas (Jasmine and Weiner, 2007). The key finding in their study was that as the students progressed and become more confident in their writing ability they went from making generic statements such as “I can’t think of what to write” and “I have nothing to say” to working during free play on their journals (Jasmine and Weiner, 2007;Myers & Pough, 2002; Nolen, 2007). Additionally, Myers and Pough (2002) saw a significant transformation of their third grade students after implementing the writer’s workshop strategy into their prospective classrooms. The increase in enthusiasm contributed to the overall atmosphere within the classroom, as students saw their writing skills improve. The shift in paradigm was essential to improving and engaging their students in the writing process (Myers & Pough, 2002).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the literature review was to explore whether the writing workshop strategy was effective in helping students gain knowledge about the writing process while increasing motivation and engagement for writing during the publication stage. The writing workshop strategy provides many opportunities for students in primary education to excel and become familiar with the writing process of planning, drafting, revising, editing, publishing and sharing their work (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Myers & Pough, 2002; Graham, et al, 2012). Overall, in studies explored, the educator and students gained motivation and stayed engaged in the writing process. In order to be engaged in an educational activity, students must value learning, achievement, and accomplishment ( Deci, et al, 2000). The evidence suggests that with the shift in paradigm to a writer’s workshop, students and educators developed engagement in the activities and became productive members of a writing community. Once the students became comfortable with the process of the writer’s workshop and gained an understanding of the purpose of writing, their enthusiasm grew (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007).

In all of the research studies, the evidence was strong that implementing a writer’s workshop in your classroom environment allows students to share their ideas, communicate orally and in writing and gain knowledge in the writing process; creating a strong writing community within the classroom. Although the studies showed that early primary education grades did not add sentences to their revision, the standard deviation for grammar, punctuation, and spelling did significantly increase ( Myers & Pough, 2002; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Nolen, 2007). Young students also showed some difficulty in participating in the peer conferencing part of the writer’s workshop. However, once trained on how to administer constructive feedback and ask quality questions to the peer author, the students enjoyed the process (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). The transformation in Myer and Pough’s (2002) classes was informative and rewarding for all parties involved. Their students are working together and actively helping one another create productive pieces of writing (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007) The motivational properties of autonomy, creative control, and interest generated by implementing the writer’s workshop with a publishing center in relation to building a community and helping the students build identities as writers came together to create self determination. These processes result in a deeper understanding of concepts presented as well as an enhanced personal growth (Deci, et al, 2000).

Although there are significant studies showing how publishing work creates a sense of authorship in adulthood, more studies need to be conducted on how publication in primary education setting affects student achievement. Publishing has given high school students a clear sense of their audience and a tangible reason to refine their work (Hubbard, R, 1985). However with the change in California over to common core standards which emphasizes primary student ability to write, there is a profound need for further research into meaningful strategies that encourage students to increase their writing fluency. For primary grade students, publication within a writer’s workshop could provide students with the motivation and self-confidence to stay engaged in the writing process and in return gain the necessary grade level achievement in both writing and reading fluency.

**Methods**

*Sample*

Participants in this study included 24 second grade general education students in a K-6 grade low SES school. There were four students who were omitted from the data analysis: two students for excessive absences, one student for extreme circumstances involving the death of a parent, and one student moved. For this particular study, twelve students were chosen from the second grade classroom to analyze their motivation, engagement and quality of writing before, during, and after publication of students’ work had occurred. The twelve students were selected based on academic performance and observation of engagement during normal classroom practices. First, the students were transitioned into three sub groups based on academic performance in reading and writing activities within the context of the classroom. The students were listed as struggling to perform at grade level, performing at grade level, and performing above grade level. Then within the context of those three sub groups, students were categorized by their participation in daily classroom activities. After analyzing student participation and discussing the result with my mentor teacher, the students were broken down into sub groups of passives, functional, and active participants in the classroom environment. A passive participant rarely raises their hand, and group participation is minimal, but completes their work. A student who functionally participates is a student, who raises their hand occasionally, and contributes to group conversations. The final sub group is the student who actively participates by raising their hand a majority of the time, always contributes to group conversations, and completes their work. Both sets of sub groups contain four of each type of students in order to look at behavioral changes such as motivation and engagement, as well as academic changes that pertain to quality for a total of twelve students; 4 boys and 8 girls.

