Writer's Workshop:
Learning to Write and Loving It

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Teaching Context

The Pennsylvania State University, in partnership with the State College Area School District, granted me the amazing opportunity to be an intern in an outstanding first grade classroom. Throughout this experience I have had the opportunity to experiment with new techniques in a safe and encouraging environment. I would not have had these opportunities and felt comfortable experimenting with new strategies in the classroom without the support of my mentor teacher, supervisor, and other colleagues.

My first grade classroom at Lemont Elementary School is comprised of twenty unique and vibrant personalities. This mix of personalities and characteristics truly creates a learning environment that is dynamic as well as challenging. There are eleven boys and nine girls who have formed a special community in my classroom. The range of achievement in my students varies greatly. I learned that each one of my students learns in a very different way and has many different interests in school and out of school. I am very cautious not to label my students because I feel each one of them has the ability to be successful in the classroom; however, it is their achievement levels that vary. Therefore, I prefer to refer to my students according to their achievement levels in the classroom. With that said, there are seven high-achieving students, of these students, five are males and two are females.   There are nine average achievers, whom I feel are performing right at the expectations of a first grade student. Of these students, six are females and three are males. Finally, there are four low-achieving students, three males and one female.

For my inquiry, I focused on five of the seven high-achieving students. Of these five students, four are boys and one is a girl. I chose these students because I felt as though they were not putting in the effort that they could be in their writing. These particular students often rush through their writing and make careless mistakes. Another

simple yet valid reason for choosing these students is that I knew their work would be easy to track. With this statement, I am referring to students who are not present during *Writer's Workshop.* Two of the students leave during this time to receive special instruction from the English as a Second Language educator. Also, the student classified with a learning disability leaves during this time to receive special instruction, where she completes writing assignments on a level that is appropriate for her. The names of these students are fictitious to protect their privacy. The students' names are John, Alex, George, Jimmy, and Mary. The person, who always seemed to rush through his writing, as I saw it, was George. He was always the first one finished and produced many mechanical errors. Alex and John were very strong in the mechanics area, but they lacked interest in writing. George and John would often complain the most about having to write a story. Alex would have the most trouble getting started. He would spend the first half of *Writer's Workshop* complaining about how he "didn't know what to write about." Jimmy and Mary are very strong students in the classroom as well. Although, I did not hear many complaints from them about writing, their work never quite showed the potential they possessed.

As I previously mentioned, the classroom that I am in represents a wide range of students. Each student brings a unique quality to the classroom community. I have two English As a Second Language students, one student with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, one student who is classified with a learning disability, and one child with Autism. This diverse group of students definitely creates an interesting learning environment. However, I feel that the students only benefit from this type of exposure. Over the past few months, I have seen them grow as a class that watches out and cares for one another. Of course there are instances where they argue about a game they are

playing or some students are irritated by a certain behavior of another student. All in all, I believe that I have a class that encompasses an outstanding group of students.

On a typical day in my classroom, you would see the students playing, talking, reading, writing, and completing math tasks. These are all activities I feel typical first grade students would be engaged in throughout the day. Knowing that my students all learn in multiple ways, I design and implement lesson plans in all subjects according to the needs of my students. Being aware of the interests of my students became an essential factor in my teaching.

While teaching, I feel fairly confident in recognizing how my students are responding to certain tasks by the behaviors they exhibit, both verbal and nonverbal. However, there was one subject where I felt that there was a consistency in the lack of interest and achievement among a certain group of my students. *Writer's Workshop* became a huge concern of mine among my students, in particular with some of my high-achieving students. When I realized this, I knew that writing was exactly what I wanted to focus my inquiry project on.

Rationale

As I approached the weeks when I would be taking over all of the responsibilities of the school day, I wanted to feel as comfortable as possible with what I was going to be teaching. Up until that point in time, I felt fairly confident in designing and implementing lessons for all subject areas, except for writing. After reflecting upon why I did not feel confident teaching this particular subject, I recognized that many of my students were less than enthusiastic about the thought of writing a story. I noticed a lack of motivation among my students, especially among a group of my high-achieving students. The mention of writing a story would produce rolled eyes and groans from these students. Their reactions to writing disappointed me because I have seen them put

forth considerable effort and show great interest in other subjects. I believe their lack of interest and motivation toward writing had a direct affect on my motivation and eagerness to teach the subject. When I am teaching science or math, I thrive on their excitement and eagerness to learn more; however, I, with the rest of the class, seemed far less enthusiastic when it came time for writing. In particular, the way that this small group of five high-achieving students responded to *Writer's Workshop* affected my feelings towards teaching it.

I knew right away that I needed to change my attitude towards writing, as well as the attitudes of my students. Writing is an absolutely critical component of each school day; students complete some form of writing during each subject throughout the day. What I immediately noticed about these five high-achieving students was the amount of careless mistakes they made and how they seemed to constantly rush to finish their stories. Their lack of concentration and effort during *Writer's Workshop* seemed to correspond directly with the writing they completed during other times of the day. I noticed these same students complaining about writing during readings stations. It seemed as though they rushed through assignments and made certain careless mistakes. My concern was that if they already had negative feelings toward writing in first grade, it seemed likely that this attitude toward writing may follow them into second grade (and beyond).

