Background Information

A. My Teaching Context:

I am currently a fifth grade teacher in a State College Area School District classroom of twenty-three students—twelve boys and eleven girls. I have taught fifth grade at this school, Ferguson Elementary, for three and a half years. This year I have a heterogeneous mix of students including four Title I students and three recently exited Title I students. In addition, I have four students who are at least one grade level above the fifth grade standards for reading and writing. Furthermore, I have an intern (comparable to a full-year student teacher) through Penn State's Professional Development School in my room for the first time.

Prior to teaching in central Pennsylvania, I taught in the Central Bucks School District, thirty miles north of Philadelphia. I spent five years there in an open-spaced school teaching both sixth and fifth grade students and two years teaching fourth grade in a large, newly constructed elementary school.

B. Road to Inquiry:

All experienced teachers have seen first hand the proverbial educational pendulum that is constantly in motion within our profession. Although I have only been teaching for close to eleven years, I am no exception. In fact, I have felt like a pendulum myself when revising my philosophy of education. When I first began teaching, the Central Bucks School District had a literature-based basal program for

reading instruction (the reading text book had excerpts from real children's literature) and not much guidance for writing instruction, except from some well-intentioned colleagues. I tried teaching the scripted lessons outlined in the reading teacher's manual and became quickly disillusioned by the artificial, mechanical nature of the process. I tried breaking all of the students' writing assignments into neat little packages with steps for prewriting, rough drafting, revising, editing and publishing; however, all of the students were doing the same thing at the same time even if some students were ready to move on to the next step. I quickly became frustrated with teaching both reading and writing—my students were very unmotivated to read and write, and I was unimpressed with their progress in both areas.

At this time, the educational pendulum was starting to swing to a more whole language and workshop approach in reading and writing. Teachers, including me, were grabbing hold of the work of educators like Lucy Calkins, Nancy Atwell, Harvey Daniels, Regie Routman, and Donald Graves. In Regie Routman's book, *Invitations*: *Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12*, she encouraged teachers to take risks with their literacy instruction so that their students would naturally develop a love and appreciation for reading and writing. She says, "The only way students will choose to read and write beyond the school setting is if they view reading and writing as enjoyable and purposeful." (Routman, p. 16, 1994) Because of my students' all around reluctance to read and write, this greatly appealed to me.

As a result of being so frustrated with my current situation, I delved into the workshop idea and soon was elected to participate in a pilot program in one of the school district's newest schools. Every teacher in this program wanted to really jump on

board with reading and writing workshop and the district poured a tremendous amount of money into training the staff and purchasing large fiction and non-fiction libraries for each classroom. The philosophy was for student self-selection to occur the majority of time in both reading and writing. The students were expected to implement the writing process not all were expected to be at the same stage at one time. The teacher was to prepare mini-lessons that would start the class period and apply to most of the students' work at the time and conduct individual conferences and instruction at least every other day. It was hard work, but there were many parts of it that I really loved. The students were so self motivated, and as a teacher, I could differentiate instruction based on student's reading and writing abilities.

However, there were many things about it that I did not like. The main concern related to this inquiry was that none of the students were "on the same page at the same time" in writing so it was very hard to design lessons that would be relevant for all of the students. In addition, it was difficult to determine whether or not the students met the lesson objectives. So after a several-year journey, I began to again wonder what would be a better practice for teaching literacy. My pendulum was beginning to shift again.

After teaching in Bucks County for seven years, my spouse and I moved to central Pennsylvania, and I obtained a teaching position in the State College Area School District. The district offered a very different approach to reading and writing instruction than what I had previously experienced. I dove into the philosophy and tried to meld it with mine. In the years since first starting in SCASD, my pendulum has continued to sway--I have settled into a more balanced writing program that combines

both self-selected writing and teacher-directed writing instruction in an environment with many workshop characteristics.

This being said, I still feel as though there are "glitches" in my philosophy. Mainly, I think that some students, especially those that do not have strong language skills, need more structure and inherent direction (or at least more than what a pure workshop philosophy offers). When researching, I found this idea is supported in the book, *Graphic Organizers: Visual Strategies for Active Learners*, when it states, "While graphic organizers aid learning for all students, they are especially appropriate for students with language differences and processing difficulties." (Bromley, p. 14, 1995) Therefore, when reflecting on what these students would benefit from in writing, I realized that since much of their writing lacked depth, focus, and organization, a natural place to start would be during the prewriting stage. I began wondering how I could incorporate structure within the prewriting phases of the writing workshop without giving up student choice.

