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Fourth Grade Writing Instruction: A Case Study of Three Teachers in Title I Schools

Keywords

writing instruction, teacher efficacy, state mandates



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Elsa M. Anderson and Lisa S. Dryden

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the writing instruction taught to students in fourth grade classrooms at two Title I schools. The researchers observed the writing instruction and classroom procedures of three fourth grade teachers at these two Title I campuses. The following three research questions guided this study: (1) How do fourth grade writing teachers in two Title I schools in Texas approach the teaching of writing? (2) How does the challenge of standardized testing impact writing instruction? (3) How do these fourth grade teachers perceive their effectiveness as teachers of writing? Analysis of data led to the following conclusions: for these three teachers, district mandates and a centralized curriculum established the agenda for classroom writing instruction for the most part. However, even within these constraints, researchers observed that efforts were made by each teacher to adapt some of the curriculum needs of their students and to incorporate their own teaching styles and strategies as much as possible.

Keywords: writing instruction, Title I schools, curriculum, district mandates, standardized testing

Introduction

Just as a musician masters the instrument and skill through numerous hours of practice, the writer also masters craft through many opportunities to write a variety of texts. Writing is a true art requiring many hours of practice (Atwell, 1998, 2001; Clay, 2010; Graham, MacArthur and Fitzgerald, 2013; Murray, 2003; Troia, Lin, Cohen, & Monroe, 2011). Developing writers who can clearly articulate their position across various genres is the ever-challenging tasks that elementary school teachers face today (Carroll & Wilson, 2008; Gallagher, 2011). In order for students to become truly proficient writers, teachers need to provide two types of writing instruction. First, students need to engage in a type of writing in which they have selected the topic and then be allowed to decide how to develop their self-selected idea (Zumbrunn and Krause, 2012). Second, students need to be taught specific information pertaining to how to write appropriately in different forms and genres, such as narratives, descriptions, persuasive essays, personal and business letters, from different points of view, informational reports, and poetry (Harvey, 1998; Tompkins, 2010).

In order to accomplish the overwhelming task of providing valuable writing instruction, many successful and effective writing teachers organize their writing instruction around a writing workshop approach (Cunningham & Allington, 2011; Carroll & Wilson, 2008; Fletcher &

Portalupi, 2001). Components of an effective writing workshop approach often include: mini lessons, teacher and student conferences, student conferences, student choice in selection of writing topics, student choice in writing format, skills instruction based on students' needs as demonstrated in their writing, rubrics for assessment and sharing writing using an author's chair (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Fletcher, 2013). Yet, studies suggest that today's students do not spend significant amounts of time each day engaged in meaningful writing activities (Al-Bataineh, Holmes, Jerich & Williams, 2010; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Troia, Lin, Cohen & Monroe, 2011). This disengagement often leads to these students being labeled at-risk (NCES, 2012). Concerns about effective instruction of at-risk students is a recurring theme among educators, as current and future teachers often express trepidation, especially in regard to the teaching of writing (Al-Bataineh, Holmes, Jerich & Williams, 2010; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Cutler & Graham, 2008).

Methods

For this study, the researchers observed how fourth grade teachers in two Title I schools with a high percentage of at risk students approached the teaching of writing given the demands of the state standardized testing and curricular mandates. Fourth grade was selected since this is the elementary grade in the state of Texas where all students must take the writing portion of the state test. Therefore, writing instruction is a key component of the curriculum and of district expectations at this grade level.

The following research questions guided this study: How do fourth grade writing teachers in two Title I schools in Texas approach the teaching of writing to meet the needs of their population? How does the challenge of standardized testing impact writing instruction? How do these fourth grade teachers perceive their effectiveness as teachers of writing?

Setting and Description of Participants

The study took place in two urban Title I elementary schools located in a large metropolitan district in north Texas. Three fourth grade teachers participated in the study; two from School A and one from School B. Participation was voluntary; all fourth grade teachers at the two schools were invited to participate in the study, but only these three agreed. At the time of the study, School A was a recognized campus and School B was rated academically unacceptable, on a scale beginning with *Exemplary* and including *Recognized*, *Academically Acceptable* and *Academically Unacceptable* accountability ratings (Texas Education Agency, 2014).

The campus population of School A was 47% Hispanic, 44% White, 5% African American, 1% Asian, 1% Native American and 2% two or more races. Only 25% of the students at School A had limited English proficiency, 42% were economically disadvantaged and 24% were at-risk. School B had a 90% Hispanic population, 8% African American and 2% White. The student body of School B consisted of 75% students with limited English proficiency, 94% classified as economically disadvantaged and 84% classified as at-risk. Even though both of the schools were Title I, the preceding information shows vast differences in the demographic make-up of each school (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

Students

Approximately 60 fourth grade students participated in the study, 40 from School A and 20 from School B. Student ethnicity reflected that of the respective schools. Special education

students, students from low and middle income families, students in bilingual and English as a Second Language programs and gifted and talented students were part of the study.

