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Write On: The Journey of a Fifth Grade Classroom
To Achieve Quality Writing
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Abstract

This qualitative research study examined the observed and reported experiences of twenty-six fifth grade students in an inclusive classroom when authentic writing experiences were implemented into the writing curriculum. In order to help students demonstrate increased proficiency in writing, as well as an improved attitude towards writing tasks, students were immersed in a balanced curriculum of direct instruction and inquiry based learning. Participating in writing workshops, engaging and motivating writing tasks, utilizing mentor texts, peer editing, and teacher conferences, students began to write more frequently, more independently, and in greater quantity. Data were gathered regularly through the use of student surveys, student writing samples, and formative assessments. Through analyzing these data, it became evident that an increased opportunity to respond, in combination with varied instructional styles and activities led to increased levels of proficiency on writing tasks, student confidence, and student enjoyment.
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Researcher Stance

It is a Monday morning early in the school year. I have vowed to give my students my best for yet another academic year, and in doing so have made promises to myself and them to be more patient, more kind, and above all else, more engaging than I was in the years previous. It is nearing the end of my Reading and Language Arts block, and I know I have to tackle a writing skill. This task seems insurmountable to me, I have so many struggling readers and writers, and I wonder where and how I can begin to grab their attention, and make an impression that will last.

I ask my students to perform a simple task, “Boys and girls, please take out your writing journals. I have a big job for you today. Please, write me one paragraph describing how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Do you all think you can do that?” Giggles from the audience begin to rise; my students laugh and shout things like “Miss, that’s an easy job.” In my mind I am only hoping that they do what I have predicted. As they continue to write, I grab for my bag of goodies, and on a table in front of them begin to pull out the materials to create a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. When the students have finished writing, I ask several volunteers to read their paragraphs to me aloud, and I am pleased to find they have done just what I had predicted.
As my first volunteer reads his paragraph, I follow his directions exactly, and create a sandwich. I first hold a piece of bread, then he tells me to put peanut butter on top, so without a knife, using my hands, I do. He then tells me to put jelly on top, so, I do just that, again with no knife using my hands. He finishes by telling me to eat and enjoy, so I oblige and take a few bites, having never placed the second piece of bread on the sandwich. The students are near hysterics now looking at their teacher with messy hands and left over bread. So, I ask them what went wrong. They begin shouting out details to me that were missing. I ask them if they’d like to change their writing pieces, and with hurried hands they begin busily writing, and I think, maybe, just maybe I’ve done it.

With this simple task under my belt, I feel the familiar butterflies of excitement in my own stomach. Could it be this simple, do my students lack the background knowledge necessary to be enthusiastic writers? I quickly begin to wonder how I can bring this type of simple experience to my students with not just how-to writing pieces, but with all writing. How can I allow my students to physically engage with authentic experiences throughout all of their writing units?

Looking back on my own educational career, I do not remember being taught how to write details, or to use exciting vocabulary words. There were no “said is dead” posters in my classrooms or word grave yards. So, the question remains; how did I learn these things, how were my elementary teachers able to
assign and receive research papers that were written with appropriate grade level skills? Teachers gave us experiences. We took field trips; we walked to the local library; we read books together and had the time to write about them. I had a diary, and I had grandparents who valued education and reading for all purposes. A father who helped me with summer reading well into my high school years, and a mother who loved to spend sunny afternoons reading on the sand. These things, in combination, are what I attribute for not just my ability to write, but for my love of writing. My quest is to bring that same passion and ability to my students.

However, today I am a teacher of 25 fifth grade students who do not take many field trips, who do not have library cards, and whose home lives vary from supportive parents to non-parents. So when the pressure is on to meet yearly gains in reading and math, and I know that writing results will not be counted against me, I like many other teachers must admit that I allow this task to fall by the way side. I give in to the pressures to conform and test and forget how important it will one day be for my students to communicate as writers. Sure, I can give them the basics, teach them about paragraph structure, and edit their work asking them to correct mistakes I have found, but I know that this is the minimum necessary, and it is far from inspiring. My students enter my classroom with an inability to write cohesive pieces of high quality. Up until the point of this action research study, I implemented the district provided curriculum and minimum writing interventions. My students hated writing, and frankly, their writing did not improve very much
throughout the year. Those who were strong writers remained strong writers, and those who underperformed continued to do so.

I was interested in determining the observed and reported experiences when authentic writing experiences were implemented into a fifth grade inclusive classroom’s writing curriculum. As a result of providing my students with more interactive and engaging writing experiences, such as journaling, writing workshops, and varied prompt styles, I expected that my students would become more engaged and proficient writers. I hoped that I would see an increase in the use of adjectives and adverbs. I hoped to see an increase in both the number and type of sentences used by my students. Furthermore, and perhaps most personally important to me, I hoped to see student attitudes toward writing change and grow to a positive degree.

I know that it is a possibility that my anticipate outcomes might not be a reality at the end of this journey. It will be difficult to reach every student within my classroom. Every student is different, and for many writing is simply not a preferred task. Furthermore, in an inclusive setting I have several special needs students for whom writing is an area of struggle and anxiety. At this early stage of the school year, I have already had students simply refuse to write. It will be important for me to remain open to the idea of unexpected outcomes within this study, and to remember that while seeing what I hoped for would be an amazing
experience, I can learn just as much from challenges along the way. Through research and a qualitative study, I hope to create enthusiastic proficient writers within my classroom.


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Literature Review

Introduction

The task of teaching and learning writing is a difficult one, which has been made clear by a plethora of researchers, and data from the National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP). Brunstein and Glaser (2011) suggests that many students never ascertain proficiency in written expression, and even fewer achieve an advanced level of mastery of writing skills. Put simply, NAEP data from 2003 demonstrate clearly that the writing of students in this nation is “not what it should be” (Grahm & Perin, 2007). Since that study, the disappointing results of the NAEP have continued to be dismal for the youth in our country. As of 2011, roughly 75% of students in the United States performed below the proficient range on a standardized writing assessment, with females outperforming males in both eighth and twelfth grades (NAEP 2012). Furthermore, students in both the eighth and twelfth grades overwhelmingly identified writing as an unfavorable activity, with 56% of students responding with “disagree,” or “strongly disagree” when presented with the statement “writing is one of my favorite activities” (NAEP 2012).

The information garnered from the Nation’s Report Card concurs with the experience portrayed in the work of Linda Christensen (2009), who writes, “It is not uncommon for a student to write without a punctuation mark on the page. But
just because a student lacks skills doesn’t mean they lack intelligence” (p. 2). This rings especially true when considering our nation’s latest push to reach proficiency in so many areas. Students who do not reach the proficient benchmark are seen as needing to be fixed. Christensen warns that when we view students in this manner, we “invariably design curriculum that erases students’ home language and culture,” and ultimately our attempts to correct their failures may lead them to resist any attempts to engage in meaningful learning (Christensen 2009, p.2).

With high stakes testing at the forefront of the minds of educators, administrators, parents, and students alike, the age of the creative classroom has been largely left behind. In the era of No Child Left Behind, writing can be a didactic task, one that may often be difficult to make multidimensional in a classroom. According to the work of Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2004), “the focus is now on accountability rather than the diagnosis of learning for instructional purposes” (p. 310). Students must be presented with lessons that amp up the creativity, and leave the monotonous task of responding to a reading passage or singular writing prompt behind. As the research of Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2004) further suggests, “students can perform admirably on formalized writing tests with instruction based on best practices rather than explicit teaching to the test” (p. 310). In order to effectively teach writing,
educators must develop a comprehensive program that addresses the whole student including their interests and need for experience.

**Comprehensive Writing Curricula**

Effective writing requires numerous varied skills including the production and recognition of letters and words, generation of ideas, mastery and utilization of grammar and mechanics, planning, evaluation, and revision (McCurdy et al. 2008). Although students must use each of these skills in unison, currently writing curricula are taught in segmentation. McCurdy et. al have conducted a significant study portraying the importance of creating a Comprehensive Writing Program (CWP), and have determined that sizeable gains can be made in the areas of acquisition and maintenance of writing skills when students are provided with multifaceted writing programs.

Writing curricula must address the whole student, as well as honor the learning process. A CWP accomplishes this by acknowledging the fact that students will not become better writers, let alone passionate writers, without writing. However, the research study of McCurdy et al. (2008) also states that the mastery of writing skills occurs at the point when students become functional writers, and so, once students are responding, classroom procedures should be implemented to allow students to do so in a more efficient and accurate manner across tasks. Therefore, teachers must create a balance between direct instruction and constant writing. Throughout the course of the study conducted by McCurdy
et al. teachers utilized a combination of direct instruction, increased opportunity to respond, motivation, and individual feedback to strengthen student writing. Between four to five times per week students participated in a CWP intervention period during which teachers used a short direct instruction lesson to teach the writing process. Following this instruction, teachers provided students with a choice of writing prompts, and students wrote. When a target skill was met by the students, the class moved into a new area of direct writing instruction, and the process was repeated.

When compared to the baseline, each class in the study was able to increase target skill performance in the areas of complete sentences, adjectives, and use of compound sentences. As a result of this important research, it is clear that when teachers expose students to a mixture of teaching the writing process in a direct instruction mode, and are given the opportunity to write in a meaningful way, the production of accurate fluent writing skills can increase.

Teaching students the writing process is a monumentally important task. All too often, teachers view their students’ writing as a finished product, as Don Murray has stated, students’ writing is viewed and “attacked” as if it is literature. Of course, most students have not produced a perfect piece of literature, and according to Murray, teachers’ “attacks” on student writing “does little more than confirm their lack of self-respect for their work and themselves” (p.1). Don Murray insists that teachers should begin to view writing as an ongoing process.
He defines the process of writing as “exploration of what we should know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world. Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, glory in its unfinishedness, and work with language in action (p. 2-3).”

While it is important not to criticize student work too soon, it is also important that students become proficient writers. According to the work of Olinghouse, Zheng, and Morlock (2012), today’s students are required to be proficient writers no matter the profession they choose. Academic writing is no longer just school-place monotony; students must leave their K-12 schooling with a firm grasp of how to write in a professional manner. This may include, but is not limited to the ability to “demonstrate, support, refine, and extend their learning and knowledge” in various forms in post-secondary educational settings and the workplace (p. 97).

In order to publish written assignments, students must demonstrate the ability to move fluidly through the writing process. Like many other subjects, it is necessary that teachers educate students in the entire process from idea generation through publishing. According to Dunn and Finley, authors of Children’s Struggles with the Writing Process, small successes are key in guiding students toward becoming proficient writers. Dunn and Finley suggest that teachers should
offer both direct and explicit instruction in each phase of the writing process to their students prior to asking them to publish a final product. These low levels of success will allow students who have had little to no success with writing in the past to confidently move forward throughout the curriculum (Dunn & Finley, 2010, p. 33).

In order to help students navigate a writing curriculum effectively, it is vital that educators garner a clear understanding of writing instruction that will provide meaningful experiences for their students. According to the research of the Educational Testing Services (ETS), many teachers give students writing topics for which they have little to no time to “think deeply,” have little information or background knowledge, and have very little “incentive” to complete (Deane, 2011, p. 2). In order to combat these issues, ETS researchers suggest that teachers conceptualize approaches to teaching writing that create meaningful “learning experiences” for students, while providing authentic opportunities for formative and summative assessment for educators (Deane, 2011). *The Art of Teaching Writing* further supports this idea by stating that writing does not begin with “desk work, but with lifework” (Calkins, 1994, p. 3). Calkins passionately defends the autonomy of teachers and notes that students and teachers must embark on the writing journey via the vessel of meaningful experience. She states, “Writing allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it. We grow a piece of writing not only by jotting notes and writing
rough drafts, but also by noticing, wondering, remembering, questioning, yearning” (Calkins, 1994, p.8). Through the use of writing workshops, a teacher has the powerful means to provide students with the occasion to notice, wonder, question, and yearn.

**Writing Workshop**

An integral piece of a Comprehensive Writing Program, writing workshops may be used as a way to increase the authenticity and importance of writing for students within the classroom by providing an audience for their writing. Writing workshops can be implemented within the classroom to create a writing community for students through which their written expression is given a purpose, and their creativity is given a voice. The idea of workshops was first generated as an important way for apprentices to work at the sides of master craftsmen to learn and important skill. Writing workshops offer the same ideals if teachers implement them well, according to Fletcher and Portalupi, authors of *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*. In a writing workshop, students will often begin by observing a brief lesson on an explicit skill, then will move into a period of independent writing, and will often end by coming together to share their work (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). However, perhaps the most powerful aspect of a writing workshop is that it places students in the role of author for an extended period of time daily. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) confirm, “the core of a workshop – the heart, the marrow – is kids putting words on paper” (p. 3).
Writing workshops are valuable classroom tools because they promote a climate of authorship within the elementary classroom. According to Fletcher and Portalupi, “kids in writing workshops do see themselves as writers. They develop a genuine feel for writing – its power and purpose. They know what it means to write for themselves…but they also know what it means to write for an audience of interested readers” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. xi). Through providing students with specific writing interventions, and authentic writing experiences, workshops allow students to learn the material necessary to be functional writers, and experience the feedback and response of an audience to become passionate writers.

**Specific Writing Interventions**

Specific writing interventions play a strong role in the CWP. Interventions, used during writing workshops provide teachers and students with valuable learning tools. The pedagogy of written expression should, like any other academic area, have measurable objectives. While incorporating authentic experiences is important and valuable, it is also essential that teachers provide students with specific writing interventions in order to improve students’ targeted writing skills. In order to measure achievement in written expression, Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, and Lovelace suggest using curriculum-based measurement (CBM). This involves a self-regulatory process of having students count the
number of words in their writing (Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, 2009, p.217).

When trying to improve the quantity and quality of student writing it is vital to have an intervention that lends itself easily to measurable goals in order to monitor progress. One intervention these authors promote involves asking students to count the number of words written in each piece, and charting their own progress. This visual cue provides motivation and ownership for students’ published writing products. Furthermore, asking students to be mindful of word choice is also an important intervention. The use of a synonym bank has, according to research, been a successful intervention that provides students with an aid in choosing less redundant words in their writing (Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, 2009, p. 225).

Culham further elaborates on the importance of keeping the objective in mind when creating writing units and curricula. Often, educators become engrossed in the processes being implemented rather than the objective at hand. Culham states that the traits of writing should unfold as mini-lessons so that students may become competent at each level. “We don’t teach students to ‘trait’ or to ‘workshop,’ or to ‘process,’ we teach them to write” (Culham, 2006, p. 53).

**Authentic Writing Experiences**

One of the foremost pieces of a Comprehensive Writing Program is the balance of direct instruction with engaging experience. Authentic writing
experiences, which are those experiences that offer students the ability to meet the real world with pen in hand, provide the balance to the direct instruction in a CWP. Authentic writing experiences can also be referred to as the simple best practices in teaching writing that are often pushed aside in order to open avenues for test preparation at the loss of student creativity and expression. These best practices should include but are not limited to providing choice of topics, and promoting creative thinking (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006, p. 311).

Teachers may offer these engaging writing experiences as an integral experience during the writing workshop.

Another reason that authentic writing experiences are such a valuable process in the writing classroom is their ability to create a level playing field for all students. It is clear that no two students are the same, and therefore no two students will have an equal advantage when considering the role prior knowledge plays in the writing process. According to Marzano, research supports the idea that crystallized, or permanent intelligence is strongly correlated to both background knowledge, and academic achievement (Marzano, 2003, p. 134). Therefore, it is vital that educators provide students with an opportunity first to create background knowledge, before they are charged with the task of writing about it.

**Picturing the process.** One authentic experience that can be used to motivate writers is providing them with writing prompts with which they are able
to connect. Zenkov and Harmon explored this idea in their study on photovoice.

In order to capture the attention of disengaged youth, Zenkov and Harmon suggest trusting students with “literacy tasks that exceed the expectations of these young adults and society in general” (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009, p. 575). In this authentic experience, teachers provide students with images that are contemporary and familiar. They then formulate written reflections on these images that can be used to publish full compositions at a later time (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009).

