

**The Effect of Guided Writing and Use of Graphic Organizer
On 4th Graders' Informational Writing Skill Development**

Literature Review

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Introduction

With the push for assessment that focus on reading and writing, majority of the students in our school are behind in meeting the benchmarks set for K-3. The students in the class to be studied have experienced multiple staff turn-over within the school year throughout the span of their 1st to 3rd grade schooling. This is unfortunate as it affected their learning of the foundational skills in both reading and writing. Just as reading comprehension is an essential element in academic success, writing skill is likewise a strong a predictor of academic success. Youngsters who do not learn to write well face many obstacles (Graham et al, 2007). Writing is dependent on the ability to incorporate various cognitive processes to successfully convey the message of the writer. It provides a useful tool for refining and extending one's knowledge about a particular topic (Applebee, 1984).

This year, the school has adopted a progress monitoring system using the Developmental Reading Assessment 2nd Ed. (DRA2) to use alongside the school's standardized testing scores to help the school and teachers inform and address their instructional practices. Using the DRA2 has given an insight on the level of comprehension the students possesses as evident with their writing ability. Although it is a school-wide problem, 4th grade, 6th grade, and 8th grade are commonly used as predictors of success. Findings from the two most recent writing assessment conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that students are not developing competence in writing needed at their respective grade levels (Greenwald, Persky, Ambell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003). As evidenced in NAEP's writing exam done in 2002, 72% of 4th grade students did not meet the established writing proficiency goals

(Graham & Perin, 2007). The school is focusing on what can be done with the 4th graders to alleviate the problem brought about by the lack of strong foundation in learning and see how the progress monitoring established this year by the literacy team can address the need to develop and strengthen their writing skills specifically in the area of informational text writing.

It is important to point out that the school give equal weight in its four core subjects—English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Science, and Social Studies. K-4th Grade classes are all semi self-contained classrooms with the homeroom teacher teaching all four core subjects. Although the school’s textbooks promote cross-curricular connections and activities, majority of the teachers do not approach it that way in their teaching practice. Thus, the students’ use of strategies learned from the ELA instruction is not always transferred when they are tackling other subject matter. This is evidence further of the lack of use of strategic skills by the 4th graders earlier in the school year, especially in the area of writing.

Four of the 4th grade students will be part of the study—Fatimah and David both transitioned from 3rd grade; Amir joined the school after being schooled in Iran, and Omeed who skipped 3rd grade. They all love sharing their written work when journal writing. However, all four have issues with writing, whether it is to answer a comprehension question, or writing a cohesive composition.

Using the instructional practice of Guided Writing and use of graphic organizers, I hope to answer two questions:

1. Will the use of Guided Writing and graphic organizers help the 4th graders develop their skill in informational text writing?
2. Will the 4th graders be able to independently use this skill they have acquired as part of their English Language Arts instruction when they read informational text in their science class?

Review of Literature

According to Nagin (2006), writing is the most visible expression of what the students know and how well they have learned it. Although reading and writing are said to be reciprocal processes which share identical skills, writing still need its own dedicated instruction because of the complexity involved in producing written work. Writing is very complicated as it employs the student to simultaneously attend to the thought process involve in organizing his thoughts, the language to be used to best convey his message, and the motor movement needed to produce the graphic signs representing meaning (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). In the paper “The Neglected R” by the National Commission on Writing (2003), writing was described as thought in paper, a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities and make valid and accurate distinctions. It espouses the need to focus on writing as it is a vital tool for learning and thinking the same way that reading is a vital source of information and ideas (Nagin, 2006).

The importance of writing in the classroom is reflected in the amount of research done to measure the effect of writing on student achievement. In the book, “Because Writing Matters” (National Writing Project, 2006), attention on how writing affects reading comprehension was mentioned by citing the study made by NAEP in 2000 involving 4th grade students showing positive correlation between the frequency of writing long answers and higher reading achievement. The National Commission on Writing also cited the NAEP’s Nation’s Report Card indicating that although students can do basic writing, they still are unable to create precise, engaging, and coherent prose (NCP, 2003). Both findings sync with the findings made by Brewster and Klump (2004) in their study involving Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) in which increased frequency of student writing enabled students to integrate and elaborate on writing strategies throughout different content areas. This was found to be instrumental in meeting other academic ends and goals.

Writing is a complex activity that incorporates thought processes, feelings, and social interactions that by middle and high school years, students should possess a level of writing skill that will help them express their complex thoughts and understand critical information (Perin, 2006). One meta-analysis study of writing instruction for adolescent students pointed out that adolescents who do not learn to write well are at a disadvantage, especially if they are part of classes where writing is the primary means for assessing progress (Graham & Perin, 2007).