Teachers

Teacher 1 (female Caucasian), from School A, was a monolingual teacher in a monolingual classroom. She was also in her twenty-first year of teaching. This was her eleventh year teaching fourth grade. Previous teaching experience included second and third grade. She had participated in district writing training and writing training following the Lucy Calkins model, which emphasizes writing workshop (The Reading and Writing Project, 2010)

Teacher 2 (female Caucasian), also from School A, was a monolingual teacher in a monolingual classroom. She was in her twenty-first year of teaching. This was her fifth year teaching fourth grade. Previous teaching experience included second grade and pre-kindergarten. She had participated in district writing training and Lucy Calkins training.

Teacher 3 (female Hispanic), from School B, was a bilingual teacher in an English and Spanish speaking classroom. She was in her fourth year of teaching. This was only her second year teaching fourth grade. Her first two years of teaching were in second grade. She had participated in district training for fourth grade writing teachers. She also attended training sessions by *Empowering Writers*, a commercial professional development model made available in many Texas school districts and in other parts of the country. The Empowering Writers methodology emphasizes whole-class writing instruction (Empowering Writers, 2014).

Procedures

Five sources of data were collected over the fall and spring semesters. First, classroom observations were conducted by both researchers. Each classroom was observed four different times for the entire writing period (approximately one hour each time). During the observations both researchers took anecdotal descriptive field notes. The researchers utilized the time-stamp method, a form of tailored observations, for recording field notes (Glickmon, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2013). Every three minutes researchers recorded what was happening in the classroom. Following each observation researchers debriefed, clarifying and comparing notes.

Second, each teacher was asked to complete a questionnaire. Researchers developed the questionnaire in an attempt to gain an understanding of how these teachers perceived themselves as teachers of writing. Teachers were asked to discuss both their strengths and weaknesses as writing teachers. They were also asked to discuss their current needs as writing teachers, as well as the steps they had taken to meet those perceived needs.

Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher. The interviews took place approximately midway into the study, focusing on the teachers' experiences in teaching, writing training received, their personal philosophy on writing instruction, their likes and dislikes regarding writing instruction and future training they felt would be beneficial.

Fourth, researchers examined a sampling of the students' work. Some of the inspections took place during the observations, as students wrote in class. In addition, Teacher 3 provided copies of actual student writings, such as stories and graphic organizers completed by the students.

Fifth, researchers also examined and noted classroom writing artifacts. These included writing charts, instructions for specific types of writing that the teacher provided to each student to maintain in a folder, and graphic organizers outlining personal and expository writing. Similar charts and graphic organizers were located in all three classrooms. The researchers were also

able to examine the variety of handouts distributed to students for placement in their writing folders. Students were expected to refer to these handouts during independent writing times.

Potential researcher biases were addressed by taking field notes only on behaviors observed; minimizing personal interpretations. Researchers focused the recording of observations on two descriptive questions: what is the teacher doing? And what are the students doing (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

At the conclusion of the observations codes and sub-codes for teacher behaviors, student behaviors, and classroom terminology used from the field notes were developed (Glesne, 2006). First, each researcher coded their field notes separately and then compared codes for to maintain consistency. Following the coding process, researchers counted the frequency of each code and identified the emerging patterns.

Findings

Overall findings from observations

Patterns emerged based on the analysis of data obtained from all observations in the three classrooms. Table 1 below lists the codes and sub-codes emerging from data collection and analysis. Each code is defined in the context in which each was used for the purpose of this study.

Table 1
Definition of Codes

Code	Definition
Teacher Behaviors from observations	
Modeling own writing	The teacher shares her own writing focusing on a skill or on a topic that students are learning about.
Direct teaching	Giving precise instructions about what to do on a writing task (“everyone is going to write a topic sentence”)
Conferencing	Teacher meets with individual students to discuss the student’s writing
Questioning	Asking whole group questions to review previous instruction
Reading aloud to students	Reading to the class for the purpose of enjoyment
Using mentor texts	Reading to students for the purpose of discussing the author’s craft
Teaching parts of a composition	Specific teaching of components such as thesis statement, introduction, body, conclusion, etc. usually in isolation
Teaching a writing formula	Giving step by step instructions to accomplish a specific writing task. Students told that this is the way they must do it. Choice of a different approach not evident.
Student Behaviors from observations	
Writing	Students write on an assigned writing task
Peer conferencing	Two or more students meeting to read and talk about their own writing.
Listening to the teacher	Listening during direct-teach time

