



Yes, There Is Room for Soup in the Curriculum: Achieving Accountability in a Collaboratively Planned Writing Program

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Yes, there is room for soup in the curriculum: Achieving accountability in a collaboratively planned writing program

In one U.S. school district a planned writing curriculum provided strong, cohesive, consistent instruction for all its students.

How can it be that sixth graders in the United States who have been taught writing since the first grade still have serious trouble expressing their thoughts coherently in writing? Moreover, some sixth-grade teachers in Pennsylvania who administer a state-mandated writing test at the beginning of the school year have told us (a literacy coach and an elementary school principal) that many of their students are not proficient in basic organizational writing skills. Some teachers' expectations were so low that they had encouraged sixth graders to respond to the assessment prompt in one paragraph rather than risk having students botch their answers with the arbitrarily placed indentations that pass for paragraphing in much of their written work.

These same students had consistently performed well in the state reading and math assessments. Surely, they could be taught how to divide a piece of writing into coherent paragraphs. But paragraphing and other organizational devices had not been part of a uniform approach to writing instruction for which teachers were held accountable. Some students simply had not had enough opportunity to learn how to organize their writing effectively.

There is now a growing realization that the principles of equal opportunity and consistency advocated in reading instruction (Allington, 1995,

1996; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; Reading Excellence Act, 1998; Slavin & Madden, 2001; Stanovich, 1986) should apply to the teaching of writing as well. "Writing," Calkins (2003) told an auditorium full of attentive educational practitioners from across Pennsylvania, "has become a non-negotiable part of the curriculum." We received her message with particular enthusiasm. The previous year we had facilitated the development of a district-wide writing curriculum created collaboratively by the elementary school staff. The curriculum had been implemented, and accountability had been established.

In this article we detail the steps that brought consistency and accountability to the teaching of writing in our school district. We examine the characteristics and needs of the population, look at the process of developing the curriculum, and consider the results. We believe that the process can be adapted to the needs of any school or school district where administrators and staff are working together to enhance writing instruction.

Demographics: Two populations

Located in a relatively remote rural area of Pennsylvania, our district is small, with fewer than 1,000 K–12 students. Although there are only 60 to 90 students at each grade level, the district serves two distinct population groups. One consists of people born and raised in the locality whose families

may have lived in the area for generations. The other group is of newcomers brought in by a large, high-tech industry and by a hospital that provides care for an extensive, medically underserved area. The newcomers, many with urban roots, include people of color and English-language learners. There is considerable variation in the amount of exposure children in our district have had to formal written English. As we know, success in writing often goes hand in hand with familiarity with formal English, whereas those unfamiliar with the academic conventions of written language are more likely to struggle to express themselves on paper (Dyson, 2003; Gee, 1990).

The need: Consistency

It was for the struggling writers who lacked extensive experience with formal written English that strong, consistent writing instruction was most needed. But were they receiving it? As noted earlier, achievement test scores and results from the state assessment in reading and math had been consistently above the range of expected performance for school districts of similar size and economic circumstances. Not so with the results of the state writing test, which varied widely from year to year; some years' scores were far below those of other annual writing assessments. In addition, the achievement level demonstrated in the three modes of writing assessed by the state system—narrative, informational, and persuasive (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2004)—fluctuated considerably from one year to the next. One assessment might show the district doing well in one mode and poorly in another, whereas the next year's results could be reversed. (See Table 1.)

It was not that some children did not receive any writing instruction. All teachers gave regular

assignments. The explanation for the results, we believed, lay in the nature of the writing activities taught and practiced and in the lack of consistency and coherence in the way instruction was delivered. There were no uniform answers to the following key questions:

- Exactly what was taught at each grade level?
- How were skills developed as the students proceeded through the grades?
- How was writing taught?
- What instructional strategies were used?
- How much time was spent on instruction?
- How much writing did each child actually do?
- How was the writing assessed?

As in many other school systems, there could be as many answers to these questions as there were teachers in the district.

Development of a planned curriculum

Before initiating this project, people in our district considered the use of writing portfolios as a way of bringing some measure of uniformity to writing instruction. A district-wide writing committee, after surveying the staff to see what was being done at the various grade levels, determined the writing to be included in the portfolio for each grade. Grade 2 portfolios might contain a friendly letter, grade 3 some poetry, and grade 4 an expository paragraph. However, this approach, largely based on present practices and not necessarily aligned with state standards or assessments, did not assure equal learning opportunities for all students. Struggling writers could still fall way behind the

TABLE 1
Writing assessment scores

Type of writing	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Narrative	1,270	1,380	1,240	1,400	Not assessed
Informational	1,280	1,320	Not assessed	1,260	1,190
Persuasive	1,270	1,360	1,300	Not assessed	1,280

already fluent and proficient. In our district's case, something more was needed.

What was required was to approach writing as a developmental process, standardizing the curriculum so that all children would receive a complete program. Gaps would have to be systematically closed. We decided to provide a uniform tool for all teachers to use, with every teacher participating in its development. Teachers would be held accountable by submitting writing samples throughout the school year from all students.