From this evolved my inquiry question: Will creating a store-house of graphic organizers (from which students could select organizers which "fit" their current writing pieces) improve students' writing products? With this question came many other questions, too.

- Which graphic organizers will be most beneficial to the students?

- Have researchers proven that particular graphic organizers work the best? If so, which ones are they?

- Is there a good source for the organizers (I have several books but have not found them particularly effective), or will I need to create them on my own?
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- Can I find just a few graphic organizers that could apply to various writing genre so that the students would not need to be pulled into so many directions?

- How should I best introduce them to my students?

- How can I make sure that the students are making an appropriate or good choice when selecting a graphic organizer?

- How do students use graphic organizers in a more independent setting?

- What are students' attitudes about prewriting organizers before and after the store-house is implemented?

- To allow even more ownership and independence with the writing process, could the store-house also be used during times of direct writing instruction?

C. The Research:

I began this inquiry fully expecting to find a plethora of information about graphic organizers for use with writing instruction. It certainly isn't a new idea—over a decade ago, I was taught to use them in my Language Instruction course work a Penn State. Since then, I have used them innumerable times and have witnessed many colleagues also using them. However, after countless hours researching in the library and on-line, questioning colleagues and pouring over personal education books, I soon realized that my expectation of a plethora of information was misguided. In fact, what I found was just the opposite. As Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo point out, "Most of the research examines the use of graphic organizers in reading. Few studies examine their use with either discussion or writing, suggesting these as important areas for future investigation." (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo, 1995, p. 8)

Although the majority of research found relates to using graphic organizers during reading instruction, some of it I believe is also applicable to writing instruction.

For example, Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo describe several fundamental reasons to use graphic organizers including the following that I believe apply to writing instruction:

- "When important information is isolated, we can see how concepts are connected, and this makes it more easily understood (Novak & Gowin, 1984). Omitting extraneous information and presenting only what is essential simplifies the learning task."

- "A visual graphic containing key ideas and information is easier to remember than extended text, whether the text is visual or verbal." (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo, 1995, p. 7)

Michael McKenna, a Professor of Reading at Georgia Southern University also cites many reasons to use graphic organizers during instruction. He says the following: (1) "They are easy to construct and discuss", (2) "There is little to "read", and (3) "They provide a way to organize for better recall and understanding." (McKenna, 2002, p. 45)

All of the reasons cited above are general enough that they can pertain to writing as well. For example, if students are able to isolate the information that they have brainstormed in a visual way, they will be more likely to be able to see how well their ideas connect to one another and flow. In addition, for all students but especially those who struggle with language, there is little to read therefore making the prewriting task much more manageable. Furthermore, a graphic organizer may make the rough drafting and revising stages easier because students can more readily recall the information they brainstormed.

This idea is further evidenced by Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo when they say, "The graphic organizer supports revision as well, as the writer can refer to it to see what may have been inadvertently omitted." (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo, 1995, p. 16)

My Inquiry Plan

A. What I Did to Carry Out the Inquiry in My Classroom:

The first thing I did in the classroom related to this inquiry was to create and implement a student survey (please see Appendix A for samples). I decided to make it a two-part survey. This came about because I wanted to know if the students could define graphic organizers and give examples of them. I thought this might give me some insight because if the students could not, I figured they probably were not using organizers independently when writing. Once all of the students completed this first part of the survey, I collected them, defined graphic organizers, and then gave the students the second part of the survey that addressed the students' attitudes about and use of organizers. After all students had completed the second part of the survey, I collected the surveys and gave the students a brief explanation of my inquiry project and their role in it.

Later that day, I sat and analyzed the students' responses on the surveys. Several items are note-worthy.

1. First, fifty-nine percent of the students were not able to answer the question, "What are prewriting graphic organizers?" This was surprising, especially

considering all of the times I had used them with the students during directed writing activities and content area lessons.

2. Second, once graphic organizers had been defined for them, sixty-eight percent said that they never use prewriting graphic organizers during their self-selected writing assignments. Unlike the first observation, this was not a surprise because during the many free writing experiences in my classroom, I rarely saw students creating their own graphic organizers.

