

**Kindling the *Kid Writing* Soul:  
Free Verse Poetry in the Kindergarten  
Classroom.**

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Inquiry Conference: April 29, 2006

Abstract: A look at the influence of a free verse poetry unit on kindergarten students in three classrooms. How will this non-conventional form of writing affect the journaling of pre-conventional, emerging, and developing writers?

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## ***Introduction and Rationale***

As experienced teachers and a novice intern in kindergarten, we have come to understand the important role that writing plays in our students' lives. In our kindergarten classrooms at Gray's Woods Elementary School, students write each day following the kindergarten writing program based upon the teacher resource, *Kid Writing: A Systematic Approach to Phonics, Journals, and Writing Workshop* (1999). *Kid Writing* is a wonderful writing curriculum designed and supported throughout the State College Area School District to introduce children operating in preconventional, emergent, and developing levels to story writing (see Appendix A). Writing is a crucial piece of the kindergarten Language Arts program and as teachers; we are constantly looking for ways to improve our students' writing.

In February, around the time of choosing our inquiry topic, we began to notice that many of our students had developed a strong understanding of the conventions of print and were able to form complete thoughts with corresponding illustrations. However, at this point in the school year, we had seen our children come to a comfortable position with simple sentences and they began to show signs of disinterest in elaborating on their thoughts and adding more detail to their stories. Together we brainstormed ideas about how we could make writing more interesting and exciting for the children. We also tried to think of different methods we could use to encourage students to be more creative and descriptive in their story writing. Many of our students are capable of writing more sophisticated stories and we were very interested in finding out how we could get the children to this point.

After much thought, we decided we would introduce the students to a free verse poetry unit. We were encouraged by the more creative and thoughtful possibilities that a non-formal type of writing could offer our students. We were interested in seeing the effects that a mini-unit

on free verse poetry could have on our students' story writing. We decided to use Regie Routman's book, *Kids' Poems: Teaching Kindergartners to Love Writing Poetry* (2000) as a resource. In this book, she highlights the advantages of teaching poetry to kindergartners. Some benefits of poetry writing include, it "requires little writing to express ideas, inspires a love of language, invites careful choice of words, provides an easy, open-ended alternative for kids who dislike (or find difficult) structured forms of writing, works as an equalizer because everyone is successful, encourages a real audience for listening and allows time for sharing everyone's work, is particularly conducive to collaboration and positively impacts other writing" (Routman, 2000, p. 7).

The main intent of our inquiry project was to discover whether a free verse poetry unit would have any effect on our students' story writing. The advantages highlighted above exemplify why we chose to implement a poetry unit in our three classrooms. For three weeks, we decided to replace the *Kid Writing* program with an introduction to free verse poetry. We were excited to see if three weeks of exposure to poetry would have an impact on our students' writing. We thought poetry had the potential to help build confidence for the less successful writers in our classroom. We were also curious to find out whether poetry could bring about a renewed interest in the children's writing and if it would encourage them to take more chances in order to express themselves creatively. We also believed poetry could potentially encourage the use of more description and more focused illustrations in the students' story writing.

Free verse poetry is unique in that students do not need to worry about the everyday writing conventions and can instead focus on the content and creativity of their own ideas. We hoped this would be beneficial for the students because it could get them in the routine of thinking more about using descriptive words. This introductory poetry mini-unit also provides

students with the opportunity to hear each other's poems read, clapped, and snapped to out-loud. Listening to others' poems has several advantages for the students. It may be inspirational, it may encourage them to write about different topics and it might help them hear the rhythm within the poems, which is important in learning to differentiate between writing poems and writing stories.

The intent of our inquiry was to find out if a free verse poetry unit would have a positive impact on students' writing. We were interested in knowing whether a poetry unit could enhance our students' writing and increase their interest in creating elaborative stories. For the above reasons, we chose a free verse poetry unit with "no rules" as a way to help all students experience success in their writing. We hoped that an introduction to a free verse poetry unit would have a positive impact on all aspects of our students' writing. However, we sincerely believed that teaching this poetry unit would be a great learning experience for us, as teachers, even if we did not see dramatic improvement in our students' story writing.