Working together

It was decided at the outset that the entire staff would collaborate in creating the curriculum. As authorities in the field of professional development have shown, active participation in the change process gives participants an investment in the outcome (Barth, 1990; Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002; Wagner, 1998). Describing a program in which staff development was provided to help school districts align curriculum with state standards, Dutro et al. noted,

Because individual districts made the content standards and benchmarks their own and had opportunities to determine the steps their districts could take...what had initially seemed like externally imposed mandates became part of the district's own aims. (p. 809)

In our district, full participation of the staff was relatively easy; all the elementary pupils were housed in a single state-of-the-art building under the supervision of one principal. The school had four teachers at each grade level, with a multigrade option offered in grades 1 to 4 in addition to the self-contained classrooms.

The demographics of the faculty were in many ways typical of similarly sized school districts. Twenty were female, including all the primary teachers. There were male teachers in grades 3, 4, and 6. Of the 24 participants in the project, 10 had 30 or more years of teaching experience, 3 had been in the classroom for more than 15 years, and 5 had 9 or more years of experience. The majority of the staff, then, had plenty of time to develop writing programs with which they were thoroughly comfortable. The faculty came from a fairly uniform background: All but one were originally from communities located within a 100-mile radius of

our district. None had gone to college out of the area, with three staff members attending large state universities about 100 miles away, and the rest graduating from smaller state institutions or local colleges that specialized in teacher training.

All teachers were fully certified in elementary education. Of the 24 participating faculty, 15 had master's degrees. The primary teachers had received district-sponsored inservice training in balanced literacy and systematic phonics instruction. Teachers at some of the grade levels were accustomed to collaboration and worked together effectively as a team. At other grade levels, teachers had developed their own unique programs and proceeded independently. A number of variables appeared to determine the extent of collaboration in place. These included age, gender, length of time teaching at the grade level, inservice training received, and affinity for either individual or group work.

To develop the curriculum, teachers at each grade level met for two and a half hours every other month with a literacy coach who provided some guidance in the process but whose main task was to combine the many ideas offered by individuals into a coherent whole. Helpful in this regard were worksheets developed with the teachers, outlining the format to be used. (See Figure 1.) Teachers were encouraged to jot down their thoughts under the various headings provided before the general discussion began. The worksheets helped shape the myriad suggestions and ideas received into a uniform curriculum.

What was to be taught?

We discovered that although most early writing tended to be mainly narrative, differences in the kinds of writing taught became increasingly apparent in the intermediate and upper grades. Whether or not students had the opportunity to practice expository *and* narrative writing often seemed to depend on the predilection of the classroom teacher, a situation typical of many school districts. For example, while Mr. N. would be enthusiastically reading and writing folk tales with his group, next door Ms. S., who loved history, would have her students writing sophisticated research reports. Down the hall, Mrs. L., whose specialty was science, showed her students how to write detailed observations of scientific experiments.

FIGURE 1
Writing workshop planner—Pages 1 and 2

Writing workshop (Page 1)	Writing workshop (Page 2)
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> Curriculum connection: Grade: Standards: Mode: Domain(s): Skills: Month: </div> Introduction Read-aloud(s) Minilesson Brainstorming, planning Composing, drafting	Having conferences, revising/minilesson Editing Publishing Assessment rubric Support for diverse learners Additional resources Comments

Her neighbor, politically active Mr. D., had his students write letters to the editor of the local newspaper about issues affecting their school and community. The result was a unique writing curriculum for everyone, depending on which teachers the students had as they progressed through the grades.

While the enthusiasms of various teachers accounted for inconsistencies in writing programs, the teachers' attachment to certain assignments and their experience in executing them also constituted strengths that would have been lost if their projects had been replaced by a generic curriculum. Lost, too, would have been the results obtained by the teachers skilled at eliciting writing in a variety of modes who encouraged students to self-select topics. In either case, many teachers would have continued to make room for at least some of their

favorite projects and strategies regardless of administrators' directives.

The importance of having 100% participation in the design process cannot be overemphasized. If this work were to be done by a curriculum committee, its members would likely be the district's star teachers who already were doing an outstanding job teaching writing in their classrooms. But every district's elementary faculty includes, besides its all-stars, teachers whose strengths lie in areas other than writing. School districts, like sports teams, must rely on the contributions of steady performers of journeywork for consistent, high-level results. The enthusiastic and effective implementation of curricular change throughout a school district is best facilitated by including all staff in the planning (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Robb, 2000). In our district, all elementary classroom teachers—

those who were writing stars and those who were not—were actively engaged in the process.

At grade-level meetings, all teachers described their favorite writing projects and jointly reached consensus regarding which projects would be included. As work began, Ms. R., a third-grade teacher, assumed that an activity she had enjoyed in her classroom for years would not fit into a curriculum in which writing would be done in a certain mode, according to a common set of strategies. Ms. R.'s project consisted of reading a classic version of the folk tale "Stone Soup" (Brown, 1947) to her class, after which students brought in ingredients—onions, carrots, celery, and such—for cooking their own soup in the classroom. After consuming the soup voraciously, the students wrote up the whole event, language-experience style.

"I guess there's no room for soup in the curriculum," Ms. R. said, nostalgically recalling the aroma of simmering soup wafting through the classroom as the children studied their spelling. Not so; there was plenty of room for soup in the curriculum. In a process typical of how the group converted other long-standing "writing assignments" to fit the pattern of the new curriculum, it was decided to do "soup" in the Informational mode, with a minilesson on sequential organization and transition words. A very specific language arts skill practiced in the workshop is spelling of ordinal numbers. Suggestions were made for helping the students generate a graphic organizer for prewriting, minilesson procedures were clearly outlined in the workshop plan, and checklists and a rubric were created. (See Figures 2 and 3 and Table 2.) Ms. R., like many other teachers, chose to give the rubric to her students before they worked on the project so that they would know exactly what was expected.