This topic was a huge concern to me because I worried that there was some missing link in the way that I introduced *Writer's Workshop* to the students; it seemed as though their negative reaction to writing was, in part, a reflection of my teaching. I began to wonder whether it was the way I designed the lessons for the students or the topics I assigned. In the future, when I embark on teaching my own classroom, I may face this challenge repeatedly. As a future educator, I may encounter the same

predicament of having high-achieving students who have all of the potential to create wonderful stories, yet they may lack the motivation to write more carefully and/or enthusiastically. That is why I believe conducting this inquiry on writing is so valuable to me; I hope it will affect the way I teach writing in the future. With all this in mind, I finally came to my main inquiry question: **How would using a variety of writing techniques and strategies affect the motivation of my high-achieving students and their writings?**

Main Question and Sub-questions

As previously stated, my main inquiry question and wondering states: **How would using a variety of writing techniques and strategies affect the motivation of my high-achieving students and their writings?**

As I started to think about writing more carefully, I noticed that the lessons for *Writer's Workshop* were presented in a similar way each week. I saw them almost becoming monotonous to both the students and myself. This realization led me to discover other sub-questions. The combination of my initial question and continuous observations of *Writer's Workshop* led to even more wonderings, which would eventually steer the direction of my inquiry. The following is a collection of some of my sub-questions that I derived from my root question:

-If the students are indeed disinterested or unmotivated, as I expect they are, why do they lack motivation?

-What kind of topics and/or activities would affect the motivation of these students to write more or to write better?

How might certain activities and/or topics affect these students individually?

Would these activities and topics affect "high achievers?"

-What might it entail to present or facilitate these lessons in a way that is

motivating and interesting to the students, yet also effective and informational?

-Would using sample writings and graphic organizers affect their writings in any

 way, especially in the area of mechanics?

-Would implementing some type of sharing time affect the students' levels of

motivation and/or performance?

-Would this affect the writing in other subject areas (beyond language arts)

throughout the day?

These questions beckoned me to experiment with different ideas and approaches for

Writer's Workshop while specifically observing and recording how this might affect my

high-achieving students' attitudes toward writing and the actual writing itself.

Inquiry vs. Improvement Project

I feel my inquiry has proven itself to be a true inquiry project, not merely an

improvement project, in several ways. An inquiry project aims at trying to understand

something better in order to inform one's practice, where asking questions *is* the focus.

When a person is completing an improvement project, he/she is focusing on

implementing an idea because he/she is already convinced it is "better" and already feels

certain it *will* be more successful than the previous situation. The main difference

between an inquiry and an improvement project is that an improvement project has

predetermined results. A person who is completing this type of project is aware of the

fact that the actions put in place will prove to be beneficial in some way. An inquiry

project differs in that it begins with a problem, but rather a wondering.

My wonderings came about from a persistent problem I noticed in my classroom.

That problem was that my high-achieving students showed a lack of motivation toward

writing and made many careless mistakes. This problem led to my wondering:

How would using a variety of writing techniques and strategies affect the motivation of my high-achieving students and their writings? I was completely unaware of what the outcomes would be when I began my inquiry. As I conducted background research on the topic and began to collect data with my students, I noticed more and more wonderings emerging. For example, I wondered if using different writing topics would increase their motivation. The steps I took throughout this inquiry and the way I approached it definitely show how it proves to be a true inquiry over an improvement project.

Literature Review

Teaching writing can be a hard enough concept on its own, as I have experienced this throughout my first full year in a first grade classroom. Teaching mechanics, while maintaining the motivation levels of these students is difficult for almost any teacher. Before beginning my inquiry project, I researched writing in primary classrooms. I wanted to become as knowledgeable as I could about this topic before I started the inquiry process. I focused on researching about problem areas of primary students with respect to writing, what writing should really look like in the classroom, and the use of graphic organizers during writing times.

Writing achievement among students has been a main focus in our nation's schools today. Based on the research of L. Buhrke, L. Henkels, J. Klene, and H. Pfister (1995), factors contributing to poor writing achievement among elementary classrooms include poor attitudes of students, the inconsistent modeling of writing, and the infrequency of dedicated writing times. These authors pointed out that these weaknesses must be addressed. I researched further to see the best way to address those weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

One reoccurring theme I found in my research that I believed could assist in addressing the problem areas of writing was the importance of having the students write about relevant topics or topics that interest them. "We care about writing when we write with, for, and about people who matter to us over when we write about or off of the issues and experiences that matter to us" (Calkins, 1994, p. 14). Therefore, if a student does not show interest in the topic he/she is writing about, it is unlikely that he/she is going to show much enthusiasm and interest in writing. "We all invest greater effort and energy when we care deeply about a task and its outcome" (Routman, 2005, p. 215). As students write about a topic of interest to them, teachers should encourage the students and make it known that they have an interest in what they are going to write about. Teachers need to become involved in the process of selecting and helping the students select a good topic. "When students choose good topics, point out why they are well chosen" (Graves, 2004, p. 12). This will increase the students' motivation and confidence.

Giving writing topics that are appropriate and interesting proves to be an essential part of the writing process. Another essential feature of writing is that it should occur on a daily basis. "Students need regular, sustained time to write…If we try to squeeze it in, well, students will feel the squeeze and their writing will suffer accordingly" (Fletcher and Portalupi, 1998, p. 34). Students must be given a focus or a direction in the form of a mini-lesson with the opportunity to share their work with a teacher for feedback. A dialogue must occur between the student and the teacher. In Regie Routman's book, appropriately titled *Conversations,* Routman states "…all learning involves conversation. That conversation may be with ourselves, between ourselves and an author's words on the page, with a colleague, with a mentor, with an apprentice, with a student … Always, conversations play a major role in my thinking, learning, teaching, and changing" (64).