This inquiry project has affected our teaching in many ways. It has made us more aware of our students' writing. Before the poetry unit, we encouraged our students to elaborate and add more details to their stories, but we did not push them as much in this area. During the poetry unit, we spent a lot of time talking with the students about using details and thinking about descriptive words. After we finished up the poetry mini-unit and returned to the *Kid Writing* program, we strongly encouraged the students to be more elaborative in their story writing. We gave them more support and asked that they include more details in their stories, just as they did while writing poems.

Our inquiry helped us manage our writing time more effectively. We planned our lessons so that each day we had enough time to work individually with most students as they wrote. We

feel that the inquiry allowed us to focus on our children's writing and made us more conscientious about creating meaningful writing lessons. Overall, the inquiry helped make us more aware of our students as writers and it encouraged us to be more focused on attending to their writing needs.

This inquiry project also made us more reflective about our own teaching. We were extremely excited about trying something new in our classrooms and as a result, we spent a great deal of time planning lessons for the free verse poetry mini-unit. We wrote journal entries about our writing experiences with the children (see Appendix B). In these journals, we discussed the sequence of our lessons, how we could improve upon the lessons and our teaching, what we saw as the students were writing, any comments they made about writing poems or stories, and how we felt about the inquiry project that week. All three teachers met and talked each week about what we had done with the students and how their writing looked at that point in the inquiry. It was very helpful to hear and see the things that we did similarly and differently in our classrooms. We shared and borrowed ideas from one another because even though we were all teaching the same free verse poetry mini-unit, we each have different teaching styles and as a result, the lessons were implemented slightly different in the three classrooms. Our collaboration was extremely advantageous to this inquiry project.

Each of us firmly believes that our inquiry project will help us in our future teaching. We now have some experience teaching poetry to kindergarten students and our inquiry has allowed us to see first hand how much they have enjoyed writing poems. Free verse poetry is something that each of us has vowed we will use again. The students were so excited about writing poems and as one student said to Maggie, the kindergarten intern, "Miss Dwyer, can I *please* write poems with you today?" This may not seem like much, except it is a positive comment coming

from a boy, who normally dislikes writing and often makes this known. This type of success with poetry writing is something each of us has seen in our classrooms. We now know that we will implement a free verse poetry unit in our classrooms each year.

Our inquiry project has driven each of us to be more thoughtful about our teaching. We are all now more aware of our students' as writers and we know that if our students begin to show disinterest and are not using descriptions in their writing, then introducing them to free verse poetry is one way to help students get past those things. We know that as teachers, we can help students' story writing by periodically giving them writing prompts or really encouraging them to be creative with their stories. We also know that brainstorming ideas and talking with one another is very helpful because we all have different ideas and teaching techniques that can be useful to one another.

We have researched and read about children's writing and we have learned a great deal about how to teach free verse poetry writing. As a result of reading and using Regie Routman's free verse poetry format from her book, *Kids' Poems: Teaching Kindergartners to Love Writing Poetry*, we now feel confident using poetry, as a teaching tool, in our kindergarten classrooms.

### ***Background Information***

All three of our kindergarten classes at Gray's Woods Elementary School have twenty-three students. For our inquiry, we decided to focus our research on eighteen students. These eighteen students in our classrooms are operating at three different writing levels. Six of them are operating in the preconventional level, six of them are operating in the emergent level and six of them are operating in the developing level. These levels are determined by the State College Area School District's standards, which are found in the Language Arts Curriculum (LAC) (see Appendix C). Students are classified as being part of one of the above levels based upon specific

criteria established by the school district. Students are considered to be operating at one of the three levels when their writing abilities match the characteristics of writers within that specified category.

