

How Does Peer Teaching Affect a Kindergarteners' Writing Skills and Motivation to Write?

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Abstract

Does social interaction between kindergarten students hinder or enhance their writing interest, motivation, and skill level. This inquiry examines the effects of peer teaching on motivation to write. Learning to write in kindergarten is a very complex process. This inquiry may give teachers some insight into how to approach grouping students to encourage peer teaching. It also explores the advancements in writing skills and motivation, which can be achieved from peer teaching.

The word kindergarten was created from two German words that meant children's garden. As a gardener tends to his garden with patience and care, kindergarten intends to young children gently, like flowers ready to unfold, so they can develop to their fullest when they are ready. (McCloy 2002)

Background Information

Teaching Context

My inquiry was conducted in a kindergarten classroom at Ferguson Township Elementary School in the State College Area School District. The focus was on how kindergarten students learn the writing process, and the role social interactions play in motivating students to write and help to improve their writing skills.

There are 20 students in my classroom, eight of which are boys and 12 are girls. The classroom has a unique closeness and the children love to help their peers. We have a wonderful classroom environment in which the students take an active role in helping to setup and maintain a smooth running classroom. Our class is not very diverse in terms of ethnicity. We have one African American student and also one Hispanic student. In terms of disabilities, we have one student who is sight impaired and another with PPD. My mentor teacher and I adapt lessons to meet these students' needs. The other children are very accepting of what makes these two children unique. Our class always makes sure these two students are happy and are understanding when they may need special help. The students in our class are always willing to help each other in any way they can. They take delight in being able to help someone who may be struggling with an assignment or who just needs a gentle reminder of how to follow our classroom promises. Because of

their interests in helping each other, I decided they should not be limited when working in their Kid Writing groups. Initially, the students could sit anywhere they would like. They had taken it upon themselves to create groups even though I did not assign them to groups. I did not like these groups because the organization seemed to be according to abilities. For example, the struggling students tended to sit at one table and the more capable students at another.

Usually when grouping students in my room they are heterogeneously grouped and each student has a chance to work with everyone in the class throughout the year. One of the only groups we have according to ability levels is guided reading groups, in order to help differentiate instruction and be able to focus in on specific skills for each student. The rest of our centers, math and science, throughout the day are heterogeneously grouped. When students are grouped in this manner it creates opportunities for students to interact and peer teaching to occur.

Rationale

Throughout the year, I had watched the children make progress in their writing. It is amazing how quickly they learn and go from simple illustrations with a few letters telling the story to creating a detailed illustration with a page full of text. The writing process intrigues me as a teacher. I am interested to learn as much as I can about the process, because it is one of the best ways to understand what they each know about language, and also, to provide the best learning environment for my students.

At the beginning of the year, the students were able to choose their own seats and groups for Kid Writing. Initially, the students seemed to choose a different seat each day

and sit with a new group of students. There were a few students who always sat next to each other. As the year progressed, the students began to sit in the same spots each day with fewer and fewer children switching their seats. Before I knew it they had practically assigned themselves seats. Once I started to realize these groups were actually designed around abilities, I began to worry. I didn't like the fact that the students were not able to benefit from peer teaching because the higher ability and the struggling writers never had a chance to sit and work together. All of the strong writers sat together and all of the struggling writers sat together with the average students intermixed.

Once these groups became established, I noticed that more of the students were making comments like "I'm stupid and I can't do this." Then on the other end, I had students who were complaining, "I'm bored", which is something a kindergarten student should never say. Everything is so new to them and they should be excited about learning and coming to school. I became concerned because the students were able to pick out who were the "smart" children and made comments regarding ability levels. This is not the type of environment I wanted in my classroom because I do not feel it is conducive to an enriching learning environment. Also, it does not enable students to learn from each other and share their ideas.

My interest in how a child learns to write and peer teaching, which takes place in this process, was the driving force behind deciding on this topic. Another factor was to help break down the ability grouping, which was occurring in my kindergarten classroom. Kindergarten is such an impressionable time where a great deal of learning takes place. As a teacher, I want to provide my students with opportunities to learn as much as possible. One great way to do this is to set up situations in which children can

learn and share ideas with their peers. As the teacher, I decided to create opportunities to encourage peer teaching in my classroom.

Inquiry vs. Project

My inquiry is truly an inquiry because my wonderings and focus kept changing and shifting around the topic. I hoped to gain insight into how to create the best situation for peer teaching to occur during Kid Writing in my classroom. This project was not designed with an end result in mind and was not done to fix a problem in my classroom. I wanted to find out if there was a more beneficial way to group my students to encourage peer teaching.

