

Structure: Its Impact on Kindergarteners' Independent Writing

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Description of Teaching Context

This year I am an intern in a kindergarten classroom at Ferguson Township Elementary School in State College, PA. The school culture is one that makes everyone feel at home. My colleagues and I refer to ourselves as the “Ferguson Family”. Everyone is there to help each other in any way they possibly can. Both students and teachers are very caring in this friendly environment. Within this rural school community, the children come from a wide range of backgrounds. Some of the students have parents who are professors at Penn State University, while others have parents working at a local grocery store. The diversity does not separate the students at school; instead, the students participate together in school-wide activities to help build a strong community. A great example of our close community shows through at the end of each day. As the buses depart from the school, all of the faculty members wave to the children on the buses. With friendly smiles on their faces, most of the children wave back.

Although my mentor and I foster the kindergarteners in building a classroom community, diversity is evident among them. The students have different personalities, which means they each exhibit a variety of behaviors in diverse situations. Their learning styles are also different, which demands that a teacher formulate ways of differentiating instruction during lessons. A wide range of social skills is also evident in the classroom; these skills can affect how the students work independently and cooperatively.

Specifically, my classroom is composed of twenty-two children, eleven girls and eleven boys. One of the positive characteristics of this group is that generally they are academically on-target. However, there is diversity evident among the language arts groups. The children are separated into four language arts groups according to their

reading levels, which range from early kindergarten to late first grade. Six students are at the middle of kindergarten level, five are at the end of kindergarten level, six are at the middle of first grade level, and four are at the end of first grade level. One of the students has Down Syndrome; she functions at about a three-year-old level and receives instructional support outside of the regular classroom, so she is not part of the groups. Her paraprofessional also works with her on activities that help her learn developmentally appropriate material.

Not only is there a wide range in the language arts achievement in our classroom, but in the areas of behavior and social relationships as well. Five of the students are social leaders, which set a good example for the other children. Seven of the children are easy to get along with but exhibit difficulty in getting their work completed. Seven students are quiet in class, always eager to do what the teacher directs. Of these seven children, one has mild autism. He is repeating kindergarten for a second time, and his TSS worker does an appreciable job of helping him stay on-task. Three children are nonconformists, and they show a range of behavioral challenges. One of these nonconformists has severe ADHD/ODD, which can create an atmosphere that makes some aspects of teaching and learning quite challenging in the classroom.

In the classroom, Kid Writing is a time for children to write independently, which can be a challenge for some children because they are dependent upon the teacher for guidance. This observation led to the formulation of my rationale.

Rationale

My wondering came from my observations during Kid Writing time in my classroom. We have four mixed-ability groups of students that write and illustrate during this time, and I noticed that it was impossible to help all of them simultaneously as they tried to sound out words.

Kid Writing in the classroom is an unstructured time when the students are allowed to write and draw anything they want. I noticed that some of the students were independent writers; however, most of the students are not able to write independently. Some of them do not know what to write about so they sit silently or talk to friends. Other students do not sound out words on their own so they sit until a teacher comes to them, or they walk over to a teacher to ask for help. Some choose not to write, so those students continue working on illustrations without asking any teachers for help. I realized that none of these situations were effective because the students were not able to write independently.

I found that as a teacher I was not sure who needed help writing during Kid Writing, and/or there were too many children that were asking for my help at once. I became frustrated and decided that I needed to help the children in some way to assist them in becoming independent writers. The challenge was that I did not know how I was going to do this. As Kid Writing time appeared unproductive, I wondered what would happen if I implemented prompts to make it more structured. Would the students work independently if they had a prompt? As I thought more about my wondering each day, I decided to research educational articles online. I knew that adding structure to Kid Writing was something that I wanted to do, yet I did not know what the outcome was going to be.

As I conducted the inquiry, I began to realize how important it is for teachers to act on wonderings in their classrooms. As a teacher, I have had wonderings previously, yet I have never done research about them and tried to implement interventions. Looking at inquiry as a day-by-day process has helped me realize that there are no right or wrong answers to a wondering. In my future teaching, I will use the knowledge I have gained about the inquiry process to conduct more inquiries in my classroom. Doing so will help me to think critically about a situation in my classroom and provide strategies for how I might be able to positively change the situation.