In a similar fashion, the preferred activities of all teachers, whether all-stars or not, either were put into a narrative, informational, or persuasive mode or were adapted to fit the process writing format and became part of a grade-level curriculum. Because all teachers at one grade level now taught one another's favorite lessons, no one felt ignored or left out. Needless to say, the children benefited the most. All third graders now had a chance to savor soup in their classrooms, while everyone in fourth grade learned how to turn fascinating facts about Native North Americans into logically organized reports.

Many of the teachers' preferred writing activities were seasonal. Writing a Christmas story in which Santa Claus might not come, as in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (Geisel, 1957) or in the song "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," provided a fitting occasion for a minilesson on problem/solution/resolution. As we developed lists of additional material, we discovered a host of stories about winter holidays throughout the world that could be read aloud as an example of problem/solution plot formation. In *Latkes and Applesauce: A Hanukkah Story* (Manushkin, 1989), for example, the Jewish celebration is threatened, but the narrative ends with the spirit of the holiday triumphing, just as it does in the stories of Rudolph and the Grinch.

Integrating the curriculum

By incorporating established projects, curriculum integration automatically became part of the process. When appropriate, writing in content subjects was adapted, including research reports in social studies, observational reports in science, and projects in health or in mandated areas such as drug education. Writing across the curriculum has been shown to be an effective learning tool (Collins, 1992; Fulwiler & Young, 1990; Lytle & Botel, 1990; Moffet, 1981).

"No problem," was the group's response when fourth-grade teacher Mr. F. announced at a November session, "We always do something on Indians this time of year." A research report on Native North Americans fit nicely into the Informational mode; a minilesson on note-taking demonstrated how to turn the sentence fragments recording essential information into complete sentences. Both social studies and language arts requirements were met as Mr. F.'s students investigated the way of life of Native North Americans and carefully checked their finished reports to make sure all sentences were complete.

Similarly, third-grade writers studying the solar system had to have their facts straight when telling a tale of being lost in space and finding their way home after asking directions from helpful planets. A writers' crafts minilesson concerned the use of dialogue in furthering action, and during the editing process students focused on punctuating the dialogue. Teachers and space travelers agreed that

FIGURE 2
Sample planner for writing workshop on soup—Pages 1 and 2

Page 1

Curriculum connection: Language arts, science (measuring)

Grade: 3, multiage 3-4

Standards: 1.4.5 B, 1.5.5 B, C

Mode: Informational

Domain(s): Content, organization

Skills: Sequencing, transition words, ordinal numbers

Month: March

Introduction/read-aloud

A version of "Stone Soup" or any other story dealing with soup. (See additional resources on page 2.) Soup recipes read aloud from cookbooks for children may whet the appetite for this project.

Minilesson: Sequencing, following directions

Students follow written directions to get from one point to another in the school building. Transition words including ordinal numbers are used. The point of the demonstration is the need to write clear, accurate directions. With the class generate a list of transition words and write them on chart paper. Display the chart while the students are working.

Brainstorming, planning

With the group, brainstorm ingredients, materials, and information needed to make soup. Generate a soup-making planner with the students. Have the students complete their planners. Remind them that numbers must be written out as ordinals when listing steps in the process.

Composing, drafting

Following their planners, students write soup recipe.

Having conferences, revising/minilesson

Demonstrate soup making with the class. The soup can be an ethnic goody or old-fashioned vegetable. The teacher provides the broth. Children can bring precut vegetables or other ingredients prepared in advance to add to the soup pot. While making the soup, the teacher verbalizes the process, emphasizing transition words such as "Next we add salt and pepper; *third*, we put in the onions; *finally*, we turn down the heat and let the soup simmer." During and after the demonstration, students revisit their drafts to include forgotten items and steps. (Use the revising checklist [Figure 3].)

(continued)

FIGURE 2 (continued)
Sample planner for writing workshop on soup—Pages 1 and 2

Page 2

Editing

Use the editing/proofreading part of the checklists [Figure 3].

Publishing

The soup is eaten and enjoyed by all. Compile students' recipes into a class cookbook.

Assessment rubric

Can another family member make the soup from the student's direction? If so, the student is rated "advanced" on a 4-point rubric. See the rubric provided [Table 2] for additional criteria.

Support for diverse learners

Some teachers may want students to work with a partner for this project. Analytical and global thinkers may be paired to jointly create a tasty finished product. If students are working individually, monitor closely and provide one-to-one help as needed.

Additional resources

Other titles featuring soup include Betsy Everitt's *Mean Soup* (1995, Voyager Books); Gary Goss's *Blue Moon Soup: A Family Cookbook* (1999, Little, Brown); Mollie Katzen's *Pretend Soup and Other Real Recipes: A Cookbook for Preschoolers & Up* (1994, Tricycle Press); and Maurice Sendak's *Chicken Soup With Rice: A Book of Months* (1991, HarperTrophy).

Comments

such multitasking to integrate science, language arts, and what used to be called “creative writing” was far more pleasurable and helpful than completing worksheets on punctuation unrelated to anything else happening in the classroom.

