

**A Teacher Study:  
Can more efficient organization make  
teaching writing easier?**

**By Charlene A. Tackvic**



**EDUC 602: Inquiry in Practice**

**Research Conducted in a Third Grade Classroom**

## Context

“Writing is a risk venture with no guarantees of success. If you count all your beginnings and false starts and throwaways, it has a low probability of success. This is the nature of exploring the unknown. This is the nature of making something where before there was a blank.”

- Poet John Caddy

As I look into the faces of many young writers, I think of Poet John Caddy’s remarks about writing. I think about my students the minute they are told to be creative and write; many of them show signs of fear and trepidations. Many adults also share in the fear of writing, and I happen to be one of them. This leads me to the topic of this paper. As a student of The College of New Jersey who is pursuing a Master’s Degree in Education, I am required to conduct teacher research. The research that I have to conduct has to evolve around a question, a question that I have about teaching. As I began my journey as a teacher researcher, I immediately thought about writing as a topic for exploration. Writing is one of the greatest causes of anxiety in my job. When writing on the blackboard, writing lesson plans, and writing notes to peers, parents, and/or administrators, I not only worry about my spelling, but also my grammar. I constantly think about the words who/whom, good/well, etc. Am I using them correctly? I say to myself, how can someone who has so much self doubt about writing, possibly teach children to write? I want to improve my instruction in this area so I am a more effective writing teacher. I also feel it necessary to delve into the topic of writing and the way I teach it because many of my students are so apprehensive to write and seem to struggle the most when asked to write.

Although I thought about many questions dealing with writing, the one aspect of writing that continuously came up was the topic of organization. Organization is related to so many aspects of my writing program, and one necessary area I need to improve upon. Because organization is one of my challenges when I teach writing, I decided to research the question: Can more efficient organization make teaching writing easier?

### My Quest to Become a Teacher

Teaching was not my first job as an adult even though it was what I wanted to do since second grade. When I met with my guidance counselor while in high school, I was told that there were too many teachers and it would be hard to get a job as a teacher. I was told I should be a secretary. Although I did work as a secretary, it was not my only career; I was also a restaurant assistant manager, a retail manager (children's clothing), and a realtor. Even though these jobs had their moments, they did not satisfy my adult aspirations. So at the age of twenty-six, I went back to college to become a teacher, and after close to ten years of going to school part-time, I graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelors of Arts Degree from Kean University.

### Where I Teach

Somerville School District

The town of Somerville is relatively a small town (2.4 square miles). It is the county seat with a very diverse population. Of the approximately 12,500

residents, 36% of the population is White, 33% of the population is Hispanic, 21% of the population is Black, and 11% of the population is Asian. Only 60% of the people in the homes in Somerville speak English as their first language. This makes for a very diverse population in the schools.

### Van Derveer Elementary School

Van Derveer Elementary School, the school where I teach, has students from kindergarten through fifth grade. The pupil population has approximately 800 students with students entering and exiting almost on a weekly basis. There are 61 teachers, and 19 instructional assistants. The average classes per grade are six, and the average class size is approximately 20 students.

### My Classroom

This year I have an inclusion class. Inclusion classes have students with special needs and general education students. My class consists of nineteen students; five students have special needs and fourteen students are general education students. One of the general education students is in the process of being classified. Three of the special needs students go to a resource room to be instructed by a special education teacher for math and language arts, and two of the special needs students are taught by the special education teacher for language arts only. The “perfect” model of an inclusion class is when the special education teacher comes into the classroom and teaches with the general education teacher. That model is not used in my classroom this year. I have an

instructional aide in my classroom for math, science, and social studies to make up for the fact that the special education teacher does not come into my classroom. This is not the same as having the knowledge of a special education teacher to confer with. During the social studies/science teaching block, all nineteen of my students are scheduled to be in my classroom. However, I never have all my students during any part of the day. Six of my general education students are pulled during science/social studies time to have extra reading help, six of my students have speech lessons during this time, and two of my students have occupational therapy during this time period.

#### How I Teach

I have been teaching third grade for all of my six years as a teacher. As a third grade teacher, I teach every subject. However, just because I teach every subject, does not mean I am an expert in every subject. I really do not think I am an expert in just one subject – I feel I am an expert in TEACHING. When I think of the word teacher, the first thing that comes to mind is teaching someone how to do something. I feel I am good at this. During the course of the day, I not only teach, but I also have to create an environment where learning can take place. I spend over six hours with nineteen students. I have to manage all my students, and solve their problems. A teacher can know all there is to know about a particular subject. However, if children are not in an environment where learning can take place, not a lot of learning will occur.

My classroom is a warm and inviting place. I try to make it an environment where all students can find success. I allow the students to be an integral part of what is decided in the classroom. They are given many choices. They are also held accountable for their actions. Providing an environment conducive to learning is something I feel I do very well (or should it be good?).

When I first began teaching, some of the things I had to teach, I had to learn shortly before teaching them. For example, in science I teach a unit on rocks. I had to learn all about metamorphic, igneous, and sedimentary rocks. I had to do this for many topics. Now, I am very comfortable teaching most topics. Writing, however, is one area where I still have apprehensions when I teach. A teacher needs to have confidence in the way he/she teaches writing in order to convey confidence in his/her students. This is where I feel the need for research.

### My Writing Program

The subject of writing is scheduled in my classroom during the last period of the day. The writing curriculum that I follow is closely connected to our reading series, Harcourt Brace. I am very fortunate because my principal allows teachers to incorporate many of their own resources for writing. Right now, I use a modified version of Writer's Workshop.

