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**The Engagement of Students in Writing When Using Strategies
From Mentor Authors**

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Abstract

Teachers are continually looking for ways to motivate their students to become more engaged while writing. This action research focused on the incorporation of mentor author(s) into a kindergarten classroom writer's workshop. The first study compared the volume and complexity of students' writing before and after the inclusion of a mentor author. The results of this study showed that the volume of students' writing increased, as well as complexity in terms of dialogue and more punctuation. The study also demonstrated an increase in students' time on task while writing after the use of mentor texts. The second study looked more in depth at the time spent on task writing while incorporating a mentor text into the writer's workshop mini lesson. The results of this study showed that students were more engaged in their writing after listening to a mentor text read aloud during the mini lesson at the beginning of the writer's workshop time.

The Engagement of Students in Writing When Using Strategies From Mentor Authors

Foundation for Research

In my classroom, my students have been working on their writing in a Writer's Workshop setting based on Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Calkins (1996) states "not only is it important that writing have a predictable place in the schedule so that children can plan for it, it is also important that the writing workshop itself have a simple structure" (p. 188). Calkins also lists components that are important in the Writer's Workshop: mini-lessons, work time (writing and conferring), and share sessions.

Using these components as a guide, I begin each Writer's Workshop time by teaching a short ten-minute mini-lesson focusing on a particular skill. The mini-lesson is followed by

twenty minutes, or so, of writing time. During this time, students are working on writing pieces, while I, along with two aides, walk around the classroom to conference with students on their writing. While I am conferencing with students, I make note of potential growth areas in their writing as well as areas of strengths. At the end of writing time, the students come to a carpet area to share what they have written, three students sharing each day. Sharing time consists of the student reading their writing aloud to the class. Once the student has shared their writing, either I or another student will offer suggestions as well as congratulate them on work well done. We end this share-time by clapping for students' hard work.

My students had been enjoying their writing time very much this year, but I wanted to make writing more meaningful for them. In *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Calkins (2006) stated "we need to bring powerful literature into those classrooms and to do everything possible to invite children to live and write inside of that literature" (p.252). Reading this led me to my overarching question: Are students more engaged in writing when using strategies from mentor authors? I wanted to know if, by simply incorporating mentor authors into my classroom, my students would write for a longer length of time, if the volume of their writing would increase, and if they would begin to incorporate the mentor author's writing style into their writing.

Will students write for a longer length of time if they are introduced to a mentor author's strategies at the beginning of Writer's Workshop?

Time Spent Writing

Richard L. Allington (2002) stated that in exemplary elementary classrooms "teachers routinely had children actually reading and writing as much as half the school day" (p.742). As teachers we know how short the school day seems and how quickly days go by; that is why, as teachers, we have found ways to intertwine our lessons. It is more beneficial for students to not

compartmentalize our days. Reading and writing are two areas that intertwine together for a number of reasons. In Peter J. Lancia's article (1997), he noted that in his classroom, students tended to borrow ideas from literature in five ways: entire plots, characters, plot devices, elements from a genre, and information. In the book *I Can Write Like That!* Susan Ehmann and Kellyann Gayer (2009) discussed how they selected mentor texts: "We attempted to select books whose characters and settings address the broad range of lifestyles experienced by children across the United States" (p. 4). When the books are selected to reach all students in the classroom it opens up a world of possible writing ideas, activates students' prior knowledge and shows them that the options for what to write about are endless. "Linking children's in-school and out-of-school lives builds relationships and makes learning relevant as well as communicates to parents and students that they are valued" (Evers p. 467).

Since Writer's Workshop takes up a fair amount of teaching and learning time, I wanted to ensure that my students were actually using this time appropriately. I noticed this year that, if I did not take the time to teach a mini-lesson before allowing time to write, they had difficulty working on their own writing. In Calkins' book, she noted the importance of a predictable schedule and that predictability provides comfort to students (Calkins, 1996). Writing time can be a very challenging and overwhelming time for students. By providing that predictable format I was able to ease some of my students' worries and help them enter the mindset of writing before actually beginning the sometimes-daunting task of writing. Linda Lamme, stated that "nudging children to take risks moves them out of their comfort zone to explore new territory and try new skills" (Lamme, 2002, p.78). Writing can be a very daunting task for many students, but providing the support they need allows them to take these risks and show them that they really are capable of writing great stories.

Will the volume of students writing increase if they are modeling their writing after a mentor author?

