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TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

St. Francis School
Writing Project: A School-
Wide Program to Improve
the Writing Skills of Grade 1
to Grade 8 Students

Mark Cantin
Tina Mohr
Rod Orioux
Aimee Osmundson
Bev Scheirer

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Research Coordinator
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation
2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8
Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or 306-373-1660

Table of Contents

Executive Summary 1

Acknowledgements 2

Rationale for Research 3

Research Question 4

Research Objectives and Methodology 5

Methods for Gathering and Analyzing Data 6

Summary of Data 7

Reflections 10

Conclusion 12

Limitations 13

Recommendations 14

References 15

Appendices

 Appendix A: St. Francis Writing Project Planning Guide 16

 Appendix B: Teacher Resource Binder Summary 18

 Appendix C: Description of Student Binder 19

 Appendix D: Common Formative Writing Assessment Class Tracking Sheet 20

 Appendix E: Student Tracking Sheet 21

Executive Summary

This action research study was conducted by the staff of St. Francis School with the Grade 1 to 8 students. The principal research question was:

Does the explicit teaching of writing strategies and the writing process at each grade level foster the attainment of writing skills necessary to improve the organization and coherence of student writing?

The researchers initially met as part of a teacher-led collaborative project to develop a vision for student writing in our school by becoming more familiar with best practices in writing and having a common understanding of how to teach writing at our school. As a group we reviewed:

- The curriculum outcomes and indicators for writing at each grade level.
- The results of the school's provincial writing assessments.
- The results of school division writing assessments.
- Teacher resources.

Through our discussions we felt there was a need for further study. We wanted to be able to provide support to our staff in teaching writing by developing a school-wide plan that focused on improving student writing. We hoped to accomplish this by:

- Familiarizing each teacher with the outcomes and indicators for writing at their grade level.
- Developing a key list of teacher resources.
- Developing a manual for teachers.
- Having teachers assess their students' writing three times during the school year.

Key results of this study are that student progress in writing can improve once teachers have the opportunity to **unpack** the outcomes of the renewed curriculum and become familiar with them. Using common formative assessments helps teachers and students target skills so students can enhance their skill level. There are numerous benefits of a school-wide writing plan.

The work we have accomplished is only a starting point in addressing student writing at our school. We plan to continue with this initiative as part of our School Improvement Plan.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the staff and students of St. Francis School for their support in our research project. We would also like to thank the Prince Albert Catholic School Division who initially provided funding for our Teacher Led Collaborative Project. The professional dialogue that occurred during our TLC project led us to apply to the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for a grant to make our action research project possible.

We appreciate the support of Bill Prentice who was our compass and guide. His advice was invaluable and it provided us with a starting point.

We are grateful to the McDowell Foundation for their support of this project which was a very rewarding experience for each of the researchers. It provided the opportunity for collaborative planning and promoted collegiality among staff. The project also provided the school-wide advantage to accommodate student needs and diversity, increasing students' growth as confident writers!

Rationale for Research

We teach at St. Francis School in the Prince Albert Catholic School Division #6. St. Francis is a Kindergarten to Grade 8 school with a population of 228 students. St. Francis School is populated by children from working families of a middle-class socio-economic majority in Prince Albert. Twenty-six per cent of our students are of aboriginal descent. St. Francis School ratio of girls to boys is 93:135 (for every three girls there are 4.5 boys). There are 15 teachers, one intern teacher, and 10 support staff. Within the 15 teachers are two administrators and one teacher-librarian. St. Francis is not a community school; however, we are a feeder school for students in Grades 7 and 8 coming from a K-6 community school.

Our research team consisted of a Grade 3 teacher, a Grade 5 teacher, our education support teacher, the vice-principal and the principal of our school. The idea for this research project came about after teachers from our school met for a teacher-led collaborative project on writing. The results of our provincial writing assessments indicated that students' writing skills needed improvement. Our school division also has been administering common writing assessments which also indicated a need to look at how to improve the writing skills of our students. We wanted to know what needed to be taught.

It was our belief that teachers have access to instructional strategies or activities for teaching but limited in-service on the meshing of the resources and new curriculum indicators and outcomes. Our goal was to develop a school-wide plan for the teaching of writing. Goals for our teachers/school are: recognizing the need to familiarize teachers with the outcomes/indicators in the revised Saskatchewan English Language Arts Curriculum, focusing on assessment for learning as part of the School^{PLUS} Effective Practices Framework to benefit all students, and using the data from provincial and school division assessments to help improve the teaching and learning of writing.