Writer's Workshop is a model used by many teachers. It is when teachers use a block of school time devoted entirely to writing. It involves the teaching of a process where students plan, draft, revise, and edit compositions. It begins,

most of the time, with the teacher presenting a mini-lesson. The mini-lesson can involve a short read aloud of a book, or part of a book, that demonstrates an author using a craft the teacher wants the children to learn. This is called using “craft lessons” or “author’s craft”. For example, every year I use the book, *There’s a Frog in My Throat: 440 Animal Sayings a Little Bird Told Me* to teach figurative language. After reading parts of the book aloud to the students, I ask my students to find sentences in the book that were funny or didn’t make complete sense to them. We then discuss figurative language. The students then try to “decode” the book. They have so much fun trying to figure out what the phrases actually mean. After the mini-lesson, students will then try to incorporate similar phrases into their writing.

Other resources for mini-lessons involve using samples of students’ writing to teach particular skills. Students love to see writing that other third graders wrote. They like to find ways to make the writing better. Using students’ writing is not only a great resource for teaching skills, but it is also a way for students to practice peer editing, another component to Writer’s Workshop.

Writer’s Workshop also involves student-teacher conferences. Students meet with the teacher to read what they are working on. The teacher acts as a guide. He/she questions the students about particular parts of their writing. The teacher is not supposed to “pick apart” everything that needs to be corrected. Depending on the skill level of the students, the teacher helps them make decisions about what to revise and/or edit in the writing.

Many days, Writer’s Workshop ends with children sharing a part of their writing. Students can’t wait for their day to be able to share a particular story or poem they are working on. Reading to the class is a great way for students to not only showcase their writing but also see what other students are doing with their writing.

Although I use many aspects of the Writer’s Workshop format, I do not use them consistently. This is why my research question is so important to my students and me. The way I organize many aspects of Writer’s Workshop needs to improve.

Shortly before beginning this research, a colleague and I applied for a grant in writing through the Somerville Education Association. The grant was titled, “Expanding the Writing Program.” My colleague, Christine Garot, also happens to be one of my research partners. The goal of this grant is to enhance our writing program through the use of craft lessons during Writer’s Workshop with a focus on organization of student materials. With the money we were awarded, we purchased many books for read alouds as well as several organizational items.

### Back to My Question

Before deciding on my research question, I worked closely with other teacher researchers – three of who became part of my research group. Three out of four of us, in my group, decided to research writing. This was very helpful, especially since Christine was part of my research group. Through the



exploration of my question: Can more efficient organization make teaching writing easier? I hope to not only improve the organizational skill of my students and me, but also lessen the fear and trepidations my students have when they are given a blank piece of paper and asked to write. If students' fears are lessened, their creativity should shine through!

## Literature Review

As I began to research my question, Can more efficient organization make teaching writing easier?, I had to research various types of writing programs that are used in various third grade settings throughout the United States. After reading about many different ways to teach writing, the one writing approach that I decided to base my writing program on is Writer's Workshop.

Although there are many educators who use and have written about Writer's Workshop, Lucy Calkins is one of the most well known authorities on the subject. Lucy Calkins is the founding director of the Teacher's College Writing Project at Columbia University in New York City. She was part of the initial Philadelphia Writing Project, which was one of the first writing projects in the country.

Just like I feel the need for change in my writing program, Lucy Calkins felt the need for change in the way she approached the writing workshop. In 1986, Calkins published the first edition of *The Art of Teaching Writing*. In the first edition, the following are her thoughts about the importance of teaching writing:

For me, it is essential that children are deeply involved in writing, that they share their texts with others, and that they perceive themselves as authors. I believe these three things are interconnected. A sense of authorship comes from the struggle to put something big and vital into print, and from seeing one's own printed words reach the ears and minds of readers (Calkins, 1986, p. 9).

In the second edition of *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Calkins states, "I've come to believe that authorship does not begin in the struggle to put something

big into print; rather, it begins in living with a sense of awareness” (Calkins, 1994, p. 3). She directs more attention to the importance of what the children are writing. She encourages teachers to allow ample time for students to explore ideas for writing. Calkins, like several other authors on the subject of writing, encourages students to use a journal or notebook to jot down thoughts and ideas for writing. She states, “When students become deeply involved in their writing, they don’t need motivating activities” (Calkins, 1994, p. 11).

Just like Calkins changed her approach to Writer’s Workshop, so must I. This is something I feel so necessary for my classroom, in order for my students to blossom as writers and for me to grow as a writing teacher. My focus of change, however, will be on organization. This study is not focusing on how I teach Writer’s Workshop, but on how I organize the way I teach Writer’s Workshop, and how I help the students organize their process of writing. The following quotes from Lucy Calkins’ book validate the importance of organization with Writer’s Workshop. Calkins states,

Our teaching changes when we turn our classrooms into writing workshops. Instead of planning each day’s new activities and assignments, we need to anticipate how we will initiate, scaffold, and guide the classroom community toward an ever-deepening involvement, and we need to select rituals, arrangements, and classroom structures (Calkins, 1994, p. 183).

Calkins goes on to share a story about an incident that happened to a fellow writing workshop teacher. She recalls an event that author Nancie Atwell talks about in her book, *In the Middle*. Nancie Atwell recalls the day Don Graves (another Writer’s Workshop guru) came to visit her classroom.

At the end of the day, Don came and stood in my doorway with his coat on, smiling. “What are you smiling about?” I asked.

“I’m smiling at you,” he said. “You know what makes you such a good writing teacher?”...

“What?” I asked.

And he answered, “You’re so damned organized” (Calkins, 1994, p. 185).

After their exchange of words, Don explained the following about Writer’s Workshop to Nancie.