Conversations that occur between a teacher and a student give the teacher the opportunity to focus on the child's writing, give advice to a struggling writer, and/or evaluate the child's intent of the paper. Dialogues also allow students to take responsibility of their own writings and feel as though they are successful. Allowing students to feel as though they have real ownership over their papers is an important tool in encouraging students to write. "Thousands of well-meaning teachers stop kids from writing when they take possession of their students' work" (Glazer, 2002, p. 2).

As I was thinking about what activities I could implement during *Writer's Workshop* that would possibly affect the students' stories, I began to think about how the students would respond to pre-planning their papers, in particular, using graphic organizers. When researching, I found a statement in the book, Graphic Organizers: Visual Strategies for Active Learners, which states, "While graphic organizers aid learning for all students, they are especially appropriate for all students, they are especially appropriate for students with processing difficulties" (Bromley, 1995, p. 14). This immediately sparked my interest because it reminded me of one of the five students I was focusing on, Alex, who had much trouble getting started with his stories. Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo describe the use of graphic organizers, which I believe apply to writing:

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

-"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).

With all of this information in mind, I believed I could then decide how and where I wanted to direct my inquiry process. While establishing my lesson plans and writing topics and strategies, I often went back to my research to reinforce the ideas that were relevant to my students and me.

Inquiry Plan

The first step I took in the inquiry process was identifying the problem I noticed with my high-achieving students and their writing. I realized that there was a lack of motivation among these students when it came to writing, and I wanted to see the outstanding work they could produce in *Writer's Workshop* with the strong capabilities that each one of these students possessed. This problem developed into my inquiry question, or otherwise known as, my main wondering. I began to wonder how using different writing topics and strategies would affect these students and their writings. Along with establishing my main wondering, I also came up with a list of sub-questions relating to my inquiry. All of these questions led to me how I was going to carry out my inquiry.

The first step I took to carry out the inquiry process was developing a survey for my students. This survey focused on how my students felt about writing at that time. The survey asked the students to write down what their least and most favorite thing about *Writer's Workshop* was, what topics they would like to write about, and finally they had to circle a face, (smiling, undecided, or unhappy) that represented how they felt about *Writer's Workshop*. I gave a copy of the survey to all of my students. (Please see Appendix A1) From these surveys, I took the information and focused on my five high-achieving students. I wanted to see how these students felt about writing and what kinds of topics they would enjoy writing about.

After analyzing the surveys I gave to the students, the next step I took was creating a pre-assessment for my students. I wanted to see where these five students fell on the writing scale. How lengthy their stories were, how well they did with mechanics, and what kind of interest they showed in writing that story were some of the questions I had. The students just returned from spring break and I knew many of them went on vacations. However, I also knew that many of my students did not go anywhere for spring break. I decided I would assign a writing piece about traveling. I started the students with the beginning of the sentence, "If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to…" The students had to finish this writing. I did introduce a graphic organizer to my students. (See Appendix B1) This graphic organizer, which was created through Kidspiration, resembled a web that the students had to complete. The web asked the students questions about the place they would like to visit. Along with introducing the graphic organizer, I also gave reminders about what should be included in a "good" story. These reminders are always given to the students before and while they are writing. They are reminded to use punctuation marks, appropriate upper and lowercase letters, and include a beginning, middle, and an end. *Writer's Workshop* falls on Tuesday and Wednesday of every week. The lesson plan for these two days can be found in Appendix B1.

I created a checklist, which evaluates the students' writings. (See Appendix B1, B2, B3, B4, or B5) I used the checklist to focus on the problem areas of my students. The first thing that I noticed was that even though the students who I was focusing on were fairly strong with using punctuation marks, more than half of the class was not. Therefore, I decided that the next week's lessons would be focused around punctuation marks. For the first *Writer's Workshop* lesson, I had the students look at a story I wrote on the overhead projector that had many missing punctuation marks. (See Appendix B2)

The students had to find them and then I corrected it on the overhead. I gave the students a worksheet with sentences that did not have any punctuation marks. (See Appendix B2) The students had to copy the sentences and make sure they included the correct punctuation mark for each sentence. The following day, I gave the students a new topic to write about, titled One Spring Day. In this writing, I wanted to see how well the students would remember to include punctuation marks. The lesson plan for these days can be found in Appendix B2.

After reviewing the checklist from this writing, I focused on the next problem I noticed the students having. The students did not include any details, in particular, adjectives, in their writing. In my classroom, we call adjectives, "sparkle words." As much as I would say, "Remember to use those sparkle words," I never saw them used in any of my five students' stories. Therefore, for the next two weeks, I focused my lessons on using sparkle words. The students completed a worksheet called, "Stretch It." (See Appendix B3) During this lesson, I gave the students a simple sentence and they had to "stretch" it by using "sparkle words." The students worked in pairs and individually. The next day, I assigned a writing topic. When assigning topics, I looked back at the surveys to see what kinds of topics the students were interested in writing about. One of the topics that my students were interested in was "dinosaurs," and since we were covering dinosaurs during the *Prehistoric Life/Fossils* unit, I decided to do a writing about a missing dinosaur. I read the students a story that I wrote, titled, The Case of the Missing Dinosaur. As a class, we discussed what was "good" about the story. Then, the students used the same title and created their own stories. The lesson plan for these two days can be found in Appendix B3.

Once again, after reviewing the checklist after this writing assignment, I focused on the next problem area, using a beginning, middle, and an end. I created a lesson plan

for these two days; see Appendix B4, which focused on using a beginning, middle, and an end. On the first day, I read to the students a summarized version of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. However, in this version, I did not include the ending. (See Appendix B4) We discussed how the story needed an ending and why an ending is important to use in writing stories. I gave the students a graphic organizer, which resembled a traffic light. (See Appendix B4) The graphic organizer had three boxes, the first box was green, the second one was yellow, and the third one was red. The beginning would go in the green box, the middle would go in the yellow box, and the ending would go in the red box. The students had to develop ideas for the beginning, middle, and end to their stories, which would be focused around the story of Goldilocks. I did give the students the option of creating their own characters for the story, instead of using a young girl and three bears. The students completed this writing and I looked for the use of a beginning, middle, and an end.