The children in our three classrooms are mostly from middle class families and the majority of our classroom populations are comprised of Caucasian students. Of the eighteen students we focused on for our inquiry project, eight of them are girls and ten of them are boys. These students have each been writing using the *Kid Writing* curriculum since September. They have differing attitudes towards writing. Some of the students, mostly the higher ability students, who are operating at the developing level, enjoy writing. Other students, mostly the lower ability students, who are at operating at the preconventional level, dislike writing very much. And some students, mostly the average ability level students, who are operating at the emergent level, have a neutral attitude toward writing. Some of the preconventional students are not independent writers and require teacher guidance as they write. The emergent and developing phase students are independent writers. At times, they require extra teacher guidance to remind them to use more details and descriptions in their stories.

### ***Wonderings and Subquestions***

As we began to think about possible inquiry topics, we felt strongly about understanding our students' writing more fully. As noted in an initial journal entry, we discuss the need to narrow our topic (see Appendix D). We realized there are many different aspects of our students' writing that we could research and learn more about. We were all extremely interested in finding out how we could make writing more exciting for students. As Nancy Dana and Diane Yendol-Silva (2003, p. 54) point out, "Having interest(s) in common with another professional lays the foundation for the first configuration of collaboration-*shared inquiry*." Since we all teach

kindergarten and spend a great deal of time writing with our students, we felt it would be very beneficial to work together and learn more about our students' writing through this inquiry.

We have all noticed that many students dreaded writing time and made remarks such as "Aw, why do I have to write today. It's so boring. I want to go to a different station." We also saw that students were not writing stories they were capable of writing. Many students used simple sentences, but were not elaborating or using details in their stories. Our concern this year is similar to ones we have had in the past. Each year around this same time, we have found that students are writing below their appropriate ability levels and we were anxious to see whether there was something we could do, as teachers, to help them through this writing lull.

Since we each shared a similar worry about our students' writing, we decided to collaborate on this inquiry project. As we began to research the inquiry process in more depth, we saw many benefits of working together. We felt that sharing ideas and discussing our findings on a weekly basis would give us more insight into how our different teaching styles may affect our students' writing. We also thought it would be beneficial to talk about our experiences because we were eager to borrow ideas and learn from one another. According to Kathy G. Short, Jean Schroeder, Julie Laird, Gloria Kauffman, Margaret J. Ferguson and Kathleen Marie Crawford, authors of *Learning Together Through Inquiry*, (1996) "Collaboration prompts people to consider new ideas and explain their thinking to others. We believe that it is through collaboration that people consider other perspectives and go beyond their current understandings, we encourage them to form groups where they actually think with others, not just cooperate to complete a task." The authors believe collaboration helps to gain new perspectives and this is one of the most important reasons why we chose to work together on our inquiry.

## **Main Wondering**

Once we decided we were going to use a free verse poetry unit to try to help students with their writing, we were able to narrow our main wondering to the following:

- How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at the preconventional, emergent and developing levels?

## **Subquestions**

We had additional questions about how poetry might affect the students' story writing. We were concerned that students might become confused about the different structures of poems and stories since they have very different and distinct characteristics. After much thought and consideration, we came up with three more subwonderings that are directly related to our main wondering. These include:

- How will the mini-unit on free verse poetry affect the students' creativity and interest in story writing?
- Will the children be able to differentiate between story writing and free verse poetry?
- Will an introduction to free verse poetry encourage and build more detailed story writing?

## ***“A True Inquiry”***

Our inquiry project began with an initial wondering about how a free verse poetry unit might affect our students as writers. We were extremely curious to find out whether an introduction to poetry would have an impact on our students' writing. We wondered if it could enhance our kindergartners' writing or whether it would have no impact. We also were open to the fact that it might have a negative effect on our students' writing. Early on in our inquiry process we had many wonderings. A couple of these wonderings included: Would

this poetry unit make students more excited to write? and Would poetry help students learn to write using more detailed and descriptive words?