**Procedure and Data Collection**

*Writing Attitude Questionnaire*

All students were administered the writing attitude survey with 15 phrases in a Likert-type format, with 5 possible responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Additionally, at the top of the survey, each response had an emoticon associated with each response in order to assist students with defining how they felt. The phrases are meant to determine students’ reaction to the statements, which helps the researcher understand their personal motivation and engagement towards writing and the writing process. The students were given 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire with the teacher researcher and her co-teacher present to assist. The researcher thoroughly explained all responses were personal in nature and no student would be held accountable for negativity towards writing. All phrases were read aloud before the answers were marked. During the administration of the survey, students had difficulty understanding some of the phrases and additional explanation was needed by the teacher researcher. The survey was administered at the beginning of the action research before the publication commenced and then at the end of the data collection. A means report was calculated on each question represented with a weighted response. Open-ended questions were analyzed for similarities in order to facilitate guided instruction.

*Interviews*

In order to get a more authentic response regarding students’ attitude towards writing, the students were interviewed individually during the school day. The interviews were conducted after the first publication party, and after the concluding publication celebration. The interview consisted of six open ended questions designed to gain an understanding of each of the twelve students’ attitudes and interest in participating in the writing process as both a writer and publisher. The interviews were conducted by asking the student the questions and the researcher listening. The students are typical seven and eight year old students, who often answered the interview question with one word answers, therefore the teacher researcher probed the student with questions to encourage a more in depth response. For example, many students responded to the question “How do you feel about yourself as a writer/author? Many students responded with “good.” The teacher researcher would then ask students “why do you feel good about yourself when you write?” The questions were asked in order to a gain more in depth perspective regarding the students’ mindset towards publication/sharing, which was the purpose of the interviews.

*Writing*

Writing has been conducted within the context of the classroom since the beginning of the school year. Mini-lessons that introduce grammar and writing were being conducted for 20 minutes 2-3 times a week. A baseline writing sample was taken from the students before introducing the writing process. The students were given the topic” Tell me what you like to do for fun outside of school” and had twenty minutes to produce a writing sample. The writing samples were used to inform teacher practices and determine future mini-lessons.

A whole class introduction to the writing process was performed as a formal start to our new writing endeavors. We read “Little Monster becomes an Author” by Rozanne Lanzcak Willams, and made a process grid to emphasize the phases of the writing process. The writing process became a central focus of several mini lessons before we engaged in actual writing. The students participated in a workshop style environment for 20 minutes twice a day. Each station consisted of read to self activities, word work activities, journal writing, a computer station and two teacher tables. The students were grouped homogeneously by academic level with 6 students in each group for 20 minute rotations. The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance compiled research on the most effective ways to teach elementary students to be writers, and one of their recommendations is to teach students the writing process (pg.14). Writing workshop with an emphasis on the writing process from drafting to publishing would replace the teacher tables and become an intregal part of the social writing process.

During small group sessions students generated narrative writing ideas, and were guided through the writing process with the use of graphic organizers, pocket charts, dictionaries, and formal lined paper. Students also engaged in informational writing at the other teacher table, where research projects were conducted. The students produced four separate writing projects: two informational texts and two narrative pieces. Each writing project went through the editing and revising process. Once students completed the planning stage of writing and were given examples of a high quality detailed writing projects, they were sent to the journal work station to begin the drafting process. Students drafted their writing onto a lined piece of paper which was cut into strips and inserted into a pocket chart. The pocket chart allowed the student and teachers to edit and revise the works with the student without overwhelming them with errors. Each student was told to go through and revise and edit on their own before coming to revise and edit with the teacher.

At the teacher table students would read aloud their first drafts to a small group of peers and the teacher. Each student helped the student reading to recognize their error and insert words to make complete sentences. The teachers facilitated the conversation with questions such as: How could you describe the pizza? What did the dog look like? Is that a telling sentence, asking a question or showing excitement? These questions helped assist the student in adding detail and punctuation to their sentences.

*Scoring*

All writing was scored on a writing rubric created by the teacher researcher (see appendices). The rubric addresses organization, grammar, capitalization, and spelling. Second grade students are beginning writers, and have none to limited basic skills entering second grade. Therefore, the rubric is simple with the ability for interpretation based on characteristics of the writing assignment. In the informational text genre, in the area of organization, the teacher researcher was looking for topic sentences and conclusion. The students were taught narrative writing in the form of sequential order, and therefore the teacher researcher looked for time order words and how the paper flowed on narrative assignment. Spelling was another category, which allows for interpretation based on past instruction. If students misspelled the same word throughout the writing assignment, the teacher researcher only counted the error as one mistake. All other categories stayed true to the rubric, and all assignments were scored with the same mindset for each project. A perfect score on the rubric is a sixteen.