Sharing writing	Whole group share of portion of students' writing by volunteering or being called upon
Using writing resources	Students use anchor charts and other resources available in the classroom or in their writing folders and/or teacher refers to the resources available
Writing terminology frequently used during observations	
Sharing	Students are asked to read part of their writing to the whole class or in small groups or pairs
Writing process	Teachers references to any part of the writing process
Prompt	Writing topic given to the student
Personal Narrative	Referred to in the context of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) standardized test. Writing that involves telling about a personal experience or event based on a given prompt.
Expository writing	Referred to in the context of the STAAR test. Writing that involves explaining something based on a given prompt.

Observed student and teacher behaviors are consistent across the three classrooms. The three teachers direct-taught writing strategies and writing lessons to their students the majority of the time. The role of the students during direct-teaching involved listening. Often, however, students were given the opportunity to utilize creativity and imagination in their own writing as the teacher presented the ideas and strategies. So, in a way, this process mirrored a choreographed dance of teacher instruction, student application, further teaching instruction and more student application. The whole time this mode of instruction took place in a whole group setting with all students working on the same aspect of writing and with the same prompt. Teachers conferred with students as the students applied instruction to their writing. Conferences during this time consisted of the teacher coming to the student, looking at the work, asking a question and/or providing a suggestion. At some points during class time, when students worked on their own aside from teacher-direct instruction, teachers spent more time with each student conferring about the writing in progress. During these conferences, student and teacher talk rather than one-sided instruction was more frequently observed.

Interestingly, across the three classrooms observed, a great deal of the instruction can be considered formulaic, meaning that students were provided with one and only one way to accomplish a writing task and instructed to follow the specific guidelines. Formulaic writing usually involved step-by-step writing instruction. The following examples of teacher instructions to students illustrate the scope of what was considered to be formulaic writing:

“The thesis statement must be in the introduction. Then your ideas.”

“You start with your introduction. Then next? Your body. What then? You write about your three ideas and then explain.”

“Today we are going to move into idea #2. I’m going to explain idea #2. The first sentence is the topic sentence and then we’ll move into explaining the idea.”

“Everyone is going to write a topic sentence, underline it, and then begin explaining it.”

“Tell us what you want to be [when you grow up]. Give us two reasons and then the question you came up with that combines the two paragraphs.”

The same graphic organizer was used in all three classrooms as a planning tool for expository writing. Working within the parameters of this organizational tool, all students followed the same outline and wrote to the same prompts. Given this structure, striking similarities were found in student writing across the three classrooms representing the two schools. On occasions, teachers made reference to the writing process; most of these references focused on revision and editing of the current draft. Some anchor charts posted in each of the three classrooms displayed the framework of the writing process.

In each of the three classrooms, students were observed sharing their writing, including both drafts and final versions. Most often sharing involved reading a section to the whole class based on teacher request. At other times, students were observed sharing their writing in small groups. None of the three classrooms focused instruction on a writing workshop format. Writing was an activity that emanated from direct teaching and only at some points was students allowed to write on their own. Writing time was limited. Within the time of writing instruction, teachers were observed at times teaching parts of a composition, such as discussing how to write an introduction or a thesis statement. By the time the first observations took place, it appeared that much of the instruction on writing genre (personal narrative and expository) had taken place earlier in the semester in preparation for the state standardized test. During our observation times, writing instruction targeted expository writing.

Findings from individual observations

In addition to analyzing the overall teaching behaviors observed during class time, the individual behaviors of each of the three teachers were observed and analyzed, as well as the student behaviors in each of the three classrooms. Table 2 indicates the frequency across the four observations conducted in each classroom.

Table 2
Teacher behaviors observed for each teacher

Teacher Behaviors	Teacher 1 School A	Teacher 2 School A	Teacher 3 School B
Modeling own writing	0	0	7
Direct teaching	19	9	20
Conferencing	9	7	7
Questioning	6	8	5
Reading aloud	1	2	0
Using mentor texts (literature as a model for writing)	1	2	1
Teaching parts of a composition	3	4	2
Teaching a writing formula	2	4	15

In addition, Table 3 displays the student behaviors observed in each classroom as related to writing. Such behaviors provide an indication of how students engaged in writing as a result of teacher directions and consequently, teacher behaviors in writing instruction.