**Role play.** Additionally, students can be engaged in authentic writing experiences by capitalizing on the games students play as suggested by the work of Warren, Dodlinger, and Barab. According to these authors, motivational techniques and the material being taught must be congruent for students, and a “dissonance between the two can decrease learning” (Warren, Dodlinger, & Barab, 2008, p. 115). Media plays a huge role in the lives of students today; the ability to offer the students interaction with the media, and through role play, the opportunity to play a role in it provides students with an authentic experience that is intrinsically motivating. While not all educators have the ability to provide students with virtual reality opportunities as writing prompts, teachers can certainly simulate these adventures within their classroom. Staging mysteries and turning students into reporters, or using the game of Clue are just some examples of exciting activities that teachers can quickly and easily turn into authentic writing experiences for students (Warren, Dodlinger, & Barab, 2008).
Music as Inspiration. Along with role play and the visual arts, music can also provide an authentic writing experience that may be used as an agent of inspiration during writing workshops. Marsha Baxter performed a study in 2010 in which she used various musicians to inspire her students to question social justice in the poetic form. She writes, “Teachers, like artists, have the responsibility to question and challenge the historical and social realities around them” (Baxter, 2010, p. 3). Baxter’s willingness to confront social issues head on with her students harkens to the call of Linda Christensen to honor our students’ home languages and cultures. It is imperative that teachers begin to teach students with material that will speak to them about the issues that are prevalent in their everyday lives. Using music, students in Baxter’s class were able to write poems and songs that not only transported them back in time, but also allowed them to communicate freely and passionately about social issues of their present time. As an authentic writing experience, using music as a writing prompt allows students to connect freely to their own thoughts, and to generate powerful pieces of writing during the course of a CWP.

Summary

“Our darlings need, through their writing, to clear the sill of the world. They need to do work that is gigantic in scope and consequence” (Calkins & Harwayne, 1990, p. 3). Gigantic in scope and consequence indeed, students must write in order to become writers. Writing as a means to prepare for a standardized
test has not in the past been successful, and continues to turn out a generation of
students who are not only impassionate, but underperforming writers, as
evidenced by the aforementioned findings of the NAEP.

It is imperative that teachers begin to find new and exciting ways to design
writing curricula that engage their students in meaningful direct instruction
lessons, and allow them to pursue engaging and authentic writing experiences.
Calkins and Harwayne (1990) remind teachers that the writing process has come a
very long way, that not long ago the writing process was “desk work,” yet still;
teaching writing has quite a long way to travel (p. 6). Through the use of
Comprehensive Writing Programs, that balance direct instruction with meaningful
experience via writing workshops, students may be able to become not only
proficient, but passionate writers.
Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

The driving force behind the research and implementation of this action research study was the need to determine the best practices in implementing a meaningful and engaging writing curriculum for fifth grade students in an inclusive setting. According to Olinghouse, Zheng, and Morlock, teachers are calling upon today’s students to be “proficient writers in postsecondary and workplace environments,” and it is vital that motivational factors be strongly incorporated into writing tasks (Olinghouse, Zheng, & Morlock, 2012, p. 97). The intent of this study was to determine the significance of authentic and engaging writing experiences on the achievement and proficiency levels of fifth grade students in an inclusive setting on writing assessments. Furthermore, the teacher designed all writing tasks to increase the quality and motivation of students to write.

Setting

This study took place in a suburban intermediate school located in eastern Pennsylvania. Situated in a borough, the community consists of various family structures and ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and lies adjacent to a bustling urban city. The intermediate school serves approximately 680 students in grades five through eight, of varying levels of academic ability. There is no formal
tracking system for students, so all students are included into the general education curriculum with the exception of cases of extreme special needs.

The intermediate building is split into two wings. The first wing serves the fifth and sixth grade students in a traditional elementary model. The students stay with their classroom teacher for the duration of the day, and are walked to their specialist classes. Grades seven and eight comprise the second wing of the building, and are run in the traditional middle school model.

The school itself is located in the middle of a residential community with access to a large outdoor area. The newly constructed building is in good condition. The fifth grade classroom where this study took place contains four student computers. Furthermore, the classroom contains a large whiteboard which can be made interactive through the use of the Mimio and LCD projector.

**Participants**

Within the classroom in which this study took place there are 26 students total. Of the 26 students, 12 are female, and 14 are male. There are three students who receive Title I reading services, and nine students who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Of the 26 students, approximately 73% are Caucasian, 15% are African American, and 12% are Latino.

At any given time during Reading and Language Arts instruction, as well as during mathematics, a Learning Support Teacher is present in the classroom for push-in instruction and support of IEP students. The general education teacher
works together with the Learning Support teacher to create a cohesive educational environment in which both the Learning Support teacher and general education teacher are available and accessible to all students.

Procedures

The first step of my action research study was to apply to the Human Services Internal Review Board (HSIRB) (Appendix A). Furthermore, I sought permission from my building principals, as well as from the students’ parents or guardians (Appendix B). Once I received approval from the HSIRB, my principal (Appendix C), and students, I conducted the units described below.

Unit one: Descriptive/Narrative Writing

1. The students took surveys. These surveys helped to determine student attitudes toward writing (Appendix D).

2. The students responded to a descriptive writing probe. I analyzed these writing samples to determine number and length of sentences, variety of sentences, and number of adjectives (Appendix E).

3. The students participated in room tours. During this activity, the students brought a clipboard and a pencil as we toured the building. Each student picked a room on the tour to write down everything and anything they could see. Once back in the classroom, the students turned these lists into descriptive paragraphs.
4. Each student shared the descriptive paragraph they wrote about the room tour with their writing workshop groups. After sharing, students had the opportunity to guess the rooms of their peers. Students then completed a Photovoice journal. During a Photovoice journal, students looked at an image (a portrait or picture) that was striking to them. Using a photo is a nontraditional writing prompt to encourage more creative thinking.

5. Word Graves: Students created a word cemetery as a visual aid to help them choose stronger synonyms for over-used words in their writing.

6. Hershey Kisses for Aliens: Each student received a Hershey Kiss on their desk. The students then had to write to an alien in their journals to describe the object on their desk. The students were asked to use strong details that appealed to their senses – however, students had to avoid using common words such as sweet or chocolate.

7. Point of View: During this activity, students were asked to write twisted tales. In order to meet a curriculum standard of teaching point of view, the students worked together to read several familiar fairy tales, followed by *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. This text modeled telling a story from an alternative point of view, in this case the wolf tells the tale of the Three Little Pigs from his point of view.
Using this as a mentor text, the students wrote their own twisted tales implementing the strategies used in the previous weeks.

8. Adjective Tree: During this lesson, students decorated the bare tree trunk in our room with adjective leaves. This acted as a visual aid in the classroom so that students could easily choose strong adjectives for their writing.

9. Mentor Text: Students read a story from the Trait Crate entitled *Nothing Ever Happens on 90th Street*. In this story the main character is given a prompt just like the students have had: Write about what happens on your street. Students followed along as the character uncovered all the fabulous adventures on their street.

10. Halloween Photovoice Journal: During this lesson students viewed a photo of a cemetery. The teachers gave the students no parameters other than the direction to use the photo as the setting for their story. Students later shared these journals with their workshop partners and eventually turned their journal entries into published Halloween stories.

11. *Mahalia Jackson* Writing Extensions: Students were asked to measure out the size of a standard shipping box on the floor using masking tape. While sitting inside of their boxes students viewed *Henry’s Freedom Box* and created journals to express and identify their feeling
with the main character. Students also listened to famous blues musicians while taking on the point of view of freedom riders in their journals during these writing workshops.

**Unit Two: Expository/Informational writing**

1. Revolutionary Newspapers: The students read the Longfellow poem *Paul Revere’s Ride* as a required reading from the ELA curriculum. Students then chose battles and events from the Revolutionary War and completed research. Students used the computer and a special Liberty Kids layout program to create newspapers about their chosen events.

2. A Game of Clue! Students kept journals detailing the events of the game. Students turned their notes on Clue! into a newscast style report. Students taped their newscasts as a final project in the school’s news room.

**Unit Three: Persuasive writing**

1. What “bugs” you? In this activity, students added bugs to our writing wall as a visual aid. This activity acted as a brainstorming of possible topics for persuasive writing.

2. Students explored editorials from magazines and newspapers. We then discussed tone and point of view in persuasive writing.
3. Ripped from the headlines! The students ripped headlines from the local newspaper and turned the headlines into their own persuasive journals.

4. In this lesson the students viewed several commercials for familiar candies. We discussed various word choices and aspects of the commercial. The teacher gave students teams to work with to journal about their commercials.

5. Students worked in their teams after the teacher assigned a candy to each group. The students then created a persuasive entry about why theirs was the superior product, and they also created a commercial jingle to share with the class.

6. Direct instruction was used as a format to introduce the three-paragraph essay.

7. Students chose topics after completing a weekend journaling project to write down everything that annoyed them throughout the weekend.

8. Students utilized writing time and the computer lab to turn outlines and graphic organizers into persuasive essays.

**Data Sources**

**Field log.** Throughout the course of this study, I kept a detailed two-column field log. This log allowed me to make careful observations of my students as they undergo this new and exciting writing process. Furthermore, the
field log served as a helpful tool in allowing me to separate what specific behaviors were occurring from my own nuances of why those behaviors were occurring.

For example, in keeping my field log I observed the participants of the study. I split my field log into two columns. On one side of the column, I was able to record exact observations and quotations from my students, while on the other side of the column I recorded my own presumptions and reflections about those specific behaviors. According to Hendricks, this type of journaling works best because I am both “participant and observer” in my own study, and a field log is meant to help record and track any “detailed information about implementation of the intervention, participant responses, and surprising events” (Hendricks, 2009, p. 91).

**Student samples.** Student samples also proved to be a valuable resource when collecting data throughout the study. I kept student journals, quick writes, and responses to authentic writing activities, and I closely monitored them for progress along the way. Using the student artifacts acted nicely as a formative assessment piece, which according to Hendricks allowed me to “determine the effectiveness of an intervention continuously throughout” my study (Hendricks, 2009, p. 82).

**Writing prompt analyses.** At the start of each modality of writing over the course of the research study, students responded to prompts. I collected data
from these prompts including but not limited to word counts, sentence counts, variety of sentences, cohesiveness and originality of ideas, and amount of adjectives used throughout the piece. This type of summative assessment aided me in determining the “instructional outcomes” at the end of my action research study (Hendricks, 2009, p. 82).

**Student surveys.** At the start of the action research process it was important for me to understand clearly how confidently my students could approach a writing task both academically and emotionally. In order to garner this information from my students, I asked each participant to complete a brief survey (Appendix D). Students then revisited this survey at the end of the study in order for them to reflect upon the ways their attitudes and knowledge about writing have changed.

**Writing rubrics.** In order to generate data on the cohesiveness of the aims of my study with the aims of my district’s proficiency rate goals, I scored the participants’ writing pieces using the PSSA standard rubrics (Appendix F) for the four modalities of writing in fifth grade. By the end of the unit, I was looking for growth in proficiency by comparing the percent scored on the initial writing prompt according to this rubric with the percentage scored on the repeated prompt.

**Writing Portfolios.** In order to gain a clear sense of the improvement of the quality of my students’ writing, I collected writing samples in a portfolio for
each student. This form of assessment allowed me to gain a clear comparative
view of my students’ progress from the start of the study to its completion.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is a process that is vital in an action-research study that
intends to uphold levels of credibility and validity. As defined by Hendricks,
triangulation is “a process in which multiple forms of data are collected and
analyzed”(Hendricks, 2009, p. 80). I have implemented triangulation throughout
the course of my action-research study as illustrated in the multiple data collection
plans described above. It is my intent that my initial research question can be
answered by each one of the above forms of data collection in order to ensure that
the answer to my research question is not slanted or a reflection of my own biases
at any given time.

**Trustworthiness**

Throughout the course of my action-research study, I followed all ethical
research guidelines. I submitted and received approval for my research through
the Moravian College Human Subject Internal Review Board. I gave all
participants were given permission slips (Appendix G) which contained a full
explanation of the action-research study, its purposes, and a full explanatory note
stating that participation in the study is optional, and would not in any way affect
the students’ success within the classroom. Furthermore, I submitted consent
forms for the approval of my building principals (Appendix H) prior to conducting any action-research within my classroom.

Beyond receiving full consent of all participating members of the study, I also collaborated regularly with the colleagues in my research support group who have taken a stake in my action-research. I maintained open dialogue with them, ensuring that my own biases about the study or my classroom did not cloud the results of my study. Furthermore, I allowed the research to drive its own course in my classroom; I did not change or omit any surprising results during the course of my study.

Finally, as Hendricks suggests, I used reflection throughout the course of my action-research to identify any initial bias I may have had (Hendricks, 2009, p. 116). I approached this action-research study aware of my own passion for writing. I firmly believe that if students are inspired through creative methods, their writing will show it. In order to keep these biases out of my action-research study, reflections were kept in a two-column journal, and through the use of my field log as the study was being conducted within the classroom. I kept all records and findings, including assessment results and field logs in a secure and locked location throughout the duration of the study. Plus, all participants remained anonymous during the study. Any non-essential materials were destroyed at the conclusion of the twelve-week action research period.
Summary

In summary, the purpose of my study was to determine the observed and reported effects of using authentic writing experiences to improve quality of writing in a fifth grade inclusive classroom. During the course of the research study conducted in a suburban setting, students engaged in a variety of hands-on writing activities while progress was being carefully monitored through a variety of data collection methods. Participant data was also observed to determine the effectiveness of this type of writing on state achievement scoring rubrics as well.
My Story

Thanksgiving Thoughtfulness

It was Thanksgiving morning; I was standing in the kitchen of my neighbor’s home. Every year, the rag-tag group of neighbors, who came to be more like my family after helping my single mother raise me, gather together to play touch football, over-eat, and laugh. This is an eclectic group full of people who have always supported me, but not without a little good natured antagonizing. Mary, my mother’s best friend and rock brought a prop with her for this year’s roast. The list was titled “Fifteen Things Teachers Still Waste Time On.” This was one of those chain e-mails that get passed around, and was meant in good fun, nothing more than a farce. Mary is a strong advocate for public education, long married to the most dedicated Philadelphia Public School teacher I know. That said, she is not lacking in sarcasm. Little did she know it would also inspire me to have the courage to begin this journey with passion. One of the items on the list was cursive handwriting.

The crowd of rowdy mimosa-drinking neighbors was unanimous. I was wasting my time teaching these students, these fifth graders, to write in cursive. I quickly responded, “I teach my students everything for a reason!” Of course this brought back the obligatory childhood “oh yea, prove it” chorus from the crowd. So, I pressed on. “I teach my students to communicate – everything we do, above all else is so they can communicate and navigate this world. I teach them cursive
because it breaks my heart that they can’t put a signature on our behavior contract. I teach them to read and understand so that they can succeed in the future. I make them work with friends and enemies so that they might one day be able to make it in the work force. I teach them how to write so that they can write a killer college application essay! I want my kids to succeed, so I teach them. Everything I can – everything I know!” Then, through the stunned silence in the middle of the – she just got too serious - moment I thought yea, I DO teach them to communicate. So, why am I failing at it? It was at this moment that I realized I had so much work to do if I was going to live up to my own expectations, let alone my Moravian College Alumni reputation as a teacher. I would start I thought, with writing.

**My Personal Journey**

I am by nature a pleaser, a do-gooder, a fixer. Perhaps this is what drew me to seek out field experiences and student teaching practicums with socio-economically disadvantaged students. It is what drove me to seek out teaching time in the juvenile detention system over my holiday breaks as a college student. It is still what inspires me to volunteer to be the teacher to host one of the inclusive classrooms in our fifth grade wing every year. All of these things, I have looked on as positive attributes, qualities to make my loved ones and professors proud. Unfortunately, these same attributes are what have led me to pass the buck in terms of writing instruction within my classroom.
I entered my classroom prepared and inspired. I believed I could make a
difference in these students’ lives. I ran interactive reading centers, used
manipulatives in math class, led cooperative learning investigations in science
class and helped coordinate an amazing trip to Philadelphia so my students could
live and breathe their Social Studies curriculum, and yet, in writing class, I used a
coach book. I did what I was told. We read stories, we responded to stories; we
used spider-web graphic organizers. My students began with a zero or a one at
best on the writing rubric, and my shining stars ended the year with a two. This,
all this mediocrity, all in the name of pleasing. The problem was, my students
were not becoming communicators; they hated writing and they weren’t getting
any better at it.