Throughout the inquiry process, we kept anecdotal notes with detailed comments, both positive and negative, that the students said about writing. We were unsure if a free verse poetry unit would have any influence on our writers. We were hopeful that our students would benefit from writing free verse poetry. However, since this is an inquiry and not an improvement project, our goal was not to improve students' writing. Rather, our main objective was to find out if or how poetry might affect our students' story writing. For our inquiry project, we were able to take an honest look at our students' writing by comparing children's stories written before the introduction to the poetry unit with stories written at the completion of the poetry unit. This enabled us to see the true results and the overall positive impact of the free verse poetry unit.

### ***Inquiry Project Implementation***

Once we decided that we would like to use poetry as a way to learn more about our students' writing, we contacted Mindy Cocolin (personal communication, February 16, 2006), who is a Curriculum Support Teacher for the State College Area School District. She informed us that it was acceptable for us to carry out the three-week poetry unit. She also gave us several suggestions about how we might implement the free verse poetry unit into our classrooms. She encouraged us to have students create poems that allow them to express how they feel. She stressed the idea of students "playing off their senses." She believes it is beneficial for the students to write poems that are descriptive and show others what they see and hear, how they feel, and how things taste and smell.

Once we learned that we were permitted to use a free verse poetry unit in our three classrooms, we took the information Mindy provided us and developed a plan that each of us could follow. Short et al. (1996, pp. 166-167) describe the importance of devising an inquiry plan in their book *Learning Together Through Inquiry*. They believe this is an essential aspect of the inquiry process because it helps the inquirers create and examine vital inquiry questions. Dana and Silva (2003, chap. 4) also point out the importance of developing a research plan in their book, *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Inquiry*. They state that, "Meaningful teacher inquiry should not 'depart from' the daily work of classroom teachers, but become a 'part of' their daily work." Therefore it was important for us to plan how we could make inquiry a part of our kindergarten classrooms. This involved taking a closer look at our day and in particular, our daily writing routine. We also needed to look more closely at the students in our classrooms.

As noted earlier, we each chose to focus on six students in our three classrooms. Two of the students were operating at the preconventional writing level, two were operating at the emergent writing level and two were operating at the developing writing level. In total, we focused on eighteen students among the three classrooms. After we chose the eighteen students, we more thoroughly researched the free verse poetry unit that Regie Routman discusses in her book, *Kids' Poems: Teaching Kindergarteners to Love Writing Poetry* (2003).

We each followed the suggested format for implementing the poetry unit from Routman's book. The free verse poetry unit replaced our regular writing program for a period of three weeks. We implemented a lesson sequence for introducing the children to free verse poetry writing during our regularly scheduled Writing Workshop times or *Kid Writing* times. The lessons included all or parts of the below possibilities and they were taught in both large and small group settings. The format includes:

- Sharing examples of kid's poems collected from either resources or student work (see Appendix E)
- Teacher demonstration, a “think aloud”, on chart paper- modeling the thinking and writing process (see Appendix F)
- Whole class shared writing or interactive writing (see Appendix G)
- Brainstorming with children as they begin to write their personal poems (done in small groups) (see Appendix H)
- Sharing and celebrating the created poems (see Appendix I) (Routman, 2000, p. 9)

Each of us implemented the lessons in a similar way using the above format. However, there were some variations within the lessons among the three classrooms. One classroom used the overhead projector during the celebrating part of the lesson. This was a unique way to show the class a typed version of specific students' work. These transparencies were shown to the entire class before writing time. The same students also had the opportunity to use “special markers,” which were used only during poetry writing time. The “special markers” were used during writing time, as a way to spark the students' interest in creating exciting and elaborate poems. The other two classes allowed students to use large 11 x 15 white construction paper for their poetry writing. This larger size paper allowed students to write bigger and it gave them the chance to fit their writing and illustrations all on one page, which is something that is typically not possible when the students write stories.