As part of my teaching philosophy, I feel students should be grouped in heterogeneous groups as much as possible in order to create opportunities for peer teaching and collaborative learning to take place. Every child can learn from every other child. Students can learn a great deal from each other because children can teach things to their peers with a connection an adult could not have as successfully.

I often wondered about how these interactions take place and what is the best way to create an environment in which students learn to interact with their peers in a beneficial manner. This is why I was driven to ask how social interactions affect motivation and writing skills? This project truly is inquiry and not a project because there is no end result, which must be reached. I engaged in this inquiry to gain knowledge about one possible way to effectively teach Kid Writing in my kindergarten classroom. As I have progressed through my research, I have developed new wonderings and further

wonderings for inquiry. The learning process of a teacher is never completed, there are always new things to learn and areas to improve. I feel this inquiry has started a process, which will never be completed.

You begin with a wondering and, through the course of your data collection, you are driven to new wonderings, which continue to evolve as you learn and grow as a teacher. This inquiry has done this for me and I hope will continue to do so in the future.

Wonderings

Based on my experience in the classroom and observations I have made, I began to wonder about the way in which I was teaching Kid Writing. The main wondering I developed concerned the role social interactions play in a student learning to write.

Main Wondering

- How do social interactions between kindergarten students affect their motivation and writing skills?

Primarily I was interested in the following sub wonderings:

Sub Wonderings

- What effect does designing and implementing heterogeneous groups for students have on their motivation and writing abilities?
- What effect does peer teaching have on a student's motivation and writing abilities?
- Does gender have a bearing on the types of interactions taking place during Kid Writing?

- Does having another student help with illustrations help to increase a student's ability to write the text to the story?

Inquiry Plan

To begin my inquiry, I looked at the unassigned groups my students had created on their own. I decided many of these students needed to be separated and assigned to groups. The way I designed the groups was to look at five main areas, above average students, average students, struggling students, strong sound spellers, and strong illustrators. I thought if I could create groups, which contained at least one of each of these students then the students could act as resources for each other. They would get to know which children were good at certain things and look to them for help when writing or illustrating. In doing this and seeking out these types of social interactions, the students would be engaging in peer teaching. They would be learning from each other and helping one another to grow as a writer. The stronger students would benefit from being able to share their knowledge and the struggling students would be able to learn and practice their skills by working with a friend as opposed to a teacher. The students are given the opportunity to make advancements in their writing and help their peers to do the same.

When making the groups for my classroom, I decided it would be too hard to collect data on all of my students because we do Kid Writing as a whole group activity. Consequently, I chose one group to focus on and observe during Kid Writing. This group consisted of three girls and three boys. It contained one advanced student, two average students, two struggling students, one strong illustrator, and one strong sound speller. I

explained to the students we were going to have specific tables to sit, but they would be able to sit wherever they wanted at their table. It was not necessary to assign them seats since the table is round and all of the students are able to interact at the same time.

Creating such a controlled environment for my students would make me feel uncomfortable. They should be provided with the opportunity for peer teaching and social interactions.

Data Collection

I began my inquiry on February 13, 2006. Due to the nature of this inquiry, I decided the best means of collection was observation during Kid Writing. We have Kid Writing every day for 30 – 45 minutes. There are some days we are unable to write due to scheduling issues. I would pick one or two days a week to observe the students and also asked my Professional Development Associate (PDA) to come in and observe. I asked her to do this so I would have another objective perspective on the children's interactions. I am with them every day and may not notice interactions in the same way an outside visitor who is not in the classroom everyday might. My PDA came in once a week to observe. I choose to observe the children on different days of the week, because our schedule changes and I wanted to find out if this had any effect on their writing.

I did not create a specific form to use when observing the students. I found it easiest to use a notebook and simply write anecdotal notes between students. This recording method afforded me the opportunity to document the conversations between students quickly. When reading through the observations, I would then use symbols

(discussed later in detail) I had created to code the data so it would be easier to analyze. When observing students, I listened and watched for social interactions that were related to their writing. I wanted to see what effect heterogeneous grouping had on the students. I wondered if peer teaching would occur within the group. Moreover, would this have an effect on the students' motivation to write? Would this interaction enhance their writing abilities? I watched for students helping each other to sound spell words, assisting each other with illustrations, discussing their finished pictures, listening for requests from students to share their work, the frequency they asked for teacher assistance as opposed to peer assistance, student observations of others' abilities, and how much the students used resources within our classroom to help them write.

When observing, I would record conversations taking place in which the students looked to each other for help to write words or to draw pictures. I also recorded which students were interacting and how often they looked to a particular student for help.

Another way in which I documented students writing was by making copies of their work prior to the regrouping, when they were choosing their own work tables. I also made copies of the students' work throughout the inquiry and in the final days of data collection. I used these Kid Writing journal samples to show the progress the students had made throughout the inquiry and how the social interactions taking place among the group helped to contribute to the advancements they made in their writing as well as their illustrations.