“Look, he said. “You can’t teach writing this way if you’re not organized. This isn’t an open classroom approach, and you know it.”

Don Graves was right. The best workshop teachers value structure and organization (Calkins, 1994, p.185).

Even though most of the literature about Writer’s Workshop focuses on the process, many authors stress the importance of organization and classroom structure. Two other noted teachers and authors of Writer’s Workshop are Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi. In their book, *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*, they note the following, “This (writing) doesn’t happen by magic. It happens because teachers create a unique environment where students get to walk in the shoes of writers nearly every day” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. xi).

Organization, on the teacher’s part, is not just about organizing daily or weekly lesson plans. When Writer’s Workshop is used to teach writing, teachers need to consider many factors when planning the writing for the year. This is important to ensure that the entire language arts curriculum is taught during the year. Teachers must also organize mini-lessons so there are enough opportunities for all language skills to be presented throughout the school year (Rickards & Hawes, 2004).

When it comes to organizing the students, careful planning must be considered when deciding how to set up the way students organize their writing. Teachers cannot tell students one thing one day and then the next day tell them something different. Children need consistency, especially when it comes to their education. The author of the book, *6 + 1 Traits of Writing*, Ruth Culham devotes an entire section of her writing approach to organization. She states, “There is no single program to solve all of our organizational woes. Student writers need a whole array of organizational strategies from which to choose in order to make their idea(s) shine” (Culham, 2003, p. 73). Helping to organize my students will be a major part of my teacher research.

Although most writing teachers are in favor of the Writer’s Workshop approach, there are still some who believe it is not the best way to teach writing. Several who feel it is not the most beneficial way to teach writing happen to be publishers of language arts textbooks. If you look through many teachers’ manuals, writing is not presented though the Writer’s Workshop format. The language arts series used in my school, Harcourt Brace, encompasses a writing program geared towards the product. Every week the students are introduced to a new type of writing. Students are encouraged to begin the week brainstorming topics for a particular type of writing. By the end of the week, students should be at the point where they can publish a final copy.

For the first three years of my teaching career, I tried to follow this model. Children spent a lot of their writing time very frustrated. The writing program was too rigid and planned out. Many children were not able to complete a writing

piece in the time frame of one week, especially when other skills were also addressed during the language arts period. I found that students were less creative when they were told they must work on a specific style of writing.

This rigid format for teaching children writing did not work for me. The way I have taught Writer's Workshop in the past, however, has not completely worked for me either. During this research project I plan to fine tune my writing program and get both the students and me more organized. I am looking forward to seeing the children more motivated about their writing.

Ben Franklin once said, "Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing." I want to enable my students to be able to write something worth reading. In order for them to be able to do this, I need to create an atmosphere where worthwhile writing can take place. My hopes are that this teacher research process will help to make this to happen.

## **Methodology**

After numerous journal entries regarding the organization of my writing program and the way my students write and after having many discussions with Christine, I was ready to jump, no dive in, and begin my teacher research! Besides setting up my new writing program and meeting with my research group, my research involved many steps. I needed to conduct surveys, organize a writing area, implement new procedures, observe my students, and reflect on my new approach to teaching writing.

I was a little worried about starting a new program in April, but the students just finished taking the NJ Ask test and were excited to do something “different.” I started with conducting a student survey about school. My students numbered the subjects: math, reading, writing, science, and social studies according to how much they liked them. My hopes were that students would like writing more after implementing my new program.

I also felt a teacher survey would help me to design my new writing program. I designed a survey to be distributed to all first through fifth grade teachers in my school. Before I was able to administer the survey, however, I needed to get Board approval. Due to unforeseen circumstances, there was a major delay in distributing this survey. I did administer the survey, but I did not get the results until the very end of my teacher research. Although the results gave me some insight into what other teachers in my school do for writing, it did not help me with setting up my program. I will share the results with you in the Implications section.

Next, I set up an area in the classroom with materials for Writer's Workshop. I called it our Literature Center. It is an area where students can peer edit, read books to get ideas for writing, and find all necessary writing supplies. The writing supplies include: writing paper, editing materials, writing logs (see appendix), and graphic organizers for brainstorming and prewriting. There is also a book display area where all the books used during mini-lessons are kept.

After setting up the Literature Center, I introduced the Writer's Notebook to my students. After reading the second edition of Lucy Calkin's book, *The Art of Teaching Writing*, I was inspired to incorporate the Writer's Notebook into my Writer's Workshop. Calkins argues that writers need to do more than just brainstorm; they need to work through a process of development. She states,

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I saw writing as a process of choosing a topic, turning the topic into the best possible draft, sharing the draft with friends, then revising it. But I've come to think that it's very important that writing is not only a process of recording, it is also a process of developing a story or an idea. In this new edition I describe writing episodes that do not begin with a topic and a draft but instead with a noticing, a question. When writing begins with something that has not yet found its significance, it is more apt to become a process of growing meaning (Calkins, 1994, p. 8).

I did not give the students set rules for using the Writer's Notebook. They did not have to write sentences in their notebooks. I told the students to use the notebooks to record experiences, thoughts, memories, etc. I hoped the students would use the notebooks to help inspire them to write creative stories.

After the students spent time using their Writers' Notebooks, they were given new binders. The binders were the key to organizing my students. Prior to



my new writing program, students had one folder where they kept everything for writing. With the implementation of my new writing program, each student was given a binder to organize all his or her writing materials. The binders are divided into five sections. There are sections for writing logs (see appendix), writing in progress, resources (informational sheets from mini-lessons, etc.), a section for works of writing the students are not presently working on, and a section for a thesaurus and spelling book.