Volume of Writing

Susan Anderson McEveven and Connie Campbell Dierking (2000), shared two benefits of using children's literature in Writer's Workshop. "Firstly, literature allows students endless opportunities to generate personal topics for writing. Another benefit is that students are exposed to models that facilitate the development and enhancement of 'writerly' thinking and language, which they then apply in their own writing" (p. 362). When students are allowed to write about something they know and care about they tend to be able to write more and in greater detail. By using mentor texts my hope was that the students' memories and interests would be peaked and they would be able to generate some ideas as to what they could write about. Anderson McEveven & Campbell Dierking (2000) stated, "Students write best about what they know from their personal experiences. Topics of interest to them are found in many children's literature books" (p. 363).

For my first study I had composition booklets made up for my students, consisting of one colored cover page and four blank writing pages. For my second study students were given just one piece of paper, due to the fact that we were at the beginning stages of writer's workshop in September, while the preliminary study looked at students' writing in March. With both studies, I had extra paper available for them to use if they chose to add additional pages to their stories. During students' writing time, I expect them to complete at least two pages per day. This means that they were to illustrate and write on two pages of writing. I have found that if I do not set this expectation they are not quite as focused when writing. I would like to challenge some of my more literate students to write more than one sentence on each of their pages as well. I have

found that writing time is a perfect time for differentiation in my classroom, since I am able to conference one-on-one with my students. In a study investigated by Margerie Hertz she stated “despite the range of abilities of the kindergarten students, process writing instruction allowed them to show appreciable, measureable gains in their writing skills” (Hertz, 1997, p.6). Also, by studying a mentor author, I found that I was able to ask more deep-thinking questions that were challenging to my more literate students. Anderson McElevan & Campbell Dierking (2000) stated in their article, “Through such a study of literature, students will attempt to mimic an author in their pieces as they search for their own voice and style” (p. 364). Marjorie Hertz also commented that, “writing workshops in kindergarten should continue to emphasize the reading-writing connections. An emphasis should be places on helping kindergarten students to develop the content of their stories by using literature as a springboard for writing” (Hertz, 1997, p.6).

Will students writing become richer/will they incorporate the mentor authors writing style into their writing?

Incorporating Mentor Author’s Writing Style

During my mini-lesson time, I modeled a story that I was writing in front of my students. Most, if not all of them, used my story as an inspiration for their own writing. I know that I am not an expert in writing by any means, so I have found that I use mentor authors when creating my mini-lessons. This caused me to ask myself, “Why not show my students how to model their writing after a mentor author as well?” I chose to focus on the work of Nancy Carlson for my mentor author in my preliminary study, and in my subsequent study used various mentor authors. During the first study, two of the writing strategies I stressed to my students were sentence formation (capital letter in the beginning and punctuation at the end) and incorporating discussion into their writing. In study two I was more focused on where students were

developmentally in their writing as well as the length of time spent writing. When someone wants to become better at something they look for an expert in that area to read about and study what she or he does. So, when teaching my students how to improve their writing, it was very helpful to select a book from our author expert and talk about what she or he did to make her or his writing great. Peter Lancoa (1997) says, “as any novice learns by imitating a role model, children learn about writing by interacting with professional writers” (p. 471). Linda Lamme noted that, “books can be wonderful sources of words to spell correctly, examples of elaboration, matching illustrations to text, and topics for writing. A well-stocked library of well-written books is an easy way to provide more instruction in writing for children” (Lamme, 2002, p.77).

Roy Corden (2007) stated that “as research in the United States has shown, children’s literature can provide a model of quality writing that, along with explicit teacher instruction and peer discussion, allows personal response and encourages children to transfer ideas to their own writing” (p. 270). By reading great books in my classroom, I have been able to expose my students to language features of a text and how stories are written in an organized way so the reader is able to understand the message. Irma Sturgell (2008) states that when looking for a mentor text, one must “look for books that first engage students as readers and then as writers” (p. 411). One cannot simply read a book once and expect the student to be able to look closely at the author’s writing techniques. It is in the rereading of a text that this takes place. Loretta T. Stewart (1997) has used Readers Theater in her classroom to keep her students engaged in rereading a text. “After reading a piece of literature, my students and I examine it together” (p. 174); this time of working and discovering together is what really helps students make meaning from what they have read. In Kathryn Brown’s classroom she says, that she reads mentor texts months before she begins her writer’s workshop. She notes, “we had read excellent books

everyday, which helped the children understand books and enables them to use the books as models for their writing” (Brown, 2010, p.28).