Expert Opinions and Literature

Deciding how to teach writing in your classroom can be a challenge. “When setting up early childhood curriculum, research indicates that educators need to consider more than intellectual growth of a child. Educators must also regard aspects of physical and social growth areas when teaching developmentally appropriate practice (Hall & Cunningham 1997).” “Learning to read and write is a complex and multifaceted process that requires a wide variety of instructional approaches (Fisher 1998).”

There are many factors to consider. When creating your classroom environment you need to integrate writing into the entire school day and encourage students to work cooperatively when they are writing. We need to remember,

“writing is about more than picking up a pencil and setting words on paper. Since so much of early education is dedicated to early “literacy” – acquiring the skills of making letters and matching them to sounds - it is easy to forget that writing is about seeing and hearing and receiving the world in an open way (Siemens 1999).”

The classroom environment you create for your students needs to be a place where they feel comfortable and can work cooperatively with others. “Children learn best while talking and doing in a social context, in a non-competitive environment where learning is self-selected, meaningful, and interesting (Fisher 1998).”

“Authentic learning will occur when the curriculum includes the social world of children. Young children learn best when they are given the opportunity to make connections to their present knowledge or when they can use the stories of their peers (Vesquez 2001).”

“The teacher’s role is critical in creating a positive and competitive free atmosphere. When teachers set up a positive and cooperative community, where each child is appreciated, then students become more comfortable. This increases the student’s confidence and promotes the value in learning from each other (McCloy 2002).”

“This will foster a positive atmosphere that will continue when children practice their own reading and writing (Fisher 1998).”

In my classroom, I use a program called *Kid Writing* to teach my students writing.

“*Kid Writing* provides an integrated approach in which phonics instruction is a systematic, rigorous, planned and essential part of fuller instructional program throughout the school day. Systematicity appears not in the materials used to teach phonics nor in the order in which sound symbol correspondence are taught, but in the social interactions between teachers and children. Children learn phonics as they master other concepts and learn about their world (Cardonick and Feldgus 1999).”

One technique I use to teach writing is a writing workshop in which students use journals to express their ideas and feelings. According to the text *Conversations*,

“journals promote fluency in reading and writing, encourage risk taking, provide opportunities for reflection, and promote the development of written language conventions. Additionally, journal entries over a series of months can be used to note a student’s progress and to set goals in writing and spelling (Routman 2000).”

Using journals for writing helps students to learn all the components of writing.

The developers of *Kid Writing* suggest that

“journal writing provides children with an opportunity to systematically explore written language in the supportive environment in which they are learning by doing for an authentic purpose – to communicate their ideas (Cardonick and Feldgus 1999).”

One of the most important reasons for using journals is, “Journals teach children that their lives are important (Routman 2000).”

When teaching children to write it is important to provide them with a model.

“Demonstrating what we want students to do can lead to powerful teaching and learning. Writing demonstrations can take many forms: the teacher thinking and writing aloud in front of students, shared writing,

peer sharing and discussing their writing, oral brainstorming, teacher student conversations (Ruthman 1999).”

Without a model, students are unable to understand what is expected from them when they are writing. Teachers need to take time each day to model writing for students.

“Teachers need to provide frequent and varied demonstrations of writing in full group situations in order to model the knowledge and thinking process involved and show that writing is an important and integral part of the classroom culture (Cardnoick and Feldgus 1999).”

“In promoting literacy, research emphasizes the importance of teachers utilizing the numerous teaching opportunities that present themselves throughout the day. Instead of teaching literacy skills in isolation, skills should be incorporated as teachable moments reveal themselves (McCloy 2002).”

Experts encourage teachers to encourage students to select their own topics for writing and encourage them to record and reflect on personal experiences. “Being able to choose what to write about is critical in journal writing. Otherwise students are merely writing to complete an assignment, and quality suffers (Ruthman 2000).” “Students’ selection of topics makes writing more enjoyable to them, which in turn, will develop self – confidence and success (McCloy 2002).” “ If writing is perceived as an enjoyable, creative activity, many children will eagerly engage in the act of writing and produce beautiful pieces (Riordan–Karisson, 1999).”

Illustrations play a major part in young children learning to write.

“Many kindergarteners and first graders need to draw before they write to solidify their ideas and thinking. I share drawings to show how writers use, lines, shapes, and colors; how they make sure their drawings go with their text; and how illustrations and visuals can convey important details that are not in the writing (Routhman 2000).”

Step one in the Kid Writing process is for students to draw an illustration. This is the foundation upon which their story is built.