Once the three weeks of poetry writing ended, we returned to the regular *Kid Writing* program. Students went back to their regular story writing routine. However, all three teachers stressed to them the importance of adding details and descriptions to their writing. We reminded students about the types of words they used in their poems and we encouraged them to use more

elaboration in their stories. We also made it clear to the students that poems and stories are structurally very different. Mindy Cocolin (personal communication, February 16, 2006) cautioned us, before we even started our poetry unit, that some students might experience difficulty when they return to their story writing. She informed us that some children's writing might regress before it actually progresses. As a result of this information, we made a point to stress the differences between poetry and story writing. We emphasized the variations that exist between the two, so that students would understand the importance of using capital letters, punctuation and complete thoughts when writing stories.

We continued with *Kid Writing* for two weeks and then we began the data collection and analysis phase of our inquiry, which is described below in great detail.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

#### ***Data Collection Methods Used:***

##### **I. Student Products**

- a. Written and illustrated story samples

##### **II. Teacher Products**

- a. Data Collection Assessment Sheet (DCAS) Part 1
- b. Data Collection Assessment Sheet (DCAS) Part 2
- c. Anecdotal notes

##### **III. Communication**

- a. Parent communication and verbal comments

##### **IV. Teacher Journals**

- a. Reflections of student comments and reactions

As noted earlier, data was collected from the originally selected eighteen students. Two students from each of the three operating writing levels (pre-conventional, emergent and developing) were chosen from each of the three kindergarten classrooms.

## **I. Student Products**

- a. Written and illustrated story samples

*Subquestion #2- “Will the children be able to differentiate between story writing and free verse poetry?”*

### ***Data Collection Strategy***

The student written and illustrated story samples were examined upon reentry into story writing. If their writing pieces showed awareness of appropriate story writing structure (ex. directionality, complete sentences, punctuation), then they were able to make the transition from poetry to story writing thus differentiating between the two.

If their writing pieces did not show awareness of appropriate story writing structure (ex: no directionality, no complete sentences, no punctuation), then they were not able to make the transition and not able to differentiate between the two.

Our wondering “How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at preconventional, emergent and developing levels?” was also addressed using written and illustrated story samples.

## **II. Teacher Products**

- a. Data Collection Assessment Sheet (DCAS) Part 1 (see Appendix J)

### ***Data Collection Strategy***

One writing sample from each of the following categories was selected for each student:

- One week before the poetry unit

- One week after the poetry unit
- Two weeks after the poetry unit

By selecting an equal number of students operating at each writing level, we believe we are sampling a balanced audience. Selecting two students from each writing level rather than collecting data on the entire class was more practical for our purposes and time restraints. Evaluating the selected students from all three classes as one inquiry group rather than three individual classrooms serves as an equalizer for individual classroom special needs (behavioral, emotional, social and low/high academic levels).

a. Data Collection Assessment Sheet - Part 1 (Curriculum Standards)

***Subquestion #1-*** “How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at preconventional, emergent and developing levels?”

Each student piece was analyzed using a Data Collection Assessment Sheet (DCAS) that our teaching team created and modeled after the State College Area School District (SCASD) Language Arts Curriculum (LAC) writing standards and our own writing wonderings.

The SCASD LAC writing standards (the first section of the DCAS printed below) were chosen as criteria to look at during our data analysis because of its validity in measuring developmentally appropriate writing practices in the state of Pennsylvania.

Journal Poetry Journal Journal

**Emergent - 2005-06 SCASD Writing Standards**

1. Takes risks in writing activities
2. Draws pictures and may “label” these to convey meaning
3. “Reads” own writing; may not match words to print
4. Writes left to right most of the time
5. Forms most letters so that they can be recognized
6. Attempts sound spelling, often with assistance, using beginning and/or ending consonants

A “check mark” is placed in the box of the corresponding standard if that standard is observable in that particular writing piece. If that standard is not found for the individual student, then the box remains empty.