The next step before beginning my new program was to prepare mini-lessons for teaching writing. Books are an excellent resource for teaching writing skills. My goal, during the course of this research project, was to create new mini-lessons that utilized the books I received from my writing grant. After creating the mini-lessons I made an index of the lessons I created and cross-reference them with the specific writing skills and books. The following is an example of one of the lessons I created for using more creative words. I used the book *Andy Shane and the Very Bossy Dolores Starbuckle*. This book is an excellent book for teaching word choice. The use of rhyming words and vivid verbs present many opportunities to discuss word use when writing. Although this is only be the beginning of my collection, it will make planning and preparation for mini-lessons so much more organized.

Before I could implement my new writing program, I needed to decide on a schedule for conducting conferences. It was important to create a conference schedule that both my students and I were comfortable with. Conferencing is one of the most difficult parts of Writer's Workshop. It is so hard to meet all

students' needs during this time. Students tend to write what they consider a complete story and want a conference immediately. They have a difficult time revising and editing writing without constant prompts for revisions. My hope for my new conference schedule was to meet with each student at a scheduled time each week. The first half of my conferencing time would be for my scheduled conferences and the second half of my conferencing time would be for students who needed editing before writing the final copies of their writing. The scheduled conferences would be posted in the classroom and there would be a sign-up sheet for unscheduled conferences. In between each scheduled and non-scheduled conference, I would meet with students who signed up for a quick question. (There would be a dry erase board for students to use to sign-up for quick questions.)

The last step needed before beginning my new program was to create a Writer's Workshop schedule. My schedule is extremely tight during the language arts period (see appendix). I have to teach writing, spelling, grammar, and prepare for state testing. I don't have enough time in my schedule to conduct Writer's Workshop every day, so I decided to conduct Writer's Workshop three days out of my six-day schedule. This schedule would allow the students three hours of creative writing a week. Spelling, testing practice, and other language arts skills will be taught the other two days. Having a specific time set aside for creative writing is not only important for the students, but will also give me structure.

After much anticipation, my new Writer's Workshop began full swing. My research was now ready to take on a new aspect. I continued to journal, continued to meet with Christine and the rest of my research group, and observed, observed, observed!

## **Findings**

Through observing, journaling, surveying, and coding all the collected data, I found three major things out about my writing program, my students, and myself. Being more organized made it easier to teach writing, using author's craft inspired more creative writing, and with the implementation of my new writing program, students were more interested in writing.

The key to organizing the students was the use of binders to keep all their writing materials together. The students were so excited about using the binders. They created poems about themselves as writers and put them on the front covers of their binders (see appendix). The student logs allowed me to know what everyone was doing and kept the students on track. The sections for "writing in progress" and "writing on hold" kept the students' writing organized, and the resource and reference sections helped the students keep all their helpful information in one place.

My conference schedule and conference logs helped both the students and me. The students were able to know what day of the week they had a set conference. They not only had a set conference schedule, they were also able to sign up for specific conferences. I was able to track students' progress on a weekly basis. I wrote notes on the logs to record what was discussed during the conferences. This was an excellent way to keep track of the skills the students were working on and the progress they made.

My new literature center was another great way to keep the classroom organized. There was a place for everything. The students knew where

everything was. There was no need to interrupt me during a conference. Everything had a place and the students could find things independently.

The last key component to my organizational system was the cataloging of the books I used for my mini-lessons. Having received over 30 new books from my writing grant was very exciting, and the fact that I was researching writing at the same time was very helpful too! It made me really critique my program and look for new ways to make it better. Having so many resources was a blessing, but if I had not been working on teacher research at the same time I might not have made such good use of all the materials I received.

Reading all the new books and planning lessons that maximized the use of the new materials was quite a daunting task. I conducted several Internet searches on various lessons that teachers already created for the many books that I had received. I then created a list of the skills that I cover in my third grade language arts curriculum. I cross-referenced the skills with the various books I received, therefore creating a great resource for mini-lessons. I now had a reference sheet to use for mini-lessons.

The following is an example of one way I used my organized reference sheet. One day during conferences, three students that I met with were having a difficult time making their writing more descriptive. The next day, I taught a mini-lesson on descriptive language. I used the book *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen. Because I had catalogued my books, I knew right away what book would be good for teaching a mini-lesson on descriptive language. The use of author's craft makes learning writing skills more real for the students. They love imitating

authentic authors, and the students have a library of exemplary writing. All books that I use for mini-lessons are kept in a special bookstand so the students can easily refer back to them when they are writing. They can also enjoy the books again during Independent Reading. As students read more, their writing should progressively get better.

Students' writing was much more creative and interesting with the new writing program. Experts might argue saying I cannot prove that my new writing program is the reason why the students writing is more creative, but having compared my students' writing from September through March before I implemented my new writing program and then comparing their writing from April to June, the difference is so noticeable it only makes sense to believe it is from the new program.

The exposure to much more literature, I believe, has made a huge impression on my students. The following is a journal entry from May 14, 2007.

I can't believe how much the children are talking about figurative language! Every time the students or I use figurative language, they keep pointing it out. This morning they kept stopping me during a reading lesson while we were reading the book *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*. They kept commenting on the figurative language in the story. Later during Writer's Workshop, I looked through several students' writing and noticed Susie, Jennifer, and Lucas were all using figurative language throughout their stories.

This is just one example of the increase in creativity in the students' writing.

Another positive change I noticed in many students' writing was the use of dialogue. Many more students were experimenting with dialogue. I attribute this also to the use of author's craft. Many of the books I use during mini-lessons

have a great deal of dialogue. The students were starting to model this. I can attribute this to the use of literature because students who are unsure of how to use dialogue when they write usually refer to the Mini-Lesson Library to make sure they are using quotations correctly. The following is an excerpt from a conversation two of my students had in early June. Randy said to Keisha, “Why don’t you get the book, *Punctuation Takes a Vacation*, to help you with your writing. There is a lot of dialogue in that story.”