“ While drawing is optional, we encourage it because drawing serves as excellent prewriting organizers, much like outlines or concept maps do for older children and adults. The drawing phase is often the most social time as children talk about their illustrations in progress and ask each other questions (Cardonick and Feldgus 1999).”

From the text *Let Children Show Us How to Teach*, the author discusses the importance of drawing in a child’s language development and learning to write.

“Like many four, five, and six-year-olds, Chris rehearses for writing by drawing. This doesn’t mean that his drawings are important only as preludes to writing. In fact, the drawings are far more important to Chris than the writing: the drawings take up most of his time and most of his paper, and they convey most of his story. In the writing area he doesn’t begin by thinking about his final product but by drawing the conventional person: Then, in the middle of drawing he announces, “This is gonna be my brother”

When young children are learning to write, their stories are developed through their illustrations. They may only be able to write out a few letters on a page, but they can look at their picture and tell you an elaborate story. As their writing skills develop they are able to write more words and the text they write begins to grow. Due to the importance of the illustrations and being able to share and work cooperatively with their peers during this time, it is vital to encourage students to talk and reason through their illustrations and stories with their peers.

Next in the Kid Writing process, after illustrations are completed, children write the text for their stories. Teachers help the students to sound out and stretch each word so they are able to hear all of the sounds. They then work through their sentences and write out the text as writing the letters they hear when sounding out the words. They understand this is their writing and adults write differently. Once they have finished their sentence the teacher will write the conventional writing of their sentence underneath.

Then there is an opportunity for the teacher to show the student how wonderfully they have written and also give them goals to work on such as periods at the end of sentences, remembering sight words, or using lower case letters.

Fostering a classroom community in which children may engage in peer teaching is a critical component in the Kid Writing process. It is impossible for the teacher to help every child during writing time; peers can be wonderful teachers when given the opportunity. “By encouraging all of the children to help each other, we not only foster cooperative learning, but also empower the children to learn from each other’s phonetic challenges (Cardonick and Feldgus 1999).” Children strive for the opportunity to help one another. When they see a student is struggling with a word they can offer assistance and become the teacher. “Creating a classroom environment in which children value one another’s writing processes and written products expands opportunities for every child to participate in phonics learning (Cardonick and Feldgus 1999).”

Once students have illustrated and written their text it is important to allow time for them to share ideas with others. This is a major component of Kid Writing.

“The most powerful models for students are those created by their peers. Celebrating writing is a great way to reinforce what has been done well, encourage, other students to write similarly or take risks in their writing, and set goals for writing through new conversations and direct teaching. Setting time aside for students to share and celebrate their writing helps students to move forward in their writing and learn from their peers (Routhman 2000).”

You need to provide your students with opportunities for social interactions regarding their writing to take place.

“In early grades, informal sharing with classmates before, during, and writing really takes off by midyear. Students love to hear and see one another’s stories and illustrations and ask questions. Those conversations

help writers continue, clarify, extend, and “fix up” their writing (Ruthman 2000).”

According to the founders of Kid Writing “Children learn best through social interactions with a more knowledgeable peer or adult (Cardonick and Feldgus 1999).”

Teachers need to take this into account when they are thinking about how they are going to group students during writing time.

“Our premises place emphasis on the teaching and learning relationship of social interactions rather than on the teaching materials. These ideas combine Vygotsk’s (1978) notion of zone of proximal development with Bruner’s (1981) notion of scaffolding: What a child is potentially ready to do today with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers, he or she will be able to do independently tomorrow (Cardonick and Feldgus 1999).”

You as the teacher need to find the right combination of students so that they can learn from each other. There are so many components to writing and each child learns the process at a different rate. One child may be an excellent illustrator but struggle with sound spelling and another may be an expert at sound spelling but unable to draw illustrations. If these two students are grouped together, through their interactions, peer teaching takes place. The strong illustrator may become better at sound spelling and the strong sound speller can become better at drawing. Simply sitting next to a peer and seeing how they convey their ideas can teach a child so much. Children are able to teach each other in a way no adult ever could. Their interactions are critical in their learning and play an important role in their development.

Data Analysis

After each week I would sit down and reflect on my observations of Kid Writing. I made up letter symbols to help me to count the type of interaction and also the frequency of interactions taking place. “A” stood for students making reference to another student’s abilities, “TA” stood for a student asking for teacher assistance, “I” stood for a student or students asking a peer for assistance with illustrations or referenced students discussing illustrations they were in the process of creating, “S” stood for students asking peers to help them to spell or sound spell a word, “R” stood for the students using resources around the room such as the morning letter or students’ name tags to help them to spell words, and “E” stood for the students wanting to write about each other and draw them in their illustrations. All of these things were observed during conversations taking place at the groups Kid Writing table.