Evidence of how the standards are met or not met in each selected student sample will answer our wondering “How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at preconventional, emergent and developing levels?” If the students' writing sample during the second week of reentry to *Kid Writing* exhibits evidence of meeting the same or more of the standards documented in the DCAS, the poetry unit did not negatively influence their writing mechanics. Examples of “met” standards in a writing piece are provided in the Appendix portion of this paper (see Appendix K).

b. Data Collection Assessment Sheet - Part 2 - (Creativity and Detail Rubric)

***Subquestion #1-*** “How will the mini-unit on free verse poetry affect the students’ creativity and interest in story writing?”

***Subquestion #3-*** “Will an introduction to free verse poetry encourage and build more detailed story writing?”

The second part of the DCAS focuses on two of our subquestions: “How will the mini-unit on free verse poetry affect the students creativity and interest in story writing?” and “Will an introduction to free verse poetry encourage and build more detailed story writing?”

Our inquiry team devised the creativity/interest section of the rubric (shown below) based on our combined years of kindergarten language/literacy training and our experiences with young children and their written expression. Examples of rubric-scored writing pieces are documented (see Appendix K).

**Level of creativity in illustration:**

- 0-No illustration
- 1-limited colors and form. May or may not reflect the writing/dictation
- 2-limited colors and form. Reflects the writing/dictation
- 3-Variety of colors and forms to reflect the writing/dictation
- 4-Detailed use of colors and forms to reflect the writing/dictation

**Level of creativity in writing/dictation:**

- 0-No independent production of topic/writing/dictation
- 1-Models activity/topic
- 2-Models the topic and adds 1 individual detail/feature
- 3-Models activity and adds 2 individual details/features
- 4-Chooses his/her writing topic/style and includes 3+ details/features

**Interest in process/activity:**

- 0-Does not willingly participate
- 1- Participates with little effort
- 2-Participates attentively and interactively
- 3-Eager to participate, i.e. “When can we have writer's workshop?”

Although the rubric section titled “Interest in process/activity” may appear extremely subjective, we (the inquiry team) felt it important to include because the student's behavior towards/during the process can be a very telling tool to guiding his/her instruction.

Our ideas behind the individual criteria in this area are:

- *0-Does not willingly participate* - i.e. student must continually be verbally directed, prompted and encouraged to engage in the activity. Student may lay his/her head on the table, engage in another activity and/or ask to use the bathroom at the beginning of every writer's workshop.
- *1-Participates with little effort* - i.e. Student writes and draws as little as possible and then moves on to next activity. Student may choose to scribble on paper with hard dark lines in an aggressive manner.
- *2-Participates attentively and interactively* - i.e. student attends to his/her writing directly following the teacher led introduction. Student may reread writing and pause for reflection/direction.
- *3-Eager to participate*, i.e. “When can we have writer's workshop?”

If the student's total creativity/interest score is higher the second week of reentry to *Kid Writing*, then the total creativity/interest score of the students pre-poetry evaluation will address our subquestion “How will the mini-unit on free verse poetry affect the students' creativity and interest in story writing?”

### **c. Anecdotal notes**

#### ***Data Collection Strategy***

***Wondering*** – “How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at preconventional, emergent and developing levels?”

***Subquestion #1-*** “How will the mini-unit on free verse poetry affect the students’ creativity and interest in story writing?”

**Subquestion #2-** “Will the children be able to differentiate between story writing and free verse poetry?”

**Subquestion #3-** “Will an introduction to free verse poetry encourage and build more detailed story writing?”

All three teachers wrote anecdotal notes while working with their student's during the inquiry project (see Appendix L). Students’ comments, observable behaviors and actual writing details were often documented. Information gathered from the observations was shared with team members to help guide instruction.

### **III. Communication**

- a. Parent communication and verbal comments (Appendix M)

#### ***Data Collection Strategy***

**Wondering** – “How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at preconventional, emergent and developing levels?”