Literature and Experts

As I investigated educational databases online, I found several articles that discussed independent writing involving students who have emergent writing skills. One of the first articles I found was about two second-grade teachers who conducted research in their own classrooms regarding the effect of word study on students' independent writing. I read about Lev Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) and became more aware of how I might introduce new words to students. The second-grade teachers at Chandler Elementary, Janet Elliott and Kimberly Rietschel (1999), explain, "Vygotsky defines the ZPD as the space between a child's independent performance and the child's level of maximally assisted performance. Abilities that are fully developed exist at the level of independent performance" (p. 4). As I read about this notion of emerging abilities, I wondered how it applied to initial levels of skill development in writing. As I read the article further it explained, "If instruction takes place outside of a learner's ZPD, nothing will be gained as the child is beyond the scope of his understanding and

development” (p. 4). After reading that part of the article I knew that I had to be careful as I introduced spelling words for the kids to use during Kid Writing. I did not want to introduce words that would be too difficult for them to remember because they would not remember.

Wonderings and Questions

As I developed my inquiry in the classroom, I considered all of the characteristics of the children when implementing a different structure during Kid Writing time. I hoped to help students to become more independent writers during this particular time of school day.

Main Wondering

Will creating structured stations for students, using prompts, help them to become more successful at being independent during Kid Writing?

Sub-Wonderings

1. Will making Kid Writing a more structured time in the school day motivate students to write?
2. Will adding structure to Kid Writing reduce the amount of students’ off-task behavior?
3. Will adding structure to Kid Writing stifle the students’ creativity?

Inquiry vs. Project

After doing research and deciding to make kid writing structured, I am not sure if this way will be effective in making my students independent writers. I hope my students will be able to write on their own, but I do not know if it is possible to help them become

independent by only making kid writing time more structured. Perhaps there is another method or idea that needs to be implemented to aid in their growth. There is not one set way to find out the answer to my wonderings, and I know that along the way through the inquiry process I will definitely be thinking of new wonderings that arise from the situation.

Inquiry Plan, Data Collection, Data Analysis Description

This section of the paper explains the inquiry process step by step. In each step of the process, the data collection strategies and the data analysis process are explained.

Step One, Data Collection and Analysis

The first part of my plan was to take collect data regarding ways that the students were not being independent during Kid Writing time. For one week I collected this data. On the first day, I observed a Kid Writing session to determine the most prominent ways in which the students were demonstrating dependence. I determined that (a) raising their hand for help, (b) getting out of their seats to ask for help, and (c) talking to friends, were the top three ways. For the remainder of the week I decided to record data to determine exactly how many times the students exhibited these three behaviors during Kid Writing time. I recorded the data using tally marks on a sheet of paper as I walked around the room; therefore, the students did not know that I was observing them. I discovered that within three days I gathered 37 tally marks total (see Appendix C). Within this week, information gathered from the tally marks was taken from 12 students in the classroom. I noticed that the category that received the most tally marks (15) was “getting out of their

seats to ask for help.” I was not exactly sure at that time if the data would help me or not in my inquiry process (see Appendix B).

Step Two, Data Collection and Analysis

The following week I decided to give a survey to the students about kid writing. I wanted to know how they felt about this time of the school day. I asked four questions on the survey: (1) How do you like Kid Writing?, (2) Do you use your word ring during Kid Writing?, (3) When you need help sounding out words do you ask a teacher?, and (4) Do you sound out words on your own?. The children were asked to respond by circling facial expressions on the character Garfield, which included very happy, mostly happy, slightly mad, and very mad. I collected 19 surveys that day and analyzed the data (Appendix B).

From the data, I found these four statements to be true: (1) 15 students enjoy kid writing most or all of the time, (2) 15 students do not use words rings, (3) 13 students do not ask for help or only ask for help sometimes from a teacher when they need it, and (4) 14 students try sounding out words on their own. After looking at this data some of the information was surprising to me. When I found out that most students do not use their word rings, it made me wonder if the word rings were useful resources for the children. I began to wonder if I could implement an activity or prompt that could help the children to actually remember how to spell words. It also surprised me that most students said they try sounding out words on their own. I wondered if that meant that those students who I thought were sitting quietly and staring off in the distance during Kid Writing were actually trying to sound out words on their own!