Once I had all of the data coded, I went back and looked at the interactions and looked for patterns among these interactions. I wanted to see if the students were going to the same people for help in their groups. When I designed the “study group”, my focus was to make a group that consisted of a strong illustrator, strong sound speller, an above average student, two of my struggling writers, and an average student. They all had something unique to contribute to the group. When analyzing my data, I wanted to see if the students were able to pick out who they should use for resources if they needed help with specific things.

Another focus when analyzing data was to see if the grouping of the students provided an environment for peer teaching to take place. I looked for interactions among the students in which peer teaching was occurring. I also analyzed story samples from my

students' writing journals. I made copies of samples prior to the regrouping and also throughout my inquiry to see if the students were making advancements in their writing and illustrating. To analyze these, I looked at their stories to see if they had made improvements in their sound spelling, use of capital and lower case letters, spacing between words, punctuation, phonemic awareness, and proper spelling and use of sight words. I also looked at their illustrations to see if they were beginning to use more detail in their illustrations, were including others in their drawing, or if the story they wrote was directly related to the text. I looked at all of these components when deciding on the claims I could draw from the data I had collected.

Claims and Evidence

Claim One

Providing opportunities for social interactions within peer groups fosters a cooperative learning community.

Evidence

Through my observations of students during Kid Writing, I have gained insight into exactly how this group of children interacts and functions as a small learning community. As we started to use groups for Kid Writing, I began to see a cooperative learning community form among my students. A cooperative learning community is one in which the students work together to solve problems and look to each other for support when they are faced with challenges. They were willing to take the time to help each

other to write or draw. I also feel working with the same group of students each day helped them to grow closer as a small group. They came to realize one another's strengths and weaknesses. For example, they knew who to ask for help when they needed it and most of the time the students were willing to help their peers. If the student asking for help was not paying attention to what the others had to say they lost interest in helping them.

When observing a small group working together on April 7, 2006, I observed the following: *A struggling writer 'S' asked two of his friends 'Z' and 'E' for help to write his words. 'S' asked, "Now which letter?" 'Z' responds, "n.'" 'E' responds, "Look for the bird nest." 'S' was giving the two boys a hard time. 'Z' responded, "'E' is smarter than me I don't know how to spell it." 'E' responds, "I don't know how." Another student sitting at the table enters the conversation. 'A' responds, "'B,' you can read, help him." Then 'S' experienced difficulty finding help from his group, due to the fact every time his peers began to help him he would begin to fool around. The students take their writing time seriously and know they are not being productive writers when they are fooling around. The other students became frustrated and didn't want to help him. Once he got himself together he asked 'Z' once again for help. 'S' says to 'Z,' "Please, 'Z.'" He responds, "Sound it out". 'S' says, "I can't, now you have to help. Let's both do it together." 'Z' responds, "You need to learn to sound out, sound it out yourself." 'S' says, "Why don't you know how to do it?" 'Z' responds, "I do know how to sound out." 'S' once again began to fool around and 'Z' became frustrated. 'S' after being redirected, regains focus. 'S' says, "Can you please try again." 'Z' responds, "OK, last time. Ok what is your sentence?" The two then began to work through sounding out all the words*

in the sentence and 'Z' helped 'S' find all the letters as they worked through writing the text. (see appendix A for complete observations)

This is an example of the social interactions, which transpire between the students when they are engaged in Kid Writing. 'S' is one of my struggling writers who needs a great deal of extra support to be able to write his stories. The students in this group are aware of this fact and are willing to help him if he is willing to sit and pay attention to what they are trying to teach him. 'S' knows who the strong writers and illustrators are in his group and always makes sure to get a seat next to one of them. He knows who to go to when he needs help with an illustration, as well as who to go to when he needs help to write words.

Even though a student might ask one particular student for help, all the others offer advice when someone asks a question. As in the example, 'S' asked 'Z' for help, but 'E' began to offer advice on where to find the letter "n" he needed. Also, when the two boys were reluctant to help him because he was fooling around, 'A', who was sitting across the table, offered 'S' advice to ask 'B' for help because 'B' knows how to read.

After watching these students interact on a daily basis, I have seen how they engage in cooperative learning, assist each other in staying on task, and help teach each other to write. They are always willing to help each other out with whatever someone needs. Being part of this type of learning community shows students the best way to achieve a goal, such as writing a story or drawing illustrations. They demonstrated their understanding of the importance of working cooperatively with others and have carried this with them into other lessons. In addition to one group's beneficial interactions, I have

also noted the class, as a whole, developing into a cooperative learning community throughout my inquiry project. (see appendix A and B)

Claim Two

When students engage in peer teaching, it increases their motivation to write as well as helps them progress as a writer.