Integrating writing with content area subjects, particularly with required parts of the curriculum, meant that teachers would not have additional tasks put on their already overflowing plates. The drug education, dental health, and fire prevention units, all mandated in the primary grades, were naturals for early efforts in the persuasive mode. While systematic instruction in persuasive composition is often delayed until third grade or later, awareness of the power of words to convince and persuade could be created through these early attempts. Again, teachers were able to multitask, meeting content, language arts, and writing requirements in one activity.

How was writing to be taught?

As evidenced by classroom practice, some teachers were obviously familiar with the literature on process writing that has brought immense changes to instruction in the last 20 years (Atwell, 1987/1998; Calkins, 1986/1994; Graves, 1983, 1994; Murray, 1968). Others were not. Writers’ workshop and process writing strategies were amply practiced in some classrooms but only minimally in most others. A select few provided experience with literary language and forms through regular read-alouds and imparted instruction in specific skills and crafts through focused minilessons. These same few teachers had students incorporate newly learned techniques into their own work through the revision process and taught the students to self- and peer-edit.

Journal writing is now common, but its nature varied greatly from classroom to classroom in the same grade. Some journals functioned as writers’ notebooks in which students responded to the world around them and jotted down ideas for future development. Others consisted mainly of sentence starters to be completed regardless of student interest. It was decided that all projects would be in process writing format. Included in the plans for each workshop were suggestions for a related book to read aloud; a minilesson focusing on pertinent skills, crafts, or procedures; organizers to aid in brainstorming and planning; and guidelines for the

FIGURE 3
Checklists

Revising

Do I list all the ingredients needed? ____

Do I list all the materials needed? ____

Do I have all the steps? ____

Are the steps in the right order? ____

Do I have transition words? ____

Editing/proofreading

Does every sentence make sense? ____

Does every sentence have punctuation at the end? ____

Do I have capital letters where they are needed? ____

Do I use words for transition numbers? ____

Is the spelling correct? ____

composition, revision, and editing steps. Because we concurred with many experts in the field that revision was at the heart of the writing process (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998; Lane, 1993; Zinsser, 1990), the teachers agreed to try to take their classes through the revision steps of each workshop. All students, then, would have the opportunity to apply skills and crafts taught in the minilessons in an authentic setting by revising their own work. As in the traditional, less structured writers’ workshop format, as much choice as possible for topic or point of view would be given.

Another benefit of having *all* staff agree to use the process writing format was district-wide improvement in instruction (Dutro et al., 2002; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Participating teachers came to understand at a gut level the theoretical principles underlying the changes they were being asked to make. In jointly hammering out a writing workshop that incorporated the principles of process writing, they were actively turning theory into practice. Ideas were grasped concretely as teachers adapted their own projects to fit into a writers’ workshop format, and this understanding was reflected in classroom practice.

The principle of maximizing student choice was honored in the early grades when teachers agreed that a child could always substitute a topic

TABLE 2
Domain rubric for writing workshop on soup

Points	Focus	Content	Organization	Style	Conventions
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the sentences in my writing are about the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I list all the ingredients that go into the soup. • I tell about the other materials that are needed. • I list all the steps. • I include detail. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I list all the steps in the right order. • I use transition words between the steps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I use a variety of transition words. • The directions are clear and easy to follow. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All my sentences have capital letters and end punctuation. • The spelling is correct. • The sentences are complete. • I write the words for numbers when they are used for transitions.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the sentences in my writing are about the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I list all the ingredients and materials. • I tell about the steps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I list all the steps. • I have transition words between most of the steps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of my transition words are not the same. • Most readers would be able to follow my directions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of my sentences have capital letters and end punctuation. • Most of the words are spelled correctly. • Most of the sentences are complete. • Transition number words are spelled correctly.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the sentences in my writing are not about the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't list all the ingredients and materials. • I don't have all the steps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have some of the steps. • I have some transition words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I use "and then" a lot. I don't have different transition words. • It would not be easy to make soup from my directions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I sometimes use capital letters and end punctuation. • Some words are spelled correctly. • I have some correctly spelled number words.
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can't tell what the topic is. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wouldn't want to eat the soup made from this recipe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My writing is confusing and hard to follow. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't have transition words. • Some of the sentences don't make sense. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't have capital letters and end punctuation. • My writing is hard to read and understand.

of immediate concern for the curriculum project during writing time. Said one first-grade teacher, "If you've just lost your first tooth or your hamster died that day, never mind the fire-prevention poster." In the upper grades, students were to be

given as much say as possible in choosing their point of view in informational or persuasive writing. When writing a letter to King George III, any position on the independence of the colonies could be accepted. A student could be an official loyal to

the court, a protesting merchant, or an indentured servant who just wanted the chance to earn freedom. Regardless of the position taken, the facts had to be correct.

How much writing would be done?

In addition to the how and what of teaching writing, the amount of time spent on writing varied greatly at the beginning of our project. We agreed to design a writing workshop that could be taken to publication for each month of the school year at every grade level. Of the nine workshops, three would be in the narrative mode, three in the informational, and three persuasive. It was understood that these workshops would not be the only writing taking place. All students would do some writing every day in which specific skill development would be practiced. The district's language arts texts were available as a resource. Some teachers might work with exercises from the book; others would encourage specific skill application in student work every day. In either case, the nuts and bolts of writing would be regularly taught and practiced.