*Publication*

Publication was set up to give students some freedom of choice with color, pictures, and binding, but all students’ books were in the same format. The format changed for each endeavor to experiment and to keep the students’ enthusiasm high. Many projects incorporated the use of technology for typing and finding pictures. Once all students were near completion of their projects, dates and deadlines were established for an author’s celebration. The celebrations were conducted in various ways to allow the teacher research to document excitement. For the first party, only teachers and administration were invited and students shared their work amongst each other with mini tri-fold posters. The second celebrations involved parents and administration from the school. For the third and fourth party other second grade classes were invited to come listen to the students read. The students were separated into groups of 6 students and given an authors chair. Their peers sat on the floor in front of them and listened to the story. After the student authors read their book, the audience could ask questions and make comments to the students. A light snack was served at all celebrations, and the room was decorated with a few posters and balloons to create a celebratory atmosphere for the student authors. All parties were videotaped and the teacher researcher examined them for reactions, engagement, and comments during the party. The teacher researcher also wrote down observations in a teacher research journal.

*Engagement/Motivation*

Engagement and motivation were recorded in a teacher research journal. Recordings took place in the second grade classroom during writing workshop on a weekly basis. The teacher researcher wrote down comments during all aspects of the writing process, from students interactions to feelings about their books. To assist with engagement the teacher researcher used guidelines set up by the National Center for Leadership Education regarding behavioral traits, which show student engagement. When observing a student during the writing process, the teacher researcher looked for how well the student focused on the task, the body language the student exhibited and whether the student showedexcitement for the project. During social interactions the teacher researchers looked for verbal participation and whether the student interacted with their peers during small group discussions.

**Findings**

The purpose of the action research study was to see how recognizing students as authors by publishing their stories and celebrating the endeavor of going through the writing process leading to a final product had on motivation, engagement and writing quality for young students. The data focused on three specific areas: motivation, engagement and quality. The teacher researcher found that students struggled with writing personal narratives that incorporated a story from their personal lives. When writing about their personal lives not only did student engagement and motivation decrease, but the quality of their writing was not as significant as other writing projects (see table). Informational writing and writing with a prompt was much easier for this group of budding writers. Publishing students’ academic work has given the students a sense of self confidence and self determination towards writing, which was found through observations, student surveys and a change in attitude between pre and post attitude surveys. However, the most significant changes during this action research project were seen in students who were struggling in all academic areas. I attribute this change to the feelings of success the students felt by publishing and celebrating their work. The struggling students made significant growth in motivation, engagement, and quality of their writing. The analysis of this growth can be seen in table 2.2, which shows the difference in growth in the quality of writing produced by the academically struggling students versus the students performing at or above grade level. Further explanation of these findings is broken down into categories of motivation, engagement and quality.

*Motivation Discussion*

Publishing students work validated each student academically and gave them an increased determination to write the succeeding projects. The increase in self confidence amongst the student body after completing several products showed through in the post writing attitude survey, student interviews, and teacher observation.

The writing attitude survey showed a slight shift in students’ attitude towards writing. The data was presented on a Likert scale, which the teacher researcher felt was difficult for primary education students to interpret. The questions that represented motivation showed a shift towards a favorable attitude towards writing from the pre survey. There was a increase in positive attitudes towards writings. Overall, the students who disagreed transferred to the neutral category, showing a slight change in attitude towards the writing.

The student interview results all show a positive attitude and a motivation to write after publication. Students showed enthusiasm and an increased excitement during the interview with comments such as: “I feel like a rock star writer because we made books”, “I feel great and want to make more books”, “I feel so happy, and excited to hear all my friends’ stories”, “I feel happy to share with others, so they can see my hard work”. This was the overall general attitude of the students in the classroom after publishing two of our works. There were two students who showed decrease in motivation because of the critical thinking involved in writing. The ability for second grade students to come up with ideas on their own proved to be a difficult task, which affected a few students’ motivation towards writing future projects.