Conclusion of Literature Review

After completing my literature review, what I currently teach was reaffirmed. From the moment I started teaching, I have modeled my writing time after Calkin’s Writer’s Workshop. As time moved on, I felt as though I needed to challenge myself further. Incorporating mentor authors into my writing instruction has been working wonderfully. As teachers we know that students enjoy listening to stories being read to them, so it makes sense to teach students that they can model their writing after an inspirational author. Samuel Johnson once noted, “The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make a book.”

One of my main focuses for my study was how I can increase students’ writing stamina. The research supported providing students with ample time to practice writing and suggested that they can become better only if they are given time to practice writing daily. I was wondering if the use of mentor authors during the mini lesson would cause my students to write for a longer duration of time, or if the mini lesson would become too long, causing them to lose their writing focus? One of the biggest struggles for students when it comes to writing is coming up with a topic to write about. It is important to allow students the opportunity to select their writing topic to ensure they are taking ownership of their work. As students become more comfortable in their writing they are able to move onto writing more stories. Mentor texts provide a background for students to understand how stories work, for example sequencing events. I have been wondering that, if by reading mentor texts aloud, my students would begin to sequence their own stories and add additional pages to their work.

Action Research

Are Students More Engaged in Writing When Using Strategies From Mentor Authors?

Study One

Methodology

Participants

Twenty-two Elementary kindergarten students (eleven boys and eleven girls) participated in this study. The students ranged in age from five to six years old and also varied in their educational background. Some of students had attended preschool, others had attended an academic daycare center, and others had been taken care of by family members. Two students were English as a Second Language Learners, with their home language being Spanish. One student was African American and one student was Jamaican, with English being their home language. Eight students received Title 1 reading services in the afternoon.

Setting

This study took place in a kindergarten classroom where students had been participating in traditional Writer's Workshop, modeled after Lucy Calkin's suggested format (Calkins, 1996), starting in September. Many of the mini-lessons had focused on students' needs that had been identified while mini-conferencing with students during writing time. During writing time, two aides were able to come into the classroom and help students with their writing. While students were writing, they were sitting in various spots around the classroom to ensure that they had a comfortable place to write, and were given their writing folder. This folder had their writing from the quarter as well as an alphabet chart inside. Students were encouraged to read what they

had written the day prior before they begin their writing for the day. After about half an hour of writing time, students brought their folders to the carpet to share. Three students were called on to share what they had written each day.

Materials

The mentor author chosen for this study was Nancy Carlson. Many of the themes in Nancy's stories are relatable to kindergarten real life experiences. Students also used writing paper that was composed of a large rectangle for illustrations and four lines for writing; these pieces of paper were stapled together into packets of four sheets. Students sat on the floor around the classroom with their booklets, pencil boxes and a writing folder. Their writing folder contained an alphabet chart with pictures for students to use as a reference tool. During the mini-lesson the teacher would use chart paper on an easel for demonstration of her writing.

Procedures

Week 1: Students were introduced to their mentor author Nancy Carlson. They learned about who she is as an author, saw pictures of her, and also learned a bit about each of the characters in her books. Students were then allowed to look at roughly fifteen of Nancy Carlson's books. They also had heard most of these stories as a read aloud. During the read alouds, they asked and answered questions about the stories.

Week 2: After a week of reading and looking at Nancy Carlson's books, students were guided into looking more closely at the text in these books. They observed spacing and punctuation on each of the pages. In addition, students discussed the importance of those writing components. During mini-lessons the teacher would model writing and incorporating spaces and punctuation in her writing. Students were then asked to try this during their independent writing time.

Week 3: Students were again directed back to the text in Nancy Carlson’s books. This time they were to look for dialogue. When looking at the dialogue students identified that they heard the word “said” and also saw quotation marks on the page. During mini-lessons the teacher modeled writing with dialogue in her writing. While students were writing, the teacher and classroom aides would work with students individually on their writing. They would discuss with the students where they should place their quotation marks if they had chosen to include dialogue in their writing.

Findings and Results

The quantitative data shows that students were engaged in writing for a longer length of time after the inclusion of mentor author writing strategies during the mini-lesson. In the figure below one can see the length of student writing time in minutes.