After my second writing assignment, I decided to incorporate some type of reward for the student or students who I believed had the best writing of the week. I created an "Award Winning Author" certificate, which I gave out at the end of the week. (See Appendix I) The student who receives the award gets to read his/her story to the entire class. I would talk about why I chose that particular person's writing by pointing out the positive aspects of the story. I hoped this reward would increase the effort and motivation of the students who I was focusing on.

After completing these lessons and writings with the students, I knew I needed to do a final assessment with my students. Just like my pre-assessment, I did not want to instruct the students too much. I told the students they would be writing about a walk they took in the woods. The students began a new unit, *The Wonderful World of Nature,* which I wanted to incorporate into the story. I instructed the students that they must

include a plant and animal in their stories. They could choose any plant or animal they wanted, but they had to include at least one of each. The students started writing on the first day of *Writer's Workshop* and finished it on the second day. The students accompanied their writings with pictures.

To end my inquiry process, I wanted to survey the students one last time. I had the students complete a survey. (See Appendix A2) The survey asked the students how they felt about writing now and similar questions on the first survey they completed. I also decided to pull John, Alex, George, Jimmy, and Mary aside and interview them about their writing experiences. (See Appendix H) I recorded these interviews on my laptop and jotted down notes. I showed the students the writing they did for their pre-assessment and then one of their more recent writings. I asked them if they noticed any differences about their writing and what they liked about their writing now. I wanted to interview these students on a one-to-one basis to see what they were really thinking about their writing skills. I thought this was an intriguing way to end the inquiry process, which was going directly to the sources and finding out first-hand how they felt about themselves as writers.

Data Collection

Student Surveys-My first method of data collection was the student survey given at the beginning and end of my inquiry project. I thought this would be a helpful tool in establishing a baseline of my students' perspectives on writing. Both of the surveys I distributed to the students asked them how they felt about *Writer's Workshop*. The students had to circle a smiling face, an undecided face, or an unhappy face, which represented how they felt about *Writer's Workshop*. Other questions in both surveys included asking the students to describe their most and least favorite things about writing. Also, the students were asked what kinds of topics they would like to write about. The

only question that was different between the two surveys was that in the second survey, I asked the students if they felt as though they were better writers now than they were at the beginning of the year and why. All of the students received both surveys, even though I was only focusing on five of the students. (See Appendix A1 and A2)

Student Work Samples-My main source of data collection was student work samples. These samples included the five students' stories, graphic organizers, and worksheets completed during *Writer's Workshop*. Collecting the students' work allowed me to analyze student progress and growth over the span of the inquiry project. (See Appendix C-G)

Interviews-At the end of my inquiry project, I interviewed each of the five students I was focusing on a one-on-one basis. I interviewed each student separately and recorded the conversation on my laptop through a program called, *GarageBand*. From these interviews, I was able to hear what each of the students thought about his/her writing. I presented the students with a copy of their pre-assessment writings and then one of their final writings. I asked them to talk about any differences they saw in their writing and what they liked about their writing now. I listened to the interviews and scripted some essential parts. (See Appendix H)

Lesson Plans-There were several lesson plans I designed and implemented throughout the inquiry process. The lesson plans indicate the preparation that goes into effectively presenting the information to the students. The lesson plans also show the sequence of my instruction and the activities I completed with the students. (See Appendix B1-B4)

Videotapes-Throughout some of my lessons, I videotaped parts of my lessons and mini, informal conferences with my students after they completed their writings. These recordings focused on the students' reactions to new writing assignments, in particular

the reactions of some of my five students, and some of their reactions after writing the stories. (Written notes from the videotaped lessons can be found in Appendix H)

Data Analysis

Student Surveys-At the beginning of my inquiry process, I decided to give each of my students a survey to find out how they felt about writing. I did not want the students who I chose to focus on for this inquiry project to feel pinpointed or those who I was not looking at to feel left out, thus that is why I gave the survey to all of my students. While giving the survey to my students, I noticed that I did not include the question that asked them to describe what they liked least about writing; therefore, I wrote it in while I gave the survey. I gave the students the survey at the end of the day, which was quite close to dismissal time. The students felt a bit rushed so I wrote in some of their answers. (See Appendix A1) After giving each of the surveys, I focused on my five students, John, Alex, George, Jimmy, and Mary. I focused on one question at a time. I placed each survey beside each other and covered all but the question I was focusing on at that moment. I found that of the five students, two students, John and Jimmy, circled a happy face for how they felt about *Writer's Workshop.* The other three students, Mary, George, and Alex circled the undecided faces. Secondly, I looked at the responses of each of the students for question number two, which asked them to describe what they liked the most about writing. John, George, Alex, and Jimmy all replied in their answers that they enjoyed spelling or sound spelling. Mary was the only one who responded to this question in a different way; she stated that she enjoyed writing stories.

While looking at the responses for question three, which asked the students what kinds of topics they would enjoy writing about, I discovered two common themes in their answers, "animals and friends."   In particular, I found out that three of my students, John, Alex, and Jimmy showed interested in writing about dinosaurs. Since *Prehistoric Life/Fossils* was the social studies and science unit during this time, I thought I could use

this interest of theirs to my advantage during *Writer's Workshop*. "Friends" was the answer for two of my students. These two particular students happen to be very outgoing students; therefore, writing about friends would be relatively easy for them.