Step Three, Data Collection and Analysis

The following week I decided to implement a word study with the students. At that time we began our study of transportation, and a car was the first example we were beginning to discuss. I decided during that week that it would be a good opportunity to implement the word “car” into Kid Writing time. I chose the word “car” because it was within the students’ ZPD. Elliot and Rietschel (1999) said, “Those skills that are on the edge of emergence and that can be enhanced by varying degrees of assistance are located within the ZPD” (p. 4). Therefore, I decided to assist the students in order to scaffold their growth in writing skills. I introduced one vocabulary word in various ways; the children thought of words that rhyme with “car”, played a word game with the rhyming words, and used the words in their Kid Writing.

The first day that week I wrote the word “car” on a marker board. We talked about the “-ar” ending of the word, and I asked the students if they could think of any words that rhyme with “car.” The students thought of many words, some I was not even thinking of, such as “guitar.” Then, I realized that it would be beneficial to use plastic orange squares with letters on them to further the children’s study of the rhyming words. I decided that the following day I would play a rhyming game with them.

On the second day I had the students sit in a circle and I showed them two orange squares, one with the letter “a” and one with the letter “r”. I asked the students if they remembered what sound these two letters made together and several of them raised their hands. I reviewed the word “car” with them and asked if someone could come to the front of the circle to help form a new word. I spread out a variety of squares across the carpet

to give students a choice of letters that may or may not make rhyming words. The students took turns coming to the front of the carpet, using new orange squares each time to formulate new rhyming words. I was thinking back to the article that mentioned Vygotsky and I thought it was important to conduct this lesson for reiteration. I thought that implementing repetition of these vocabulary words every week would help each student to remember the words.

Finally, I gave the children their Kid Writing assignment. This was the first time that they were having structure during their writing time. I explained that they must choose one of the words that rhyme with “car” and use it in their Kid Writing story. At this time, I was thinking about my third sub-wondering and I realized that I did not want to stifle their creativity by assigning them a specific word they must choose. Therefore, I gave some freedom in having them choose which word they wanted to use in their stories. To differentiate for the diverse writing abilities, I told the children that they might use more than one rhyming word and/or write more than one story.

Because the students are in kindergarten, it took them several days to complete their stories. It took time for them to develop their ideas through illustrations and words. As the children worked on their stories over the next three days, I observed them in the same three categories that I did during the pre-assessment, using tally marks to record the data. Overall, I had 21 tally marks, which was less than when I conducted the pre-assessment (Appendix D). A surprising observation was that although the number of tally marks decreased, the number of students whose information was recorded was 11; this piece of data means that the amount of students stayed about the same from the pre-assessment to this post-assessment. When analyzing the data, it was found that the number of times

students raised their hands for help stayed about the same, the number of times students talked to each other decreased slightly, and the number of times students were out of their seats decreased dramatically (See Appendix C).

After analyzing the data, I wondered what I could do to further my inquiry investigation. I decided to randomly choose students to interview in order to find out their thoughts about structured vs. unstructured Kid Writing.

Step Four, Data Collection and Analysis

I chose 5 students to interview for a post-assessment about students' feelings involving Kid Writing. I thought it would have been beneficial to interview more students; however, there were time constraints that inhibited my inability to do that.

When interviewing each child, I asked him/her 4 questions: (1) Tell me about your story. What rhyming words did you use?, (2) Do you like it better to create your own ideas or to use ideas that a teacher suggests?, and (3) Can you think of any ways you would like to make Kid Writing better? I used an audio recorder to record our conversations. After conducting the interviews I organized the results on paper (see Appendix E).

By analyzing the data I observed that all 5 students preferred creating their own stories; however, 4 out of the 5 students claimed the rhyming game helped them to spell during Kid Writing time. Looking at this evidence made me think more about my students' needs. My hypothesis at this point was that students need freedom of choice when creating stories, but also need frequent introduction to vocabulary words in order to

improve their independence during writing time. As I analyzed this piece of evidence, I wondered if my results could help to formulate a claim.

Claims

Claim 1: The amount of off-task behavior decreased when structure was provided.

Evidence: There are two pieces of evidence to support this claim: (1) the comparison between the pre-assessment tally sheet and the post-assessment tally sheet, and (2) reflections I made during Kid Writing time.

When analyzing this data I began to wonder what the correlation was between all of the evidence. As I carefully assessed the pre-assessment and post-assessment result sheets, I noticed similarities and differences. When conducting the pre-assessment, there were 37 tally marks, compared to 21 tally marks from the post-assessment data (see Appendices B and C). This evidence showed that the amount of off-task behavior decreased when the structure was provided as opposed to when there was little or no structure.