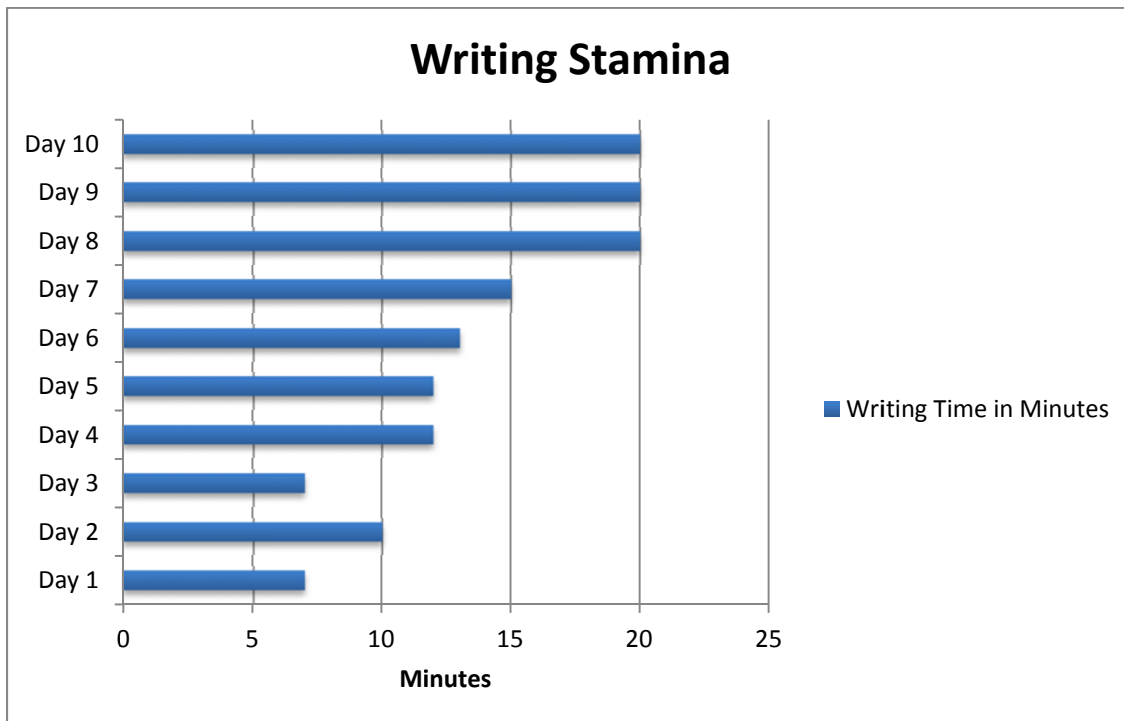


Figure 1: Writing Stamina in Minutes

During week two of writer’s workshop students were shown how they can add additional pages to their booklets if they needed to. Students were shown where to find the additional pages and how to staple them to their booklets. The figure below shows that three out of twenty-two students chose to add additional pages to their booklets.

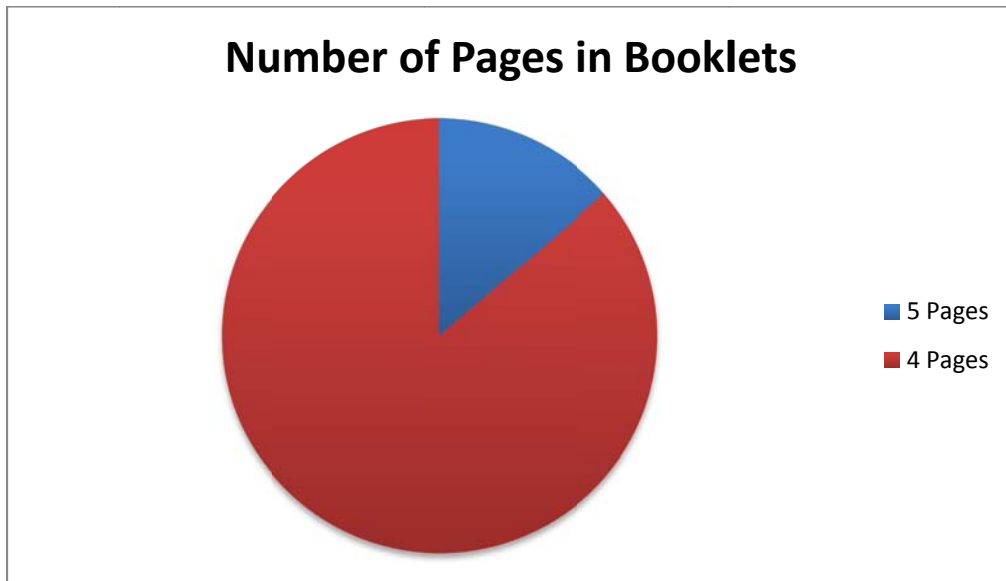


Figure 2: Number of Pages in Booklets

During week one of Writer’s Workshop mini-lessons students were introduced to the idea of incorporating dialogue into their writing. Examples of dialogue were shown to the students from numerous Nancy Carlson books. The figure below shows the number of students that incorporated dialogue into their writing.