While analyzing question four, which asked the students to describe what they could to do improve their writing, I was looking to see if these five students noticed the problem areas that I noticed with their writing. George, who I described earlier as the student who always is the first one done and rushes through his writing and makes many mistakes, replied that he could take his time. Alex, Jimmy, and Mary all replied that they could write more or longer stories. This answer fits these students well because I reviewed these students' writing and they do not go in depth or in great detail in most of their writings. John surprised me the most with the answer to this question. He replied that he could improve on making his "b" and "d" letters the correct way. This answer surprised me because he usually does not face this problem while writing.

Finally, when reading the answers for the question I added at the end about what was the least favorite thing about writing, all of the students but Mary stated that they did not enjoy writing long stories or "having to do so much stuff." This answer once again did not surprise me because these students either rush their work or have complaints about having to write. Therefore, when given a writing topic, they are not eager to have to write a story. Mary replied that she did not like having to "write short stories." The students have never been asked to write "short stories," thus this made me question her response. I realized that she might have been thinking of past times during *Writer's Workshop*, where the students were asked to respond to a read-aloud with at least a specific amount of sentences. She may have not liked the restriction or amount of sentences placed on the writing, even though she was allowed to write more.

With all of the information gained from this survey, I focused on incorporating the topics the students were interested throughout various writing workshop times. I also continually returned to these surveys to focus on what the students liked least about writing. I wanted the students to look at writing in a way that's more than something they just "had to do," but rather in a way that is enjoyable for them.

After completing the last writing assignment with my students, I gave each one of my students a final survey to complete. (See Appendix A2) I pulled my five students' surveys from the pile and put each survey beside the first survey so I could scan the results. The first question that I looked over was the first question, which asked the students to circle a face, which represented how they felt about *Writer's Workshop*. This time, instead of only two students circling happy faces, four students circled smiling faces: Jimmy, Mary, Alex, and George. John was the only one to circle an undecided face. Next, I looked at question two, which asked the students what they liked the most about writing. John and Jimmy both wrote that using "sparkle words" was what they liked the most about writing. Alex and George wrote that they enjoyed writing about the mystery story they completed. Mary stated that she enjoyed "writing long stories."

The next question I focused on was question four, which asked the students if they felt as though they were better writers now than they were at the beginning of the year. All five of my students replied that they did believe they were better writers. John stated that he felt as though he was a better writer because he had been practicing. George and Alex responded with answers that resembled each other. Both of them stated that they are better writers because they include more in their stories.

Questions one, two, and four were the prominent questions I focused on. I focused on these questions because they deal more with the attitudes of the students towards writing, which was one of my main wonderings. I placed the other two

questions in the survey because they were included in my first survey and also for my and my mentor teacher's reference for further use in the classroom.

Student Work Samples-One of my main pieces of data collection was the writings done by the students. When deciding on how to analyze the students' papers, I took into consideration the problem areas of the five students and those areas of my other students since I would be instructing the whole class. I created a checklist of specific criteria I would be looking for in each paper. (See Appendix B1-B5) I used the checklist to evaluate each of the student's writings.   I focused on punctuation, the number of sentences/complete sentences, capitalization at the beginning of sentences, details ("sparkle words"), whether there was a graphic organizer used, a beginning, middle, and an end, and finally whether or not the student stayed on topic. If the student correctly completed one of the above categories in his/her writing, I marked that box with a "star." I marked the "details" or "sparkle words" section with a "no," "fair," or a star. If the student received a star in this section, it meant that I felt he/she used sufficient descriptive language throughout his/her story. For any section that the student did not complete successfully, I wrote down the number of times the student did it correctly out of the number of possible times. For example, if a student only used punctuation at the end of five of their seven sentences, then I wrote, "5/7." For the beginning, middle, and end section, which I added on to my checklist, I marked what the students included with a "B," "M," and/or "E." (See Appendix B1-B5 for examples of how the students were marked) The first writing was more of an informative writing; therefore, I did not mark for a beginning, middle, and end.

Using this checklist gave me the chance to really take a closer look at the different strengths and weakness of my students as writers. After each week, I had the opportunity to examine each student's writings and how his/her writing changed in accordance with

the lesson and topic presented for that week. After collecting the five writing samples from each of my five students and completing the checklist, I focused on one student at a time and looked at their markings for each writing assignment. I placed the writing checklists side by side and analyzed the data.

Jimmy was the first student who I focused my attention on. He was my student who did not complain as much as the other students when assigned a new writing topic, but I did not see the effort and ability as a writer shine through while reading his papers. However, after looking at the data, he showed great improvement. After looking at the data, it is clear that when he was provided with a graphic organizer or a sample writing, he tended to write more. This proved true even in the final story. The students were not provided with a graphic organizer or sample story, but he managed to still write a lengthy story, actually one of the longest stories in the class. Jimmy maintained constant success in the areas of punctuation, capitalization, and staying on topic. He also showed constant growth in using "sparkle words" in his writing. He went from using no details at all, to some, and then finally to an abundant amount. Finally, I saw growth in his ability to include a beginning, middle, and end. Out of the five writings I did with the students, his last three included a beginning, middle, and an end compared to the two previous writings completed in the inquiry process.

Mary was the next student I focused on. She was another student who did not complain about having to write another story; however, I did not see her full potential as a writer shown through her previous writings. Mary showed great improvement in including a beginning, middle, and an end, as well as using "sparkle words" in her stories. She was perfectly consistent in correctly using punctuation marks and using capital letters to begin each new sentence.