The observations made during the course of writing the action research revealed an increased motivation for students, who were struggling in other academic areas. Student 3, started his first writing project grumbling and laying his entire upper body on the table. By the final writing project, he was eager to write his project; confident in his ability and was helping others. Student 11 had trouble thinking about what to write and had little motivation to produce academic work, because it was naturally a more difficult process for her. She would express to me that it was hard, and she was scared to publish her work.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Survey Phrases** | **The change in number of students in agree column** | **The change in number of students in neutral column** | **The change in number of students in disagree column** |
| I like writing. | +4 | 0 | -2 |
| I like writing at school. | +1 | 0 | -1 |
| I like to know what others think about my writing | +5 | -6 | +1 |
| I like to share my writing. | -2 | +6 | -4 |
| I think I am a good writer. | +2 | 0 | -2 |
| I like to talk about my ideas with a friend. | +1 | -4 | +3 |
| I like to write about things that I have learned. | +1 | -3 | +2 |
| I like to write about things that happened to me. | -4 | +2 | +2 |
| I have trouble thinking about what to write. | +3 | 0 | -3 |
| I follow the writing process. | +5 | -4 | -1 |
| It helps if someone reads what I wrote before I make changes. | +4 | -2 | -2 |
| My final draft might be different from my rough draft. | +2 | 0 | -2 |

= Measures motivation = Measures engagement = Measures Quality

However, with encouragement, and she began the process. As an English Language learner, writing was a daunting task for her, but once she conquered the first project, she was eager to feel that sense of success again. I was able to watch her blossom and open up to others in class about her writing topics. She told me she was excited about taking her book home and showing her family the hard work she had done. These feelings were exhibited by a majority of the 12 students, who were tracked in my observation journal.

*Engagement*

Overall, students’ engagement and ability to focus on writing increased throughout the course of this study. The students enjoyed writing about topics that pertained to our thematic unit, which during this time of the study was famous Americans, and then dinosaurs. Informational writing was much easier for students to become engaged in once they understood the writing process, a sense of autonomy was seen. However, the writing attitude survey revealed a significant decrease in engagement during the personal narrative project, which is displayed with the phrase “I like to write about things that happened to me”. Students had a difficult time writing a personal narrative and coming up with a topic for writing, which reflects their attitude change to disagree. Student engagement during the personal narrative was observed to be notably lower. The teacher researcher’s journal exposed a lack of focus, more off task behavior and a determined negative body language was displayed by a students. The negative body language exhibited by the students was slouching, falling off their seats, putting their heads down on the table, and resting their chin in their hands.

During informational writing and writing with a prompt, students’ engagement rose as their motivation to complete the project increased. During and after the publication parties for informational writing, students were asking to come to the teacher table and eager to complete their writing projects. The videos during the publication parties revealed attentive, and engaged behaviors, as well as excitement to listen to their peers’ stories. After two publication parties, the students’ engagement increased and eagerness to write became more apparent. Student interviews suggested student engagement increased because the students felt an overall happiness to share what they had learned with others. This was displayed with the question “How do you feel when you are asked to share your writing with others?”. Student 8’s response was “I feel very cheerful; when it’s time to share because it’s fun to hear my friends make comments”. Student 12 stated “I feel brave, because I am very nervous to share, but it feels good when people like my story.” Student 9, who is a very shy student enjoyed writing, but was too shy to read his own story. However, he said “It felt amazing to see people smile when my story was read.” In fact, student 9 normally display a lack of focus and engagement in everyday classroom activities, but there were several times during small group writing sessions that he sat down at a nearby table and wrote several pages about a topic that interested him. This type of engagement was witnessed by the teacher researcher and her co-teacher during informational writing. Both the co-teacher and the teacher researcher noticed a noteworthy increase in engagement with struggling students. In a documented conversation after school, the co-teacher and teacher researcher discuss how enjoyable it had become to work with the group of struggling students because their engagement and motivation to produce quality work had improved tremendously.

*Quality of Writing*

Second grade students are in a natural period of growth both academically and socially. Students in the second grade are changing developmentally, emotionally, physically and psychologically (Calkins, 1994). Those developments can put students’ academic and social growth at a wide-range of levels. The students grew significantly in their writing skills, but data could not be attributed solely to student publication. Although, there was a defined progression of quality throughout the publication process (see Table 2.1). The data in the quality progression table shows a significant increase in quality from the baseline writing sample give n January. All students struggled with organization, grammar, capitalization and spelling. The majority of students scored between a 4 and 7 on the writing rubric, with three students with an 8 or above on a 16 point scale. The quality progress chart shows a dip in quality for the narrative project, which coincides with previously reported observation that personal narratives were difficult for this population of students.

Table 2.1

Table 2.1 shows a dip in quality for the narrative writing project, but an overall increase for all projects.

The writing attitude survey showed a shift in students’ attitude towards understanding the writing process, which contributes to the autonomy seen in engagement during the final project. This change will benefit the students in their future writing endeavors. The strategies presented by using the writing process allow the students to grow and to see the changes possible for their writing at a young age (Graham, et al, 2012). The writing process is difficult, but an essential step for students of all ages.