From the outset, while committed to daily and monthly writing tasks, the teachers determined they would not march lockstep through a prescribed series of lessons. They would be able to rearrange the order of the monthly workshops to dovetail with other classroom activities and, more important, would be able to adapt each project to the particular needs of their classrooms. Teachers were encouraged to substitute minilessons addressing their students' shortcomings for those included in the workshops. "This bunch can't write in complete sentences," one teacher commented. "I think I'll save the minilesson on strong verbs for another time."

How was the writing to be assessed?

When we began our curriculum work, writing assessment procedures varied widely in our district. While checklists and student-friendly rubrics were in use in some classrooms, in others the teacher's red pencil was still the chief assessment tool. Assessment procedures in the new curriculum were determined in part by the requirements of the state system that evaluated writing in narrative, informational, and persuasive modes. In addition, the state system called for analytical assessment of five separate domains, or characteristics, of good

writing. These were focus, organization, content, style, and conventions, and so we used them in our domain rubrics. (See "soup" example, Table 2.) A separate score indicating the level of competence was given for each domain, ranging from below basic to basic, proficient, and advanced (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2004).

Our curriculum was designed to address all five domains, with organization given top priority at first because of the teachers' concern regarding coherence in writing. Instruction in the other four would receive more emphasis as implementation progressed. Rubrics were based on the state assessment's criteria but written in student-friendly terminology, and they provided guidelines specific to each workshop. Students would know exactly what was required to score at a proficient or advanced level in each of the assessed writing traits in each of the workshops. Specific, meaningful assessment and uniformity of criteria and materials were simultaneously assured.

Completing the task

Flexibility was part of process and substance as we designed a constantly evolving work in progress. Responding to teacher desire to cover more of the prescribed language arts curriculum, we included minilessons on specific skills that related to the writers' crafts minilessons presented in the workshops. We also revised the workshop content as we went along. Following a trial run of a winter project in which the children were encouraged to write about the adventures of a lost mitten, one teacher reported that after listening to *The Mystery of the Missing Red Mitten* (Kellogg, 1974), singing a song about mittens, receiving an unmatched mitten as a motivator, and using a mitten-shaped planner as a prewriting tool, her students were "all mittened out" before drafting of the story even began. The workshop was quickly changed to include any narrative with a beginning, middle, and end as an option. Generic beginning, middle, and end planners were provided.

Nothing, we reiterated as we worked, was carved in stone. With this maxim in mind and continuing to work in a highly collaborative manner, we managed to create nine workshops (three in each mode as originally planned) by the end of the school year. We added a skills-and-crafts index, a

list of all children's books referenced, and a bibliography of teacher resources. The curriculum was ready by the time school opened in the fall.

Results

Acceptance of change

After a year and a half of implementation, a survey designed to gauge the effectiveness of the curriculum was administered to teachers participating in the project. (See Figure 4.) Responses were based on scoring of the writing samples with the rubrics provided, traditional grading, and the teachers' observations. The state assessment results, because of a change in the testing procedures, were not available.

Twenty-two of the 24 participating teachers responded to the survey. (Two teachers had left the district.) Responses to an open-ended question inviting general comments ranged from somewhat reluctant acceptance of the new curriculum to whole-hearted endorsement. One initially lukewarm participant said honestly, "At least I didn't have to scrounge for material. *It wasn't any more work for me* (emphasis added). It was definitely easier and more organized. It was helpful." A 30-year-plus veteran, also originally doubtful about the need for change, commented, "It got us all on the same page. That's a plus." A primary teacher said, "We focused on different kinds of writing. We didn't stagnate. The children liked the variety. They looked forward to it." Some degree of structure makes life easier. "I was happy to have writing guidelines," said a third-grade teacher. "The monthly writing activity encouraged me to do more writing. It was good for the class to have writing on a more regular basis." And, finally, came a candid comment that every literacy coach wants to hear: "I feel that I am becoming a better writing teacher—*slowly!*"

More time spent on writing

Of the 22 respondents, 19 reported they were spending more time on writing instruction than they had the previous year, with a median increase of one hour per week. The additional time was allocated as shown in Table 3. Teachers who had not increased the amount of time spent on writing reported a reallocation of resources from narrative

to informational and persuasive modes and to mini-lessons supporting them.

Improvement in organizational skills

Organizational skills, such as logical order, beginning, middle, end, main idea and topic sentence, introduction and conclusion, and transitions, were built into the curriculum. Students and teachers were accustomed to generating content by brainstorming as a prewriting activity, but planning for structure with advance organizers had not been stressed. Each workshop, whether in the narrative, informational, or persuasive mode, included prewriting activities in which graphic organizers were provided or in which students were guided in designing their own planners to help them write coherently. In the intermediate grades students increasingly generated their own planners so that they would be able to undertake this essential step independently.

After following the curriculum for a year and a half, 19 of the 22 teachers responding reported increased progress in the domain of organization. Teachers were asked in which writing skills and crafts their students' performance improved in comparison with the previous year. (See Table 4.) Dividing writing into paragraphs was the skill in which most teachers indicated their students had made particular progress.