Evidence

As I have watched my students over the course of my inquiry project, I have noticed improvement in their writing skills as well their desire and motivation to write. Before I started my inquiry students would complain about Kid Writing time, “Do we have to do Kid Writing today?” and “ How much longer do we have to do this?” The students weren’t enjoying their writing time. Meanwhile I (teacher) loved Kid Writing time; it was my favorite time of the day. I felt it was a wonderful way for students to express themselves and also progress through their writing at their own pace. I wanted the students to feel the same way and enjoy Kid Writing as much as I enjoy teaching it.

Before my intervention placing students in assigned groups, I observed students sitting by their friends who were of similar abilities. Therefore they were not benefiting from peer teaching opportunities. Once they were in their new groups, they began to help one another write and illustrate their stories. Slowly the complaints about Kid Writing began to diminish and they were replaced by, “I love Kid Writing” and “ Can’t we have a little more time to write?” There were times we would have scheduling conflicts and not have time for Kid Writing. Most of the students would complain because we were unable

to have it. Also, if we ran out of time for them to share their work they would complain about not having enough time to share. I could tell a difference in their motivation because everyday the students would ask me repeatedly “can I share today?” This was music to my ears. I was so excited the children were beginning to find joy in their writing time and looking forward to it.

The evidence to support an increase in the students’ motivation to write and also improvement in their writing skills is demonstrated in their Kid Writing journals. The students can choose which type of journal they would like to use during Kid Writing. There are four types of journals for the students to choose from. As they feel comfortable moving from larger illustrations and smaller amounts of text to larger amounts of text and smaller illustrations, they progress through the four journals. As they grow as writers, they gain confidence in their writing and are able to create smaller illustrations and write more text to accompany their story.

I have quite a few students who are choosing to move to the writing books, which have a smaller portion of the page dedicated to illustrations. When one looks at their journals, one can see the progress they have made throughout my inquiry. A great deal of their progress and motivation seems to write comes from the social interactions taking place in their groups. The students engage in many conversations about illustrations and text. Often times they are writing about each other and their daily activities. They look to each other for support in drawing their illustrations as well as writing their stories. They talk through ideas as a group or in a pair and the idea they had for their picture turns into an elaborate story. Working together cooperatively has had such an impact on the students writing abilities and their motivation to write. They have discovered if they put

in effort to their stories instead of slapping some letters down on the page, they can create amazing stories their peers are interested in learning about. I believe their progress in writing would not have occurred so quickly if not for the help from their peers. (see Appendix A and B)

Claim Three

For primary age students, drawing illustrations is an important way in which they convey their ideas.

Evidence

As I observed my students interacting during their writing time, I noticed the majority of conversations revolved around the students' illustrations. They also discussed a great deal about drawing each other in their illustrations. Often the children would begin discussing their illustrations and carry on these conversations throughout most of Kid Writing time. They would discuss who from the class they would like in their drawing and then discuss how each other should look and who should be doing what in the pictures. The students would start off with an idea of what they would like their picture to be about and then use input from the group members to add details into their drawings.

As the students would write their stories, they would ask their peers for help to spell the words if they needed it, or look to other resources around the room, such as the word wall or others' name tags. When they would share their stories with each other they would elaborate and include the details they had discussed while they were drawing.

Even though they might not be able to write and record all of the details of their stories, they are present in their illustrations. Even when they revisit their stories days later, they may not be able to read what they have written but they remember the details they have “written” into their drawings.

Examples of this are seen in the anecdotal notes both my PDA and I observed. (see appendix A) While listening to the children’s conversations they usually began with discussions of their drawings or who they would like to include in their drawings. An observation taken on March 13, 2006, demonstrates this: Student ‘Z’ and student ‘B’ discussed student ‘Z’s picture. Then student ‘E’ joined the conversation and asked ‘Z,’ if he knew “A” liked basketball, and ‘Z’ responded, “Yes.” Then ‘G’ explained her picture to the group. Her picture included Bella, our class bunny, then B’ drew a picture with Bella in it. The group then went on to discuss Bella, the bunny, while they were all working on their writing.

This excerpt from the observation shows how the students’ conversations are centered on their drawings. Throughout the observations, the discussion revolved around illustrating with a few deviations. Toward the end of Kid Writing time, there was some conversation about how to write the words. This is how a typical Kid Writing center should be run. Since primary age students develops their writing skills by first refining their drawing skills, these discussions help to move the students forward in their writing. As they are able to add more detail into their drawing, they are able to explain more when they are retelling and explaining their story. Slowly as they build their letter/sound correspondence skills, they are able to record more of the ideas they have represented in their drawings.