3. Third, close to three-fourths of the students who responded that they did not use graphic organizers felt that they were helpful when prewriting. Students said things like, "Yes (they are helpful) because they help you <u>see</u> and understand the story," and "They help you brainstorm because they are charts. I learn better by seeing things so that is better for me." This data was very meaningful for me because it showed me that even though the students appreciated the value of graphic organizers, they were not using them. Why? My hypothesis is that they were not using them because they did not have them readily available.

4. Finally, six students clearly stated that graphic organizers were not helpful. Interestingly, most of these students are among my strongest writers.

After analyzing the pre-survey results, I then spent a great deal of time contemplating which graphic organizers to actually use for the project. As stated before, little research has been conducted related to the effectiveness of prewriting graphic organizers or which graphic organizers tend to work the best with students. After making this discovery, I considered several things while selecting the best graphic

organizers to use. First, because the students historically select a variety of writing genre for their free-writing pieces, there needed to be organizers appropriate for each of the genres. The majority of the students' previous writing pieces fell into the areas of non-fiction research, short stories and poetry.

Second, I wanted to start small so that I did not inundate the children with so many graphic organizers that they did not know where to direct their attention. Finally, given the schedule of the PSSA exams, I really only had one week to introduce the graphic organizers so that the children could complete their free-writing pieces before the Inquiry Conference on May 1st.

I obtained the organizers used in a variety of ways. First, I asked several colleagues, Curriculum Support Teachers, and a Professional Development Associate with Penn State's Professional Development School for any graphic organizers which they found to be effective during writing instruction. Next, I searched the intranet and various books for possible organizers. Finally, I poured over the many organizers I had obtained from these sources and tried to determine which would work the best for each of the categories I had identified. More specifically, I looked to see if the organizers were simple, clear, visually appealing, and easy to use.

Once I had identified the organizers that I felt would be the most effective, I introduced them to the students during the week of March 22.   By instructing students on how to use one organizer each day, I hoped that students would have an opportunity to digest the information and really focus on the lessons. At the same time, I was also hoping that by introducing one each day for a week it would help maintain the momentum of the project. So, on Monday, March 22, I again explained to the students

why I was doing the project and what they would need to do. Prior to Monday's lesson, I had determined that I was going to offer five choices of organizers: two narrative, one research, one persuasive and one poetry organizer. However, I decided to change the direction of this original thinking. I began questioning whether or not this would definitely meet their needs when they began their free-writing pieces. So, I was prepared to introduce a story frame on Monday since narratives were usually the most frequently written pieces. As Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo's suggest, "When you are introducing graphic organizers to your students, use one that is based upon a topic with which our students are familiar." (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo, 1995, p. 20) However, I decided that during the lesson, I would ask them to share the genre that they were thinking about doing. This way, I could tailor the remaining instructional days to suit their needs. I'm glad I did this because several of the students wanted to write some newspaper articles and no one predicted the need for a poetry organizer. I had not anticipated these genre needs.

So within the first few minutes of class, I had a list of the four graphic organizers the students anticipated needing -- narrative, persuasive, research and newspaper article. As described earlier, I had hoped to have five graphic organizers to start with so I asked the students to keep thinking about their writing pieces as the week progressed and to let me know if they felt they wanted another type of organizer. I formally asked them on Thursday if they were anticipating any other forms of writing and they were not. So, after discussing it with my intern, I decided that I would create an organizer related to sensory description. I did this for two reasons. First, I was surprised none of the students anticipated writing poetry since this is usually a very popular free-writing genre,

and I had the feeling some students might change their minds and decide to write some poetry. Because I had a hard time finding a generic graphic organizer that could apply to many types of poetry, I opted to create one related to the five senses. The second reason I chose to include a sensory description graphic organizer was that it could be used as a secondary organizer for the narrative selections.   The following is a list of the graphic organizers used and the days they were introduced.   Copies of the organizers can be found in Appendix C.

Narrative	Monday
Persuasive	Tuesday
Newspaper	Wednesday
Research	Thursday
Description	Friday

I was really surprised by how the introductions to the graphic organizers went. I was struggling to find some different ways to model the use of the organizers with the students--five days of using the overhead just seemed so monotonous. I brainstormed other options with my intern and her supervisor; however, given the time restraints of the PSSA testing, I was left with few other options. In the end, I did vary instruction slightly by having two of the graphic organizers already filled in and having the students analyze them.   What I found interesting was how the modeling unfolded. Every day, I asked for student suggestions for topics to model the prewriting. I always had an idea in the back of my head but felt that if the idea came from them, they would have a more vested interest in the piece. For example, for the narrative piece they wanted me to "tell" the story of how my husband and I met. So with the graphic organizer on the overhead, I began filling in the various sections using that story. They were transfixed

and really became involved in the whole process. I wasn't able to do this for every organizer, but it certainly helped keep them focused.

