

Enhancing Fourth Grade Students' Writing Achievement through Purposeful Experiential Learning: An Action Research Study

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Abstract This study focuses on the effects of involving fourth grade students in an experiential learning task that improves the school and requires the students to call on community agency, area business, and high school student support. Data related to students' learning were collected by using evaluative writing surveys, student and parent conferences, observational records, and other student works. From the qualitative data analysis, it was clear that purposeful writing increased student's enjoyment of writing. Student enjoyed orally presenting their prewriting and these presentations proved to be an effective method for the revision and editing of their written work.

Keywords Action Research, Experiential Learning, Fourth Grade Students, Writing Achievement

1. Introduction

Writing is an invaluable skill to achieve meaningful learning; yet, in 2002, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scored only 28% of tested fourth-grade students as "proficient", decreasing to 24% by 12th grade [1]. Similarly, in 2011, 8th and 12th graders averaged only 27% proficient, or above the basic level, on the computerized version of the same national assessment [2]. It's human nature that whenever students struggle with an activity they tend to avoid that activity, so how do teachers increase motivation in a subject area that causes most children difficulty? Mo Et Al. write: To develop students' motivation, a wide variety of text forms aligned with the main purposes for writing found in CCSS-WL can be incorporated in writing assignments. Students should be given opportunities to choose topics, purposes, and audiences of interest when writing. Teachers can assist students in setting clear and specific goals for what they are to accomplish in their writing and help students to evaluate

whether they met these goals [3].

Purposeful writing has its roots in topics and feelings the writer cares about and in writing experiences that have a clear function and audience. When students know the function their writing serves, the writing process is meaningful for the student. Frank Smith (1994: 80) states, "As long as writing remains a natural and purposeful activity, made available without threat, then children will be willing to practice it and consequently will learn" [4]. In Sipe and Rosewarne's book, "*Purposeful Writing*," authors consider how critical it is to help our students understand that their voices matter if we want them to believe that writing has relevance in their lives [5].

Jay Robinson, for example, urges us to create habitable spaces in schools where students can experience a connection between school-sponsored literacy and the discourses that matter in the world [6]. Describing partnership projects, such as the Saginaw River Project, which engaged students from two high schools in the real work of testing and reporting on the river quality, he shares how such a project created a context for writing that significantly affected a community. For the students involved, clearly, writing mattered because it had a real purpose, audience, and message, and it offered the possibility of making a difference. Because it offered these elements, it warranted the time to carefully consider the organization, word choice, and conventions [6].

Some research has presented that differentiated instruction may be needed depending on the skills students bring to the classroom [7]. Additionally, the importance of student characteristics in writing achievement, as well as considering the need for differentiated instruction based on student needs [8]. In addition, self-efficacy, outcome expectancy beliefs, and causal attribution have potentially important motivational influences on children's reading and writing; that the higher the grade level, the link between beliefs for reading and comprehension skill strengthened relative to component skills, whereas the link between

beliefs for writing and component skills strengthened relative to communication skills; and that for all achievement levels, a similar pattern of beliefs was linked to achievement [9].

This study focuses on the effects of involving fourth grade students in an experiential learning task that improves the school and requires the students to call on community agency, area business, and high school student support in a suburban school of a large southeastern city. The aims of this paper are to help the students transfer the knowledge that they have learned in the classroom into community situations. Through discovering and working towards purposes that the children found of interest and meaningful, children would help to provide self-driven reasons for education and learning. The children's perspectives about their writing, the format of the class, and the products that they completed were all extremely meaningful to this study.

2. Materials and Methods

Participants and Context

One classroom teacher and 28 fourth grade students participated in this study. Students' parents, high school students, community and area business people assisted in the outdoor classroom project. The study took place in a suburban school and community, 30 minutes outside of a large southeastern city.

Data Collection

After gaining the principal's permission, the researchers gathered informal consent from parents and guardians during parent conferences. Data collection included: student questionnaires (completed at home); student evaluative writing surveys (completed at school); student and parent conferences, along with phone conferences; observational records and field notes; and other student work: reading logs, discussions, and drawings.