Beyond the obvious need of my students to become more proficient
writers, I wanted my students to become passionate writers. I pride myself on
getting the most resistant learners to love being a member of my classroom. I
have become passionately engaged in working with students with special needs
and ensuring that they leave my room with at least one positive learning
experience a day. Sure, this was happening in my classroom, but never, it seemed
with respect to writing. Yet, for the first three years of my young career I let it go.
I did what was easy, so that I could keep the rest of my important work afloat. I
did what I was told to do because I was afraid to rock the boat. I felt like I hadn’t
earned the right to implement instruction the way I saw fit; I felt like it was
impossible to teach the way I was taught to teach. It was frustrating and
heartbreaking, and worst of all it made me a lack-luster teacher.

Then, as I was preparing to begin my mini-study for Dr. Shosh’s Teacher
as Researcher course, I had my Thanksgiving epiphany, and my action-research
study was born, sort of. The following fall I spent my time in MEDU 506
collecting student writing samples, scoring them on a rubric, and incorporating as
many scattered strategies as I could into my writing classroom. My approach
changed, and that felt like an accomplishment; however, in retrospect, while my
students made some gains, I did not impact my students in the way I had hoped I
would. Time continued to march on, and I let my idea for the perfect writing
classroom marinate for a semester.

Finally, two classes later in this journey I was sitting in Dr. Conard’s
classroom. The course was entitled Teacher as Inquirer. Dr. Conard shared a
teacher led project with us that centered on taking students out from behind their
desks to inspire excellent writing. This was just the inspiration I needed. If I was
going to implement changes in my writing instruction, I needed to change
everything: my teaching style, the writing prompt, the motivation. It was during
this class that I came to understand that my desire to increase passion would, I
hoped, inherently increase the quality of writing within my classroom. And so, the
interactive writing classroom was born.
Getting Ready

I spent an entire semester before I even knew who my students would be in excited preparation. I completed research. I wrote and rewrote my literature review. I wanted to know this content; I wanted to be confident. When the time finally came to meet my students and begin the work of my action research, I felt as though it was my first day of the first year of teaching in the classroom all over again. I went about my usual routine for the most part. I handed out important paperwork, completed ice-breakers, learned student names, and reviewed classroom policy and procedure. As the week went on, I wanted to be sure to hand out my participant consent forms. It was time for me to have a conversation with my students about my study, and I wasn’t sure how they would react. I explained to the students that I was still learning just like they are, and I was going to need their help. I promised them that I would be working very hard this year to become a better writing teacher, and if their parents and they decided together that it was appropriate I would like their permission to include them as a part of the story I was going to write for my own teachers. Overall, the students and their parents reacted with support and enthusiasm, as did my administrators. With this important step completed, I was able to move into the initial phases of my action research study.
Where Do We Stand?

Just like I had every year thus far, I began the year wanting to get to know my students. I felt like it was important for me to understand how my students would attack a writing activity. Did they feel like they were good writers, did they like writing, did they know what the different forms of writing were? These questions led me to implement my pre-study survey. I struggled a great deal with how to create this survey. I wanted to be sure to be detailed and thorough without confusing my young students. I decided to use a straightforward survey that had several questions but would work on a simple picture rating scale (Appendix D).

The data I gained from the initial survey with my students was eye-opening, and was in direct correlation with the results of the Nation’s Report Card. Only fifty percent of my students identified themselves as confident writers. While sharing my findings with several teachers near the copy machines and in the teacher’s lounge, my disheartening news was met with even more disheartening responses. Veteran teachers mumbled things like “at least some of them want to do something” or “well, could be they all hate what you’re teaching; wait until they’re in eighth grade it only gets worse.” This mentality stopped me right in my tracks. Now more than ever I understood the importance of the work I was about to begin. That was just it, I thought, it WILL only get worse if we don’t fix it. I had to find a way to engage my students in writing activities that they could live and breathe; I had to get my students to interact with writing just like
they interact with science experiments or math manipulatives. Writing needed to become more than just a subject to be dreaded, it needed to be something more than modalities that my students could define.

However there was some good news garnered from my initial survey. The majority of my students responded with a thumbs-up signal when they read the statements “I know what narrative writing is,” “I know what persuasive writing is,” and “I know what it means to be descriptive in my writing” on their surveys. It was clear that my students had an understanding of what each type of writing was if they were to read a sample text, or a model of any one of those modalities of writing, they simply lacked the faith that they themselves could be the authors of such a work.

This lack of confidence in their writing skills led me to look more closely at yet another set of questions from the initial survey the students took. I wanted to start at the beginning of the writing process with the students and see if they felt confident starting a writing task. When I looked back at the surveys I found that the majority of students replied that they were capable when given the statement “I can fill graphic organizers in on my own, without help.” This was a positive sign to me that students knew that it was important to brainstorm, and organize their thoughts before writing. However, in stark contrast to the idea that students understood prewriting strategies was their response to the statement “I understand how to pre-write and use my graphic organizer.” Even when taking
the survey many students asked me about this particular prompt. The students asked, “Miss what does it mean use my graphic organizer?” I explained I wanted to know if they knew why they filled a graphic organizer in, and what they should really do with it once it was full. We stopped in the middle of our survey to discuss this issue. The students mostly responded with a thumbs-down signal to this question. When I asked them about their responses later, one student explained his choice to me. “Well I just write my sentences in the bubbles and then copy them on my paper – I don’t get why I can’t just write my sentences on the paper in the first place.” Wow, I thought, my students don’t pre-write at all. They just write their essay or response in the organizer and then copy it – mistakes and all right onto their response sheets. I had to determine the best way to get their ideas flowing, and make them see that their organizers did not have to be full written paragraphs.

The school year had just begun, but I had learned quite a bit from my students. I knew that they could define or describe the various modes of writing, and I knew that they wished they never had to use any of them. I knew that they could draw a graphic organizer, but did not have a true understanding of its purpose, and that they were not using prewriting as a way to flesh out ideas, but rather that they were simply copying identical pieces of writing from place to another. Armed with this important data, I decided to take the plunge into my first writing unit; it was time to get descriptive.
Super Teacher?

I designed my writing units with a clear balance. I was going to do it all, I would find a way to mine for PSSA style data while making my students love writing all at the same time! I was going to be the teacher that no one else could be! The first step in completing my grand plan was to have each of my students complete an initial writing probe. I asked my students to complete a one paragraph writing piece simply describing what they were seeing. I explained that they could go outside, or even describe their bedrooms. I simply asked them to give me their best writing.

I was anxious to collect this first assignment from my students. No matter what, I thought, this will be our first step together. I remained positive, and perhaps even allowed my hopes to get ahead of me when I collected the paragraphs the next day and every single student turned one in! Then, I remembered quickly what these prompts were meant to measure, and I began to collect my numbers. I feverishly counted every adjective, adverb, conjunction, compound sentence, complex sentence, and use of figurative language. I organized my numbers nice and neatly into a table on the computer, and brought my results to seminar that Tuesday. In the table below, I have listed the average use of each stylistic component I had gone over with my students. I collected their writing samples, counted the usage of each item, and garnered an average number based on the class data.
Table 1: Results from Initial Descriptive Writing Prompt (Baseline Assessment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stylistic Component</th>
<th>Average Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Sentences per Paragraph</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Adjectives Used</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Adverbs Used</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Conjunctions Used</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Compound/Complex Sentences Used</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Figurative Language Examples Found</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was proud of my first piece of data collection, until I met with Dr. Shosh.

“Melissa” he said, “may I ask you, what do any of these numbers mean?” “Well, these numbers are indicative of all the growth we have to accomplish in our classroom” I responded.

He did not look pleased, but polite and supportive as always he smiled, and paused. This, I had come to learn over my years in this program, meant I had some reflecting to do. I would need to think about why I was collecting each piece of data and determine if that data would truly be the best way to measure the writing growth within my classroom.

Empowered by the research of McCurdy et al. (2008), I pressed on and continued to work through my descriptive writing unit with my students as I had planned. The research study of McCurdy et al. had been an important driving
force behind the original design of my study; in their work McCurdy and his associates found that students who were exposed to a variety of instructional strategies coupled with meaningful writing opportunities had an increased production of accurate and fluent writing skills. The students involved in the study conducted by McCurdy et al. were able to increase productivity in the areas of complete sentences, adjectives, and use of compound sentences. While my professor might not totally approve of my methods of data collection, I felt that this research was a valuable and meaningful component in improving my teaching, and my students’ writing.

At first glance of the data I collected, it was clear to me that my students did not enjoy writing. The most glaring statistic I had collected was the number of sentences written. When asked to write a paragraph, my students on average were writing just shy of five sentences each. To me it was clear that the students had little time to implement any stylistic choices into their writing because they were hardly writing to begin with. Furthermore, I was starting to learn that my students write in what we would later call “laundry list style.” This was a name my students and I created for the type of writing that had no transition words or phrases. The students never varied their sentence structures while writing and so rather than writing in cohesive paragraphs, their work sounded more like a list of items describing an object. This would become a major focus of our mini lessons moving forward. However, in order to accomplish any of my goals, I was going to
need to convince my students to write, and I thought I’d start by giving them a place to do it.

**Introducing Ownership**

I began the first lesson for the interactive writing unit by handing each student a new writing journal that they could call their own. I explained to them that I was going to give them a place where they could write their ideas, and grow their thoughts. Many of them looked puzzled when I explained this, and so I told them that writing doesn’t always have to take a long time. I asked each of them to go to the back of their journals and title it Bank. Here, if an idea struck them as funny, annoying, or even inspiring they could simply jot it down, and write about it at a later time. It was my hope that doing this initial activity would make writing seem less intimidating to them, and for some, I believe it worked. For others, simply the idea of having a space and place of their own to write in engaged them. Many students responded with questions like “Miss, can I keep this?” or “Do I have to give it back?” I ensured them that they could take it home, and write in it at any time.

We started the use of our journals by going on mystery room tours. During this assignment, the students visited several places, and I gave them three minutes to observe and note as many details as possible about each room. We began in the art room, moved to the office, the guidance counselor’s room, the nurse’s room, and two other fifth grade classrooms. The students were excited when I told them
we would be moving around the building. They loved getting a special pass into
the administrative wing in the building, and most students had their pencils
moving the entire time we were in a room. The students seemed to respond well
to having physical objects in front of them to inspire their thoughts, and the three
minute time limit in each room seemed to keep most writers from feeling
overwhelmed with a task. I observed many of my most timid learners busily
jotting down notes in each room really utilizing the space around them – very few
students stood still while making notes. The students even let out audible sighs
and moans when it was time to move onto a different room. Whatever this
experience was for them, I was noticing my students as observers of their world,
and even better still, they were using writing to convey what they had seen; they
were writing to communicate.

When we returned to our own classroom, the students turned their details
into a paragraph. We then sat in a circle and tried to guess what room each student
was describing.

This was the students’ first meeting with an authentic reading audience,
and unfortunately many students were reluctant to share their work. When I asked
for volunteers to read their paragraph aloud, no one, not one single student raised
his or her hand. If ever in my life I thought I may hear the proverbial crickets, this
was surely it. So, I leaned on my experience, and I read my paragraph first. One
of the best lessons a mentor teacher ever taught me was never to expect students
to do something you yourself aren’t willing to do. Therefore, I read my work. I asked my students to critique me, “Tell me, what did you notice?” I asked.

“It wasn’t perfect like it should be” Jason offered. Jason I had noticed was very willing to call out faults of others. He already was in the habit of telling me I had forgotten to change the date, or I pronounced a word wrong. Luckily, he was able to continue pointing out my flaws here in this activity. “That’s right I said, my paper’s not perfect, but who says it should be? Let me ask you another question, can anyone guess which room I was describing?” Now I had hands - the participation I had so been craving before. Of course, many students guessed the room I had described. I continued on explaining to students that my writing, although not perfect had done just what it was supposed to, I had successfully provided details for my audience to guess the room. “I’ll bet some of your paragraphs did their jobs perfectly too! Now, is anyone willing to share?” At this, I had a few reluctant students ready to share their work with our whole class. I thought if I could just motivate them to open up more and more each week, to take writing out of its big scary ivory tower, and to view writing as a work in progress, perhaps I could create authors after all!

On Monday when we returned to school, I was anxious to see if any students had brought home their writing journals. Five students volunteered that the journals had made it home with them for the weekend, although none had yet reported using it. One student offered, “I brought it with me, in case something
cool happened.” This sentiment was promising, students were at least thinking about writing, and I looked forward to seeing if the students began to choose writing as a preferred home activity at some point during the course of the action research study.

**Introducing Inspiration**

Motivated by the desire to ignite a passion for writing within my students, I reflected on my research to determine what writing strategy I wanted to introduce to my students first. I decided I would begin with a mini-lesson focused on elongating sentences with the use of adjectives, adverbs, and figurative language. I settled on this particular lesson after collecting the journals of volunteer students. I noticed a common pattern among their mystery room paragraphs. While my students were excited by the activity, many of them wrote in the style of a laundry list rather than in a cohesive paragraph.

Hopeful that the use of descriptive language phrases, as well as transitional phrases and clauses would improve student writing, I planned lessons utilizing direct instruction. I then had the students break up into small cooperative learning groups to create posters with the new writing terms, and examples of each. After completing this lesson, and watching the students creating their posters, I wanted to make sure I gave them an authentic opportunity to implement the use of these stylistic choices. It was at this point that I decided to allow students to participate in a photovoice journal, even though I had not planned to
do this lesson quite so soon. A photovoice journal uses an image as a writing prompt rather than the usual more traditional written prompt.

To begin I showed the students four different pictures on the LCD projector. I asked the students to choose any picture they found to be the most interesting, and begin to write about it. I tried to guide them by giving them verbal prompts such as, “What do you think is happening in this photo?” or after looking at an abstract picture of a man, “What possibly could have made that man look that way?” I then tried to keep quiet, and let the students become authors.

As I observed my students, I noticed that some of them were extremely excited about this unique opportunity to respond to a visual writing prompt, and some of them not only did not want to write, but also it seemed without explicit written directions they were incapable of writing. One student who demonstrated this inability to write, and at a more basic level, to function in my classroom was Antonio.

An interesting student, Antonio is the youngest boy in a family where there is historically very little guidance. It was early in the school year when I began to notice behaviors that were worrisome from Antonio. He showed a lack of maturity, impulsive behaviors, and exaggerated storytelling. He seemed incapable of keeping his hands off of other students, showed little remorse when held accountable for his behaviors, and seemingly had no consequences at home. When I became worried about these issues as they started manifesting time and
again, I asked teachers who had dealt with his family in the past for some insight. According to their reports, he has an older sister who is known to be “wild” and “troublesome,” and there is “no follow through at home from dad, who is more interested in his son’s athletic abilities than school.”

In the first quarter alone Antonio missed twenty-three homework assignments, served three lunch detentions, and two after school detentions. I attempted to consult his family several times, and true to the rumors, I never received any communications in return. Specifically, I can remember reaching a serious moment of frustration when Antonio showed up to school not only without his homework, but without his books at all. Now not only had Antonio not been able to practice independently, but he didn’t have the materials needed to function within the classroom for the day. I was furious, and in my moment of frustration I took a lap around my classroom to check in with my other students.

_Just met with this kid’s mom a week ago for conferences. We’ll get it settled she said...we’ll do better she had said... he’s never done this poorly she said. UGH! Help me out here people! Someone has to make this kid do the work! It has to be important to everyone for him to believe it is important too!_ After I finished with my silent rant, I calmly asked Antonio to march back to the telephone and explain to his mother that he was unprepared for class yet again. I was hoping to get him to immediately own his errors and be held accountable for them in some way. After he spoke to her I asked him to pass the phone to me. She
said no, that she simply did not have the time to talk to me. *Okay then, I thought, the message clearly won’t come from home.*

For weeks after this, I tried everything I could think of to more deeply involve Antonio in school. I made it a point to ask him how he was doing every morning. I checked in with him during morning math to review concepts from the previous day’s class. I made sure to call on him any and every time his hand was raised. I wanted him to feel involved, important to our classroom community; I needed him to buy in. I thought that by making Antonio feel that he was an integral part of our school family, I could help him connect to his accomplishments here the way he might on the football field or the basketball court. He enjoyed being praised in those areas of his life, and I wondered if he would enjoy it in school more too if he felt he was successful. For a few days, it even seemed to work, and then he quickly slid into old habits. He was dismissive of assignments; he avoided independent tasks; he hated school, and he was showing it.