On Monday of the following week, I directed the students to begin their next free-writing piece using one of the graphic organizers presented. Use of a graphic organizer was required of each student during this writing piece so that valid data could be collected. I then introduced the store-house, which consisted of a clear, hanging-file container filled with folders. I created two folders for each type of organizer. In one folder, I had many copies of the organizer. In the second, I had a sample of how to fill in the organizer.

Once the students began writing, my intern and I conducted conferences with the students about the selections they made and guided students toward more appropriate choices when necessary. We also used writing conference time to observe and take anecdotal notes about students' use of the organizers and instructed students who needed help with the implementation of their chosen organizer.

Several observations made during implementation are worth mentioning.

- ♦ The students were generally self-sufficient when completing the graphic organizers. They used the store-house easily and were able to fill out the graphic organizers independently.

- ♦ Most of the students took between one and two class periods to complete their graphic organizer(s).

- ♦ Five students used multiple graphic organizers because they were writing anthologies.

♦ The vast majority of the students put forth a great deal of effort when completing their organizers.

♦ All chosen organizers worked well except the Story Frame's section on main events. This section did not work very well because of the following reasons: (1) the space allotted was not big enough to allow students to put much detail into it, and (2) it did not have numbers to outline the story's main events. After noticing that all of the narrative writers' organizers appeared lacking in this one area, I called them into a small group and addressed the issue with them. I told them to turn their paper over and use the back for this section. In addition, I directed them to number the events, hoping this would help students attend to each event and keep the events organized.

Many of the students initially had difficulty going from organizer to rough draft. I did not expect this to happen. My initial reaction was that we had done this before, so why was it a problem now? However, after contemplating it for a while, I soon began to wonder if it was because of the much more independent nature of these self-selected writing pieces. Previously when the students were required to use the graphic organizers before when writing, I had been at the "helm" directing them and modeling for them how to go about each step of the process. This time, they were on their own, and I think many of the students just hadn't internalized this process. Noticing this, I spent our next writing lesson revisiting this skill by modeling for the students how to effectively use a graphic organizer while rough drafting. After this reinforcing lesson, the students had less difficulty with the process.

After the three-week writing assignment was over, the students' writing pieces were assessed using the State College Area School District writing rubrics for fifth grade (See Appendix B for samples of the rubrics used). I then compared the current writing scores with the students' scores from their last self-selected pieces where no teacher-prepared graphic organizers were available.   On the rubrics, I identified three descriptors that most highly correlated with the use of prewriting graphic organizers. They were as follows: (1) complete piece with a beginning, middle and end, (2) used descriptive language and details, and (3) used multi-paragraphing for organization.

The rubric is on a four-point scale where a three is considered the benchmark. Therefore a score of a one or two is considered below grade level and a four is considered advanced. The graph on page 12A illustrates the total number of "hits" in each of the point values when considering the three identified descriptors. Two of the three score summary areas indicate an improvement in students' scores while one indicates a decline. More specifically, the graph demonstrates that before the store-house was implemented, sixteen "hits" occurred in the below grade level score of two. After implementation, only eleven "hits" occurred which indicates improvement in the students writing products related to the identified descriptors. Likewise, looking at the benchmark of three, there was also an improvement/increase in "hits" after implementation. Conversely, after implementation fewer "hits" occurred in the advanced score of four. This surprised me because I had anticipated that all of the scores would have improved. The second chart, Breakdown of Rubric Scores, on page 12A illustrates the specific number of "hits" in each of the identified categories.

Finally, I conducted another survey after the implementation of the graphic organizers to determine students' attitudes towards and knowledge of graphic organizers. My hope was that the students would realize a positive correlation between their writing progress and the use of graphic organizers. In fact, based on the post-surveys, this did happen. Eighty-three percent of the students responded that they did feel graphic organizers were helpful. This is a ten percent increase from the pre-survey. In addition, all of the students were able to define prewriting graphic organizers. Because the students took such ownership of the selection of their graphic organizer, I believe the students were better able to really learn about them and how to use them. In other words, it was meaningful for them so they learned. Finally, of the four students who responded that they did not feel graphic organizers were helpful to them, three responded the same way on the pre-survey. This indicates that for those more advanced writers, their attitudes about graphic organizers have not changed despite the implementation of the store-house. As one student wrote, "No (they are not helpful) because I like to think of stuff while I write."