As students discuss their illustrations, it helps others in the group to come up with topics to write about. This demonstrates the students working cooperatively within their center. They also discuss how they can incorporate each other into their drawings. An example of this comes from an observation taken on March 30, 2006. Student 'S' and 'Z' are discussing their drawings. 'Z' says to 'S,' "You are number eight." 'S' says, "I don't want to be little. I want to be a teenager in your next picture." 'S' says to 'Z,' "Are you on my team?" and then tells 'Z,' "I'm making a picture of me and 'Z', we're robots." The discussion taking place between these two students shows how they use each other's input when they are drawing their illustrations. They discuss their pictures and a new image evolves from the conversations taking place between the students. The final story is a product of cooperative learning. (See appendix A and B)

Conclusions

What I have learned

After completing my inquiry, I have come to the conclusion that encouraging your students to engage in peer teaching can be one effective way for them to progress in their writing. There are many other possible ways for teachers to structure their writing time opposed to using groups. I have discovered, if you group students heterogeneously and make sure to include a wide range of abilities in each group, it can help students to progress in their writing. There are also many factors to consider when analyzing data. Even if I did not conduct my inquiry in the area of writing, my students would have made some advancement in their writing throughout the year. This would be due to their

development and the fact I integrate writing into all subject areas. They also could have received extra support at home, which may have contributed to their growing success as writers. There are many outside factors which may have influenced my students and their motivation to learn to write.

I do feel I have gained insight into the effectiveness of peer teaching and the role social interactions play in a child's learning development. Children can teach their peers in a way no adult ever could. Children can also learn in a different way when watching others engage in an activity. Seeing a peer demonstrating a skill and doing it well shows children then are capable of having the same skills. It motivates them to try new things and exceed their limits in learning.

In observing my students I have seen how much of their learning actually comes from their social interactions. Whether it is with a fellow peer or with a teacher, kindergarten students learn a great deal from interacting with others. Even though it may seem like they are merely having a conversation with their friends, if you take the time to really listen to the context of their conversation, you may be surprised to hear they are discussing topics. Students at this age learn through experiencing new ideas and concepts. One major way they do this is through interacting with others. This is why it is so important to encourage your students to discuss ideas and topics with their peers and allow them time to freely express themselves.

Another conclusion I have come to realize is it is important to provide your students with as many writing resources as possible. These resources come in many different forms. They range from word rings and letter strips to other students in the class and teacher demonstrations. Students at this age learn from models and it is important to

provide them with many opportunities to use these models in their writing. Using peers as resources was a focus of my inquiry and I have seen how observant students can be when working cooperatively. They very quickly pick up on who has strengths in certain areas and will look to these students for assistance. This is why it is vital to thoroughly think through the structure of the groups you are creating. If you are sure to provide each group with children who possess different strengths, then you are providing them with the resources they need to be successful writers.

To have a successful Kid Writing program you need to make sure to give your students the time they need to write. The writing and illustrating of stories takes students a large amount of time. This is what you should strive for as a teacher. If your students are interested and spending time putting detail into their stories, they are becoming true “kid writers”. When you have set up an environment in which they feel comfortable expressing their ideas, they will enjoy writing and want to spend time doing it.

One thing I will change when implementing this into my class will be the amount of support I offer my students. Because I had a focus group and was observing the way they interacted with each other I tried to stay out of their conversations as much as possible. I felt my input into conversations would change the nature of their discussions. As I looked through and analyzed their writing, I notice I was not taking the time as I did in the beginning of the year to have the students share their writing with me. I knew where each student was in regards to improvements they were making in their writing or struggles they may have been having. I feel there may have made even more improvements in their writing had I been there more to act as a guide for them in their writing. It is a hard thing to know when your students are ready to work independently

and also difficult to determine how much assistance you as the teacher should provide. Many students are capable of writing on their own, they merely desire the attention from an adult. It is hard to know how they will handle the independence and if they will use it as productive writing time when working with peers. The delicate balance between peer interaction and instructional help is a continual priority for a teacher.

I plan to create opportunities for peer teaching and social interactions to take place in my classroom when I have my own classroom. I have seen the benefits it has for struggling students as well as advanced and average ability students. It was amazing for me to watch my students go from “visiting” (off task conversations) with their peers to conversations which were focused on their writing. They enjoyed talking with each other and using the group’s input when designing their stories.

In my classroom I will continue to group students in a heterogeneous manner as much as possible in order to foster a cooperative learning community. Seeing how well this has worked to increase my students’ writing abilities makes me want to use it in as many ways as possible in order to create an enriched learning environment for my students.

Future Wonderings

After completing my inquiry regarding what role social interactions play in a kindergarten student learning to write and also increasing their motivation, I have developed some new wonderings.

- How can one teacher effectively structure and run writing centers in her classroom with no outside help?