During the photovoice activity, Antonio sat throughout the entire mini lesson, and only when it became time to write he asked to use the restroom. I allowed him to go to the restroom, and he was gone for several minutes. When my learning support aide entered the room, I was able to go and call him out of the restroom, and escort him back to the classroom. When Antonio came back to the room, he again sat for about ten minutes not writing at all. He simply stared at
the blank pages of his notebook, or at the pictures and refused to write. Even after I walked up to his desk and worked with him, he would simply shrug his shoulders in response to my questions and write nothing. In the end, Antonio only had three sentences written, even though we had been writing for about thirty minutes total. It was clear that Antonio’s task avoidance for writing went beyond my initial observations of the class. I would have to determine some way to make Antonio believe he could succeed in school before I could get him to believe in himself as a writer.

While Antonio is a fascinating case, he of course is not my only student. I also enjoyed the opportunity to interview Dameon and Jaylyssa during the photovoice lesson. Dameon and Jaylyssa are both conscientious students. They each complete their homework and independent tasks in a timely manner, achieve well on formative and summative assessments, and follow general classroom rules respectfully. Jaylyssa seems to enjoy writing, but tends to be more reserved and avoids sharing her work with others. Dameon is the consummate cool kid in class. The students find him funny and look up to him as an example; it was important to me to get his feedback as I thought of him as being the voice of the class. Often I might see Dameon do or say something, and sure enough there would be five other students mimicking his exact behavior shortly after. On this particular morning, I wanted to know what the students thought about writing from a picture instead of a story or words.
Me: Do you think it is easier or harder to write when you are looking at a picture?

Dameon: I think it’s harder because now I have to make it all up.

Me: What do you mean? How is that different from when you normally write?

Dameon: We usually read something first.

Jaylyssa: I think it is easier. I like to be able to make it all up, it’s like I can see and hear all the details.

I reflected on their responses as I continued to circulate throughout the classroom. Dameon and Jaylyssa’s responses seemed indicative of the two camps I was noticing in my classroom, students who responded positively to a challenge and students who were settled in the comforts of mediocre teaching and the acceptance of mediocre responses. I realized in this moment that by lowering the bar of expectations for myself, I had also lowered the bar of achievement for my students. This was a heart wrenching moment for me; in this moment I realized I had to change my personal expectations as a teacher. Armed with this new knowledge, I felt more determined than ever; there would be no more settling in my classroom. I planned on changing things, and fortunately, change was already slowly beginning to occur.

As this lesson came to a close, the students finished their writing at various times. I was elated when I found a workshop group who had taken it upon
themselves to share their writing with each other. I stopped by their group to ask
what made them decide to take this step, and was truly inspired to hear Jonny say
“I write stories a lot Miss, and sometimes I even write sequels to them too, but I
never get to share them with anyone usually Miss.”

I had learned several important lessons that I would carry with me for the
remainder of this journey. Students needed to be challenged; a teacher’s settling
was a student’s settling. Secondly, students were more inclined to become authors
when they knew they could find their voice with an audience who was ready to
listen. I would be sure to include this element strongly in future workshop
sessions.

**I Have Nothing To Write About…**

The more I reflected upon my students’ writing each day, the more I
noticed the same patterns in each student. Yes, the kids in my class were writing,
but the writing they produced had no style. When I asked them to stretch their
stories, they would almost always reply with the same old response, “But Miss, I
have nothing to write about.” Another very popular line became, “I’m finished.”
Since my students had technically completed the task at hand, it was a hard point
with which to argue. I went home at night with their journals staring me in the
face, and this chorus ringing in my ears.

I decided to do what I always did in times of teacher desperation…I went
to my storage closet. There, sitting in the dark of my closet, I began to rifle
through old binders and Rubber Maid containers full of notes from previous classes. Buried deep inside a notebook, inside a binder, inside that bin I found some notes on the Scholastic Trait Crate. Curious about my notebook scribble, I went digging for a bit more information on this series. I was quickly reminded that this was a pre-packaged instructional tool that offered trade books to illustrate several different writing traits for students. That was when I found the perfect title, *Nothing Ever Happens on 90th Street*. This story, written by Ronni Schotter was the perfect mentor text for my students. In it, the main character, Eva, is given the assignment to write a story about her street. She begins the story furious with her teacher for such a difficult assignment because, much like my own students, she believes she has nothing to write about. Throughout the course of the story Eva is introduced to many interesting characters who encourage her writing such as the baker who encourages her to “find the poetry in her pudding,” or the ballerina who lives in her building who reminds her to “stretch her ideas” into something more interesting. In the end, Eva’s commonplace street becomes the setting for a most intriguing story.

The next day I arrived at school, mentor text in hand eager to greet my students. I began the lesson by gathering the students on the reading rug in the back of my room. In this warm safe space, I was beginning to notice my students were becoming more of a community. They were sitting near different students than they might normally, and were already opening their writing journals. I
started the direct instruction portion of this lesson by tossing squish, (a stress ball I use to increase participation) to eager raised hands. We reviewed the terms and usages for each of the elements we had began studying in previous classes, and to my surprise I had two students share pieces from their writing journal they had worked on independently. I was already thrilled with the way this was going.

After my students had listened to a read aloud of Nothing Ever Happens on 90th Street, I wanted to give my authors the opportunity to become Eva, to become writers without constraints, without the handcuffs of providing an explicit number of details, or the dull task of responding to yet another mundane story prompt.

I showed my students three photos over the projector. This would be the students’ second time completing a photovoice journal. One picture was an impressionist piece done by Picasso, the second was a painting of a park by Monet, and the third painting was a Revolutionary Era painting by an unknown artist. I prompted my students to use their writing journals to create stories for whatever photo spoke to them. I urged students to think the way Eva had on 90th street and create an exciting story about the photos in front of them. Beyond that, I gave my students total creative freedom.

As the students began to write, I walked around the classroom, both observing and talking with my students about their experience. This activity seemed like it was splitting my students, dividing them into writers, non-writers,
and a group of finishers. So many of my students began to put pencil to paper immediately, and then, I had many students who just stared. Some at the pictures, some at their blank pages, some into outer space as though they were searching, or maybe even dreaming of being anywhere else, of doing anything else.

My students were seated in tables throughout the classroom. I visited table one, a table that had several students who are struggling writers sitting at it. I asked these students if they thought it was easier to write using a picture or a story. After ten minutes of writing time, Dave still had nothing written on his page. I wanted to know what he felt was holding him back from completing this task. When I asked him he responded, “This is harder, I usually get to read something first. Now, I don’t know where I’m gonna’ start, or how much I have to do.” This struck me as a giant roadblock. I thought I was creating the ultimate writing moment for my students, doing everything right. I had offered choice, I had used a mentor text, I was providing visual cues and allowing students to brainstorm in cooperative learning groups. I had even provided scaffolding and model writing prior to the actual writing taking place. Yet, even with all of this the very idea of not being explicitly told what to write or how much to write was paralyzing to some of my students, including Dave. It was clear to me that in the future I would need to balance explicit instruction and provide more scaffolding if my students were going to become proficient writers, and all of the pictures in the world weren’t going to accomplish that task for me. I would also need to refocus
my student grouping. It was at this time that I began shifting students into like
ability groups in my mind. I thought that this would give me the opportunity to
help students like Dave in a more direct manner while allowing the other groups
of students to carry on in their writing journeys.

Still another group of students that emerged before me during this lesson
were the finishers, my non-Daves. This was my group of students who are not
particularly strong academically, but who at the same time have typically positive
attitudes about completing assignments. This group of students wrote as quickly
as possible, trying to finish the given assignment, and please me, their teacher,
their authority figure. As I observed these students writing, I noticed how proudly
they announced to me, “Miss, I’m done.” The problem was, in my eyes, and
according to every mini-lesson we had done to this point, their writing was far
from done. These students simply had no desire to review their work. There was
no intrinsic motivation to improve their writing. Did this mean my students, the
finishers, didn’t like writing? Was it that they didn’t understand the writing
process? I wanted to create opportunities for my students to peer edit and revise
their work, so I decided to ask these “finishers” to swap papers in order to
improve their writing. As I looked on, I saw students attentively read each other’s
work, then they began to circle a few minor spelling mistakes before quickly
returning the work to its rightful owner. That exercise solidified in my mind the
importance of peer editing and revising as a mini lesson in the future. It was clear
that my students had no understanding of revising a piece of writing for content or anything at all beyond spelling. I was oddly pleased with my students’ struggle in this area as I finally felt my lessons giving way to a clear path for action-research. I observed something, and now I had a clear direction to move in.

Finally, the last group of students was my writers. These were students who seemed to be latching onto the writing process. These are not necessarily students who I would consider to be my strongest writers, although those students were not excluded from this group. One group of “writers” sticks out to me during this particular exercise. Table three. This table of students finished their writing assignment, but they extended the experience for themselves. I was witness to autonomy in its finest form during this lesson. These students not only whisper-read their work and made changes independently, but they also chose to share their stories amongst themselves. As I observed them, they seemed to be reading, laughing, and discussing their work as true authors would. This was, as I see it, the first real victory I had experienced during the time of my study. It was, at its core, students passionately engaged with and enjoying the act of writing. The true test would be how I could make these three groups of students more fluid.

**Peer Editing**

In the days following the second photovoice lesson, I wanted to marry my ideas for authentic writing experiences with the district’s need for meeting
proficiency rates, all the while looking for a valid way to improve my students understanding of revising and editing for content.

I decided that I would go online to the released item samplers and print off as many open ended response examples as possible from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, PDE. Each year, PDE releases a number of student written samples ranging from a score of zero through a perfect three. I brought these items in, copied them in an enlarged form onto card stock, and placed them all around my classroom. The students were instructed to tour each writing sample, and using a marker, rank the writing with a zero, one, two, or three. We tallied the responses for each writing piece, and found that students were able to identify written responses that lacked appropriate answer choices and stylistic qualities. I then charged the students with an additional task; I wanted them to fix each writing sample. We discussed that sometimes, editing work has nothing to do with fixing a spelling mistake. So, we made a list on our chart paper of things one might do to help a fellow writer. The students created the following list:

- Add missing ideas
- Explain things better
- Get rid of the stuff that doesn’t belong
- Change the order of things
- Combine ideas into one sentence
- Add more details
• Make it more exciting

After the students finished creating their list, they set to work in their writing workshop groups to edit and revise their given writing sample. We printed our new samples on cardstock again, and scattered them throughout the room. We then repeated our grading practice once more. The students scored these new revised writing samples much higher the second time around. After holding a whole-group discussion, the students came to a general understanding of what it meant to edit or revise a piece of writing for content. The students would be practicing this with their next formal piece of writing, and they seemed excited to try out their new skills. Dameon chimed in, “I like helping, and its cool that our ideas are gonna’ show up in everyone’s stories.” With this new attitude about helping their classmates rather than making them feel poorly about their stories, the students seemed ready and willing to edit and revise in a more meaningful manner than ever before, and I was beginning to see that teaching my students about meaningful writing and communication meant also creating a beautiful classroom community.

Said is Dead!

There is a certain something about writing that just exists within students. It is difficult to teach students how to write with quality, voice, and style. One part of this trio of important writing characteristics is word choice, and my students collectively, even the most talented, bright pupils tended to use the first word that
came to their minds, and did not give much thought to how they were saying what they intended to get across to their audience.

While this was evident from the first writing prompt my students completed for me, it became strikingly clear when Melany somberly handed her writing journal to me one Monday morning. Melany had become my most avid writer, she was a student who chose to write during our silent time after lunch, and frequently offered me her journal to read. This particular morning however, she seemed solemn, and not her usual effervescent self. I would soon come to learn that her parents would be divorcing, and she wanted to share her thoughts with me about this in her journal. She mentioned in her entry that she felt sad, and that she cried. I of course wanted to honor Melany’s feelings and comfort her. After quite some time passed, Melany gave me her journal with yet another story in it. I called her to my desk and asked her if it would be alright if we discussed her entry from Monday today instead. She complied, and I reminded her if it made her too sad, that we could stop at any time.

I began our conversation by approaching a familiar topic. “Melany, were you sad last week when you lost your soccer game after school?” “Yea” Melany said, “Everybody gets mad when they lose.”

I continued, “Did you feel the same after that soccer game as you did the evening you wrote this journal entry?” Melany looked a bit shocked, but responded “No, I was more mad and stuff that night.” Perfect, I thought, this is
going exactly where it needs to. “Ok Melany, so if you did not feel the same, why did you choose the same word?”

She looked a bit puzzled, but gave it some time and finally responded, “Well, I guess I never really thought about it that much I just wrote it down, but it was really different.” I asked Melany to try to think about that in her stories from now on.

Of course, this conversation made me wonder about the rest of my students. I asked the students to meet me on the reading carpet in the back of the classroom, and I showed them a series of pictures and asked them to give me one word to describe them in their journals. The first picture I showed students was a small child in front of a birthday cake with a big smile on his face. When responding to this photo, twenty-three out of my twenty-six students responded by writing the word “happy.” I showed them several more pictures until finally coming to a picture of a man with a giant check written in the amount of one million dollars, this man too had a big smile on his face. Once again, the majority of my students, this time twenty-two out of twenty-six students responded by writing the word “happy” in their journals. When I placed the two pictures next to each other and asked who is happier, all of the students pointed to the man who had won the lottery. “So,” I asked, “Why did we use the same word to describe them if one person is happier than the other?” The students pondered on that in silence for quite some time until I asked, “If you wanted to find a different word
to use, how many of you would know how to accomplish that?” Less than half of my students raised their hands.

I wanted to introduce my students to the use of a thesaurus, and yet from my own action research, I had learned that students respond favorably to hands-on engaging activities. I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt that my students would not learn from circling words in their writing and replacing them by looking them up in the thesaurus. How was I going to provide my students with word choice in a way that would be challenging to them?

After some searching, I stumbled across the idea for a word graveyard. During this lesson I printed several tombstones with overused common words. These words would become “dead” words in my classroom. These included words such as “sad,” “nice,” “cool,” “kind,” “like,” and “awesome.” I explained to my students that they would no longer be allowed to use these dead words, but rather, we would be brainstorming words that our dearly departed friends were survived by. The students created a graveyard of synonyms that I later turned into a bulletin board that is still hanging in my classroom at the current moment.
The students regularly began using these graveyards independently of my instructing them to do so. It was a true pleasure to watch the students take ownership over the challenge of first creating this visual display within our classroom, and then later utilizing it as a crucial resource to improve their writing.

The students enjoyed the idea of creating a graveyard so much, that I was inspired to bring them on a virtual field trip. Several mornings later, as the students entered the classroom, they noticed that something was a bit different
than usual. The lights were turned off, the blinds were drawn, strange sounds of things that “go bump in the night” were eerily drifting about the room, and our white board was filled with a dark and gloomy picture of a graveyard empty but for a black crow that sat atop a headstone in the forefront of the picture. Students were aflutter with excitement asking things like “What’s going on, Miss,” or “Where’s the morning math Miss?” “Everyone get unpacked” I had instructed them. Once everyone was settled, I gave the students a new challenge. I wanted to see how well they could tie together all of our mini-lessons so far. “Your challenge is to create a story that uses this photo as the setting. Rely on all of your senses, and remember, I’d like to see all of our workshops put to good use. The rest will be up to you. Get started!”

It was the fastest I had seen my fifth grade work on writing to date. The students soaked in the atmosphere, they looked and listened, and many of them got out of their seats to visit our word graves in order to improve their writing. It was during this lesson that I was reminded once again of how important motivation and student choice can truly be. Jayce, an autistic student in my class was a person who I was eager to observe during this lesson. Mornings are particularly difficult for Jayce. He perseverates on the idea that school should start later in the day, and frequently spends the first hour of his morning in the throws of a tantrum, completing very little work despite my best efforts and implementations of various strategies to help him do otherwise. Furthermore,
Jayce had been quoted as exclaiming, “Can’t you just see that my brain is melting!” while completing writing tasks in his workshop group to this point. Needless to say, I was nervous to give Jayce a writing task first thing in the morning, but I wanted to give the students the maximum amount of writing time possible, and so it was necessary to begin early. I watched as Jayce entered the room, and paused to stare at the picture, then remove his hat slowly to listen to the noises more closely. I greeted him at his desk to help him settle in, and personally explained the task to him. He smirked, grunted a simple, “Cool.”