A second piece of evidence to support this claim is my reflections during Kid Writing. When I conducted the pre-assessment I felt somewhat overwhelmed because of the off-task behavior that was occurring. However, I remember assessing the students during structured Kid Writing time, and I felt more at ease. I reflected at the end of each school day; I realized that because the students were working more independently, Kid Writing was occurring as a more productive time of day. Although approximately the same amount of students was recorded as being off-task, the number of off-task behaviors

decreased. Because there was a lower amount of off-task behaviors, I noticed that students were more focused on their writing.

These two pieces of evidence support my claim, yet I would have hoped to gain more evidence to make my claim stronger. Perhaps conducting more than one structured activity would have given me further evidence to compare.

Claim 2: Implementing word games are more helpful than using word rings in assisting students to remember how to spell words.

Evidence: There are two pieces of evidence to support this claim: (1) Kid Writing survey results, and (2) post-interview results.

While analyzing data I noticed a piece of information that was somewhat surprising: 15 students did not use a word ring at all during Kid Writing (see Appendix B). Originally, the word rings were implemented for the students to use during Kid Writing in case they needed to know how to spell a word. Some of the basic sight words were included on the word rings. Students were also told they were allowed to add words to it that they did not know; a teacher would write the conventional spelling on the card. Prior to this inquiry process, I knew that some children did not use word rings. However, I did not expect that 15 students did not use them! That means approximately 75% of the class population were not using word rings as a writing tool.

Since I knew that the word rings were not working well I decided to see if there was a connection to other pieces of evidence. When looking at the post-interview results it is evident that most of the children said that the rhyming word game helped them to remember how to spell the “-ar” ending in words (see Appendix B). This evidence shows

that the children remembered how to spell more words from playing the word game rather than looking at their word rings.

This claim is supported by these two pieces of evidence. To further support my claim I would have liked to play more word games with the students. As an additional part of the data collection I would have also liked to assess students at a future date to determine if they retained the information. Doing so would have possibly made my claim even stronger. As stated by Dale A. Gill (1997), who conducted research on conventional and inventive spelling, “Educational psychologists have long favored a system of spelling instruction that relates knowledge instead of teaching skills in isolation... Words are more meaningful when students encounter them in subjects and experiences being taught than when asked to memorize lists of less meaningful work” (p. 14). This quote relates to the rhyming words that were used for the Kid Writing inquiry. It was important to first introduce the word “car” since it was part of the social studies curriculum in class; it was meaningful for the children. This claim has led to a new wondering: Will students remember how to spell words from the word game after a certain period of times passes (week, month, etc.)?

Claim 3: Although students repeated that the structure helped them to remember how to spell words correctly, they preferred having free choice about what to write.

Evidence: There are two pieces of evidence to support this claim: (1) post-interview results, and (2) Kid Writing survey results.

When analyzing the responses to the interview questions, it is evident from students’ answers that they enjoy creating their own stories (see Appendix E). They have great

ideas and want to share them with their classmates. Most of them expressed that the rhyming game helped them to spell previously unknown words in their stories, although they do not like to be given an idea from the teacher to incorporate in a story.

Students' answers from the Kid Writing survey also contributed as evidence for this claim. Two pieces of information are evident from the analysis: (1) Most children enjoy Kid Writing, and (2) most sound out words on their own (see Appendix B). From this information, it can be inferred that most children enjoy Kid Writing because of having free choice in creating stories. Also, knowing that most students sound out words on their own informs me that they are growing in becoming independent writers. As stated earlier, perhaps when I think students are not paying attention they may be just thinking about how to sound out words.

This claim is strong, but I would have liked to interview more children to receive a greater variety of responses about Kid Writing. Perhaps this claim would have changed if I had been able to do so.

Conclusion

As a pre-service teacher conducting an inquiry investigation for the first time, I have learned much about the process and also about my wondering, to use the knowledge I have gained in a future class that I will teach. Pertaining to my wondering, I have learned new information about the students in my classroom. It seems as if they really enjoy free writing, but still accept some structure for support. I would like to continue implementing word games as part of Kid Writing to help the students learn new words to incorporate in their writing. Researching other ways to implement structure during

writing time is something else that I would like to do in order to help my students become more successful authors. When conducting the surveys, I realized how important it is for teachers to listen to students' input and incorporate their ideas in the classroom. Since the interviews with the children, I am already thinking of changing the make-up of Kid Writing groups more often and creating dictionaries for the students to use. Since writing is one important part of the students' day, it is imperative that I always think of ways to help writers who have achieved different levels of independence. I would like to investigate more ways in which I can differentiate instruction for all writers.