George exhibited great improvement in his writing by looking at his writings throughout the inquiry process. From the first writing assignment to the last, the number of his sentences went from five to thirteen. He also went from always being the first one finished to being the third and fourth one done. After the mini-lesson on "sparkle words," he went from using none of these descriptive words to using an abundant amount. Also, the last three of his writings included a beginning, middle, and end, where in the first two writings, he did not include any kind of ending. Along with the two previous students, George showed continual success in the area of capitalization and punctuation.

Alex was one of my students who had the most trouble getting started with writing a story, and it seemed clear to me that *Writer's Workshop* was not one of his most favorite times of the day. He was typically the last student finished with his stories. After reviewing the checklists I made, I noticed that as time passed, he went from being the last one done to being the first and close to the first one done. The length of his stories increased in number. He went from writing five sentences to seven sentences. Alex was always strong in the area of mechanics and proved to continually be successful in these areas throughout the writings completed during my inquiry process. Out of the five writings, Alex included a beginning, middle, and an end in two of the writings. He failed to include an ending on three of them, even after the mini-lesson and graphic organizers presented on beginning, middle, and ends. Alex's use of sparkle words also increased throughout the inquiry process. He went from using no details at all, to a little, and then finally to a good amount of them.

John was the last of my five students I focused on. Again, he is one who is very strong in the area of mechanics. However, like Alex, he often complained about having to write stories and did not put forth a lot of effort during *Writer's Workshop*. While

reviewing his five writings, it is clear that his use of "sparkle words" increased. He went from using no details, to using a fair amount, and then finally to using an adequate amount of them. John was the only one out of the five students who did not show improvements in including a beginning, middle, and an end. He only included a beginning, middle, and an end to one of the stories, which happened to be his favorite story that he wrote.

Interviews-At the end of my inquiry process, I decided to interview each of my five students separately. I wanted to interview each child to see his/her reaction to his/her separate writings. During each interview, I showed each student the first writing he/she completed for my inquiry project, and then a writing he/she completed recently. I instructed each student to read both of his/her stories. I then asked the students several questions. For example:

> Of these two stories, which one did you like writing more? Why?
>
> Which story do you feel you did a better job on? Why?
>
> Do you feel as though you are a better writer? Why?
>
> Is there anything we have done during *Writer's Workshop* that has helped you become a better writer?

These questions were the most common ones I asked the students in the interviews. I asked students varying questions according to the child I was interviewing. For example, when questioning George, who was known to rush through his stories and was always the first one finished, I asked him if he felt as though he took his time now and if so, why? Also, for Alex, who struggled to get started on many of his stories, I asked, "Do you feel like you have trouble writing now or thinking of things to write about?" Asking these questions gave me a better feel of the attitudes the students had towards *Writer's Workshop* and writing in general.

After recording each interview, I went back and listened to each individual interview. While listening to each interview, I wrote down some of the key essential parts of the interviews, in particular, any student responses that revealed how the students felt about writing these stories. (See Appendix H) From the interviews, I found that four out of the five students said the graphic organizers and other activities during *Writer's Workshop* helped them write their stories better. All of the students replied that they felt as though they were better writers and they felt as though their second piece of writing, which was their most recent was better because they used "more sparkle words" and wrote more. These interviews gave me the chance to have the students voice their opinions about writing. I also could get a feel for their opinions by the intonation of their voices while they read each of their stories.

Videotapes-Throughout the inquiry process, I videotaped sections of three separate lessons during *Writer's Workshop*. Throughout these recordings, I tried to capture the students' reactions to writing a new story and also my expression and how I delivered my lessons. I wanted to observe my facial expressions as well as my students' during these recordings to see if my behavior and actions affected the students' attitudes towards writing. I recorded simple notes down on paper as I watched each of the lessons and then typed them. (See Appendix H)

While watching parts of the first lesson I videotaped, I carefully watched and listened for reactions from my five students when I announced the new topic. There were no complaints. As I began to read my story, I observed how engaged the students were. They were looking at the overhead and not talking. Right after I read my story, Alex raised his hand and noticed the sparkle words that I used in my own story. He participated much during the discussion I had with the students about what was "good" about my story.

As I watched the second lesson, I immediately noticed the intonation of my voice. I seemed much more animated than in the first lesson I watched. When I showed the students the graphic organizer, which they had to complete before they wrote their stories, I did not hear any of the students complaining. What I did notice in this video was the amount of questions the students asked while I gave directions. The students asked more questions about what they could include in their stories and the kinds of words and people they could include in their stories.

The last lesson I recorded was the final writing I completed for my inquiry project with the students; it served basically as my post-assessment. Given that there was little instruction at the beginning of that lesson, I focused more on recording the students as they started to write their stories. As I approached George and asked him how his story was coming along, he looked up at me with a big smile and talked about the trapped deer he ran into while walking in the forest. As I walked around the room, Mary called to me and said smiling, "Miss Lauer, I'm going to make my story really long." She also went on to tell me about the many animals she ran into while walking through the woods.

Claims

Claim 1: Providing sample stories and graphic organizers for the students has had a positive impact on my high-achieving students, who are now <u>including a beginning, middle, and end</u> to their stories. (Other students have made progress toward this end as well.)