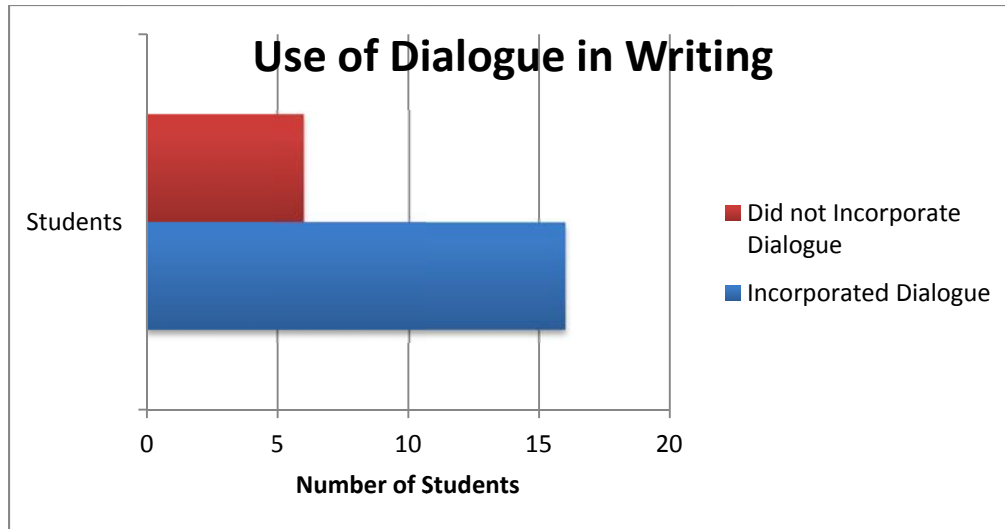


Figure 3: Use of Dialogue in Writing

Interpretation of Analysis and Results

It is evident that the use of mentor texts during Writer's Workshop was useful to most students. All of the students made great improvements in their writing stamina. A few of the students are showing interest in adding more pages to their writing and also writing additional sentences on pages in their booklets. Lastly, over half of the students incorporated dialogue into their writing.

During this research time period students were very engaged in the mini lessons that were being taught. They enjoyed hearing familiar stories repeated and also enjoyed listening for dialogue in the text. During the mini-lesson time students often ran the lessons, by questioning things the teacher was doing and also offered bits of advice to make her writing better. Students were able to write for longer lengths of time when they were given time to work on their writing. Several students also asked if they could work on their writing during playtime later in the day.

Applications

I was very pleased with the results of my research. I think that it would be beneficial to my students if I incorporated more reading and writing activities into our day. I also think that

this study peaked my students' interest in looking at books in a different way. I have noticed that they were picking up more books and attempting to read them; they were also asking to working on their writing during playtime. It has been interesting to listen to them compliment or offer suggestions to each other during our daily writing share time. They have become the teachers and I have now taken on the role of ensuring they have the tools they need to be successful.

Limitations

The greatest limitation in this project was time. It was difficult to ensure that I was giving my students the time they needed to write each day. We were a bit delayed in beginning this project because of school delays and also scheduling conflicts that were unforeseen. There were also a few days that I was not able to work with the students on their writing due to testing.

Reflection

I was amazed at the gains in my students writing. It was very exciting for me to see that they were interested in making their stories better and they were also taking on quite a bit more ownership in their writing by the end of this project. This study also helped me realize that if I am excited and passionate about something, my students will also share that excitement. It was interesting to see which students tried using our mentor author's strategies in their writing. I was encouraged to try this type of project again the following school year with my students, but starting earlier in the school year.

Study Two

Methodology

Participants

Twenty-two Elementary kindergarten students (ten boys and twelve girls) participated in this study. The students ranged in age from five to six years old and also varied in their

educational background. Some of the students had attended preschool, others had attended an academic daycare center, and others had been cared for by family members. Six students were English as a Second Language Learners, with their home language being Spanish. Six students received Title 1 reading services in the afternoon.