Comments like this were constantly going on in my classroom. It was hard, at first, to get used to discussions going on during writing time, but the discussions, for the most part, were about writing. The children were excited to write – they were excited to talk about writing!

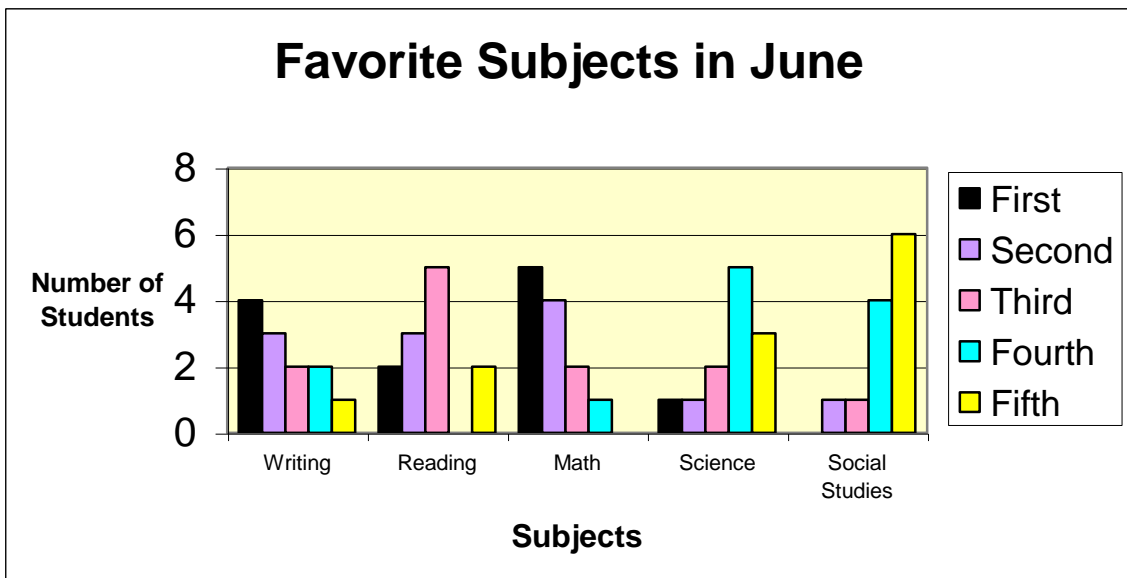
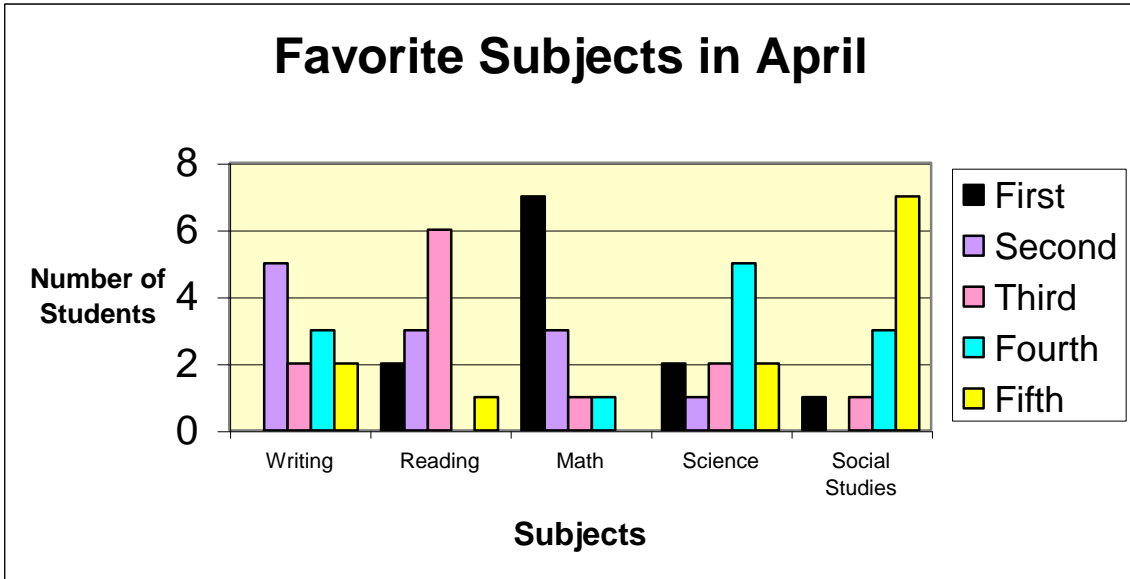
My third, and probably most important finding from this research project, was the realization of how excited my students were about writing. After implementing my new program, students couldn’t wait to write. They would ask me when they were done with their math work if they could write. They would ask me if they could write instead of reading during Independent Reading. During Science and Social Studies the students asked if they could work in their writing binders if they finished their work. It was contagious. One student would take out his/her binder during a time other than Writer’s Workshop and all of a sudden three more students were asking me if they could write too! On the days when Writer’s Workshop wasn’t scheduled, at least half my class would ask if they could write.

Adding the use of Writer's Notebook to my writing program increased many students' excitement about writing. It really motivated some of my students. The first day the students got the books, we went outside to brainstorm. My class sat in a circle and we wrote for about ten minutes. We wrote about anything that came to mind. After about ten minutes, we shared the one thing we wrote that might inspire us to write a story. Abigail, one of my students, stated the following, "I wrote about a butterfly. I kept watching this butterfly. It made me wonder what it is like to be a butterfly. I am going to write a story about the life of a butterfly."