There was always something missing at the end of my students' stories. They were very inconsistent with including a beginning, middle, and end to their stories. Even after constant reminders to always include an ending to their stories, they would simply not acknowledge the fact that there was not an ending to their stories. Of my five students, only two students were fairly consistent about including an ending to their

stories from the beginning of the inquiry process, Mary and George. After reviewing the

checklist for the second writing, Mary, George, and only one other student in the

classroom included some kind of ending to their stories. (See Appendix B2) However,

there was a dramatic increase in the inclusion of endings to their stories after the third and

fourth writings. Before the students began their third writing, I read the students a story

that I wrote. (See Appendix B3) After I read the story, we held a discussion about what

the "good things" were I included in my story and a beginning, middle, and an end,

happened to be one of the "good things." After this writing, four out of my five high-

achieving students included a beginning, middle, and an end to their stories. From the

checklist from this story, I observed that seven of the rest of my students included all

three as well. (See Appendix B3)

     For the fourth week of *Writer's Workshop*, I shared a story with the students,

Goldilocks and the Three Bears, but I did not include an ending. (See Appendix B4) I

had the students explain to me what was wrong with my story. The students immediately

pointed out that there was not an ending. George stated to me, "We do not know what

happens to Goldilocks or when the Bears come home." The students used a graphic

organizer before they wrote their own stories resembling Goldilocks and the Three Bears,

where they had to plan the beginning, middle, and endings to their stories. (See

Appendix B4)   The results of the use of a beginning, middle, and end in the stories were

similar to the previous weeks. Three out of the five students included all three, and

again, seven of the rest of my students included all three.

     Reading the stories and reviewing the checklist for the last writing assignment

really showed me how well the students had taken in the information from my sample

stories and graphic organizers. With little instruction, four out of the five high-achieving

students included a beginning, middle, and an end, and the majority of the rest of my

students in the class included all three. I was very pleased with these results.

Not only did my students start to include an ending to their stories, which was

often omitted, the quality of some of the students endings improved. In particular,

Jimmy's endings really improved. He went from using no endings at all to including a

rather interesting ending. The first ending he included in the story, <u>The Case of the</u>

<u>Missing Dinosaur,</u> ended with, "We found my dinosaur. The End." (See Appendix E3)

However, the ending to his last story stated, "I ran out of the huge bee hive and through

the woods and into my house panting for air! I ate some chocolate chips and never went

back to the bee hive again!" (See Appendix E5) This ending proved to me that he was

putting more thought into his stories, especially his endings.

Claim 2: Throughout the process of this inquiry, high-achieving students (as well as
***all* other students in our classroom) have begun to <u>use more descriptive words</u> in**
their writing and are <u>incorporating more details</u> into their writing.

The use of details and descriptive words in the students' previous stories was very

limited and frequently completely omitted. When reviewing the students' stories and the

checklists from each story, I noticed a gradual increase of the students' use of "sparkle

words" is quite clear. The results of the pre-assessment checklist showed me that not one

of my students used any type of details or descriptive language in their stories. After the

second writing, only three students used details in their writing, two of the students were

my high-achieving students, Jimmy and Mary. However, their use of them in that story

was only marked as "fair." (For checklists for writings one and two, see Appendix B1

and B2)

Before I completed the third writing with the students, I instructed the students to

complete a "Stretch It" activity with a partner and then individually. The students had to

take a simple sentence and "stretch" it by using "sparkle words." (To view the students'

worksheets, see Appendix C3, D3, E3, F3, and G3) After this activity, the use of

"sparkle words" really increased. All of the five high-achieving students used some form

of "sparkle words." All of them were marked with a "fair" except for George, who used

a great deal of "sparkle words" and received a star marking. (See Appendix B3) From

then on, all of my high-achieving students received a "star" marking for using a great

amount of details. Along with the success of my high-achieving students, the majority of

the rest of the students received stars for this criterion as well. (To view the use of details

and "sparkle words" for the last two writings, see Appendix B4 and B5)

Along with the significant increase in the amount of "sparkle words" used in the

students' stories, I observed my high-achieving students taking more interest in using

these types of words. This information was quite evident to me while I interviewed each

of the five students at the end of the inquiry process. During the interviews, I asked each

student which story he/she believed he/she did a better job on. All five of the students

pointed out that their second story, which was one of their more recent stories, was

written better. When asked why, I received the same type of answer, "Because it has

more sparkle words" or an answer very similar to this one. I asked George if he liked

using "sparkle words" and his reply was, "Yes!"

The final student survey given to all of the students served as another piece of

evidence that supported the idea that my students enjoyed using "sparkle words."

Question two on the survey asked the students to describe what they liked the most about

writing. John and Jimmy both replied that using "sparkle words" was what they enjoyed

the most about writing. These responses were very pleasing to me. Going from having

students who did not use any type of "sparkle words" to having just about every student

in the class using them in their stories was a great triumph for me. The use of details in

the students' stories has definitely had an affect on the length and effort placed on their stories.

Claim 3: This inquiry project has had a definite impact on the way my high-achieving students <u>feel</u> about writing and their <u>attitudes</u> toward *Writer's Workshop.*

One of my main concerns about my high-achieving students was that there was a lack of motivation and effort during *Writer's Workshop.* I felt as though their lack of motivation was directly affecting their attitudes towards writing, as well as *Writer's Workshop.* As previously mentioned, only two of the five students, John and Jimmy, circled a "happy face" to represent how they felt about *Writer's Workshop.* The other three students circled the "undecided face." (See Appendix A1) However, the last survey gave me completely different results. Four out of the five students circled the "happy face," and only one circled the "undecided face." (See Appendix A2)

From the beginning of this inquiry process, I also wanted the students to view themselves as confident writers. I believed that if each of these students were confident in him/herself, it would reflect in his/her writing. That is why I included the question of whether or not the students viewed themselves as better writers now than what they were weeks before. All five of the students circled "yes" to that question, which told me that they were feeling more confident and comfortable with their own writing. (See Appendix A2)