Setting

This study took place in a kindergarten classroom where students had been participating in traditional Writer's Workshop, modeled after Lucy Calkin's format (Calkins, 1996), starting in September. Many of the mini-lessons had focused on the main components of students' writing. For example, one lesson focused on drawing a picture and trying to phonetically spell as much as they could on their own. Students' needs had also been identified while mini-conferencing with students during writing time. During writing time, one aide was able to come into the classroom and help students with their writing. While students were writing, they were given their writing folder and allowed to sit where they found a comfortable spot on the classroom floor. The writing folder contained their writing from the quarter as well as an alphabet chart inside. Students were encouraged to read what they have written the day prior before they begin their writing for the day. After about twenty minutes of writing time, students brought their folders to the carpet to share. Three students were called on to share what they had written each day.

Materials

The mentor authors that were chosen for this study corresponded to the weeks in which their works were read aloud. Students also used writing paper that was composed of a large rectangle for illustrations and three lines for writing. Students sat on the floor around the classroom with their booklets, pencil boxes and a writing folder. Their writing folder contained

an alphabet chart with pictures for students to use as reference tools. During the mini-lesson the teacher would use chart paper on an easel for demonstration of her writing.

Procedures:

Week 1: Students were introduced to writer's workshop. Students gathered on the carpet and listened to a ten-minute mini lesson. During the mini lesson I demonstrated where to print their name, date, picture, and words. During this week wordless picture books were also shared. Students' first writing samples were collected during this week to use as a baseline for the study.

Books Read During Week 1:

- "Pancakes for Breakfast" by Tomi de Paola (1978)
- "Chalk" by Bill Thomson (2010)
- "The Lion and the Mouse" by Jerry Pinkney (2009)
- "A Ball for Daisy" by Chris (2011)

Week 2: Students gathered on carpet again for mini lessons that focused on details in pictures. Simple texts were shared to show students that they could try to write some words if they sounded them out.

Books Read During Week 2:

- "Dog and Bear: Two Friends, Three Stories" by Laura Vaccaro Seeger (2007)
- "Dog and Bear: Three to Get Ready" by Laura Vaccaro Seeger (2009)
- "What If?" by Laura Vaccaro Seeger (2010)

Week 3: Mini lessons during this week focused on coming up with a topic to write about.

Students heard various stories in which the events of the story could cause students to have some text to self-connections. These connections could be used when writing.

Books Read During Week 3:

- “The Doorbell Rang” by Pat Hutchins (1986)
- “Wow! School!” by Robert Neubecker (2007)
- “Henry’s Amazing Imagination!” by Nancy Carlson (2010)

Week 4: During the mini lessons this week students listened to stories about writing and what to do when they become stuck with their writing. A final sample of students work was collected during this week.

Books Read During Week 4:

- “Rocket Writes a Story” by Tad Hills (2012)
- “Ralph Tells a Story” by Abby Hanlon (2012)
- “The Best Story Ever” by Eileen Spinelli (2008)

Findings and Results

The table below shows the length of time in minutes that students were engaged while working on their writing. While observing students writing, I noticed that on days they listened to a read-aloud during the mini-lesson their writing stamina was less than on days they did not have a read-aloud. Writing stamina was an observed measure. While students were working on their writing I allowed them to continue their work until I noticed that some students became disengaged;

meaning they were no longer working on their drawings or printing their words. On average students wrote for 15 minutes each day.