General improvement in all domains

Overall improvement in the quality of writing over previous years was noted by the principal who reviewed student work monthly. The teachers credited their students' gains to the effects of systematic instruction. The following comment from a third-grade teacher is representative of faculty views:

When I compare this year's third graders to third-grade writers from other years, I can say that writing skills have definitely improved as a result of implementing the writing program. As a teacher, my instruction is much more focused on the specific skills targeted in each writing lesson. I have noticed that because I spend more time instructing students in the "nuts and bolts" of writing, their writing is generally more proficient in all areas than I have seen in previous years from third graders. I also noticed that certain skills that we targeted in one assignment were carried over to new writing. In one prompt, sentence variation was the targeted

FIGURE 4
Teacher survey—Pages 1 and 2

Page 1

If the time you spend on writing has increased this year, please indicate by how much per week.

1/2 hour ____ 1 hour ____ 2 hours ____ Other ____

Please indicate the activities on which you are spending the increased time.

Narrative writing ____

Persuasive writing ____

Informational writing ____

Research ____

Minilessons ____

Revision ____

Related read-alouds ____

Editing ____

Assessment using rubrics based on the Pennsylvania

Department of Education (2004) scoring guide ____

Other ____

If the time you spend on writing has not increased, but the content of your instruction has changed, please indicate the nature of the changes.

More time spent on narrative writing ____

More time spent on persuasive writing ____

More time spent on informational writing ____

More time spent on research ____

More time spent on minilessons ____

More time spent revising ____

More time spent on related read-alouds ____

More time spent on editing ____

More time spent on assessment using rubrics based on the

Pennsylvania Department of Education (2004) scoring guide ____

Other ____

Less time spent on writing ____

(continued)

FIGURE 4 (continued)
Teacher survey—Pages 1 and 2

Page 2

Of the five writing domains, which have received more attention in your classroom this year than in previous years?

Focus _____

Organization _____

Content _____

Style _____

Conventions _____

No difference _____

How would you compare the progress your class made in writing in the three modes with the progress of your class in previous years?

Narrative:

More progress _____ less progress _____ about the same _____

Informational:

More progress _____ less progress _____ about the same _____

Persuasive:

More progress _____ less progress _____ about the same _____

Please indicate the areas in which you noticed particular progress this year.

Staying on topic _____

Paragraphing _____

Transitions _____

Logical order _____

Including sufficient detail _____

Effective beginnings and endings _____

Vivid language, figurative language _____

Writing in complete sentences _____

Self-editing and proofreading _____

Other _____

Additional comments regarding the ways in which writing instruction has changed in your classroom:

skill. The students practiced starting sentences differently, so that there was a variety of sentence types throughout the writing piece. In the next writing project, students commented during the lesson that they needed to vary their sentences like last time. Including these targeted skills in the rubrics also helped the students focus on their writing improvement.

Examples of student performance demonstrating proficiency in various areas are shown in Figures 5 through 10.

The first-grade writing sample, “The Frightened Frog” (Figure 5), is a response to a narrative prompt included in the end-of-year assessment and illustrates the effect of specific instruction in organization. As a prewriting activity, the writer sketched ideas on a planner with three boxes, one for the character, one for the problem, and one for the solution. Each box became a separate paragraph. In addition, the novice writer here shows familiarity with literary language and conventions. The story starts with “Once upon a time”; the concluding paragraph begins with the transitional phrase “One day” and closes with “never again.”

Coherent paragraphing, of course, is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Truly good writing flows, linking one idea to another in a seemingly effortless way so that the reader can fully appreciate content and style without being distracted by the mechanics of organization. The second-grade author of the narrative/descriptive piece shown in Figure 6 is well on the way to such writing excellence. Encouraged to include a figure of speech in the story, the writer did so in a seamless fashion that provides a moving portrait of “someone special.”

Sixteen teachers (see Table 3) reported their classes had shown improvement in informational and persuasive modes of writing when compared to past performance in them. Third-grade teachers previously had not provided specific instruction in the persuasive mode; after implementation, all included a minimum of three workshops practicing writing to convince and persuade during the school year. For one such project each third grader wrote a letter to the principal advocating ideas for action the school might take in honor of Earth Day on April 22. Although an early example of persuasive writing, the letter in Figure 7 clearly states the writer’s purpose and is well paragraphed.

TABLE 3
Allocation of increased instructional time

Activity	Teachers* reporting time increase
Narrative writing	4
Persuasive writing	9
Informational writing	7
Minilessons	3
Having conferences/revising	8
Reading related literature aloud	3
Editing/proofreading	6