Research Question

As part of our School Improvement Plan for the 2008-09 school year, we set a goal to increase student knowledge of how to bring organization and coherence to a piece of writing. We set our goal based on the results of our 2008 provincial reading and our school division's common writing assessments. To achieve our goal, we met as a group to work on a plan for writing in our school for next year. We looked at what students should know, understand and be able to do by looking at the curriculum objectives for writing at each grade level. After looking at the assessment results and looking at the curriculum objectives for writing at each grade, we decided that we needed to work on a plan to help our teachers and students become more familiar with writing strategies and the writing process.

After spending time reviewing writing assessment results and discussing what support we felt both teachers and students needed to improve student writing, we decided our research question would be:

Does the explicit teaching of writing strategies and the writing process at each grade level foster the attainment of writing skills necessary to improve the organization and coherence of student writing?

Research Objectives and Methodology

Our goal was to develop a vision for student writing in our school by determining what we wanted students to accomplish as a result of this initiative. As teachers, we wanted to become more familiar with best practices in writing and have a common vision of how they would be taught in our school. We wanted to have common understandings and attitudes amongst the teachers, administration and parents to improve student writing. We needed to agree on essential questions about the teaching and learning of writing, and we needed to use our assessment results to help guide our improvement plan. We wanted our students to become better writers through having more consistent and varied writing experiences across all grade levels. We needed to agree upon what knowledge and skills teachers, administrators, parents and students required for this vision to be accomplished. We wanted teachers to be familiar with the resources, and the researchers wanted to be able to support them in their implementation. We want our parents to also become familiar with the writing process by providing them with parent information to include in our handbook and newsletters.

We planned to monitor and evaluate the effects of this school-wide writing initiative for students from Grade 1 to Grade 8 over the 2009-10 school year.

Our purpose was to work towards improving the organization and coherence of student writing. Our objectives were to:

- In-service teachers on writing strategies and the writing process.
- Share resources with teachers to assist them in explicitly teaching writing strategies and the writing process.
- Have each teacher collect samples of writing from one or two students that show how students have improved in organization and share their results with their colleagues.
- Encourage teachers to use literature and exemplars to help teach writing.
- Familiarize each teacher with their grades outcomes and indicators for writing.
- Develop a key list of teacher resources available at our school and central office.
- Develop a manual for teachers that includes writing strategies, the writing process, language conventions, handwriting suggestions, as well as assessment based on the curriculum.

Methods for Gathering and Analyzing Data

We decided to use the *Ontario Writing Assessment* (Reid & Reid, 2008) as the starting point for this project to collect data. We didn't feel that teachers were confident in developing writing prompts on their own at this time. We felt they needed more time to become familiar with their curriculum first. All English Language Arts teachers used this assessment for the first term.

In January, our students in Grades 3 to 8 had to complete the Prince Albert Catholic Schools Common Writing Assessments, so we had teachers score their own assessments and use that data for term two. The students in Grades 1 and 2 used the *Ontario Writing Assessment*.

In term three, the Grades 5 and 8 teachers scored their Provincial Writing Assessment, and the rest of the teachers used the *Ontario Writing Assessment* with their students.

These results were compared with the Prince Albert Catholic Schools Common Writing Assessments in Grades 3 to 8 from 2007-10 and with the 2008 Provincial Writing Assessment.

Teachers also used ongoing assessments with the student writing binders and portfolios and had students set individual goals based on their assessment results.

Summary of Data

TABLE 1

Total Average Scored on a Five-Point Rubric Based on the Writing Traits of Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency and Conventions by Grade Over Three Terms

Grade	Writing Genre	Average
Term 1		
1	Informative	3
2	Narrative	3.5
3	Narrative	3
4	Expository	
5	Narrative	3
6	Narrative	3
7	Narrative	2.5
8	Narrative	3
Term 2		
1	Narrative	3.5
2	Expository	3.1
3	Narrative	2.5
4	Persuasive	3
5	Narrative	3
6	Narrative	3.5
7	Expository	3
8	Narrative	3.5
Term 3		
1	Persuasive	3
2	Persuasive	3.2
3	Persuasive	3.5
4	Descriptive	3.1
5	Narrative and Expository	2.8
6	Narrative	3.5
7	Narrative	
8	Narrative and Expository	3.5

Note: Some data was not collected by each grade all three terms due to teacher absences. Student performance was better on narrative than expository and persuasive writing. Students stayed within the satisfactory level based on the rubric. In Grade 5 and Grade 8, the results were based on the Provincial Writing Assessment.

TABLE 2

Total Average Scored on a Five-Point Rubric Based on the Writing Trait of Organization by Grade Over Three Terms

Grade	Average
Term 1	
1	
2	
3	3
4	
5	3
6	3.4
7	2.5
8	2.8
Term 2	
1	3
2	3.1
3	2.5
4	3.3
5	3
6	3.2
7	3
8	3.2
Term 3	
1	2.9
2	2.9
3	3.5
4	3.3
5	2.9
6	3.5
7	
8	3.4

Note: Students stayed at a satisfactory level on the trait of organization. The most improvement was seen in Grades 7 and 8.