When I checked back with Jayce later, I found that he had launched himself into a vivid tale about a zombie attack. His writing was colorful, lengthy, and descriptive while not altogether grammatically accurate. Moreover, he could hardly contain the excitement to read his work aloud to his peers at the end of the workshop, and even cut another student off to begin reading his work. This was a noteworthy achievement for a student who by nature of his identified disability was not always comfortable speaking with his peers.

Jayce’s writing is pictured below. In it, I noticed several observable and reportable measures of improvement. Jayce first and foremost was visibly excited about this writing project while he was completing it. Jayce frequently engages in self-talk by nature of his autism. On this particular day he was overheard saying things to himself like “Hey what if the zombies were people I know,” or “Wait a minute I got it…that makes me pretty clever!” This type of self-talk was, as I
On a spooky night I was at a yard for my uncle’s death, my cousin, morticia, and Rigby were there with me. They were in shock. The crow circled around. My stone. Suddenly I heard something or someone. It was the signorist Jim came over with a bottle of chemical. He said, “Look.” This bring life forms back to life. He it on every single grave in the graveyard. The ground shook. Uh-oh. I’m saying. What do you mean uh-oh. Morticia said, I unhashed the undead. Jim went back to his car and got 4 bats he gave each of us one. We were sanding their hands pop up. And less than 3 minutes they were out of their graves. We were hitting the zombies. There were two left. We hit one.
observed it a major improvement in Jayce’s attack of a writing skill. Furthermore, when looking at his actual writing sample, Jayce’s story used many of the stylistic elements we had discussed in class such as adjectives and adverbs. His writing was lengthy and had a clear plot structure including a beginning, middle, and an end. I was impressed with Jayce’s work, but more importantly in my eyes, so was he.
From Graveyards to Spaceships

In keeping with my students’ fascination with Halloween writing topics, I chose to complete an activity entitled Alien Kisses as my next writing workshop lesson. In this lesson, the students would once again be focusing on the challenge of using exciting words within their stories and writing. During the direct instruction portion of our writing lesson, we reviewed the structure for writing a friendly letter along with its purpose. The students also completed a toss and talk with our classroom squish in order to review all of the items we had discussed up until this point. Once we had completed this task, I wanted to push the students to further explore using new and exciting words to improve their writing.

During this assignment, each student took on the persona of an alien, sent to Earth to learn about everything they could. One part of their job as aliens was to report back to their alien friends about the new products and items they found. I explained to the students that they would be responsible for reporting about a very special new object today, and I asked them each to open the package that was on their desks. Inside each was a single Hershey’s Kiss. Of course, at the sight of candy in the classroom, the students were buzzing with excitement. As I expected, this was more at the prospect of eating the candy than it was at the prospect of writing about it. However, I at least felt as though I had their attention which was
valuable and important information for me; it reminded me once again of how important motivation can be for a task.

My next task was to introduce the challenge to my students; I called this the “non-word bank.” This was simply a list of words that students would not be permitted to use in describing this product to their alien peers. It included the following words: “chocolate,” “silver,” “candy,” “tinfoil,” “Hershey’s,” “Kiss,” and “sugar.”

After hearing the words that they would not be permitted to use, most students, especially those that fell into my “writers” and “finishers” groups were excited to write. It was as though a little literal give and take is what these students thrive on. I give them something to stimulate another style of learning, and take away a little of what makes them comfortable and put a challenge in its place, and bingo, the students were writing the morning away!

Even more exciting than the majority of my students enjoying this activity, was one of my non-writers shifting, if only for the day, into my group of writers. This student, Annabeth, is a special education student who has several diagnoses. Among these is a severe case of Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), and a fine motor skill deficiency, which makes writing a laborious, non-preferred task. This student is prone to physically reacting to tasks which she finds unappealing, throwing chairs, kicking, screaming, and having general temper tantrums. In every way possible, I accommodate tasks within the classroom for this student.
She is given alternate writing environments, extra time, and a laptop to help make the physical task of writing easier. Yet, I still approach a writing activity with a certain level of anxiety with this student, as I can never truly be sure what version of Annabeth I am going to get in the classroom that morning.

To add to my level of angst, the laptop that this student uses, was not in working order that day, and so, this task would have to be at least started without that accommodation in place. I decided my best course of action would be to sit with this student personally, and allow her to tell me her story while I scribed her work. Annabeth responded favorably to this idea, and quickly began to tell me her story. She was writing in her usual style at the start, short choppy sentences, and I could tell that if I let her, she would simply write her standard five sentences, and tell me she was “all done.”

However, since she seemed to be her best self today, I decided to try to push her to achieve a higher quality of writing than she had for me in the past. In order to allow Annabeth to stretch her thoughts, I wanted to model inner dialogue for her. So, as she was writing, I began to simply ask her the questions that are inherent for most proficient writers. As she answered my questions, I asked her to place her ideas into a sentence, and I recorded it for her in her journal. Eventually, and with some scaffolding, Annabeth began to take up this task independently. I cannot say with any certainty that this is something I have seen her do independently again, but in this moment she was writing, and enjoying it.
Due to the combination of diagnoses that this particular student possesses, I wondered later if providing her with the time to think aloud was the bridge she needed to get her thoughts from her mind to her paper without them being juddled in a haze of confusion that appeared to be a mix of an inability to slow down her thinking, the physical task of writing, and an overly persistent need to spell every word in the correct way.

In general, the students were successful in completing this writing activity because they had a physical object to use as a prompt. Furthermore, students reported this activity as being a favorite because they had to complete a challenge, and many reported that it made writing “feel like a game.” On my part, the take-away lesson is that engaging students more fully in their writing allows them to become more proficient and passionate writers. Students were able to use their five senses, were forcibly aware of their word choice, and had a strong and familiar connection with a tangible writing prompt. Generally, students became passionate and engaged writers during this lesson.

**Hurricane Sandy Strikes**

At about this time in the school year, Hurricane Sandy struck and rained down destruction. While the devastation of this storm is nearly too immense to speak of, especially along the New Jersey coast line, it is important to note that my school district, including my students were also greatly affected by the wrath and power of this storm. Due to the loss of power, school was closed down for an
entire week, and even upon returning to school both myself and many of my students were still without power. Not only were my students and I feeling tired, uncomfortable, and frustrated, but we had lost an entire week of valuable writing time. Beyond the timeline of my action-research study being affected, I was now also facing a crunch to meet the guidelines of my school district’s scope and sequence. I knew that I would need to begin meeting the requirements for my Reading and Language Arts program as well as providing my students with valuable writing experiences. The next lesson I designed for my students would be one that would meet the lesson requirements for point of view.

To introduce the concept of point of view I asked the students to meet me at the reading rug in the back of the classroom. Here, I read the students a story entitled “The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs” as told by Jon Scieszka. When we finished reading this story, the students learned the various types of point of view, as well as what character was telling this version of the common folk tale versus the original tale.

The students then broke into their writing workshop groups with the task of creating their own twisted tales. During this activity the students had finally started to combine all of the direct instruction lessons we had completed. As I walked around the room I noticed students busily writing in their journals, walking over to our classroom graveyard to find exciting words to include in their tales, and even accessing the dictionaries and thesauruses which I had placed in a
crate on our reading rug for easy access. As the students finished their writing projects, they even seemed happy to share their work with their writing workshop groups. Several students even asked me if we could take the time to share our twisted tales aloud with the whole class. We did luckily have the time to do this. Jayce in particular was once again elated to share his work. He had even created illustrations to accompany his work. He happily shared his twisted tale, which he had modeled after our mentor text about the three little pigs.

Jayce was calm and poised as he shared his work. He made eye contact, and paused at all of the appropriate moments within his story. He laughed, smiled, and the other students did the same. To this day when the workshop groups meet all these many months later, the students sometimes still request to hear Jayce’s “Wolf Story.” This moment, of all the victories and disappointments I had experienced throughout this journey was one of my favorites. Jayce was using his writing to communicate with his peers in a way he hadn’t before. Jayce often sat at his desk playing with erasers and doodling in his journal creating stories, but rarely shared his thoughts with anyone. This was a major breakthrough for Jayce, and my study.
Hello, it's Alexander. Work again since I got out of jail because of the pigs. I been trying to get a cup of sugar so I decided never get sugar from pig again or get in trouble, but all of a sudden a bike went by me. It was little R. Hoo she doesn't listen to me. My brother big John got in trouble by her. But maybe I could get sugar by her Granny. Mom, so I ask her, but she said no way Harry, and slam me with the bike. Now I got a bit mad but I don't want end up in jail again, so I took my brother's shortcut over the woods and through the river, but the river was wet and deep. So in Granny house I had snack, Granny. Opp's and took one of night gown and when I'm in the bed for a nap, when Red came by I was dead because I might go to jail again and I did so that's the story of bratty R. Hoo.
Yet another way I chose to integrate my action-research study with my reading curriculum was while reading about the blues era with a story entitled “Mahalia Jackson.” The students were exposed to a variety of writing prompts throughout the course of this lesson. They made use of sensory motivation such as listening to blues music, using a parallel experience, and viewing videos and photos.

We were reading about Mahalia Jackson, a famous blues and jazz musician. The district anthology opens up with a vignette about the history of blues music, and how it has its roots in being a method of communication for slavery. I wanted my students to truly be able to identify with blues music, and its history, but didn’t know how I could possibly make them understand the importance of communication and the hardship of a life of slavery unless I could make them experience it. This is when I came upon the children’s picture book Henry’s Freedom Box. This picture book is a true story from the Underground Railroad. Coming across a video reading of this book, I decided I wanted my students to truly identify with Henry, who chose to ship himself to Philadelphia to gain his freedom. He made the long perilous journey in a sealed shipping box, spending many hours in a small, cramped space. I did some research and found the dimensions for a standard medium sized shipping carton, and began my lesson by asking my students to use masking tape to create a square in those dimensions for themselves somewhere in the classroom.
The students complied, and then swiftly returned to their seats eager with curiosity. We then read the opening vignette in our anthology about blues music and its relation to slavery communication. This led us to a powerful and wonderful class dialogue about slavery, the Underground Railroad, and means of communication. I told the students that we were going to be experiencing what it would be like to be searching for our freedom, and instructed the students to bring their pencils and writing journals, and fit themselves inside the square they had taped on the floor. I reminded them that no part of themselves was allowed to be sticking out of the perimeter they had created. The students met this challenge with mixed reviews. Some were excited, and some were annoyed. Shouting things like “Not so funny that I’m small now y’all” to “You gotta’ be kidding me, Miss.” Still, the students complied and settled into their boxes.

Pictured below are several students watching a narrated version of the story. While they watched and listened, soft blues music played in the background. Students were given the opportunity to free write during this experience. They were allowed to record their own feelings about the experience, or even take on one of the characters in the story to create a journal entry. Most students chose the latter, and wrote diary entries from Henry’s point of view. This was a nice nod to our previous twisted tales assignment, and also allowed the students the opportunity to use multiple forms of real life motivation and inspiration to create writing that described in great detail what it must have been
like to travel from the southern states all the way to Philadelphia in such a small space with such a big risk.

Figure 4: Photos of Students During *Henry’s Freedom Box* Writing
Halfway There

At about the halfway point in my action-research, I wanted to check in with my students to see how they were feeling about writing, and to see how many of the students would identify as writing more often than they used to independently. This survey (Appendix G), which I had not intentionally included as a part of my research design was my way of performing a member check. While I had observed that the students seemed to approach writing tasks with less trepidation, and tended to choose to write in their journals more during what used to be designated only as a silent reading time, I wanted to be sure my observations of their attitudes towards writing were accurate. The first statement on the survey came in the form of a fill in the blank. The students read a statement that said “I feel __________ about writing because ______.” The students responded to this statement in a variety of ways. The students chose words that varied from “mad” to “excited.”
The Pastiche above illustrates the students’ responses to this initial statement. The next set of questions the students faced were also critically important to my ability to understand how the students had grown as independent writers. The table below illustrates the percentage of students who responded to the following two statements: “I am writing on my own now more than I used to, less than I used to, about the same amount as I used to” and “I hate writing, writing is okay, I like writing, I love writing.” In each statement, the students were asked to circle to feelings they identified with, and were also given room to write if they felt they needed to provide an explanation.

Table 2: Mid-Study Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Given Statement</th>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I write more on my own now.</td>
<td>60.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I write the same amount as I used to.</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I write less on my own now.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hate writing.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing is okay.</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like writing.</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While my students may have responded with mixed feelings about writing in the fill in the blank statements, the most important thing to me was that
students were choosing to write more independently, and the majority of my
students were responding favorably to writing tasks. I felt as though I was well on
my way to teaching my students to communicate with writing. I was well on my
way to sharing a classroom with authors who were passionate about what they
had to say, and looked forward to having their voices heard in their writing
workshop groups.

**Practice Makes Perfect…Almost**

The time had come for me to administer my final descriptive writing
prompt (Appendix H). I wanted to be sure that the prompt mirrored the original
one. I gave the students a prompt in which I asked them to write about anything
they saw on their street. The final prompt the students received was given for
homework. Once again, all of the students responded to the prompt, and turned it
in on time. The students were asked to respond to the following, “Close your eyes
and visualize a place you are familiar with. Remember what Eva taught you, and
write one descriptive detailed paragraph to describe this place.”

Once the students turned in their writing samples, I again began counting
up all of the various components I would be using to measure my students’ gains.
The table below shares the results I found when the data collection for this
particular writing piece was over.
Table 3: Results of Final Descriptive Writing Prompt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stylistic Component</th>
<th>Average Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Sentences per Piece</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Adjectives Used</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Adverbs Used</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Conjunctions Used</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Compound/Complex Sentences</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Figurative Language Usages</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students had made gains in each of the categories. When I brought this data to my next seminar class, I was once again pleased with myself. I met with Dr. Shosh to discuss my findings. He enjoyed discussing the gains my students had made with me; however he once again prodded me, “What do these numbers mean to you, Melissa.” Now, I began to feel frustrated. I wanted to be appreciated for my efforts with my students, and moreover, I believed that in order to create proficient writers, I would need to improve both quantity and quality within my students’ writing. I was feeling tired, frustrated, and confused. I thought I was SUPPOSED to collect quantitative data. I don’t understand what I am doing wrong.
“Isn’t it more important that your students are writing well than if they are using a specified number of each of the items on your list?” He pushed me during this conversation to think about using portfolio style assessments with my students rather than to take the time to count specific items in each of the before and after writing prompts. I reflected on this long and hard, and determined that I would prefer to combine my ideas about quantity and quality with Dr. Shosh’s ideas about portfolio assessment. The approach of first improving the quantity of writing is well supported by the research of many well respected educators. The work of McCurdy et al. completed in 2008 demonstrated that students achieved sizeable gains in the areas of stylistic components when participating in a comprehensive writing program. Furthermore, McCurdy et al.’s research stipulates that students master writing skills at the point that they become functional writers. In this sense, measuring quantity is helpful because without it, there can simply be no quality. In addition, Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, and Lovelace (2009) completed a successful research study during which students quantified their own writing by counting and tracking the number of words they wrote. These researchers noted that when trying to improve quality in student writing, it was important to provide easily measurable goals that lent themselves to students experiencing low levels of success (p. 217). I believed that by combining my ideas about quantity and quality with Dr. Shosh’s ideas about portfolio assessment I would be able to bring my students the same success of the
students that had inspired my study and illuminated the research of important educators before me.

I also had a difficult decision about what I should do with this data. I thought about sharing the numbers with the students, however, I ultimately decided that I did not want the students to focus on the numbers; I preferred to have my students thinking about writing in a more holistic manner. As much as I wanted to find measurable growth, I did want the students to focus on creating quality writing, and in that aspect I suppose I did agree with Dr. Shosh after all.

From this point forward, I modified my plan and decided I would no longer give my students prompts to begin and end each unit. This however had more to do with my students than my conversation during seminar. I felt that although the pre and post writing prompts for each unit made measuring each of the stylistic components easy for me, I felt that they also were counterproductive to the type of writing environment I was trying to create for my students. Going forward, I determined I would continue to compare my students’ writing pieces to the first writing they had published for me in order to measure growth, but each of the writing assignments would be conducted in the form of authentic writing experiences.