Table 3
Student behaviors observed in each classroom

Student Behaviors	Teacher 1 School A	Teacher 2 School A	Teacher 3 School B
Writing	2	3	5
Peer conferencing	3	0	3
Listening to the teacher	5	5	4
Sharing writing	5	3	5
Answering questions	2	6	5
Using writing resources	1	4	3

Although similarities in writing instruction are clear as mentioned before, by analyzing the writing instruction of each individual teacher, some differences emerged among the teachers. For example, Teacher 3 spent a considerable amount of time modeling her own writing in front of students as an instructional strategy. She guided students to analyze her writing and to offer suggestions for improvement. She invited students to apply some of her craft to their own writing. Teacher-modeling was not observed in either of the other two classrooms.

As noted in the second table, student behaviors, like teacher behaviors, varied somewhat from classroom to classroom, but in general remained rather similar across all three classrooms. Students spent much time listening to the teacher and answering questions about writing in most classrooms.

A recurring theme across all three classrooms is that even within the constraints of the district mandates for writing instruction, these teachers found ways to inject their own ideas and teaching styles into their lessons. They also utilized best practices in the teaching of writing. For example, at least some level of peer conferences was observed in every classroom, as well as teacher – student conferences. Teachers 1 and 2 used mentor texts to teach writing strategies. As noted before, teacher 3 consistently modeled her own writing for the students. She also provided choice of topic during journal writing.

Listening to the teachers: Findings from questionnaires

In an effort to triangulate the data and provide a richer basis for this research (Flick, 2004), the teachers were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. In addition to the demographic data discussed earlier, teachers were asked to rate themselves as teachers of writing. Through the questionnaire, the researchers hoped to gain an understanding as to how these teachers perceived their self-efficacy as teachers of writing. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 rated themselves as “mostly effective” while Teacher 3 rated herself as “somewhat effective.” All three teachers expressed the importance of continuing their professional development in the area of writing instruction. All three stated needing more time for writing instruction, needing more resources and needing more opportunities to observe other effective writing teachers. Table 4 outlines the answers given by each of the three teachers to the questions on the questionnaire.

Table 4
Findings from questionnaires

Question	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
How effective do you consider your teaching of writing to be? Please explain.	Mostly effective. Reason: Students can write a narrative and an expository piece successfully by the end of the year, as well as introductions, paragraphs and details.	Mostly effective. Could be better with more time, resources and training.	Somewhat effective. I still have a long way to go to learn about writing.
Area of greatest strength as a writing teacher?	I simplify the process and make it manageable. I get children excited about the writing process.	Experience teaching writing. Trying out different things.	Modeling my own writing and scaffolding every step.
Area of greatest need as a writing teacher?	Need for more input, training, ideas, examples from other teachers	Time and resources	Engage every single student in a meaningful and fun way
What steps have you taken to grow in your area of need?	Asked for opportunity to visit other campuses. Researched on my own to get ideas.	Gathered resources, went to training, met with writing co-teacher to get ideas	Attended professional development. Seek help from more experienced colleagues.

Teachers' Voices: Findings from the interviews

Each teacher was interviewed separately, in order to complete data triangulation and to confirm the interpretation of the classroom instruction observed. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes and several patterns emerged. First, the three teachers feel that they need more freedom to plan and deliver writing instruction away from district mandates. They feel that the current curriculum framework includes too much structure. They want students to have more writing time, and they need writing to happen at all grade levels before fourth grade. All teachers said, however, that this year students have come to fourth grade with more prior knowledge about writing than in previous years.

As each of the teachers talked, it became clear that writing is an important issue for all of them, and that they have intense and passionate feelings about writing instruction. In the voice of Teacher 1:

“I think about writing all the time!”

“[Writing workshop] would be ideal...problem is our framework doesn't support that. They send you to all these things [Lucy Calkins training] but our framework doesn't support it.”

“Some days we write, some days we do test writing.”

“Things that you know are best practices you don't get to do...wish we had more freedom to do the things we know are correct.”

“I wish they [district] would come and just sit down and ask us ‘what do you think of the curriculum? What would you like to see?’”

“[She tells the students] Today we are writing for the test, but you realize that there is another way to write...”

Teacher 2 talked about writing trainings that she found meaningful – “Lucy Calkins 3 years ago – loved it!” and ways to make writing more fun - “We will do a ‘Poetry Tea’”

[Modeling for the students] “I do that a lot”

“Feel I could be better if I had more time and resources and training available.”

“I feel like I’m not as good of a writing teacher as I am other subjects because of lack of not knowing what the district wants and how the test will be formatted (always changing).”

Finally, Teacher 3 shared her thoughts about self-efficacy, about students and about writing instruction.