E-mails, notes and verbal comments from parents regarding the effect of the poetry unit on their child were collected and shared with our inquiry team. This information will possibly be used to refine future poetry unit direction.

### **IV. Teacher Journals**

- a. Reflections of student comments and reactions (Appendix D)

#### ***Data Collection Strategy***

**Wondering-** “How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at the preconventional, emergent, and developing levels?”

**Subquestion #1-** “How will the mini-unit on free verse poetry affect the students’ creativity and interest in story writing?”

**Subquestion #2-** “Will the children be able to differentiate between story writing and free verse poetry?”

**Subquestion #3-** “Will an introduction to free verse poetry encourage and build more detailed story writing?”

Reflective teacher journal entries that shared student observations and comments were kept and shared with the inquiry team. Information drawn from these data collection tools helped guide both the inquiry project and actual student instruction.

### ***Claims and Evidence from Inquiry***

**Wondering-** “How will the introduction to free verse poetry affect the story writing of our students operating at the preconventional, emergent, and developing levels?”

**Claim-** Within the three classrooms that participated in the inquiry, there was an overall positive influence on the students’ story writing.

**Evidence-** In general, among the three classrooms that participated in the inquiry, there was a noticeable change in student attitude toward writing when returning to the *Kid Writing*, or the story writing, structure. Through teacher observation and anecdotal notes, we found that various students were choosing to write independently at choice times throughout the day (see Appendix N).

**Subquestion #1-** How will the mini-unit on free verse poetry affect the students’ interests in story writing?

**Claim-** At the beginning of the inquiry, we observed an overall increase in student interest and confidence in writing, because of the success they experienced during the mini-unit. We also noticed that there were variances among children and classrooms in the extent and duration of

their interest levels. When returning to story writing, some children maintained their excitement and confidence, while others became more frustrated or unmotivated.

***Evidence-***

*Preconventional students:*

Among the six preconventional students selected from three classes to collect relating data, all *initially* demonstrated a renewed interest and confidence in writing. The children were excited to write poems and felt successful with the freedom that the free verse poetry lent them to express their thoughts. When asked about his favorite part off the day, one child replied, “poems... because I got to write a lot and I like to write.” There was a variance among classes however, of the duration of these children’s excitement and participation when returning to story writing. Some children’s eagerness continued, as others were very quick to return to their distracted and unengaged behaviors. In reference to the data collected from the rubrics, four out of the six preconventional students showed an increase in their interest level (see Appendix O).

*Emergent students:*

The six emergent children that our study focused on were very eager to participate in the poetry mini-unit as well. They were generally motivated in writing, prior to the inquiry, but that excitement was enhanced during the inquiry. We also noticed that the emergent children from all three classrooms were writing poetry independently throughout the day. However, just as in the preconventional children, upon returning to story writing, we did notice a variance in the interest level of the emergent writers. Most were eager to return to their journals, while

others preferred to write poetry instead. In referencing the DCAS, five out of the six emergent students showed an increase in their interest level.

*Developing students:*

The students that are operating at the developing level in our classes were already highly motivated about their writing. The introduction to poetry was exciting for them, as it offered them another venue for expressing their thoughts. These children were also choosing to write poems independently throughout the day and at home. When returning to story writing, the developing children also maintained their interests in writing and creating stories. In referencing the DCAS, four out of the six developing students maintained or increased their interest level (see Appendix O). They were influenced greatly by the poetry unit, still choosing to write poems on their own and sharing them with the class (see Appendix I).

***Subquestion #2-*** *Will the children be able to differentiate between story writing and free verse poetry?*

***Claim-*** Not all children were able to independently make the transition from free verse poetry to story writing. However, with brief teacher guidance, all children were successful in returning to the appropriate structure of story writing (ex. directionality, complete sentences, punctuation).