One of my classified students who dreaded writing was so excited about the Writer's Notebook, he asked if he could take it home with him over the weekend. He was going camping and wanted to write about his trip. Knowing that he didn't have to write complete sentences took away his apprehension for writing. He came in on Monday with 100 entries! He was so excited. He asked everyday if he could bring it home. A student, who never liked to write, was taking his writing home. The students were also allowed to write in their Writers' Notebooks in pen! (In third grade, pen is not often used. The students think it is so exciting to use a pen!)

Observations weren't the only way I could see students were excited about writing. This was also noticeable through the surveys that I conducted. The survey that I took during the beginning of my teacher research and at the end of the school year about favorite subjects shows the following results:





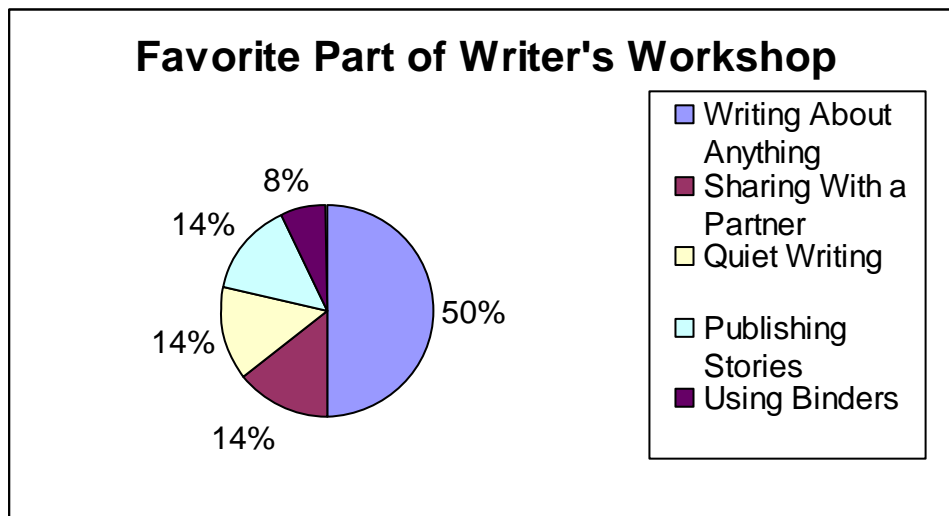
Not one student picked writing as his/her favorite subject before I implemented my new writing program. However, at the end of the school year, four students chose writing as their favorite subject. In April three students picked writing second to last and two students picked it as their least favorite subject. In June only two students chose writing second to last and only one

student picked it as their least favorite subject. I was very excited about these results. What I hoped would occur, did. My students liked writing!

## Implications

What does all this mean, and what am I going to do with this information? To me, as a classroom teacher, it means many things. For one, teacher research is a valuable tool. If I had not conducted this research, I would not have made such progress in changing my writing program. Every year I have good intentions to work on my writing program, but every year I make very little change. This year is a different story. My writing program had a complete face-lift, and my students noticed the differences. The following are the results of an opinion survey I conducted during the last week of school.

The students' responses to the question, "What is your favorite part of writing time in class?" The students shared the following responses.



Fifty percent of the students said their favorite part of Writer's Workshop was the fact that they could write about anything they wanted to write about. This was a major change in my new program. Although I implemented some of Writer's Workshop procedures in my old program, the one thing the students had to do with my previous program was to write specific styles of writing. For

example, in September, all students had to write personal narratives. In October, all students had to write descriptive paragraphs. Next year I will not be so rigid with the styles of writing the students will be expected to write. I will, however, introduce and model all types of writing; I will not force the students to publish every type of writing. The students will work on many different kinds of writing, but they will be able to choose which ones they publish.

Another question I asked the students at the end of the year was, "What would you change about the new writing program?" The following were the responses.



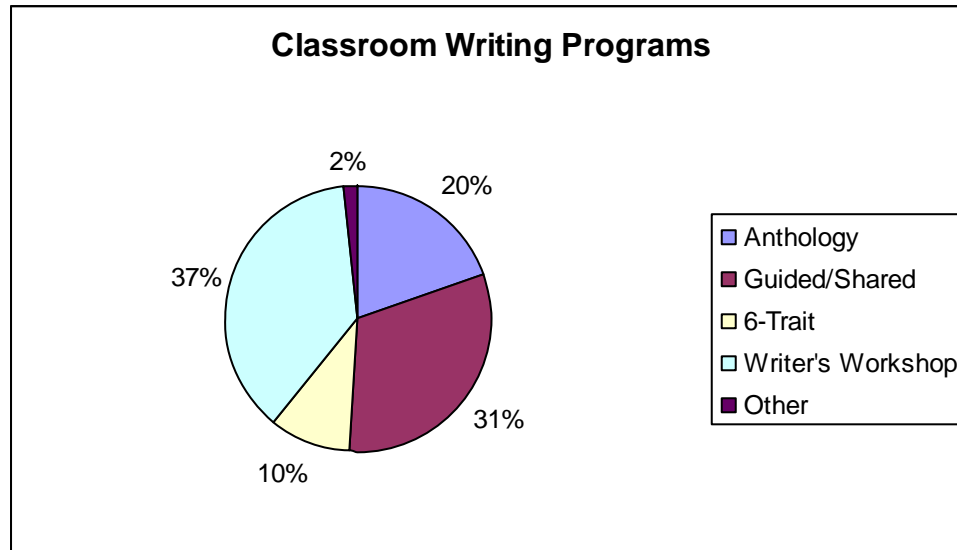
Half of the class said that they wouldn't change anything! This was very exciting to read. The other two main responses had to do with having more time to write. This shows me that the students really enjoyed their time in class writing.