“I think that being new to a writing class makes me somewhat effective because I still have a long way to go to learn about writing skills.”

“I believe that one thing I do well as a writing teacher is that I model and scaffold every step of the writing process.”

“I try to keep them [students] on the same page but the ones really smart...don’t have to wait for me.

Some teachers let them do the parts of the writing process on their own and you have those kids who never go to the next step. I try to keep them on the same page although that may not be the best...but if they are ready I let them go ahead...”

“I used to think writing was boring, but now I like how each kid has his own voice. Writing is an okay class to teach.”

[Desired changes] “Be freer and write about topics that they like...they write more when they write about a topic that they really like they do their best...”

[Like the least] “...too much structure...”

Discussion and Application

From observations conducted in these classrooms over two semesters and from questionnaires and interviews, an understanding of how these teachers view writing instruction can be ascertained. First, it is apparent that writing instruction for these three teachers is heavily affected by district mandates and ultimately by high-stakes testing. At the time that the study was conducted, the state was beginning to implement a new test and concerns were evident from educators about the upcoming change. The three teachers perceived mandates and emphasis on testing as detrimental to their teaching styles. However, even with limited freedom, these teachers still managed to use some of their own writing strategies to address and enhance writing instruction.

Many similarities based on district mandates were observed throughout the time of this research study. No major instructional differences were observed even between the two monolingual classrooms and the one bilingual classroom, except for the use of English only in the first one and Spanish and English writing in the latter. For example, teachers focused the majority of writing instruction on the teaching of expository writing. Since this is a new focus for fourth graders on the state standardized test, the emphasis is understandable. However, a heavy emphasis on one form of writing, must, by default, rule out other opportunities for students to experience other (just as valuable) writing genre. Students completed test prep packets in each of the classrooms, in the form of worksheets and writing prompts mirroring the format of the test. Second, students’ writing in all three classrooms was extremely homogenous, using the same writing prompts across campuses. Often students responded to the prompts in surprisingly similar manner (for example many wrote about the same family member as being special for the same reasons – helpful, loving and kind). Furthermore, the students were often observed listening to instruction about writing, rather than engaged in the act of writing. In addition,

formulaic writing became a consistent feature in each of the three classrooms. Finally, writing instruction consisted of whole group lessons rather than through a learner-centered format such as writing workshop, which has been consistently linked to effective teaching and learning (Zemelman & Hyde, 2005).

All three teachers expressed frustration with district curriculum guidelines that in some cases interferes with their ability to teach writing in ways they think most effective. They questioned the excessive focus on benchmarking and testing. They questioned their roles and leadership as teachers in an era where mandates drive instruction.

Looking back at the research questions that guided this study, several observations can be made. How do the fourth grade writing teachers in two Title I schools approach the teaching of writing? It is important to note that these teachers follow district curriculum while attempting to incorporate some of their own strategies into their teaching. How does the challenge of standardized testing impact these teachers writing instruction? As always, the challenge of testing that heavily influences district mandates, trickles down to the classroom and affects teacher instruction (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006).

Teachers are faced with mandates in a curriculum that from their perspective provides excessive structure and limited opportunities for implementation of best practice strategies. How do these fourth grade teachers perceive their effectiveness as teachers of writing? The mandates influence their perception of self-efficacy in the teaching of writing. Ambivalence about what exactly is expected of them in regard to writing instruction and frustration with diminishing opportunities for decision making, appear to negatively impact their beliefs about the effectiveness of their own writing instruction.

Observations of these three classrooms provide a small glimpse into the current state of writing instruction. At least for these three teachers, district mandates and a centralized curriculum set the agenda for classroom instruction. When considering the concept of teacher leadership, the question remains to what extent these teachers are able to actually lead in their classrooms, given the curriculum constraints. However, even within these constraints, each teacher made efforts to adapt some of the curriculum to the needs of their students and to incorporate their personal teaching style and strategies as much as possible.

Future Research

Are district constraints mostly found in Title I schools and are they attached to school performance? This remains a topic for further research. How can opportunities for teacher leadership and decision-making increase? In the case of writing, these three teachers felt that with additional professional development in research-based writing instruction, with access to effective resources, and with opportunities to observe other effective writing teachers teaching, they could increase in knowledge and in decision-making ability. Further comparisons between Title I and non-Title I schools in the area of writing may lend additional information regarding teacher freedom to teach writing. Observations in more than one district will also lend a wider perspective. Finally, a closer look at the same districts but observing in classrooms of teachers who have participated in a writing project, may offer a clearer view at leadership in the age of accountability.

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