* 22 teachers

TABLE 4
Progress in crafts and skills

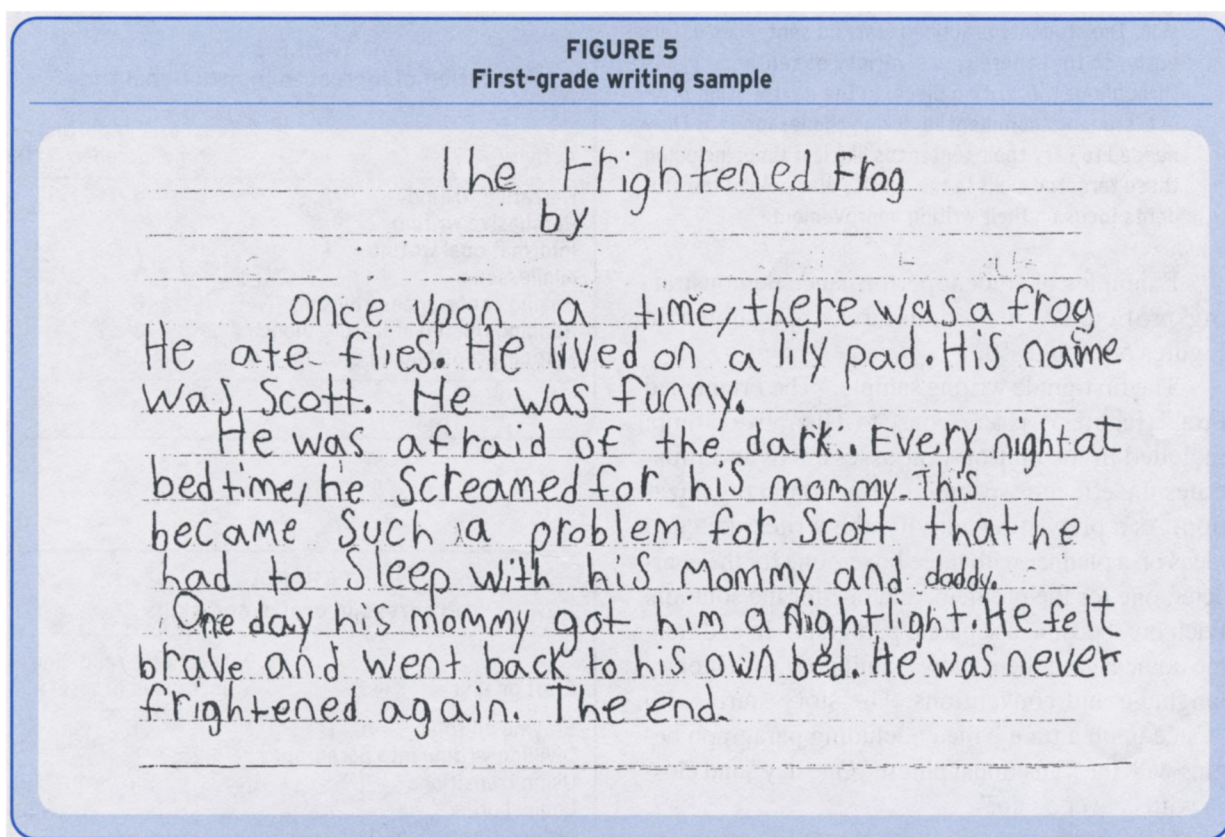
Craft or skill	Teachers* reporting increased progress
Staying on topic	6
Dividing writing into paragraphs	12
Using transitions	7
Logical order	5
Including sufficient detail	8
Effective beginnings and endings	9
Vivid language, figurative language	5
Writing in complete sentences	7
Proofreading	3

*22 teachers

The curriculum also stressed integration of writing with content areas. In our district, the fourth-grade study of U.S. history provided a good opportunity for cross-curricular writing in all modes. The letter to King George III shown in Figure 8 is accurate historically and demonstrates the results of systematic instruction in the persuasive mode. Each argument is developed in a separate paragraph, and the concluding paragraph does a fine job of summing up.

A fifth-grade teacher had long asked her students to write her a letter stating reasons why they should be promoted to sixth grade, an activity providing another opportunity for persuasive writing. The writer of the letter in Figure 9 also could have cited ability to write coherently and humorously

FIGURE 5
First-grade writing sample



in the persuasive mode as a sign of readiness for promotion.

The trip to Washington, DC, that our sixth graders take every year was the subject of personal narratives by the returning travelers. Figure 10, an account of visiting the Vietnam War Memorial, illustrates the writer's use of paragraph organization leading from the general to the personal.

A success in progress

The quality of writing submitted by the teachers at the end of the first school year the curriculum was used allowed us to conclude that implementation of our work in progress was a success in progress. Further curricular changes will be made based on teacher input and student success. Modifications will, in turn, affect student achievement. After a year of implementation, however, we believe we can tentatively make the following generalizations.

Teacher accountability for a planned writing curriculum can improve student performance in targeted areas. Our state's Department of Education has been testing persuasive and informational writing for years, and our school district's performance at times has shown weaknesses in these areas. Nevertheless, systematic instruction in nonnarrative writing at all grade levels was not provided until a planned curriculum was available and teachers were held accountable for its use. When we built organizational strategies into workshop plans for all modes of writing, performance in the domain of organization improved noticeably.

Teacher preference regarding writing modes, topics, and strategies, although still having an important role to play, should not be the main determinant of what is taught and how it is taught. Across-grade-level variation in writing instruction is indicative of the dubious place writing once held in the curriculum. Ultimately, if the

FIGURE 6
Second-grade writing sample

My mother is special because she
s very nice. She lets us go to the
movies whenever there's something
good. She will sometimes cook good
foods like tacos or biscuits and masha
potatoes. She will loan us money as
long as we pay her back. She is as
gentle as the wind. She can put a
baby to sleep in a couple of
minutes. She can clean dishes without
making a scratch.

FIGURE 7
Third-grade writing sample

Dear

My class and I are doing
a project on Earth Day. I am
writing to you because we want to
help clean up the town so it
sparkles.