Table 2.2

**Quality pointes observed is based on the rubric score of a possible 16 points per writing project. The quality increase is the difference in points between the baseline and the final prompt.**

Table 2.2 represents the difference in students’ improvement from the baseline to the final prompt. The students towards the left of the graph are the students who struggle academically. The data shows that student 11 had a 9 point growth from the baseline to the final dinosaur informational writing. Student 9 is not a student who struggles academically but is a student who typically only puts in the amount of effort expected. By the final project student 9 understood the expectations and performed up to those expectations. Student 7 is a student who has trouble focusing on academic tasks, but enjoyed writing. He had a difficult time focusing on making changes to his paper through editing and revising, therefore his growth was not as significant as other struggling students. All student writing skills improved, but the struggling students proved to show a substantial growth in skills.

**Conclusion**

As the teacher researcher, I expected to find an increase in engagement and motivation due to publishing student work. However, I found there are quite a few variables in the equations that no teacher can predict when it comes to primary education students. I thought my academically advanced students would be very enthusiastic about publishing, and really excel at the task, yet they exhibited fears and even some reservations about publishing their work. The struggling students surprised me and gained a sense of self confidence and determination that was not previously exhibited in our daily classroom tasks. The social atmosphere of publication allowed students the chance to fulfill their basic psychological needs for proficiency, while relating to others in a personal and academic setting. The consistency of the writer’s workshop and engaging in the writing process created autonomy amongst the students as expectations became familiar to them. Competence, relating to others and autonomy are all qualities of Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan’s self-determination theory, which harnesses the students’ intrinsic motivation to continue engaging in the writing process (2000). Therefore publishing students’ writing and giving them an authentic audience of their peers, parents and administration, along with a writer’s workshop atmosphere increased students’ self-confidence and determination to write.

As a new teacher, learning the developmental stages of second graders, I had not realized the magnitude to which they need acceptance from their peers. Therefore, it should be noted when students share stories about their personal lives in a narrative form it can open up the possibility for teasing both inside and outside of the classroom. On two occasions, two different students were teased about the content of their personal narratives, which decreased their self confidence and lowered their engagement to pursue writing on future projects. I was not aware this had occurred until conducting the student interviews.

Another noteworthy point for personal narratives is that it was extremely difficult for students to come up with a topic to write about from their personal lives. It occurred to me this could come from a lack of experiences, related to the high population of students coming from a low socio economic status. The lack of money and resources within the community may limit their exposure to memorable experiences. A few of my students are homeless and living in numerous hotels in the area or have a parent in jail. The experiences outside of school may be negative, and could contribute to halfhearted attempts to write when taking on a writing of a personal nature. This realization occurred to me, when one of my students wanted to write about a bad experience with her step-mother pulling her hair and pushing her at a local pizzeria. The student shared her bad experience with a small group of students during a round table session, which created a sympathetic atmosphere where others students began sharing their own heart breaking stories.

While the lack of engagement and motivation could not be solely contributed to the fact that the students reside in a lower socio-economic community, I feel it is relevant to be aware of our students’ experiences and have an understanding of their backgrounds before engaging in a personal narrative project. I believe it is also relevant to note that young students such as second graders are psychologically, developmentally and socially not aware of how small occurrences in their lives can be worthy of topics for writing, which could contribute to their lack of ideas when it comes to writing a personal narrative.

Overall, I feel publishing students’ work and celebrating their achievement has given them a sense of pride and ownership of their academic work that they had not realized was possible beforehand. I learned how important publishing can be to students’ confidence and sense of authorship. Lucy Calkins writes “Our children who publish will regard themselves in a new light if they are published authors (Calkins, 1994). Publication can provide the confidence your students need, and should be accomplished often. Therefore, I believe it should be a priority in all classrooms.

**Recommendations**

I believe further research is needed to enhance this study in order to triangulate the findings that quality increased due to publication. While I saw an increase in quality I could not determine if it was due to the normal development of second grade students or the writer’s workshop, including publication. Therefore, I would add a word count for each writing project. I would also audio record conversations during editing and revising sessions to document growth happening during that time period. I also found my writing attitude survey to be developmentally challenging for the students. Although I received favorable results from the survey, I felt the survey presented challenges and I had to explain each phrase to get authentic answers. In the future I would eliminate the Likert scale and just use a simple yes or no question format.

This action research was relevant to my teaching practice and gave me the chance to implement a writing program, which can be very daunting for teacher and students alike. Given the outcome of my results, I would recommend additional studies be completed with struggling students in order to see if the findings documented in this study remain in additional investigations.

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