TABLE 3

School Division Common Writing Assessment Results Based on the Five-Point Rubric

Organization			
Grade	2009	2010	Increase
3	2.8	3.2	.4
4	2.7	3.2	.5
5	2.6	3.1	.5
6	3.1	3.1	
7	2.9	3.4	.5
8		3.1	
Average on Six Traits			
Grade	2009	2010	Increase
3	3	3	
4	2.7	3	.3
5	2.6	3	.4
6	3.1	3.5	.4
7	2.8	3	.2
8		3.5	

Note: There was an improvement in student performance on all traits from a developing level to satisfactory level on the five-point rubric. Our project focus was on organization, and we saw a significant increase in this trait. We are pleased to see the increase.

Reflections

After our Term 1 writing assessment, teachers were asked for feedback. They responded to the following questions:

1. What traits have you focused on so far this school year?
2. How well did your students do in this area?
3. What traits do your students need to be explicitly taught to improve their writing? What will you focus on in writing with your students between now and the next reporting term in March?
4. How do you plan to meet with students to have them set their writing goal for this term?

In Term 1, organization and ideas were the traits most commonly studied. Word choice, voice and conventions were areas of focus. Teachers reported average student progress. Each teacher selected a trait and writing focus based on the needs of their students. Most teachers met individually with students during class time.

In Term 2, the teachers reported that there were notable improvements in each grade. They continued their writing program based on the needs of their students.

After the Term 3 assessment, teachers were asked for their feedback on the writing project. The results are summarized below.

TEACHER BINDER

Overall, teachers found the binder to be useful. They felt that it was a good teacher resource and helpful in keeping writing resources organized.

STUDENT BINDER

Generally, teachers found the student binders useful. Teachers felt that the binders were mainly used for storing completed writing assignments. Teachers also felt that the binders were a good visual for the students to be able to track their goals and growth in writing. The only concern mentioned was the lack of room in the classroom for storing the binders.

ONTARIO WRITING ASSESSMENT

Overall, teachers were in favor of using the Ontario Writing Assessment. Teachers felt that the assessment was “teacher friendly” and offered a “well-rounded view of student growth.” It was suggested that it would be helpful to teachers to plan their writing program for the year according to the genres being used for school division and provincial assessments.

STUDENT GOAL SETTING/CONFERENCING

Teachers felt that this helped the students to take ownership of their writing. The concerns were mostly a time issue, since the goal setting requires spending individual time with students. K-3 teachers found that the students had difficulty setting goals on their own and that it was mostly teacher guided.

IN-SERVICES

Teachers felt that the in-services offered were very beneficial. They appreciated the time given to mark the writing assessments and discuss grading with grade-alike teachers. Teachers also commented on the usefulness of the time spent becoming more familiar with the writing outcomes in the curriculum.

CURRICULUM PLANNING GUIDE

Overall, the teachers felt that this was an asset. Teachers viewed the time spent completing the guide as a beneficial exercise that increased their knowledge of the provincial curriculum, specifically in relation to writing and its outcomes.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Teachers generally felt that the writing project was a success. As teachers become more familiar with the outcomes and formative assessment, student writing results will continue to improve.

Conclusion

The research team and school colleagues have valued the opportunity and time to establish a school-wide writing plan. It provided an opportunity for collaborative planning, sharing of resources and increasing motivation to build a learning community. Knowledge and access to writing resources provided support for our teachers to improve instructional strategies and to accommodate the diversity and range of student needs. Our school team has gained insight and knowledge of the writing curriculum and the outcomes.

The project findings will be shared at our local teacher convention in March 2011, and they will become a continuing part of the English Language Arts program at St. Francis School. The findings highlighted the importance of the explicit teaching of strategies, skills and processes to improve the writing skills of all students.

Limitations

TIME

The majority of teachers felt time was a limitation that permeated the assessment process. The expectation was that teachers met one on one with students three times throughout the year following each of the assessments. Scoring of writing assessments was very time consuming for teachers.

KNOWLEDGE

As a result of renewed provincial curriculum, we assumed that the level of knowledge amongst teachers in this regard would yet be in its infancy. As a result, in-service was given to teachers to allow time to become more familiar with the writing outcomes and indicators for each grade level.

Although there is an abundance of writing resources available to teachers, we found that most were pedagogical rather than practical. This resulted in additional time spent sorting through the resources to meet the curricular outcomes.

ASSESSMENT

It was obvious to the research team that what we were asking our teachers to do would require a lot of assessment. Consequently, teachers voiced that assessing in the manner in which we had asked posed issues relating to objectivity and subjectivity. Specifically, teachers requested more detail or guidance when it came to using the rubric so that the assessments would be more objective.