When thinking about my main wondering (Will creating structured stations for students, using prompts, help them to become more successful at Kid Writing independently?), I am still not sure if I can answer the question. Although I found evidence to support that there was less off-task behavior after implementing structured activities, it is too soon to tell if there are long-lasting effects. I am pleased with progress that students have made so far. For example, one student made most of his stories about racecars prior to my inquiry, but developed a new idea after participating in the rhyming word study (Appendix F). When I have my own classroom in the future, I would like to conduct inquiry from the beginning of the year so I will be able to research effects over a long period of time. Since the kindergarten students in my class are emergent writers, I know that it will take time for them to grow into fully independent writers throughout their future years.

A kindergarten teacher Lisa Gonfiantini (2001) said, "Structure writing is often used to provide practice in print conventions" (p. 14). Emergent writers need to practice print conventions so that they may grow in their writing skills. Gonfiantini explained that she

usually schedules structured writing two to three times per week (p. 14). It is important to provide a balanced literacy program, where students can receive the benefits of both structured and independent writing time. I know that in my future teaching I plan on using a balanced literacy program, along with engaging in inquiry, to provide full academic benefits for my students.

New Wonderings

1. If I continue investigating this inquiry, will further evidence support or contradict any of my claims?
2. Will students retain spelling knowledge after a certain amount of time has passed (i.e. week, month, etc.)?
3. Since most students did not use their word rings, does that mean that most would not use a dictionary in future use?
4. If students are permitted to incorporate their ideas about how to change Kid Writing, will they become more excited about writing?

Works Cited

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Kid Writing Survey

1. How do you like kid writing?



2. Do you use your word ring during kid writing?



3. When you need help sounding out words do you ask a teacher?



4. Do you sound out words on your own?



Appendix B—Kid Writing Survey Results

Question 1

Number of Tallies

A—11

B—4

C—1

D—3

Question 2

Number of Tallies

A—3

B—0

C—1

D—15

Question 3

Number of Tallies

A—3

B—3

C—8

D—5

Question 4

Number of Tallies

A—11

B—3

C—0

D--5

Appendix C—Pre-Assessment Tally Results

1. Raise hand for help

9 tallies

2. Out of seat to ask for help

15 tallies

3. Talk to friends

13 tallies

Notes:

-37 tallies total

-12 students involved on tally

-most out of seat

-least raise hand for help

Appendix D—Post-Assessment Tally Results

1. Raise hand for help

7 tallies

2. Out of seat to ask for help

6 tallies

3. Talk to friends

8 tallies

Notes:

-21 tallies total

-11 students involved on tally

-tallies all decreased (#1 about same, #2 decrease a lot, #3 decrease a bit)

Appendix E—Post-Interview Results

Student

- 1. T**
- 2. Ja**
- 3. E**
- 4. S**
- 5. Jo**

Rhyming words used in story

- 1. car, far**
- 2. car**
- 3. far**
- 4. star**
- 5. star, target (used an “-ar” sound in the middle; created 2 stories)**

Like it better to create own ideas or use an idea that a teacher suggests? Why?

- 1. likes idea from teacher; helps her to spell words; likes to create her own ideas though**
- 2. likes to write own ideas; thinks it gets boring if he can't write his own ideas**
- 3. likes to make own stories; says she has “very good ideas”; the rhyming game helped her to think of spelling when writing**
- 4. likes to make up stories; “it’s fun to make up words that you don’t have to spell...you don’t have to spell a certain word”; thinks the rhyming game helped him to spell “-ar” word**
- 5. likes to make own stories because “they are just so fun”; says rhyming game helped him to remember “-ar” spelling**

Ways to make Kid Writing better?

- 1. have new students in group; likes when friends help her to sound out words; would rather ask a teacher for help than use a word ring or dictionary**
- 2. none; does not think he would use a dictionary if it was provided**
- 3. none; thinks dictionary is a good idea**
- 4. wants more teachers to help students “at the right time”; thinks a dictionary might help**
- 5. would like to play more rhyming games; thinks a dictionary is a good idea**