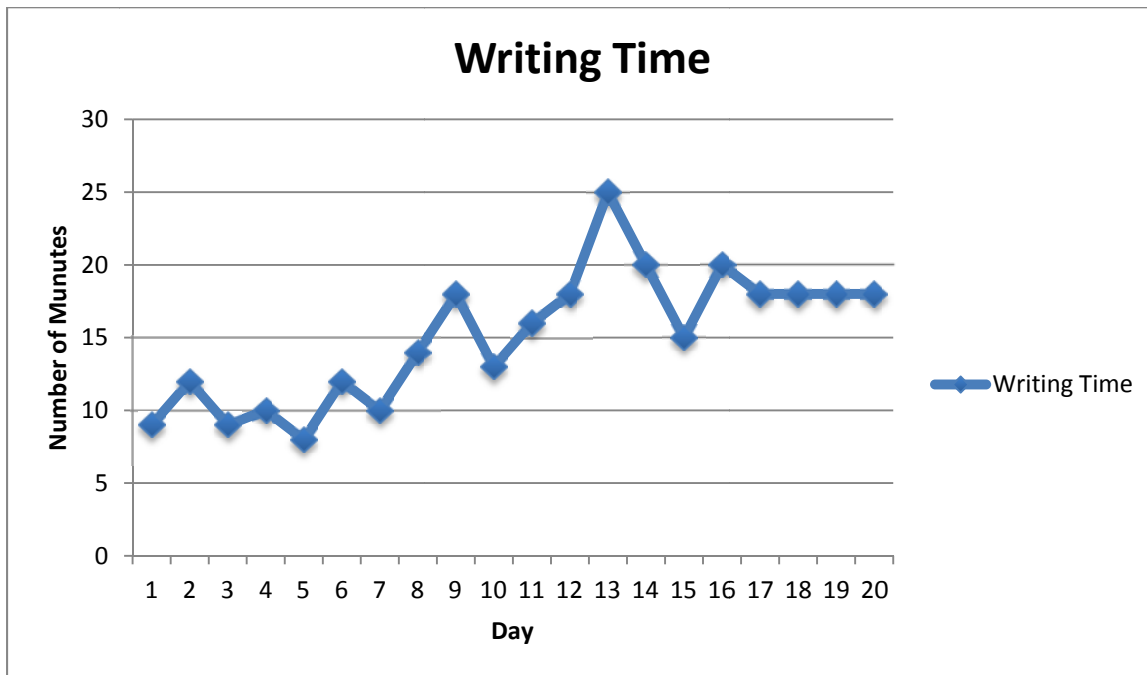


Figure 4: Writing Time

The chart below shows where students were placed on a Kindergarten Writing Developmental Scale; an example of this scale can be found in the appendix. Writing samples were collected in early September to serve as a base line of students writing and another sample was collected at the end of October as a final sample. Students’ writing was placed into one of five categories:

- Emerging: Makes uncontrolled or unidentifiable scribbling
- Pictorial: Imitates writing, draws somewhat recognizable pictures, tells about picture
- Pre-communicative: Writes to convey a message (attempts to read it back), uses letter-like forms and/or random letter strings, prints own name or occasional known word.
- Semi-phonetic: correctly uses some letters to match sounds, may use one beginning letter to write a word, usually writes left to right (may reverse some letters)

- **Phonetic:** Repeats beginning and ending consonant sounds, spells some high-frequency words correctly in sentences, includes some vowels (often not correct ones), writes one or more sentences