B. Data Collection:

I collected data in the following ways:

- student writing samples pre- and post implementation
- observations during the writing process
- pre and post student surveys
- teacher journal reflections
- analysis of current literature and research related to writing graphic organizers

Details regarding the specifics of how this data was collected and analyzed can be found in Section A in "My Inquiry Plan," *What I did to carry out the inquiry in my classroom.*

Conclusions

A. List of Claims:

1. Students, especially those that struggle with language, benefit from having access to prewriting graphic organizers during self-selected writing opportunities. I believe this is evidenced by the shift in the number of "hits" in the below benchmark categories from before to after implementation. The total number of "hits" in the below benchmark areas decreased thirty-one percent (i.e. 16 "hits" before implementation and 11 "hits" after). This shows that the students who typically struggle to meet the benchmark benefited from the use of the organizers.

2. Organization of and adding details to writing was the area of greatest improvement after using the graphic organizers. When looking at the number of "hits" in the below-benchmark category of the rubric, both areas improved by forty percent. The chart on page 12A shows that in each of the categories, two fewer "hits" occurred. This claim parallels Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo's conclusion that, "Graphic organizers benefit literacy learning by easing the organization and direction of

student learning." (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo, 1995, p. 66) In addition, they say students extend their writing with more details by seeing "relationships that were not obvious before (creating a graphic organizer)." (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo, 1995, p. 16)

3. Students can better define graphic organizers. On the pre-survey, forty-one percent of the students were able to define graphic organizers, whereas on the post-survey, one hundred percent of the students were able to do this.

4. It is possible that the use of graphic organizers negatively impacted some of the more advanced writers. I believe this is possible because of two pieces of data. First, the number of "hits" on the rubric in the advanced category decreased by 50%. Second, my strong writers described on the surveys that they felt graphic organizers did not fit their writing styles.

B. Future Directions:

This inquiry may have multiple implications for my future practice as a teacher. First, it has further confirmed for me that struggling writers respond well to structure within the writing process and the setting of developmentally appropriate expectations. As the State College Area School District's *Language Arts Continuum* states, "Teach and then expect your students to develop objectives/goals that enable them to improve at writers." This inquiry plan was the result of my trying to do just this. I wanted to

teach them how to use the graphic organizers independently, and now I expect them realize to their value and to implement their use in the future.

Dovetailing off of this, another implication is that I can now feel even more comfortable about allowing children the opportunity to free-write. I have for years seen the power of doing so, but have always wondered if my struggling writers would benefit from more structure. Now they have more of it in the form of the graphic organizer store-house.

A third implication is that I am wondering if graphic organizers impede the natural story telling abilities of some students. Because there is little research related to writing and graphic organizers, I will need to explore this concept on my own. In order to inquire about this further, the next time I conduct a free-writing assignment in my classroom, I am going to try requiring the use of graphic organizers from the students that I feel would benefit from them the most (mainly my lower level writers) and allow the other students to chose whether or not they would like to use them. By doing this, I am hoping to confirm my suspicion that my advanced writers actually write better without graphic organizers. To do this, I will again evaluate the total number of "hits" on the rubric, specifically in the "4" category.

In addition, I am wondering how well the students will continue to apply the graphic organizers in a more independent setting. I plan to gradually add to the store-house as needed; however, as stated earlier, I don't want to make it so big that the students have difficulty selecting appropriate organizers. Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo suggest scaffolding the use of graphic organizers so that the activities "fall within (the students') zone of proximal development." (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo,

1995, p. 28) I feel I have done this thus far and plan to continue in this fashion. Therefore, my question more specifically is, how much more scaffolding will I need to do in order for the students to become completely independent with the store-house?

Finally, I think this inquiry has given me the skills necessary to conduct teacher research in the future. When I started this process, I had an extensive list of possible wonderings, and it was difficult to pick just one for inquiry. Many of my wonderings were very extensive and would have required more time than what was available through the course. Therefore, I am hoping to start an inquiry early next year so that I can thoroughly explore one of my other burning questions.

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Appendix A:

Student Pre- and Post-Implementation Surveys

Appendix B:

SCASD Rubric Samples

Appendix C:

Graphic Organizers Used