**Expository Writing Unit**

Fueled by necessity as well as the new knowledge I had gained from my reflections about the results I had received from my descriptive writing unit, I
entered the expository writing unit with trepidation, and several changes in store. I
was determined not to provide my students with writing prompts that were
disjointed from the important work we were doing in the classroom. After all, the
measures I would take from their authentic writing experiences would be equally
revealing and valuable.

To begin our unit on expository writing, I wanted to be sure that the
students knew what types of writing expository texts covered. We viewed a series
of model writing pieces ranging from simple how-to pieces to newspaper articles.
When we finished studying these pieces I gave each writing workshop group a
large piece of chart paper and asked them to create a list of the characteristics they
found in common in each of the samples we viewed. The students created
wonderful lists, and we hung them around the classroom to use as a reference to
guide and focus our writing later.

Once we finished this task, I asked the students to create a second list. I
wanted them to name each of the new writing ingredients we had learned to help
us improve our writing. They did, and listed things such as “using new types of
sentences,” “describe stuff better,” “use more -ly words,” and “make sure the
reader really knows what we mean.” I was both pleased and disappointed with
this list. I was pleased because it seemed that my students were gaining a firm
understanding of how to improve their writing, however, I could tell from this list
that the technical names for the various writing components we were learning
about escaped them. I decided in the end, that the ability to write well had more to
do with their personal level of understanding for the material, and that learning
technical terminology was just an added bonus.

After we had this important discussion, I made sure that the students
understood that although we learned about adjectives, adverbs, word choice,
etcetera, during our descriptive writing unit, they should continue to utilize these
tools in their writing moving forward.

The next story in our reading anthology was Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow’s poem “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.” As this story was based
in the Revolutionary War Era, I knew that it would lend itself nicely to the
students writing an expository piece. Inspired to keep my writing unit intertwined
with the classroom curriculum, I asked the students to vote upon what type of
expository writing they would most like to try. The students chose based on the
writing samples they created their lists from the previous day. Overwhelmingly,
the students had decided they would like to try writing newspaper articles. I was
thrilled that my students were excited to try something new, and enjoyed the
prospect that I was infusing student choice into my classroom.

Once the students had made the decision to create newspapers, I set about
designing a lesson plan that would once again combine direct instruction with the
opportunity for my authors to have an authentic writing experience. I decided that
the students would each research a famous battle, person, or event from the
Revolutionary War, and would create their own two to three story layout. When I introduced this idea to the students the first thing I noticed was that a minimal amount of them complained about having to write more than one story. This observable detail in my classroom was another feather in my cap. My students, or at least the majority of them were no longer feeling put off by writing tasks, and I would even venture that the students were excited to share what they knew about this topic with their workshop groups.

Quickly, the students broke into their groups. Their first task was to dig for information. The students were told that during our Language Arts period for the next two weeks they would be entering the newsroom. I created press buttons and news hats for the students to wear. Each student was given an “office” or assigned computer to work at for the day. The students donned in their press gear began the first and most important step in creating expository writing – fact gathering. Students poured over Social Studies textbooks, Time For Kids magazines, Liberty Kids websites, and so much more. I was delighted to hear them sharing information with each other. I noticed many of the girls were moving from office to office excitedly sharing stories about heroic females of the time such as Molly Pitcher.

Within the next week, the students began drafting their news articles. They wrote, and I observed on the sidelines. The first discussion we had as a whole group centered around tone. I noticed that while my students were busily writing
and utilizing our strategies from the descriptive unit, their news articles were sounding exactly like a story. Now, it was time for my students to learn how important changing tone can be. I decided to transfer the idea of a mentor text from the descriptive unit into the expository unit. My students studied local newspaper articles and highlighted common introductory lines and phrases. They created a bulletin board of common characteristics about headlines. One student even asked, “Miss, why do we make bulletins out of everything now?” I hadn’t thought the students would ask me such a question, but valued his observant behavior and praised him for being such a good investigative reporter! I shared with him what my idea behind this had been all along, and that was, if students have access to resources, they will use them. I thought about how difficult writing was for my students, and then I thought, *well, when something is hard for me, I look it up. My students don’t have ready access to Google during the day. So, how can I make this task more accessible to them?*

The answer had been simple, we separated my white board with bulletin dividers, made lists, and left them up as visual displays. As it turns out, I was right. The students utilized these materials regularly and with ease. They continued working on their Revolutionary War newspapers, and most students enjoyed this task. Most students - but not Antonio. In the past several weeks Antonio had only become more incorrigible. He was caught smoking marijuana after school with a group of high school students; he continued to miss homework
assignments; he fell asleep in class regularly. Now, he was also serving a week of in-school suspension for his use of illicit materials. I tried every form of contact I could to involve his parents and all of my attempts were unanswered. Antonio barely completed the pre-writing for this newspaper article, and he also refused to utilize the layout program on the computers, something I truly thought would engage him. Antonio seemed to love computers, and often enjoyed the opportunity to animate his work. I thought that the chance to combine a fun use of graphics with an interesting and new newspaper layout program might motivate him to stay on task. Unfortunately, I did not get what I had hoped for. I was desperate for a breakthrough with Antonio but I simply wasn’t having any luck.

The rest of my students were making gains and they were enjoying the opportunity to share with the group. This week, at the end of the writing session when we met together on the reading carpet, I noted that I had more readers and volunteers to share than I had time to take. It was a wonderful feeling to know that my students were not only enjoying the opportunity to write, but that they were also reveling in the chance to proudly share that work.

Things were not running quite as smoothly as I had hoped for however. While my students seemed to be more engaged with the writing process as evidence by their willingness to approach writing tasks, their attention to these tasks, their willingness to extend the writing process, and their enjoyment in sharing their work, they did not make gains in the amount they wrote in this
assignment. When I conducted my data collection, I was disappointed to find that
the average number of sentences had decreased for this assignment, as did
figurative language usage. I shared my disappointment with my colleagues at
seminar. One confidant who had been incredibly supportive during this journey
asked if she could look more closely at the assignments I had done. I of course
said yes, and waited eagerly for her thoughts on the matter. She reminded me that
figurative language usage likely went down due to the modality of writing. In
non-fiction writing the need for figurative language as a stylistic component was
far less than in descriptive writing. Furthermore, each student was on average
writing 10 sentences per paragraph in this assignment. However, each student
wrote a minimum of 2 news stories. So, once again my students had made
significant gains during this assignment. I needed to learn to trust the process and
my students. Furthermore, I had to remember that data is only meaningful if it is
interpreted properly.

When the time came to put the newspapers out to press my authors were
thrilled. The students had truly come to love not just working together, but
sharing their accomplishments by living in a print-rich classroom. Below is a
photo of the bulletin board where students proudly hung their completed
newspapers.
Figure 6: Photo of Expository Writing Bulletin Board

Figure 6.1: Photo of Expository Writing Bulletin Board Continued
The Investigation Continues

The students fell in love with the process of creating a newspaper, and so I wanted to give them an opportunity to extend this learning experience. Furthermore, I also wanted to expose my students to the opportunity to become a part of the school community through the use of the newsroom.

In order to accomplish this task, I introduced the students to their next authentic writing experience. The students were thrilled when I told them that as a part of our next writing assignment we were going to play Clue! I gathered six of these classic board games, and distributed them to each of the writing workshop groups. Each student was instructed on how to play the game, and the rules for our assignment. The students were to use their writing journals to observe and take notes on everything that happened during the games. I also asked the students to remain in “character” for the duration of the game. Students should think and talk like the character they were portraying in the game. I was nervous about this portion of the assignment. I didn’t know if the students would buy into an assignment that so heavily relied on make-pretend and imagination. However, the students really had fun. I noticed that students such as Antonio who might not often get the chance to play board games or use his imagination had a difficult time getting started, but enjoyed the task once he understood its social construct.

After the games were complete, I asked the students to meet in their workshop groups. Then, I explained their next task. I told the students they were
going to turn their notes and observations into a newscast. Each group needed to cast, script, and direct their own newscast. The students were excited about this task, but I could hear a twinge of disappointment among them as well. The students had come to expect their work to be heard by their classmates and workshop groups. Furthermore, they enjoyed their work being visible to their peers from other classes. After each written assignment they had completed thus far, I had created a colorful bulletin to display their work in the hall. These boards had garnered a fair amount of positive attention for the students from principals to peers. Naturally, one of the first questions the students collectively asked was, “Miss who’s gonna’ see em’?”

I responded quickly as I could hardly wait to share this portion of the assignment with the students. I had signed out the green screen room located in the intermediate school for my students to use once they had completed writing their newscasts. The students were ecstatic that they would get to operate the audio-visual equipment in the room, an honor usually reserved only for those in the seventh and eighth grades. With the specifics explained, the students set to work for the next four afternoons working on the fine details of their scripts. They worked together to assign roles, compares observations, write, script, and rehearse their newscasts. They did an amazing job.

Finally, I observed the moment I had been waiting for with Antonio! As I walked through the classroom observing each of the groups, I noticed something
within him that I hadn’t seen before. It was subtle, and I was happy that I had been witness to it. Antonio was working in a group with Jalyssa. He was constantly checking in with her, looking at her script, and following her lead. When I noticed that this behavior seemed to be occurring, I decided to change seats, and put Jalyssa and Antonio next to each other even outside of writing workshop times. Antonio continued to rely on Jalyssa as a role model. If she was writing, so was he. This is not to say that all of the troubles with Antonio ceased to exist, but through writing workshop, he had found a viable role model, and he had already honed the skills to communicate with her. Jalyssa enjoyed the opportunity to help, and Antonio soaked up the attention.

Antonio continued to work hard during the scripting process as did all of the students in the class. Annabeth was able to put aside her behavioral issues to take a lead role as an anchor in the newscasts. Jayce was hesitant to communicate on camera, but the students utilized him for all of his best talents. He created sketches of the backdrops they would use, added sound effects such as sirens and screams from the side of the stage, and played an excellent silent police officer so that he could take part in an on-screen role as well. Through it all, my students were writing, communicating, and having a blast! They rose to the challenge exceptionally well in the green screen room. Albeit they were excitable and needed lots of reminders to stay orderly, they were on task and their chatter was
always about the project they were completing. Below are pictures of my students eagerly participating in workshop to create their newscasts.

Figure 7: Photos of Writing Workshops During Newscast Activity

The students filmed three minute long newscasts portraying the incident that occurred during the course of their board game. I filmed each of the newscasts, and we outsourced them live on the closed-feed television network to the six other fifth grade classes. I wanted the students to continue writing and producing work for an excited audience, and this seemed like the best way to make this work as authentic as possible. It was a true moment of pleasure during this action-research to see the faces of delight as I played back the newscasts for the students during a viewing party to culminate the expository writing project.
Don’t Be SADD, Be Persuasive

I had saved what I felt would be the most difficult project for last. I wanted my students to write an essay, a research-based persuasive essay to be exact. In our school, the week I introduced this project was also a kick-off week for the chapter of Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) students in our building. The fifth grade attended several assemblies that week focused on the topic of drug abuse awareness, bullying, and the importance of leadership.

This week also happened to fall just after the tragic occurrences of Sandy Hook Elementary School. My students were not given the opportunity to discuss these tragedies in school the day that they happened, and as per district directive, we were not to bring it up within our classrooms. Those directives did not however stop the students from asking questions, and pleading for an outlet. After all, the students were emotionally connected to what happened there – who can better relate to elementary school children than well, elementary school children?

I instructed the students to write their thoughts and concerns in their writing journals, and if they wanted me to see them or respond they could place them in my mailbox.

Needless to say this particular week at school was an emotionally charged one. The students were feeling a mix of emotions ranging from scared to empowered. I approached the next writing task with excitement, because I knew that some of the best persuasive arguments came from an emotionally charged
state of mind, but I also had trepidation because this would be the longest, most formal writing piece my students had written thus far. I was nervous that their old attitudes and habits would sneak back into their minds when they learned the full nature of the assignment.

In order to help the students and myself through this process I decided I would break each part of the writing project into small and manageable pieces, making them fun wherever possible. The first step was to get the students thinking about the things that really bothered them, the things they wished they could change. In order to inspire my students to begin thinking about that, I assigned them weekend homework, something I almost never do. The students were upset, angry even when I told them they would be having homework on Friday. Until I told them what they would be doing. I asked the students to bring their writing journals home, and instead of writing, they were going to make a list.

“Carry the journal everywhere with you. Write down anything that annoys you.” At that, the students began to laugh. “What kind of writing homework is that, Miss?” They couldn’t believe a teacher was asking them to record all the things that bothered them over a weekend. Once they settled down a bit, I explained the purpose behind the assignment. I wanted the students thinking about the things they would change if they were given the chance. I cautioned the students to choose topics that could be argued. For example, if someone in a restaurant lights up a cigarette and the smell annoyed the student that would be a
good example to record, whereas simply having a baby sister might not be a great example because no matter how much the students argued, they could never send back their sister. The students laughed at my examples and even helped me create a few more, and then went home for the weekend.

On Monday, the students returned to school with their lists ready. They were happy to share their experiences, and most students truly did sound as though they had carried their journals with them everywhere. The students studied their lists, shared them aloud with their writing workshop groups and eventually narrowed their lists down in order to choose a general persuasive essay topic. The next step I explained to the students would be to complete the research process. I provided each student with a graphic organizer (Appendix I), and brought them to the computer lab. We completed two days of internet safety lessons, as well as some training in how to choose appropriate websites to research on. Once the students were well versed in how to complete the research process, I set them on their way. The students researched for three full days, utilizing the internet as well as the library as resources. They completed their graphic organizers, which they then later spent several days turning into an outline (Appendix J).

Finally, the students were ready to begin writing rough drafts. Each student worked hard in completing this step. They learned how to write a thesis statement, and how to organize and reorganize their work. The students shared with their workshop groups, and rewrote when necessary. I also held individual
student conferences to offer suggestions and check in with students along the way during the two weeks of the drafting process.

We had been hard at work creating formal persuasive essays for approximately three weeks when it was time to enter the computer lab to publish our final drafts. The students were excited to see their work pay off, and to finally be able to turn in their finished product. They were inquisitive during the publishing process, asking for help and wondering if they could access the internet to gain just one more piece of information that might strengthen their arguments. Everyone was working hard on their writing; including Jayce who was writing a powerful persuasive essay on why fifth grade students should start school later in the morning (Jayce had served several office detentions for arriving to school late this year). The only person who was not able to work well on their essay was Antonio.

Antonio had served yet another in-school suspension during this week for exhibiting violence while using the restroom. Then, upon returning to my class, he seemed unable to regain any of the progress he had made during the newscasts. Antonio entered the computer lab empty handed. When I asked him where all of his writing materials were, he would not even answer me. I pushed him again asking if he needed some help finding them in his desk, and offered to escort him back to our classroom to help him search his desk. This is when Antonio looked at
me and said “I don’t know maybe my dog ate em’ or something,” followed by “I told you I don’t know” in a full on shout.

It was clear that Antonio had reached surpassed a controllable level of frustration with school. That said, I also could not allow him to speak to adults in the way he currently was. I asked him to calm down several times, and did my best to deescalate the situation with Antonio before eventually having to call the guidance counselor and principal to have him removed from my classroom. Antonio started the persuasive essay over again, but never finished the assignment. He had several other behavioral issues directly following this incident which did not allow him to participate in the regular classroom activities.

It was clear that I would continue to struggle to find ways to create a positive and meaningful environment for Antonio at school for the remainder of the school year. He was a student who was not invested in school, and his parents were equally nonchalant about academics and behavior at home. We have called together a team of stakeholders to meet with Antonio regularly, and I have started keeping him for tutoring twice a week. This has helped his overall homework completion, however any day that I do not stay with him, the same patterns reoccur.

The rest of the assignments went quite well for the students. They were able to write between four to five paragraphs per student. The paragraphs were well informed and thoroughly researched. The students had completed a formal
writing assignment, and most importantly to me, they had used writing to
communicate their opinions.

**In The End…**

It was Christmas Eve; I was sitting in the dining room of what used to be
my grandmother and grandfather’s home. This is a place that always places me in
a reflective mood. My grandparents had a large hand in helping to raise me as
they lived only seven houses around the corner, and every year it was at their
house that we gathered to break bread on the Holidays.