Procedure

In this section the teacher discuss how through an experiential learning task of improving the school yard and making an outdoor classroom the students became invested in the messages they developed through writing.

3. Results

Meaningful Activities for Enhancing Students' Writing Achievement

The students and teacher had been reading and discussing books where the main character(s) had done something good for others or the community. Through that experience the character(s) developed and enhanced their sense of self-worth and self-appreciation. As the students and teacher thought more about community service, they realized they had an opportunity right outside of their classroom. Their

school had recently been expanded and their school yard was filled with an array of rocks, pieces of asphalt and a pile of old playground equipment and broken sidewalk.

They started persuasive writing and began by writing a letter to the principal to persuade her to allow the students to work out in the schoolyard. They wrote letters to a local bank applying for a grant and explaining what they wanted to accomplish. They also wrote letters to the local business companies asking for materials to work on a schoolyard project.

The teacher had the students write on the topic, "Showing We Care." They took this free write, reread their writing and worked in groups to make a poster. Some of the posters included sentences, while others had pictures or just words related to their two writing topics and to ideas in common from their group. The student generated five subthemes including *Building Community*, *Personal Relations*, *Caring for Nature*, *Being Responsible*, and *Becoming a Better Me*. There were three or four students in each subtheme group. From these five broad subthemes, the children voted on the area they wanted to work in.

The teacher had the students add a section in their portfolio called, "journal writing," in which they put their "Showing We Care," writing. The teacher had them write periodically on topics related to this project. They then took selected journal writings, put them together, and bound them. This became a record of one of the experiences they had in fourth grade. They took photos before, during, and after the project, to help prompt journal writing, and also did a process analysis of the schoolyard project. Their writing included what working together on this project meant to them, to the community, and how such collaboration helped them develop as citizens and individuals. Every student had at least one writing piece in the bound anthology and each student chose what journal entry they wanted included in the book. They all felt they were integral to the project.

They also wrote group letters to inform their interest groups what they had done and what they were doing to meet their goals on the schoolyard project. The children completed a free writing on, "Who I Write to and What I Will Tell Them." Each of these five groups, comprised of three to five children, completed a book share and made a poster on their topic. For example, the building community group made a poster to show how a picture book they chose was connected to the topic.

While forming the student groups and to help further the students' understanding of the project they had undertaken, the teacher read the chapter "Leona" from *Seedfolks* [10]. In this chapter, Leona solicited help from a governmental agency to support a clean-up of a city lot. This chapter helped them focus on their purpose, as well as the value and importance of community support.

They developed themes, as previously listed, which included; "Building Community," "Personal Relations," "Caring for Nature," "Being Responsible," and "Becoming a Better Person." They agreed that these were attributes of people who worked for their community. They discussed

Seedfolks again, and how significant it was that the people were not only working for the community, but also, the characters in the book were the first generation of their families to move to the United States. Their family's history started in this country. They all came from different backgrounds and cultures, yet found ways to work together. They developed a common sense of purpose and interest, which were for the good of their community.

During the last few days of the month, the students developed groups to advocate for their schoolyard revitalization project. The students were aware they needed to communicate with out-of-school agencies on a regular basis to report progress and seek help in completing the project.

Some students in the classroom worked on their group themes, while others worked outside on the community project. Some students wrote thank-you letters, others asked for donations, and invited specific groups, such as the Native Plant Society, to visit their classroom project. They wrote to the educational group within the Native Plant Society, in order to have a better understanding of native plants and how to go about preserving as much of the grounds in their natural state as possible. The students chose to work on this project with vigor during their recess time instead of playing. Students often volunteered to help at the end of the day before their rides arrived, or before they attended after-school programs. The students also began writing captions for the tremendous number of photos they accumulated from their outdoor project. The teacher had a pile of photos in a box on a table at the front of the room, accessible to the students. When they completed their other work, they chose a photo from this box to write a paragraph. They talked about their own feelings as they reviewed all that they had accomplished during and since the completion of their community service work.