The twenty-seven percent response stating that they would like more time for conferences shows me this is an area I need to keep a close eye on next year. Conferencing is one of the most challenging parts of Writer's Workshop. If I had time for it, most students would request a conference everyday. Some would even like more than one conference a day!

I feel like I have done so many things with this information already! I have completely changed the way I teach writing. I have also become much more confident in my approaches to writing and this has really shown in my classroom. Next year will only get better. I will have the opportunity to start using Writer's Workshop during the first week of school. My students will be fortunate enough to benefit from this new program for the entire school year.

I will also continue to add to my collection of mini-lessons. I have already continued with my organization of the literature I have to share with my students. I brought several new books home for the summer so I can read through them and create new ways to teach writing skills.

Although not every teacher in my school utilizes the Writer's Workshop approach, many do. Information from the teacher survey that did not get distributed until the last weeks of school shows that thirty-seven percent of teachers in my school do use Writer's Workshop in some form.



This information solidifies my findings that Writer’s Workshop works. If thirty-seven percent of teachers use it, it must work!

Although there were some obstacles along the way, they were minor. The most significant obstacle was the fact that the students had to complete Young Authors’ Books for a program that takes place in our school every year. Writer’s Workshop could not be used fully during this process because every student had to have a specific type of book published by a certain date. This problem will be simple to overcome next year because I will start in September. Every student will be aware that they have to publish a book for Young Author’s Week. I will give them more choice. They will be able to publish one of the books they worked on during Writer’s Workshop. It will not be a rush the last few weeks of May like it was this year. The Students (and me) will be prepared for this well in advance.

Although I have some emerging question from this process, I feel they are questions that most any teacher would have while teaching Writer’s Workshop. I

wonder if the students in my class, next year, will enjoy Writer's Workshop as much as my students enjoyed it this year. I also wonder if I will continue to be less and less apprehensive about teaching writing. After conducting this short study, I already feel better about myself as a writing teacher. My hopes are to continue to improve my writing program and my skills as a writing teacher.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this was a very rewarding process. Although I will not conduct research to the extent that I did this year (I'll probably do everything except THIS PAPER!), I plan to use the steps in this process to look at and improve other areas of my teaching. I made great strides as a writing teacher this year. My students really grew as writers too. They not only grew as writers, they also developed much more strategies to become more creative writers. As I stated earlier, writing is a process. The process continues until the writer is satisfied with the product. Like Supreme Court Justice Louis Dembitz Brandeis once said, "There is no great writing, only great rewriting" (BrainyMedia 2007). Writing needs continue reworking and development. Hopefully, I instilled this in my students this year. I hope they continue to grow as writers. I know I will!



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## **Appendices**

### **Implementation**

I have always been the kind of teacher to share new ideas and teaching strategies with others. I think it is so important for teachers to work together in order to make learning, for children, as exciting and innovative as possible. I have also always taken a step back and looked at what I taught and how it worked. The following are just some ways I plan to continue the process of research and share my findings.

#### **Students**

First and foremost, I will continue to share my finding with my students. They are the ones who have benefited mostly from this process. I always let my students know I am not perfect. Sharing my fear of writing eases the minds of many of my students. I tell them it is okay to be apprehensive when it comes to writing. I then share all my tricks I have learned along the way. Having conducted teacher research has only given me more strategies to share with my class.

I will also share with my students the strategy of setting goals. Every September I ask my students to write things they would like to achieve during the school year. I will share how setting goals during my teacher research and my quest to get my Master's Degree has made me a better teacher.

Finding what works is something else I have learned through this research process and something I will discuss with my students. I always let my students know that there is more than one way to accomplish tasks. This became very apparent to me throughout my research. Many teachers use Writer's Workshop in their classroom. However, not one teacher does it exactly the same as another teacher. I will use this as an example when discussing how to get things done with my students.

### **Reflection**

I also plan to continue to journal on the topic of writing. Students are different every year. I can't expect that everything I did this year is going to turn out the same way next year. I need to continue to develop new strategies and continue to meet the needs of all my learners.

Reflection is a necessary part of a teacher's job. It is a way to stay motivated and really see what is working and what needs a little fine-tuning. Teachers who do the same thing year after year become stagnant. And believe me, it reflects in their students. I never plan on being one of those teachers!

### **Study Group**

Meeting with my research group was very effective. The discussions that took place during these meetings were very insightful. I would like to continue to meet with a study group next year. I plan on contacting the teachers I surveyed who responded that they use Writer's Workshop in their classroom. Christine

and I would like to implement a monthly study group. Our hopes are for teachers to share new ideas as well as discuss things that are not working out perfectly in the classroom. Also, being able to bounce ideas around with other teachers is advantageous to all who participate!

Another aspect of Writer's Workshop that we would like to share with other teachers is our collection of mini-lessons. Wouldn't it be wonderful if teachers would bring their best mini-lesson ideas to each meeting and share them with the group? This would greatly benefit the children at our school.

### **Professional Development Academy**

Working at Van Derveer Elementary School has many benefits, one of them being the Professional Development Academy. Every year teachers, mostly within our district, present workshops. I have had the opportunity to present many workshops since I have been teaching at Van Derveer. The topic of Writer's Workshop will definitely be on my list to present in the upcoming years. I would like to share the findings from this research. One aspect of my research I feel will be very beneficial to other teachers at my school is the organizational strategies I developed during the course of this study. Many teachers are always looking for new ways to make managing the classroom easier and more "kid friendly." All my students enjoyed the organizational strategies I used with my class, this year. They couldn't wait to use all the materials that I supplied.