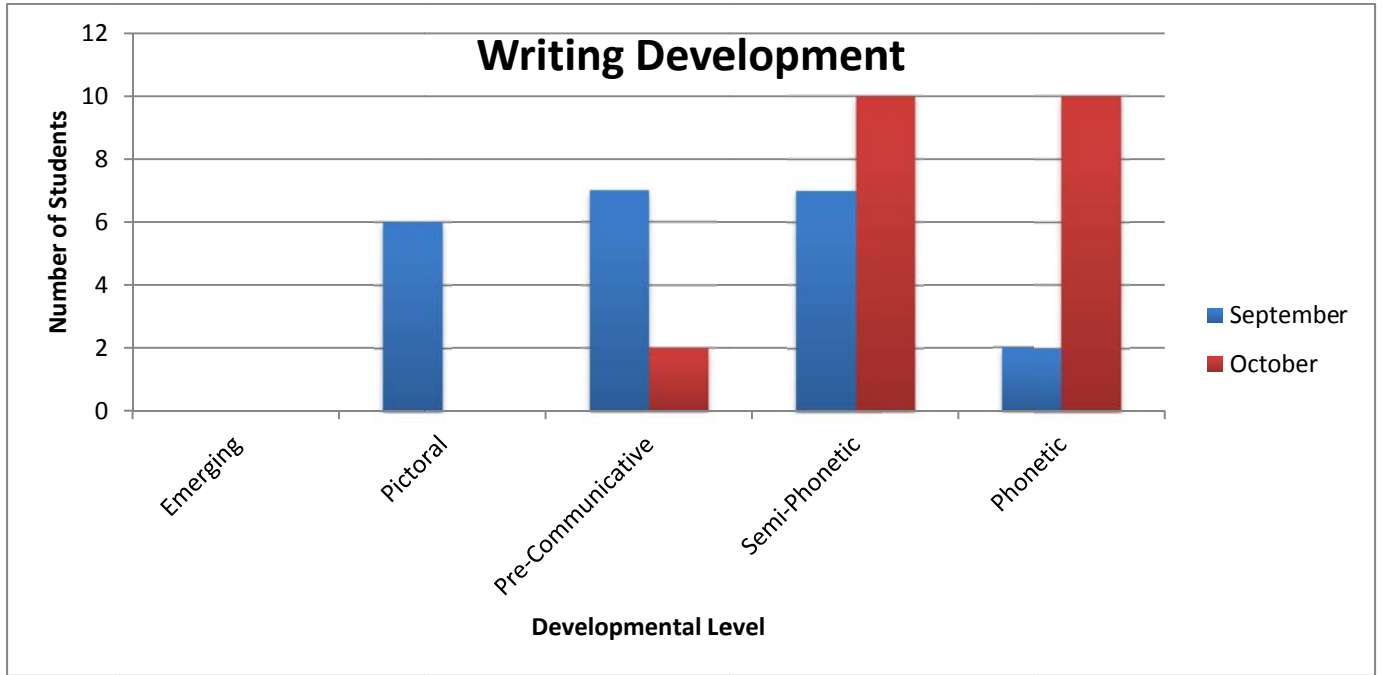


Figure 5: Writing Development

Writing Samples



The writing sample on the left is from the beginning of the school year of a child at a semi-phonetic level. One can see that this student labeled their drawing with correct beginning sounds, this student also attempted to write a sentence “take a walk”. The writing sample on the right is from the same student in October writing at a phonetic level. In this picture the child does not label instead they wrote a sentence at the bottom “we are playing zoom”. The child’s second piece of writing has more vowels and also has a complete sentence.



The writing sample on the left is from the beginning of the school year of a child at a pre-communicative level. One can see that this student attempted to write a sentence but it is unclear what the sentence says. This child has printed one of the known sight words “I” but other than that has just written random letters. The writing sample on the right is from the same student in October writing at a phonetic level. In this picture the child wrote a sentence at the bottom “we are reading a chapter book”. The child’s second piece of writing has more words written with some sight words spelled correctly, this piece of writing also includes some vowels.

Interpretation and Analysis of Results

It is apparent that all students made growth in their writing stamina and also in their writing progression on the Kindergarten Developmental Scale. I did notice that on days the

students listened to a read-aloud during the mini-lesson their writing stamina was less than on days they did not listen to a story. Students seemed to be more engaged in their writing when the mini-lesson focused on a specific writing skill, for example writing the beginning sounds of words.

In their writing I have noticed evidence of all students writing the beginning sounds of words in their stories. Some are even advancing into the “phonetic” category and using some vowels in their writing. Students are also beginning to use more sight words in their writing as well. During mini-conferences students are directed to use the word wall when they come to words that have been taught already this school year.

Limitations

This year during students writing time I only have one aid that is able to help them with their writing, whereas last year I had two aides. I found that having two aides in my classroom during writing time was very helpful. Students were able to share their writing with an adult every day, while this year students are seen every other day. At this point in the school year students have only been taught four letters (Ss, Mm, Rr, and Tt). Last year when students’ writing was looked at it was near the end of the school year and students had been taught all of the letters and sounds. A limitation in terms of research is that I don’t have a comparable group not using author study to which I can compare my results.

Reflection

Both of the studies I completed as part of this research project have taught me a lot about Kindergarten writing. I have found that students are able to use a mentor author as a model for their own writing. Students enjoyed doing author studies and oftentimes would use the author study as a focus topic in their writing. Students were able to incorporate dialogue into their

writing when they were able to look closely at dialogue in published works. At the beginning of the school year students also make many gains in their writing. The use of mentor texts is a bit more minimal and students are using the mentor text as idea starters by making text to self-connections. Students are capable of writing independently at the beginning of Kindergarten. By being expected to write during writer's workshop I have found that many of my students have picked up their letters and sounds faster than students who are not expected to write. I also believe that students made these gains in their writing because of daily writing practice. Students have begun to notice and look forward to writing time each day possibly because I have modeled my own interest and excitement in their writing.

Future Plans

I would like to continue incorporating author studies into my classroom. It has been very beneficial for students to hear stories repeatedly and to also interact more closely with the text. I would like to try to incorporate at least one author study each month into my classroom. I would like to also chart writing stamina every day. I often find that we are cutting writing time short because of other events that are unavoidable in our classroom; but the students do enjoy being given time to work on their own and also to write about what they are passionate about.

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