The students wrote and told personal experience stories and asked to sit on the benches they helped build, especially during reading time. They considered this a great reward for all their hard work in completing this community project. Being able to enjoy the fruits of their labor helped them see a purpose for their writing.

Evaluation and Reflection from Students

Four months after the beginning of the study, when the students were asked to reflect on their classroom, all the children had positive comments about the classroom and their involvement in the curriculum. When the homeroom class was asked their opinion of purposeful writing at the end of the school year, 28 of the comments were positive. To summarize, the students' positive remarks were made about areas where the children had personal choice, voice, and purpose. They offered the following insights:

"You get to express yourself, and you get to hear about other stories that make you feel sometimes sad, mad, happy and angry".

"I liked it when we had to write about the family story. I took a lot of thought into it because I love my family. It was

fun when we interviewed our parents. When I shared my interview with my class on my parents I got braver, nobody laughed".

The two negative comments, not liking writing every day, and not enjoying making a Table of Contents for their portfolios seemed to be more of a lack of enjoyment with specific assignments in language arts and not related to purposeful writing, specifically. Negative comments were in the area where they had less choice, and included activities that were more structured, assigned by the teacher, and not related to their development.

The students wanted to express themselves orally and in writing and this was a very important goal for them in the school environment. They used writing as a tool to share who they were, and to acquire a meaning and purpose for themselves within the socio-cultural system at school. The children used the presentation of their writing to others as a time to gain affirmations for who they are, what they believe in and the things they do. Their sharing was an outlet to help them develop as social beings and make connections and contact with others in the classroom.

Reflection from the Teacher

"At the same time that I was examining the development of student's personal writing, I also focused on myself as a teacher. During the past year, I gained a new respect for the revision process in student writing and the importance of listening and reading to others about the teaching of writing. My teaching of the writing process has improved, not only because I see the students developing ideas, writing drafts, revising and ending up with a much stronger paper than at the beginning of the year, but because by the end of the year, I no longer saw the strain of students believing they had to write perfectly during their first drafts. Through writing opportunities, choosing what they wanted to write, having multiple responses to their writing, and group dialogue about their writing, the struggle for the perfect paper was taken off the backs of children in my classes. They came to see the value in hearing constructive criticism when others read and made recommendations. They learned that writing takes time and significant thinking throughout the process".

4. Discussion

Action research methodology closed the gap between educational research and daily practices in the schools [11]. To arrive at the point where we could work on the theme, the classroom teacher had to infuse procedural, behavioral and academic ideals in the classroom's community. Students needed to learn how to self-evaluate their own writing and the writing of others. They need to be able to work productively in a group, to be able to think and reflect critically on the topic and find the right answer for themselves on issues. These types of self-directed learning prerequisites are necessary for effective purposeful, experimental learning tasks.

The results showed that the children in this study wanted an education that had a personal purpose, involved student choice, and increased the children's sense of personal agency. The children wanted to connect with their peers and sought acceptance as they shared themselves through their writing. The analysis of their writing showed that when children are in a context where they have opportunity to write and to make choices about what they are writing, their writing develops. Therefore, the results suggested that in order to motivate learners to excel academically, schools need to be organized to discover the child's purpose for writing and for education. Learners have to reflect on their own beliefs in a way in which new action is likely. So, students need to have time to connect what they believe about whatever is being learned to their current belief system, and to be able to express their connections. Learners need to look for ways to develop and reinforce their belief systems. Much of this development and reinforcement is done either through feedback from others in social contexts, through discussions, or from ideas they read and consider in light of their own thoughts [12-15].

5. Conclusions

Purposeful writing increased student's enjoyment of writing. In addition, student enjoyed orally presenting their prewriting and these presentations proved to be an effective method for the revision and editing of their written work. Students needed to learn how to self-evaluate their own writing and the writing of others. They need to be able to work productively in a group, to be able to think and reflect critically on the topic and find the right answer for themselves on issues. These types of self-directed learning prerequisites are necessary for effective purposeful, experimental learning tasks.

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