## **Publication**

Although I know I am not to this point yet, one day I hope to share my insights with an educational magazine. As my confidence in writing improves, I plan on writing about some of my experiences as a teacher. This research project will definitely be one of the topics I will share. Teachers, whether they know it or not, are researchers everyday in the classroom. It is the nature of our job. We need to constantly monitor the way children respond to our teaching methods. I hope to continue with my journaling and wish to one day put it in print to share with other educators.

## **Subjectivity**

What did I learn about myself throughout this entire process? Wow, this is a little tricky. I learned so many things!

For starters, I learned I CAN WRITE! Using the strategies that I teach the children helps me become a better writer too. I find it is important for me to practice what I preach! I need to get my thoughts and ideas down like the students do using their Writer's Notebook and brainstorming organizers. I need to continue to write and rewrite and then write a little more. Writing is a continuous process for me. I spent a solid three weeks writing, reflecting, and rewriting this research paper. Writing doesn't necessarily come easy to me, but in the end, it is a rewarding process.

I also found I work well when I work with other people. I like to share my thoughts and ideas with my colleagues. Having met several times with my research group, and meeting (and still meeting) with my research buddy, Christine, on almost a daily basis, made the process of teacher research a rewarding task. I even met with teachers in my school that had conducted teacher research previously. It wasn't such a daunting task with the support of colleagues, especially when I set deadlines with my group. Knowing I would be meeting with my group made me stick to my plans (for the most part). It helped me stay focused.

Goal setting was another positive aspect of this project. When people set goals, they are more apt to achieve their goals. I had to set many goals throughout my journey of teacher research. The research plan was especially

beneficial to me. It made me really think out the road for my research. My plan was organized by weekly goals. Although I did not meet every goal during the proposed week, I kept pretty close to schedule. Even though I set goals for my students through objectives and lesson plans, I don't do it enough in other areas of my teaching. This is something I plan to do more of in the future.

I also realized (Well, really I already knew it.) I like change! During the process of my research plan I had to change many aspects of my writing program. I had to change the way the students organized their writing things. I also had to reorganize my classroom. I had to make room for a new and improved writing center and I had to create a Mini-Lesson Library. I enjoyed changing all these things. Teachers are always a little confused when they enter my classroom during the school year. Something is always moved around – my classroom usually looks different. I don't know if all my students adjust well to my changes, but there is usually a lot of excitement when the students walk in the classroom and things are different. I always tell them they have to go on an adventure to find out where things are. It makes the year more exciting.

I not only changed the look of my classroom, I also changed the way I teach writing. This is something I am constantly doing and will continue doing. Conducting teacher research made me realize I have really been a teacher researcher all along; I just haven't written about it.

I also like reflection. It is such an important part of a teacher's job. Whether conducting teacher research or not, I am constantly reflecting on methods and strategies I use in my classroom. Reflecting on things I have done

in the classroom and thinking about new ways to present information is a thing I do constantly. I am constantly thinking of new ideas while driving home from school and even while taking a shower! During the course of my research I found a new way to brainstorm ideas, through reflection of my journal. Although my research is coming to an end, I plan to continue the process of reflection. It keeps me centered, balanced, and fresh.

And finally, I AM CREATIVE! I always associated creativity with being artistic. I am definitely not artistic, but I am very creative. My reflections throughout 510, 601, and 602 made me realize just how creative I am. I guess you really can't be a teacher if you're not creative. Teachers need to be creative on an hourly basis. It is an essential part of our job.

If I had to sum up my feelings in one sentence about what I learned about myself through the process of teacher research, I would have to say, "I love teaching!" I love the challenges that I am confronted with on a daily basis. All of the endless hours of work and sleepless nights are worth it. To see the excitement on a child's face when he/she finally makes a connection or discovers something new is something not every person gets to experience. The process of teacher research made me realize that even more.





Name \_\_\_\_\_

### My Daily Writing Log

Date	Title or Topic	What Did I Do?	What's Next?

## Example of Student Name Poem for Binders

Kathy

The writer

Daughter of Mary Anne

Who likes to pretend she is a teacher

Brings to the world her kindness

Lover of kittens

Who fears forgetting to do her homework

Who knows a whole lot about multiplication

And desperately wants to be a teacher

Wouldn't be caught dead cheating

Dreams about going to Disney World

And needs people to care about her

Smith

**Charlene Tackvic**  
**2006 – 2007 Schedule**  
**Room: C-29**

Times	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
8:45 – 9:00	Do Now, Attendance, Lunch Count, Pledge					
9:00 – 10:15	Mathematics					
10:15 – 10:55	Phys. Ed. Mr. Petrill	Art D38	Phys. Ed. Mr. Petrill	Music D46	Phys. Ed. Mr. Petrill	Media Ed B25
10:55 – 12:00	Reading					
12:00 – 12:45	LUNCH					
12:45– 1:45	1:00 – 1:40 Computer Lab B24	Social Studies	Health / Language Arts	Social Studies	Science	1:00 – 1:45 Science Lab B23
			1:40 – 2:20 Enrichment			
1:45 – 2:45	Language Arts		Spanish	Language Arts		
2:45 – 3:00	Dismissal					

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### **Subject Survey**

***Directions:*** What is your favorite subject? Number the subjects according to your preference (how you like them). Put a 1 next to the subject you like the most, a 2 next to the subject you like next, etc.

- \_\_\_ math
- \_\_\_ reading
- \_\_\_ writing
- \_\_\_ social studies
- \_\_\_ science