The "Award-Winning Author" certificates I started sending home at the end of each week have been a real motivator for the students. This has had an affect on their attitudes towards writing and *Writer's Workshop.* When a student receives this award, they get to sit in the chair at the front of the room and read his/her story to the entire class. Since this award has come into writing, I noticed the attitude of the students changing. While watching a clip from one of my recorded lessons, there was a

discussion about what should be included in a "good" story. As we were listing the components of a good story, George stated, "You need to include those things to receive one of those awards." The students are also very conscious of reminding me when it is time to give out the award. The happiness and smiles from the students as they come to receive their awards and read their stories is truly a gift to me. As they read their stories, I see them taking real pride in what they have written. This pride is shown in their stories week after week. Jimmy was one student who achieved the award and now when he goes back to work, he starts immediately on his story and does not stop until he thinks it's just right. When I asked to collect his paper at the end of *Writer's Workshop*, he looked at me with a disappointing face and said, "But Miss Lauer, I am not done yet." This reaction proved to me that he was definitely taking more time to write stories, where in previous writing times, he would have been done much earlier.

Claim 4: As students become more confident in their writing and develop more of a sense of ownership in its quality, (e.g. getting to share it aloud to others, etc.) they are more inclined to experiment with different words and types of sentences, as well as increasing the length (and overall caliber) of their stories.

I knew all of my high-achieving students were capable of producing wonderful stories. However, my mentor teacher and I were constantly receiving stories with very few sentences and limited detail. Sometimes, punctuation marks were completely omitted, and the students rarely used punctuation marks, other than periods. However, my high-achieving students surpassed these connotations. George was not only one student who began to include more in his stories; he also began to experiment with different types of sentences. After each story, I noticed a gradual increase in the number of sentences he wrote. He started at five sentences and ended with writing thirteen sentences. (See Appendix G1 and G5) George also started to use different types of

sentences. He started to use questions and exclamations within his stories. This showed

me that he was definitely experimenting with his writing.

Jimmy was another student whose length of stories dramatically increased.

Jimmy's first story had six sentences; however, his last story was fourteen sentences

long. He was definitely writing more and putting more effort into his writing. One

would think that jumping this much in length would have an affect on the quality of his

writing, but that only improved. When writing more, he only had one sentence that was

not a complete sentence. Jimmy's last story was truly an outstanding one; in fact, he

even received the award for that story. He not only wrote fourteen sentences, but he

included question marks and exclamations points. Using these types of punctuation

marks completely changed the tone of his story and made it much more interesting and

exciting to read. (See Appendix E5)

While some of my high-achieving students showed that they were taking more

risks by writing more and using different types of punctuation marks, I also observed my

other students taking similar risks. One of my students, Kelly, wrote five sentences in her

first story, but the number of sentences increased to thirteen, all of which were complete.

These statistics proved to me that the students were becoming more involved in their

writing while experimenting with new ideas.

Conclusions and Future Implications

I am very pleased with the outcome of my inquiry project. I wanted to see how

the use of various writing activities would affect the motivation levels of my high-

achieving students to write more and with fewer mistakes. Not only did I observe growth

in these students as writers, I also observed growth in the rest of my students' writing.

This inquiry has definitely provided me with a whole new outlook on writing within the

primary grades. While completing this inquiry project, there were times when I realized

that I should have done something another way or maybe not at all. Instead of worrying about what I should have done and view them as mistakes, I only look at it as an opportunity to use these activities and ideas in the future in my own classroom.

In the future, I definitely plan on continuing the writing activities and strategies I implemented throughout this inquiry process. I definitely would like to experiment more with the use of graphic organizers. In the future, I plan on taking more time on showing how the students should complete a graphic organizer and how to take it from a graphic organizer and make it into a story. I believe this would really affect a student's writing.

Throughout the inquiry process, I noticed how much the students enjoyed hearing my stories. I definitely plan on using this idea during writing in my classroom. I believe this a great way for students to be exposed to different types of writing. It also allows the teacher to see which students are aware of the important components of a story by observing whether or not the students are able to pinpoint them in my own stories. I believe providing these kinds of stories are an excellent motivator and model for students.

I believe implementing these types of strategies at the very beginning of the year would have a greater impact on the writing of students. It was hard transitioning into *Writer's Workshop* in the middle of the year and experimenting with new strategies with the students. The students are not accustomed to change and have a hard time adjusting. Next year, I plan on implementing these strategies at the beginning of the year, so the students are comfortable with the different activities. I also plan on giving the students more time during *Writer's Workshop* so that they are able to have more time to plan and write. Also, it would give me a chance to have more time to conference with more individual students, which is something of deep interest to me.

Given all of the information and results of the inquiry project, it only led me to new wonderings I had about primary students and writing. These new wonderings are listed below.

New Wonderings

While many claims have been made about what I learned through my inquiry project, I still have numerous wonderings in regards to writing in the classroom. My wonderings include questions about the use of different writing activities, the age level of my students, and other areas surrounding the idea of *Writer's Workshop*. These additional wonderings will be addressed in future lessons in the classroom, as well as in the classroom I will lead on my own one day.

-If I were to follow the students throughout the next couple of years, what would their writing look like? Would the various strategies that I used with these students at this time be successful or would I have to differentiate the strategies for the students?

-How would the students pulled out of the classroom during *Writer's Workshop* respond to the graphic organizers I used during writing? How would they approach them? Would the graphic organizers be effective for their writing?

-If I were to focus more on conferencing with the students how would it affect their writing? How would peer conferencing affect their writing?

-How would publishing the students' writings affect their motivation to write?

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