My grandmother, a Catholic woman who enjoyed her family, and liked to
count her blessings always told us “In the end, I’m happy that we’re together.” In
the wake of her passing, it has become a tradition for our family to finish her
famous phrase. We all begin “In the end…” and finish with a sentiment that
expresses something we are grateful for as the year is coming to a close. This
usually brings forth a fit of laughter, or wine inspired wit. We loved my
grandmother very much, but we are not an overly ceremonious people and prefer
to keep things on the lighter side.

As the turn-taking rounded the table and made its way to me, I had created
a list a mile long in my mind of all the things I was happy for “in the end.”
Several thoughts crossed my mind from good health, to steady work, to friends
and family. I also thought about all I had accomplished in the course of the past
year. I had completed so much professionally, and this brought me back to
Thanksgiving. I thought about how defensive I had gotten at the things others deemed as a “waste of my time” in my classroom. I thought about telling my captive audience about all the gains I had made in my class, ranting about how successful they had become. But, experience prevailed. I knew this audience, and I knew that would only garner sarcasm and well-meaning jabs. Still, I couldn’t help but think, *In the end, I’m happy my students can communicate. In the end, I’m happy my students enjoy coming to school, and experienced authorship. In the end, I’m thrilled that so many of my students enjoy writing.* These thoughts, I thought perhaps were a bit too serious for my close friends and family. So, I simply said “In the end, I’m happy I teach cursive.”
Data Analysis

Field Log

Throughout the course of my action research study, I kept a detailed field log which held my observations of students, notes about specific lessons, interviews, and much more. Keeping this field log helped me to identify several important themes in my research.

Motivation is essential in inspiring students to be writers. I often wondered why some of my most academically capable students were scoring such low numbers when given the PSSA writing prompts. It was not until I was conducting this action-research study that the element of motivation became so clear to me.

From the most capable to the most challenged students in my classroom, all students produced more fluid, cohesive, quality writing pieces when highly engaged and interested.

Authentic writing experiences do not need to be elaborate, but they must be real-world relatable for the students. When my students were able to actively engage in a true to life activity before writing, they were able to build background knowledge as an integral piece of the pre-writing process. This was a key element in the success of many of my students.
The strategy of peer editing is helpful to students, but must be taught explicitly. Many students read their peers’ work only for simple spelling errors and other low-level issues. Rarely did students read for content or style until those skills were explicitly explained through Writing Workshop groups.

**Student Writing Samples and Analysis**

In addition to keeping a detailed field log, I periodically collected and analyzed student writing samples from my students.

All writing samples that were collected were fully published pieces. This meant that the students had learned or reviewed the writing process via direct instruction, completed various authentic writing experiences within that modality of writing, worked in conjunction with their workshop members, drafted and revised with the help of a peer, and completed and shared with an audience that piece of work. Once the published work was submitted to me in their writing portfolio, I analyzed the student writing sample to determine the number of sentences per paragraph, number of adjectives used, number of adverbs used, number of conjunctions used, number of compound or complex sentences used, and number of figurative language examples found.

It is important to note that while the list of items I was looking for from one piece of writing to the next did not change, the modality of writing did. This
had an effect on the outcome of my data. For instance, students were less colorful with their language when writing in the expository format, and so naturally their use of figurative language declined from the narrative to expository forms. That is to say, where adjectives, adverbs, and use of figurative language are concerned, there was not a steady increase from one analysis of student writing to the next. That being said however, I also reflected a great deal upon the numbers in each category as compared with the baseline assessment. In every case, my students were clearly being more mindful of their word choice, and the style they were putting forth in their writing. The numbers for each stylistic component increased from the baseline data.

Furthermore, I was pleased with the overall increase in the quantity of my students’ writing. The students began their baseline assessment writing an average of 4.6 sentences per writing piece. By the end of the unit, the students were writing an average of 23.8 sentences per writing piece. In addition, the general quality of the students’ work was increased significantly by the end of the process. The table below compares the analyzed pieces of writing collected from my students. The numbers shown for each category are an average of the results from my class.
One theme became incredibly clear to me from reflecting on the data garnered from my student writing samples. Through studying and analyzing student writing samples I have come away from my action-research study with a clear understanding that writing more is important. This meant a variety of things in my classroom and to my students: writing more often, writing more on the page, writing with more purpose and intent. Writing more gave my students the opportunity to become more proficient writers. They were able to develop a skill and a practice as authors. From my observations of student portfolios (baseline writing pieces through the final persuasive essay) the students were writing with a
clearer focus, stronger word choice, and a more cohesive style. While this did not always mean an increase in every category analyzed, students were making more skillful decisions in their writing. Students can only become more proficient writers if they are given the chance to write.

**Survey Data**

My study began with a simple survey. It was important to me that I had the opportunity to understand if my students identified themselves as writers. Furthermore, I wanted to gain an understanding for my students’ general attitudes about writing tasks in the classroom. The survey each student took gave a question or statement followed by a thumbs-up signal, the statement “I’m in the middle,” and a thumbs-down signal. The students read the given statement or question, and circled the image or phrase they most closely identified with.

The results of my initial survey (Appendix D) were enlightening. I learned two very important things; first, my students could identify the distinct modalities of writing. Secondly, I learned that the majority of my students had no confidence in themselves as writers. When given the statement, “I am a confident writer” only fifty percent of my students responded with the thumbs-up signal. When given the statement “I feel like I am a good writer,” the number interestingly decreased to forty-two percent. However, the overwhelming majority of my students responded with the thumbs-up signal when given the statements “I know
what it means to be descriptive in my writing,” “I know what persuasive writing is, and “I know what narrative writing is.”

I also conducted a mid-study survey (Appendix G) and a final survey (Appendix K) with my students. The mid-study survey was designed to garner specific information from my students relating the new writing strategies being used in the classroom to their learning needs. I wanted specifically to see if the action-research study was having a positive impact on their attitudes as writers.

The mid-study survey was designed so that students could quickly share their thoughts and feelings about the writing journey they had been on so far. The first question was a simple fill in the blank statement that read, “I feel ___ about writing because __.” In the second question, students circled an answer they most identified with when they read the statement, “I am writing on my own… more than I used to, the same amount that I used to, or less than I used to.” In the third question on the survey, students again circled their response. The statement read, “I hate writing/I like writing/I love writing.” All three questions on this survey were followed by a set of blank lines so that students could share any thoughts or concerns they had.

This mid-study survey allowed me to understand that while not all of my students were passionate about writing, the majority of them felt confident to produce more writing without teacher assistance at this point in the study than
they had before we began. Furthermore, not a single student reported hating writing, and the majority of my students, a combined sixty percent, reported liking or loving writing halfway through my action research.

Table 5: Mid-Study Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Given Statement</th>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I write more on my own now.</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I write the same amount as I used to.</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I write less on my own now.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hate writing.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing is okay.</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like writing.</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love writing.</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, my culminating survey (Appendix K) was perhaps the most positive piece of survey data I collected. At the end of my study I gave students a final survey asking them to indicate their attitudes about writing. I prompted them to reflect on their feelings about being asked to complete a writing project at the beginning of the year, as compared to how they would feel now. The students were given two statements to read, each of which had three choices to circle. Statement one read, “I feel like… a better writer, the same kind of writer, a worse
writer.” Statement two read “When I am asked to write now I feel… confident, neutral, or anxious.” Once it was clear that all of the students understood the terminology through classroom discourse, the students began circling their answers. The results are displayed in the table below. I am pleased to report that while the usage of each stylistic component might not have steadily increased throughout my action-research study, my students’ general attitudes towards writing tasks did improve dramatically.

Table 6: Final Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage of Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel like a better writer.</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like the same kind of writer.</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like a worse writer.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I am asked to write, now I feel confident.</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I am asked to write, now I feel neutral.</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I am asked to write, now I feel anxious.</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PSSA Rubric Samples

While it was important to me that my students could produce high quality cohesive writing pieces and enjoy it, I was also aware of the fact that standardized testing is the educational reality at present throughout the course of my study. I wanted to ensure that the writing practices that were being utilized in my classroom were also helping to prepare my students for the state assessment in writing, and were closely aligned with my district’s writing goals. In order to monitor progress to that end, I gave students two cold writing prompts within the time frame of my study. These prompts were graded using the standard PSSA writing rubric. The students did not spend a great deal of time working with these prompts. They were given as an additional portion of the regular English/Language Arts curricular assessments I give every Friday morning. They were not shared with writing workshop groups, nor were they peer edited. This assessment was meant to measure improvement on the independent level based on the standardized testing rubric. The results are as shown below.
Table 7: PSSA Rubric Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>October PSSA Writing Prompt</th>
<th>December PSSA Writing Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Scoring a 1</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Scoring a 2</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Scoring a 3</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After analyzing the data shown in the table above a new theme became clear to me. Utilizing best practices while teaching, rather than a dictated script, can improve student function on standardized assessments. Furthermore, some of my most academically challenged students were able to score a three on the last writing prompt given. I believe that because I was modifying my lessons for all students, and tailoring writing experiences to meet the needs and interests of all students, the majority of my students, if not all were able to experience success at least once throughout the course of my action research study. I have learned a powerful lesson, what is best practice for some students is likely to be the best practice for all of my students.

Writing Portfolios

Finally, my students kept writing portfolios in our classroom corner throughout the course of the study. The students each had a folder with their number on it. This is where they kept their writing journals, graphic organizers,
and any notes or scrap papers they were using for inspiration. The students had access to this bin at all times within the classroom. In the bin I also kept sticky notes so that students could flag any writing they wanted me to read.

The writing portfolios provided me with a great deal of information. First, the portfolios served as a way for me to monitor student productivity as well as quality improvement. Secondly, the portfolios served as a way to generate important dialogue during individual student conferences. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the portfolios served as a guideline for my direct instruction lessons. Whenever I noted that students were lacking in a particular writing skill, I was able to tailor my direct instruction lesson for the week towards that specific skill.
Figure 9: Coded Bins

**Research Question**

What will be the observed and reported experiences when authentic writing experiences are implemented into a fifth grade inclusive classroom’s writing curriculum?

**Teaching/Writing Styles**
- Writing Workshops
- Mini-lessons
- Partner Writing
- Photo Journals
- Cooperative Learning
- Differentiation

**Engagement**
- Authentic Experience
- Student Excitement
- Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation
- Teacher Knowledge of Students
  - Student Choice
  - Student Challenge
  - Differentiation
  - Learning Styles

**Assessments**
- Student Mastery
- Student Failure
- Student Growth
  - Goals
- Proficiency Levels
- Numerical Data
- Writing Quality
- Writing Portfolios

**Authenticity**
- Authentic Experience
- Experiential Learning
  - Motivation
- Students as Authors
- Meaningful Writing
Theme Statements

Over the course of performing an action-research study within my classroom, several themes began to emerge. These themes were evident in my literature research, field log data, writing samples, and student feedback. Each of the themes listed below provided a powerful learning experience not only for myself as an educator, but also for my students.

1. Meeting the needs of individual learners through a combination of cooperative learning, partner writing, direct instruction, writing conferences, and instructional differentiation allowed all students to demonstrate improved achievement in writing.

2. Authentic Assessments and progress monitoring demonstrate that students can progress when directive and inquiry based instruction are implemented in a balanced manner.

3. Teaching students material in a manner suited to their strengths and interests allowed them to increase confidence and mastery of material.

4. Reflections are most powerful for students and teachers when used to drive future instruction and learning.

5. Students became more passionate, enthusiastic writers when immersed in authentic writing tasks with meaning and purpose.
6. Students who are given the opportunity to write more demonstrate an increased proficiency level in writing skills.
Research Findings

- Meeting the needs of individual learners through a combination of cooperative learning, partner writing, direct instruction, writing conferences, and instructional differentiation allowed all students to demonstrate improved achievement in writing.

During the research study conducted by McCurdy et al. in 2008, educators who provided students with a combination of direct instruction, increased opportunity to respond, motivation, and individual feedback saw an increased strength in student writing. From the beginning of my own research study, I struggled to create a Comprehensive Writing Program (CWP) such as the one described by McCurdy and his associates. I found that as a result of providing my students with this combination of teaching and writing strategies, they were able to increase their achievement on given writing tasks.

Students began to use cooperative learning very early on during the action-research study, and it became a useful tool for students as they relied on each other not only for the exchange of ideas and help, but also as motivation for improvement. The most outstanding example I recall of cooperative learning being useful in improving writing achievement is with Antonio. Antonio was a resistant writer and learner throughout the course of my action-research study, that being said, Antonio benefitted from cooperative learning groups during the Game of Clue Newscast lessons. During this activity, students met in cooperative
learning groups for several days in order to create their newscast scripts. During this time, I noted in my field log that Antonio was modeling his behavior after one of my strongest students, Jalyssa. In this instance, Antonio experienced success and achievement in writing through the use of peer modeling he might not have otherwise had.

Partner writing and writing conferences also became an integral part of the classroom during my action-research. Students worked in partners frequently when completing peer-editing sessions. Writing conferences became invaluable in bringing students success with the writing process. One shining example of this is Annabeth during the Alien Kisses activity. Annabeth rarely experienced academic success without a struggle. I conferenced with Annabeth during this activity when she came proudly over to me and pronounced “I’m done!” When I examined Annabeth’s finished product I found a few short, illegible sentences. So, I asked if it would be okay if I sat and read her work with her. The first thing I noted in my field log was how excited Annabeth was to partake in this special one-on-one teacher time. Secondly, I noted how valuable dialogue was as a teaching tool. Annabeth was able to benefit from my think-aloud during this process as I asked her questions such as “What is your alien’s name?” Or, “What do you think the alien might say to his friends next?” Annabeth was able to answer my questions and successfully add many valuable details to her writing from this conferencing experience.
It was not just Antonio and Annabeth who benefited from this comprehensive approach to writing. As evidenced in my data analysis section in Table 7, the majority of my students were able to begin writing with an increased level of proficiency. When given a PSSA writing prompt in October, only twenty-five percent of students were able to earn a top-score response, while thirty-nine percent of my students earned the lowest possible score. When this style of assessment was repeated in December, fifty percent of my students were able to earn a top-score response, while only twelve percent earned the lowest possible score.

Improved achievement in writing was further demonstrated by my students’ ability to utilize the stylistic components that were an integral part of my action-research. The students were regularly using more adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, sentence variety, and figurative language in their writing. As Table 4 in the data analysis section shows, students began the school year using an average of 1.5 adjectives per writing piece. Once the students were immersed in the writing journey of my research, this number grew to reach 6.2 adjectives per piece in the descriptive writing unit, 9.0 adjectives per piece in a narrative sample, 5.83 adjectives per writing piece in the expository writing unit, and 10.0 adjectives per piece in the persuasive writing sample. Similarly, the students also began using more adverbs throughout their writing as well. Students began with an average of 0.3 adverbs per writing piece at the start of the year, and showed
growth by choosing 0.34, 2.5, 1.86, and 0.6 adverbs per writing piece in their
descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive writing samples respectively.
While these numbers did not steadily increase from one unit to the next, it is
important to note that students always exceeded their baseline usage. This meant
that students were being more mindful about their word choice, and the message
they were communicating to their audience as we continued to write.

Students experienced similar success where sentence structure and variety
were considered. Students put forth an average of 0.09 conjunctions per writing
piece on their baseline assessment. Over time, when descriptive, narrative,
expository, and persuasive writing samples were collected this number increased
to 0.57, 1.0, 1.0, and 2.0 conjunctions per writing piece respectively. Students also
worked hard to increase their use of compound and complex sentences throughout
the course of the action research study. In the baseline writing assessment,
students were including an average of 0.3 compound or complex sentences per
writing piece. In the descriptive writing sample, students included an average of
1.13 compound/complex sentences, in the narrative writing sample, students
included an average of 3.6 compound/complex sentences per writing piece.
During the expository and persuasive writing units, these numbers continued to
suggest that students were creating mindful writing, measuring a respective 2.67
and 4.4 compound/complex sentences per writing piece.
Finally and perhaps most powerfully was the amount of writing my students were able to compose without teacher assistance. When the action-research study began, my students were able to write a mere 4.6 sentences per writing piece, and by the end of the study, the students were producing 23.8 sentences per writing piece. This number increased steadily as the students spent time working through various authentic writing experiences, writing workshops, and direct instruction lessons.