By middle and high school, students are given writing tasks that require higher-order thinking and the use of more sophisticated writing strategies. In addressing cross-curricular teaching and learning, it is important to view writing as a means of extending and deepening

students' knowledge as it acts as a tool for learning subject matter (Keys, 2000; Shanahan, 2004). With this in mind, a need to focus on providing writing instruction to our students is important. Poor writing proficiency should be viewed as something that can handicap student learning and assessment since mask a student's true state of knowledge. Students' performance in any academic subject is influenced by the amount of writing instruction they receive which incorporates the use of inquiry strategies (Nagin, 2006).

Echoing the sentiment that writing is a form of learning and it supports learning strategies, Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson (2004) pointed out that it is hard to name one particular approach to writing instruction that is said to be the most effective. These authors say that this is mainly due to the fact that classrooms have students who bring with them diverse experiences and skills which call for differentiation on the teacher's part. Despite the intricacies involve in providing writing instruction, attention should be directed to the positive effect brought by writing instruction—it can help students understand, process, and think critically (NCTE, 2008).

Writing Next, authored by Steve Graham and Dolores Perin (2007) identified eleven (11) key elements of adolescent writing instruction. Essential to identifying these key elements is the understanding that writing is made up of closely linked processes. Teachers can empower students by effectively modeling and guiding students through various writing strategies. Two of the key elements are (1) teaching adolescents strategies for planning, revising, and editing their composition which can have a positive effect on students' written work; and (2) structuring collaborative writing, which has shown to have a strong impact on students' writing development.

With respect to structuring collaborative writing, Hass and Osborn (2007) found that authentic writing instruction affirmed the importance of collaboration because of the social dimensions that surrounds our classrooms. They recommend fostering collaborative writing processes as part of effective writing instruction. The authors found that the effect of collaboration is strengthened by working with others (both peers and teachers), and this was perceived by students as a contributor to successful writing. Thus, providing opportunities for students to work together and make the writing instruction an interactive experience is seen as effective use of students' time and an effective approach to writing instruction.

I am exploring the use of informational text as a model for writing. This is important because according to the study done by Kamil and Lane (1998), over 98% of the text found in the World Wide Web is expository. Instruction in writing informational text will allow students the ability to access these materials. In the study done by Purcell-Gates and Duke (2003), there was evidence that the use of authentic reading and writing of informational text and how-to-text in Science for 2nd and 3rd grader resulted in higher growth in reading comprehension as well as in writing. Writing about a text improves comprehension as it helps students make connection between what they read, know, understand, and think (Carr, 2002). Modeling and direct instruction can provide the example for the type of inquiry base strategy use in writing that students need in order to benefit from these types of texts (Nagin, 2006). Providing writing instruction in the form of graphic organizer in a collaborative fashion is one approach that teachers can employ. This collaboration can engage learners and lead them to better reasoning and production of more cohesive written works.

There is a large body of research that supports the use of graphic organizers and their effect on students' writing. Kroll and Paziotopoulos (2004) described graphic organizers as a concrete skyscraper model which helps students become analytical thinkers by providing step by step thinking processes as they develop their written work. The guided writing involved in completing graphic organizer supports Washington (1988) and his belief that teachers need to model for the children the way a paragraph is developed—by using one strand of the organizer and having the children make up sentences to correlate with the phrase in the organizer to complete the paragraph—the written work. Writing instruction that uses graphic organizers as planning or pre-writing tools improves writing performance (Ellis & Howard, 2005) and can increase writing fluency.

Prewriting activities that uses graphic organizers to help students organize ideas coupled with instruction in which the teacher provides explicit and systematic application (guided writing) of the difference processes involve in writing (e.g. pre-writing) can significantly improve students' informational text writing, according to Myrick and Siders (2007). The influence of prewriting treatments, such as the use of graphic organizers and guided writing, on written work can affect the quality of expository compositions made by students. In their study, Myrick and Siders use of graphic organizers for writing brought significant improvement in the areas of content knowledge, coherence, and overall performance for sixth graders. This clearly shows that graphic organizers help student link and record new information for later use and incorporation to their written work. Studies show that students who create high quality writing

work are guided by the explicit instruction they have received which involves strong prewriting activities to set the stage for cohesive writing.

Becoming a skilled writer requires students to be involved and to exercise the skills they have learned until they can independently use it without any help or prompting. Teachers providing students with some form of support during the writing process can help improve the quality of their students' written work. Guided writing experiences help improved student writing and motivation (Ockzus, 2007). Guided writing is defined as the process where the teachers help guide students' writing through discussion, collaboration, joint text construction, and evaluation of the written piece. There are many benefits to using guided writing as part of instruction. Guided writing, a collaborative learning activity, and use of graphic organizers are practices that can be used in teaching students to compose informational text. According to Ockzus, engaging students in informational text writing early on will put them in a better position to handle the writing demands as they progress in school.

The research on writing instruction, use of graphic organizers, and guided writing make a strong case on how to provide authentic writing experiences that are collaborative and explicit. Based on the literatures explored, I studied the effect of guided writing and use of graphic organizers on 4th graders' ability to develop their informational text writing.

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