The researchers decided to use a rubric that the school division has been using to score common division assessments since they were already familiar with it and we wanted to avoid confusion. We would have preferred to use a rubric from the provincial curriculum.

As well, we had teachers administer three different types of assessments to collect data based on provincial and school division expectations. These assessments were administered the same way but the prompts varied in degree of difficulty. They were all assessed using the same rubric.

RESEARCH TEAM

When the research team was initially formed, we all agreed that our goal was to improve student writing. However, through discussions we realized that the how was the real challenge. Our individual knowledge of the outcomes and indicators in the writing area was widely varied. As a result, the consensus in the group was to familiarize ourselves with the pertinent information contained within the curricular documents at each grade level.

Recommendations

As with any action research project, regular reviews of resources, current trends and relevant research is imperative. As the goal of our research was to create a document that can be utilized for many years, we have included the following recommendations:

1. Review the teacher binder at the beginning of the school year.
2. Clarify teacher expectations for the student writing binder.
3. Purchase desktop copies of *Pushing the Pencil* (RDS Edmonton Public Schools, 1999) and *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Beginning Writing, K-3* (Rog, 2007).
4. Teach both expository and narrative genres at each grade level.
5. Focus on one genre of writing each term as a school.
6. Compare the same group of students as they progress over time rather than comparing the grade-alike groups from one year to the next.
7. Continue to have students in Grades 3 to 8 set individual writing goals. It is easier for teachers of students in Grades 1 and 2 to set class goals. Changes need to be made to their record sheet in the student binder.
8. Consider maintaining a school-wide focus on a particular writing trait based on provincial assessment results and the needs of the students.
9. Encourage teachers to create their own prompts based on the curriculum outcomes and genres specified for their grade level.
10. Use the *Ontario Writing Assessment* (Reid & Reid, 2008) where it matches the provincial curriculum.
11. Provide each teacher with a chart summarizing genres, curriculum outcomes, language cues and conventions and themes from the English Language Arts Curriculum.

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Appendix B: Teacher Resource Binder Summary

Section 1: Prince Albert Catholic School Division Writing Assessment Results for St. Francis School

- Longitudinal results (2007/2008/2009) were included for Grades 3 to 8.
- The format compared St. Francis School to the school division.
- The following were assessed: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions.
- A scoring rubric for writing was included. The rubric was based on “Six Traits” Analytic Assessment Scoring Guide and Regina Public Schools’ Rubric for Writing Assessment.

Section 2: Foundations for Literacy

- Constellation of Writer’s Concerns (document provided by Bill Prentice).
- Chapter on writing (analysis of spelling, handwriting and composition) taken from the book *Foundations for Literacy* produced by The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network.

Section 3: Curriculum

- Documents from Saskatchewan Curriculum that summarize the English Language Arts outcomes and indicators for each grade level.
- The documents were tabbed to indicate where the following writing topics are found: genre, spelling, handwriting, grammar, writing process/composition and inquiry-based/content areas.
- Writing exemplars were provided for each grade level.

Section 4: Writing Strategies

- A sampling of writing strategies was provided. Some examples are: The Writing Workshop, Writing Bingo, RAFTS (role, audience, format, topic and strong verb), Personal Organizer, Clustering Chart, Clean Writing, Think-Pair-Share, CUPS (capital letters, usage & grammar, punctuation, spelling), Six Traits of Good Writing, and examples of prompts for persuasive writing.

Section 5: Student Tracking

Appendix C:

Description of Student Binder

The purposes of the student binder are to:

- Provide a storage unit free of cost for all students from Grade 1 to Grade 8.
- Provide continuity by following students from Grade 1 through to Grade 8.
- Provide storage for all of a student's published writing pieces.
- Allow teachers the choice to include key handouts for student use.
- Support individual conferences regarding students results, strengths and goals that teachers will have following each of the three yearly writing assessments.

The following inserts are included:

- The Writing Process and Traits of Writing.
- Tabs (Writers Workshop, Narrative, Descriptive, Expository, Persuasive, Assessments).
- Assessment Scoring Rubric, Three-Term Student Tracking Sheet for Writing Traits and Teacher/Student Conference Sheet.

Appendix E: Student Tracking Sheet

Name: _____ Grade: _____ Date: _____

	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
Ideas/ Content	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Organization	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Voice	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Word Choice	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Sentence Fluency	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Conventions	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Overall Score	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

Date:

My writing strengths:	My writing goal:

Date:

My writing strengths:	My writing goal:

Date:

My writing strengths:	My writing goal:

2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8
Phone: 306-373-1660
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762
Fax: 306-374-1122
Email: mcdowell@stf.sk.ca

www.mcdowellfoundation.ca