***Evidence-*** We observed that some children were writing in “poetry form” in their journals when first returning to story writing (see Appendix P). However, with teacher guidance, all children were able to return to writing left to right in complete sentences, including punctuation (see Appendix Q).

Those children that did need a reminder of the difference between writing a poem and writing in their storybooks, varied between classrooms, however, all fell into the categories of preconventional or emergent. Our operationally developing children were able to make the transition independently (see Appendix R).

***Subquestion #3-*** *Will an introduction to free verse poetry encourage and build more detailed story writing?*

***Claim-*** There was an obvious influence on the students' descriptive writing from the poetry mini-unit. All levels of children were writing more descriptively than prior to the inquiry. However, much teacher guidance was necessary with most children.

***Evidence-***

*Preconventional students:*

Some preconventional students in our classrooms were at first interested in writing poems, rather than stories in their journals. However, with teacher support and encouragement, these children were able to include their descriptive language from the poems, into their stories. We also noticed that some children were including more details in their illustrations as well (see Appendices S and T). With continued teacher support, all preconventional students are beginning to write more descriptively. In referencing the DCAS, five out of the six preconventional students were writing more descriptively.

*Emergent students:*

Among the three classrooms, we also noticed that our emergent writers were expanding on their ideas in their stories with teacher guidance. These children's

stories became more complex, as they were encouraged to tell more about their illustrations (see Appendices U and V). Although not all children in this category were eager to return to story writing, they were able to include more descriptive language and details. In referencing the DCAS, five out of the six emergent students were writing more descriptively.

*Developing students:*

As teachers, we were eager to see the effects that the free verse poetry would have on our developing students' writing. Because of their confidence and skills in writing, we were excited to see how little teacher prompting it took for these children to transfer their creative and descriptive language from their poetry to their stories. All developing children continued to add descriptive details to their ideas (see Appendices W and X). While there was some teacher guidance, these students seemed to easily apply the expressive details from their poetry, to their story writing. In fact, we also noticed that for some developing students, their stories included more description and creativity than poems they had written during the mini-unit (see Appendix Y). In referencing the DCAS, six out of the six developing students maintained or showed an increase in their descriptive writing.

### ***Conclusions***

There was an overall positive effect from the poetry unit for the children operating at the preconventional, emergent, and developing levels. All three teachers plan to implement a poetry unit with some adaptations into our future teaching.

We were surprised to find that our preconventional and emergent writers showed

the most interest and progression in their story writing during the weeks following the poetry unit. Their confidence and self-esteem as writers was enhanced by the acceptance to list describing words, rather than full sentences. It also was appropriate for their level of fine motor skills. The developing students continued to show high interest levels and were engaged in the writing process as well.

We found that all the operationally developing students were able to independently differentiate between free verse poetry and story writing. However, some pre-conventional and emergent children needed initial teacher support to make the transition back to story writing.

With regard to the descriptive language of our children's stories, all levels of children were writing more descriptively after the inquiry project. However, as teachers, we learned that in order for this age level of children to write more descriptively, it is our responsibility to provide ample guidance and support.

Upon reflection of our teaching practices during this inquiry process, we found that as teachers we became more excited about our writing instruction both during and after the poetry unit. We tended to focus our lessons around language-rich experiences. We found ourselves emphasizing the importance of rhythm of sentence and word, text, illustration and detail.

### ***New Wonderings***

- Because of the confidence-building qualities of the free verse poetry unit, should it be introduced earlier in the school year?
- How can we better enrich the poetry experience for the children operating at the developmental level?

- When writing with preconventional children, should there be more teacher dictation strategies used earlier in the year? Would this help in establishing their confidence as writers before an introduction to a free verse poetry unit?
- Did the students' descriptive writing improve because of:
  1. an introduction to free verse poetry?
  2. our intensified attention to description and scaffolding?
  3. a combination of both?
  4. a result of their natural maturation and development over the course of the six week inquiry?

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