- At what point should students be encouraged to write more independently without the constant guidance of the teacher?
- How does restructuring student groups affect the types of stories they write?
- How much time each day should be devoted to Kid Writing and sharing of stories?
- What effects does gender have on students' willingness to engage in peer teaching with another student?
- What are the most beneficial resources to have accessible to students to help improve their writing?
- What are some techniques to use for children who have not yet mastered letter/sound correspondence when they are writing stories?

There are many aspects of Kid Writing I have begun to wonder about throughout the course of my inquiry. Writing is such a complex process to learn and every child learns it in his/her own unique way.

Future Implications for Teaching

As I reflect on my inquiry I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn the process of inquiry. I have learned a great deal about myself as a teacher and ways I can make improvements in my teaching to benefit my students. I feel teaching is a process that is never fully completed. There are always new techniques to learn and adaptations which need to be made to meet the needs of your students. This is the reason I love

teaching so much. Your learning is never finished and you learn and grow as a teacher with every new student you have the opportunity to meet.

Using inquiry in your teaching practice is a beneficial way for you to analyze your teaching and refine it. When you are faced with challenges in your classroom or you want to see which techniques would be the most effective for your students you can conduct an inquiry project. Often times it is very easy to get caught up in the daily responsibilities of teaching, but if you use inquiry you are setting aside the time you need to reflect on your teaching. The stance of teacher as researcher is an important aspect of any educator's career.

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Appendix A

These are anecdotal notes my PDA and I wrote when observing the students during Kid Writing. The letters on the side of the observations are the symbols I used when analyzing my data. “A” stood for students making reference to another student’s abilities, “TA” stood for a student asking for teacher assistance, “I” stood for a student or students asking a peer for assistance with illustrations or referenced students discussing illustrations they were in the process of creating, “S” stood for students asking peers to help them to spell or sound spell a word, “R” stood for the students using resources around the room such as the morning letter or students’ name tags to help them to spell words, and “E” stood for the students wanting to write about each other and draw them in their illustrations.

Appendix B

These are samples of the student's journal writing. They would write their stories after they had drawn their illustration. I choose samples in which the students worked cooperatively to complete their stories. Also, I chose stories that the students included other members from their Kid Writing group. There were six students in my focus group and there are samples from each student. There are samples of their work before I started my inquiry and assigned them to their Kid Writing groups and also samples of their work throughout the inquiry. Each student's section starts with a sample of their work before the grouping and then has one or two samples during the inquiry. These samples show their growth in their writing and drawing skills throughout the inquiry. When students make advancements in their drawing there are also advancements in their writing. Primary age children develop their writing skills by first developing their drawing skills. Before they can write text to accompany their illustrations, their drawings serve as their stories.

Appendix C

These are photographs taken of the children during Kid Writing. The photographs show them working cooperatively and engaging in peer teaching. There are also photographs of the many resources the children use while they are writing.

Student A

This is one of the average writers in the group, who has made advancements in her writing throughout the inquiry. If you look at the stories you can see growth made throughout the inquiry. In the sample taken before the inquiry her drawings were not very detailed. She used all capital letters in her writing and also expressed only one idea. As she progressed you can see she has added more detail and drawn her picture in color. She has also begun to use lower case letters and expressed more than one idea in her story. In her third sample she has written a story about herself and another girl in her writing group.

Student B

This is one of the struggling writers of the group, who has made advancements in her writing throughout the inquiry. Her first sample was taken before the inquiry started. She drew an illustration and only wrote one word to tell her story. As you look at her next sample she has added more detail to her drawing and her story reflects what she drew. She has written an entire sentence and used “sound” spelling to write her words. She also has begun to use punctuation in her writing.

Student C

This student is another one of the average members of the group. She too has made improvements in her writing. She has added more detail to her illustrations and uses more “sound” spelling in her writing.

Student D

This student is a struggling writer in the group who has made tremendous improvements in his writing. In his first sample, he drew a picture and did not want to add any words. In the samples taken during the inquiry he has added more detail to his pictures. He is using “sound” spelling to spell out words with help from his peers. He is writing an entire sentence opposed to not wanting to write any words before the inquiry. He is also writing stories, which include other members of his group.

Student E

This student is the strong illustrator of the group, who also has good sound spelling abilities. The sample taken prior to the inquiry shows detail in his drawings but his story does not express a complete thought. The samples taken during the inquiry demonstrates his growth as a writer. He is writing complete sentences, which express more than one idea and is also using punctuation. His drawings have progressed in detail and he includes members of his group in most of his illustrations.

Student F

This student is the advanced writer in the group, who has also demonstrated growth in his writing. When you look at his sample prior to the inquiry, there is not much detail in his illustration and his sentence only expresses one idea. After the inquiry, his illustrations contained more detail and included members of his group. He is also writing complete sentences now, which express more than one idea.