I would like for the whole
school to get garbage bags and
clean the town. I want to do this
for everyone!

Thank you for reading my
letter. I hope you will let us clean
the town.

Sincerely,

FIGURE 8
Fourth-grade writing sample

July 4, 1776

Dear King George III,

Why I am writing to you is because we want independence. It is outrageous what you were making us do!! We do not want you as king!! You are treating us like children, which we are not!!

It was not fair when you put tax on tea. That is why we threw the tea in the Boston Harbor. That was called the Boston Tea Party. It is no concern of ours whether or not you can pay for the French and Indian War!! Taxing us is getting you nowhere.

We do not like the British soldiers in our homes! We should not have to house and feed your soldiers!! You should have to house and feed your own soliders, not us. Your soliders have a bed to sleep in because of us!!

We were extremely mad at you when you closed the Boston Harbor! We had to make do with the food we had when you closed the harbor. We want the harbor open again! We want more food!!

We want the harbor open, the soldiers out of our homes, and the tax off of tea. We do a tremendous amount of work for you! Please consider these changes!!

inclusion of writing is to be systematic and non-negotiable, the teacher-developed curriculum must be uniform in content and process. After all, teachers do not choose which part of the math curriculum to teach—or the strategies to be used in instruction—depending on their liking for and interest in ratios, fractions, decimals, or long division.

An inclusive, collaborative approach to developing a planned writing curriculum is of prime importance. If every teacher is to be held accountable, every teacher's voice should be heard. Even though the logistics for assembling all the teachers at a grade level will be more difficult in districts larger than ours, groups ranging in size from 12 to 20 would be able to accomplish the task. A whole room

full of teachers might want to break up into small groups where teachers could adapt their favorite projects to a uniform format. A committee of volunteers, although less cumbersome, is likely to be made up of people particularly interested in the subject. As we stated earlier, an excellent writing program could doubtless be put together by a district's star writing teachers, but how enthusiastically would it be implemented by the rest of the staff?

Flexibility in development of a writing curriculum and in its implementation is essential. Not all teachers will use a planned curriculum in the same way. In our case, having rubrics available did not mean that each workshop was taken to publication and assessed in all the domains. Sometimes

FIGURE 9
Fifth-grade writing sample

Why I think I'm ready to go to 6th grade

I'm ready to move on. 5th grade will soon be in the past (if this essay works). 6th grade, here I come.

I think I'm ready to go to 6th grade because I have learned a lot in 5th grade and I think I'm ready to move on. I have already done numerous writing activities in language arts class. I have done different essays and letters.

I'm already working in the 6th grade math book. I have been working in this math book for quite some time now. I now know how to do a lot of math things I wouldn't have normally learned

I also want to learn new things. I am very interested in ornithology and other biology. I think 6th grade would be a chance for me to learn about these things.

Going to Washington D.C. is one of the things I'm most looking forward to. I think the trip will be very exciting. I have been there once before, but I don't remember it too well. I would really like to go again.

I think I should get new teachers ~~too~~. I have had the four 5th grade teachers for a whole school year now and I think it's time to change. No offense to the teachers, but I get tired of them sometimes. The thing is, I think they get tired of me, too, maybe more often than I get tired of them. ☺

Lastly, I think that after all this time in school (I'm talking years) I deserve to be in the oldest grade level in the school. This would be a great pleasure for me as I have been looking forward to it for a very long time.

half the class was out with flu, and all momentum was lost before the project could be completed. Sometimes student interest flagged, and another project in process writing format was substituted in which the students could practice the same skills and crafts targeted by the planned curriculum.

The master writing teacher may choose to adapt or to discard some activities altogether if the

students have already reached competence in targeted areas. The sky will not fall. However, the total curriculum will *be there* for the long-term substitute when the master teacher, after years of kneeling at the side of student desks during writers' workshops, goes to the hospital for a knee replacement. As a result, all students, especially struggling writers, will benefit.

FIGURE 10
Sixth-grade writing sample

My most memorable moments on the class of 2010's
Sixth Grade trip was

My most memorable moment on our trip was when we went to the Vietnam Memorial wall. I saw lots of people who gave their life to save our country. The wall was really long and tall. Family Members from the Vietnam Soldiers left flowers and notes saying how much they missed them. When I saw the flowers and notes I felt really bad. I would be so sad to lose someone in my family.

Accountability for writing instruction promotes equality of opportunity for all students. Even with a hit-or-miss writing program, each child has the same opportunity as all others to be tested. With a strong, planned curriculum, for which all teachers are held accountable, all children have an equal opportunity not only to pass or fail a writing test but also to learn how to write—how to put down their thoughts, feelings, and ideas coherently and clearly on paper so that others can know and understand them.

After all, if we agree with Calkins that “we write to hold our lives in our hands and make something of them” (1986/1994, p. 8), how can we do otherwise?

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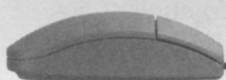
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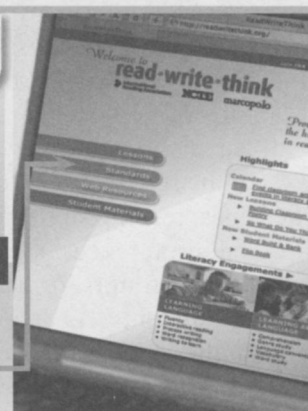
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