Not only were students able to put more written information on the page, but they were able to do so independently. According to the results of the mid-study survey conducted in my classroom, sixty percent of students reported writing more on their own at the mid-study point than they were at the start of the school year. Forty percent of students admitted to writing about the same amount independently as they used to, while zero students reported to be writing less.

This, along with all of the observable evidence from my students along the way demonstrates that a combination of best practices allows students to improve overall writing achievement. My students demonstrated this increased achievement in both the quantity and quality of their writing, along with an increased willingness and desire to write independently.
• *Progress monitoring demonstrates that students can progress when directive and inquiry based instruction are implemented in a balanced manner.*

Hollingsworth and Ybara (2009), authors of Explicit Direct Instruction: The Power of the Well-taught, Well Crafted Lesson described direct instruction as being “effective and efficient” (p. 12). The authors further their simple statement by explaining that educators need to determine the needs of their students and plan lessons that include “activating prior knowledge, concept development, skill development, guided practice, and lesson closure” (p. 13). These same principles were made well known in Madeline Hunter’s lesson plan in earlier years, and will likely continue to be used for many years to come. I too found the research of Hunter and the many other educators who have studied and utilized direct instruction to be helpful throughout my action-research. Direct instruction lessons were utilized regularly throughout my action-research as a means of developing writing skills within my students.

Progress monitoring became a powerful form of assessment when determining the needs of my students. One very helpful tool I used in order to monitor the progress of my students was my field log. I kept careful notes, observations, and reflections about the work my students were completing, along with the dialogue they were having in my log. Interestingly, the first time I asked my students to complete a peer editing exercise during my study. I noted in my field log that the
students were very quick to circle a minor spelling or punctuation mistake, but had no concept about editing for content or style. In order to address this issue, I knew I needed to implement a direct instruction lesson on editing and revising. It took the students lots of practice, but I was able to observe students offering suggestions to their peers such as “Maybe you should move this funny part up,” or “I like this part of the story but I couldn’t understand who you were talking about.” These observations, which I recorded in my field log, became clear signals to me that students were in the early stages of editing and revising work for conventions as well as content. I had deduced that this improvement in writing skills was a result of the direct instruction I provided to my students.

Beyond providing students with direct instruction on peer editing, I also provided my students with inquiry based learning. This inquiry based style of instruction became a central ingredient in creating the motivational and creative dimension of my classroom. The students developed a true desire to write as a direct result of being able to explore the world around them. My findings are supported by the research of Don Murray (2009) who suggests that providing students with real world experiences is invaluable. Murray defines the process of writing as “the exploration of what we should know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of learning about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our
world. Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, glory in its unfinishedness, and work with language in action” (p. 2-3).

Time and again throughout the course of my action-research I found that my students demonstrated the need to explore and learn about the world around them. Fifty percent of the students in my classroom identified with not feeling confident as writers in my pre-study survey. When I conducted member checks with many students after completing these surveys, many students reported that writing was difficult for them because they “had nothing to write about.” Building confidence in writing skills, and providing students with a wealth of knowledge from which to write became a primary concern throughout the course of my study.

In an effort to create prior knowledge within my students, I created many authentic writing experiences and interactive inquiry based activities. Throughout the descriptive writing unit, the students took tours of the rooms throughout the school in order to create a mystery room tour. The students further grappled with descriptive writing during the Alien Kisses lesson, in which they relied on their five senses to describe a Hershey Kiss without using banned words such as chocolate or silver. The students enjoyed a further experience of the senses when they stepped into a square the size of a shipping box to take on the persona of Henry Box Brown. As we moved into the expository writing unit, the students played a game of Clue in order to create newscasts describing the events that transpired in their games.
As a result of combining direct instruction with these inquiry based learning activities, my students were writing more. During the baseline assessment students wrote an average of 4.6 sentences. This number jumped to 13.6 sentences during the descriptive writing sample and to 16.67 sentences during the narrative writing sample. Students wrote an average of 16.71 sentences and 23.8 sentences each during the expository and persuasive writing samples, the last two projects in the study. Students who were exposed to a variety of instructional strategies were able to increase their writing achievement.

Yet another form of progress monitoring that took place within my classroom was student surveys. It was imperative to me that my students themselves felt as though they were progressing as writers. As evidenced by my culminating survey, the students did indeed feel as though the new combination of writing practices occurring in the classroom were a benefit to their writing skills. In this survey, eighty-seven percent of students responded favorably to the statement “I feel like I am a better writer” when asked to reflect on themselves “now as compared with the start of the school year.” Only thirteen percent of students reported to feel like the same kind of writer, while zero students reported to feel like a worse writer. Furthermore, the students were feeling more confident as writers. In the initial survey given to my students, fifty percent of students identified as feeling confident as writers, however, in the culminating survey, sixty-five percent of students reported that “When I am asked to write now, I feel confident.” Thirty-
one percent of students reported feeling neutral about writing, while only four percent of students reported to feel anxious when given a writing task. This informal progress monitoring allowed the students time to track their own successes and achievements as writers, but also provided powerful evidence to me that balanced instruction supported students and their progress as writers.

- Teaching students material in a manner suited to their strengths and interests allowed them to increase confidence and mastery of material.

Linda Christensen states that “it is not uncommon for a student to write without a punctuation mark on the page. But just because a student lacks skills doesn’t mean they lack intelligence.” She further warns that when educators view students as needing to be “fixed” they tend to design curricula that erase students’ home language, culture, and desire to make any attempt to engage in meaningful learning (Christensen 2009, p.2). It became imperative to me from the onset of my action-research study that I viewed my students’ work as personal accomplishments rather than pieces of literature that were in need of fixing.

From the results of my initial survey, I knew that most of my students were already feeling a lack of confidence in their writing skills. Furthermore, the results of my baseline writing assessment proved that students were producing very little writing on the page (4.6 sentences per piece), with few to no stylistic components (adjectives, adverbs, figurative language examples). I wanted to design lessons that would be of high interest for my students, and would be tailored to individual
strengths and needs. This meant reading my students work and responding with appropriate direct instruction lessons, and activities that would be intrinsically motivating for them.

I was able to accomplish these goals on a number of occasions throughout my study. One example I can recall was when responding to a student’s work in the area of word choice. A student had written about her parents’ separation and reported in her writing that she felt “sad.” I knew that the student probably felt more than sad, and so through a variety of direct instruction lessons on word choice as well as individual conferences, we were able to work together to make more appropriate word choices that ultimately improved her writing piece.

Another example of tailoring lessons to my students’ interests occurred during my point of view lesson. I knew Jayce thought in the form of pictures. He loved cartoons, and although he had a difficult time verbalizing his thoughts as a result of his autism, he loved to draw and share cartoons. In order to teach point of view, and make a breakthrough with Jayce, I used fairy tales, and a cartoon version of the Three Little Pigs. Jayce lit up when he heard these stories, and using the text as a mentor, he wrote a fabulous continuation of The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs! He enjoyed this activity so much, not only was he able to write a complete and cohesive story with a beginning, middle, and end, Jayce interacted with his workshop group. He spoke to them in direct address, made eye-contact, and read his work in a loud and proud voice.
Beyond these isolated anecdotal incidents, I had learned through a variety of ways that the whole class was benefitting from the tailored and motivating writing curriculum I was providing. The students themselves made it clear in the mid-study survey that they were beginning to feel like more confident writers. Sixty percent of the students in my classroom reported to write more independently at the mid-study point. Furthermore, the students’ general attitudes towards writing were beginning to improve as well. A combined sixty percent of my students reported to like or love writing at the mid-study point (an even 30% split), while forty percent of the students reported that “writing is okay.” Students were feeling free to write in an independent manner, and for the majority of students, independent writing had become an enjoyable, preferred activity.

Increased confidence became further evident when analyzing the culminating survey data. Here, eighty-seven percent of students circled “I feel like a better writer” on their surveys when asked to reflect on their writing journeys. Moreover, sixty-five percent of students in the class reported “When I am asked to write now, I feel confident.” By the end of the study, the students were not only by my observations better, more confident writers, but they were accomplished and confident writers by their own volition.

Several students opted to share their thoughts on how the action-research study helped them to become better writers. One student wrote, “I feel like a better writer and I also have confidence that I’m a better writer than I was before.”
Another student responded, “I feel great about writing now because the activities were fun and actually helped me learn new things.” Yet another student stated, “I feel that I am a better writer now than I used to be because last year’s writing projects weren’t that fun, but they are now. An activity I loved was Alien Kisses because I got to use all my senses.” Another student shared, “I feel like I am a much better writer this year than any other year. I feel that way because you are pushing us to use better more exciting words. I always liked writing, but once we started to do all these writing activities I started to love writing. Whenever you say ‘I have a new writing project for you’ I get excited and happy to do it.” Reading responses like these from my students made it clear that creating motivational tailored lessons was essential in creating passionate and confident writers.

Confidence was also translating into accuracy and proficiency. When given a PSSA prompt, fifty percent of the students were able to earn a top scoring response in December as compared with the twenty-five percent who were able to earn a top score in October. Furthermore, when grading the students’ persuasive essays (their final writing project), one student was able to earn a perfect one hundred percent, sixty-three percent of students earned a ninety percent or better, thirty-three percent of students scored an eighty percent or better, while only eight percent of students earned a grade in the sixties. The students were proving that they were confident authors who wanted to write and share their messages with
their peers, and the adults in their school community. Jayce even submitted his powerful essay on school start times to the principal of the building. It is important to note that one of the goals listed on Jayce’s behavioral support plan is “to communicate feelings with confidence and appropriate actions.” Jayce struggled frequently with the 7:35 start time, which is much earlier than his elementary school was. He wanted to share his feelings with the principal of our building. This showed a powerful bolstering of confidence for a student who communicated infrequently and often inappropriately when upset. His essay entitled *Do Not Disturb* is published below. (Please note this is Jayce’s published work, all writing errors have been revised and removed).

**Do Not Disturb**

In 2010, when 5th grade was in the elementary schools, students could not arrive at school until 8:40 am. Now that 5th grade is at middle school, students must be at school by 7:45. That is when school starts. Bad, right? Since 5th grade is still an elementary grade, 5th grade should start school later, just like elementary grades.

First, the _________ School District considers 5th grade to be an elementary grade, but they moved from the elementary buildings to the intermediate school. Until 2011, 5th grade was at the elementary school buildings and could not be at school until 8:40. Now, 5th grade must follow the intermediate school schedule and are being punished by detentions when they are late more than five times.

Research shows that 5th graders need more sleep. Doctors recommend that 10 and 11 year olds need at least nine hours of sleep. Research finds that 90% of students report feeling “groggy” in school and 43% report having sleeping problems that last more than six months arriving or going in or out.
As a result, poor sleep causes learning problems and bad behavior. Poor sleep equals causes like poor academic achievement. Sleep specialists blame lack of sleep for behavior problems. Students not getting enough sleep will fail.

In conclusion, 5th graders should start school at 8:40 like other elementary students. Fifth grade is still elementary and needs more sleep to improve learning and behavior. The ________ School District should change 5th grade start time to 8:40 instead of 7:45.

It is clear that Jayce and the other students were becoming confident and proficient writers as a direct result of tapping into their personal motivations and desires to share well planned thoughts.

- **Reflections are most powerful for students and teachers when used to drive future instruction and learning.**

According to Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann, “the focus of (education) is now on accountability rather than the diagnosis of learning for instructional purposes” (p. 310). In order to help students become better, more passionate, more proficient writers, it was vital that I make my assessments, both formal and informal useful in the classroom. I had fallen victim to the habit of going through the motions of an assigned curriculum, not taking much stock in figuring out why my students weren’t achieving proficiency rates. It became quite clear to me throughout my study that if I reflected upon my students’ work as the study went along, and used that information to make sound instructional decisions, I would see my students responding in positive ways within their work.
This would be made clear many times during the course of the study, but never more than when I reflected upon the baseline writing assessment I provided for my students. When I looked at that writing sample, it was made clear that my students could not write much, and they could not write well. Students were using between zero and one adjectives and adverbs per writing sample. Students barely were able to write five sentences per sitting. By the end of my study, my students were able to produce multi-paragraph writing pieces with an average of 23.8 sentences per piece. Students were making stylistic decisions where their writing was concerned, choosing words carefully that held appropriate meaning. The students in my classroom were become authors, crafting work that included adjectives and adverbs (on average 9 and 2.5 as respective highs), and they were using a variety of sentence structures within their work. All of this was a result of the instructional decisions I had made within my classroom.

The time spent with my students sitting on the reading rug during writing workshop lessons became so important as a planning tool for me. I listened as my authors shared the stories. I listened for what we still needed to accomplish, and I included it in my next direct instruction lesson. For example, when my students needed to learn about word choice after hearing words such as “sad” and “cool” and “stuff” repeatedly used, I designed the word graveyards lesson and the Alien Kisses writing project. My students were observed regularly using the graveyard from that point forward. When my students were having a difficult time varying
their sentence structure, I conducted a direct instruction lesson on transition words and phrases, and had the students help create a word wall that was left on display for the remainder of the year.

My students, and their work were constantly making me reflect, and those reflections were the driving force behind every instructional decision I made throughout the course of my study.

The students themselves reported many activities that they found helpful in the open-ended section of the mid-study survey. Students shared thoughts such as, “dead words helped me choose what to say and made picking better words more fun.” Yet another student reported, “I liked writing for an audience. It was nice to have my writing go somewhere.” A third student reported, “I liked that Miss Carmel let me move around when I needed to. I liked visiting the other classrooms because I could picture what to write.” “I loved looking at pictures and listening to music when we wrote. It helped me use my imagination and challenged me a lot.”

The students felt that they were being given writing that was helping them achieve, and they were also enjoying writing more. Thirty percent of the students in my classroom reported to “like writing” by the end of the action-research study, while another thirty-percent of students reported to “love writing” by the end of the study.
My classroom was never more aligned with my students’ needs and interests as it was during this study. My curriculum map was set, but it was a guide. My students’ needs came first, and I found that doing this created an opportunity for increased success for all.

- Students become more passionate, enthusiastic writers when immersed in authentic writing tasks with meaning and purpose.

Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2004) suggest in their research that “students can perform admirably on formalized writing tests with instruction based on best practices rather than explicit teaching to the test” (p. 310). When I began my study, it was my intent to prove that I could get students to achieve without focusing solely on a curriculum intended for test preparation. I was determined to use authentic writing experiences to help my students build curiosity, observational habits, and a desire to write in order to communicate.

There were several points throughout my study where I believe I accomplished this goal. The very first activity that students completed, mystery room tours, allowed me to see that by simply changing the usual routine of reading a story and responding to it could help my most reluctant learners to achieve small success in the area of writing. I observed students who I could barely get to write a name on the top of their paper writing from the time we walked into a room until the timer went off signifying we had to leave.
I further observed the importance of authentic writing experiences when the students were asked to become Henry, the main character from *Henry’s Freedom Box*. The students wrote poignant first person memos from their contained and isolated boxes on the floor. They were observant and empathetic in their writing. They made wise word choices, and furthermore showed an observable enjoyment in the writing task. All of the students were engaged in the story, eyes forward intently watching, the majority of students asked to have more time than what I had originally allotted for writing that day, and many students shared their work not just with their small workshop groups, but also with their entire class. Below are a few samples of the memos and letters that students wrote in Henry’s voice. The first piece is written by Jalyssa while the second piece was written by Serema. Both of these students are strong academic students who served as leaders throughout the course of my action-research. Published below are their revised and edited memos.

**Mama:** Try not to worry about me too much. I’d had about enough of the work Master was putting me through. It was tough to put that big burn mark on my hand. It was boiling hot, but it was worth it. When I found out they had sold my wife, it was the very last straw! I couldn’t even whistle anymore. I was as blue as the sky. I’m going to mail myself to freedom. I heard that Philadelphia is full of nice people who will be waiting for me. I tried out the box today. It is dark and scary, and I can barely fit inside. Nothing hurts worse than what I do here though. Pray for me mama and I will try to find you and my wife when I get to Philadelphia. Love, Henry.
Today I decided to find my freedom. The problem is, I am a slave and if I get caught I’ll be in enormous trouble. I found the doctor, the only white man in the south I could trust. He works for Master, but he told me he thinks slavery is awful. He helped me burn a big mark in my hand so I could get excused from the tobacco rolling tomorrow. This way Master won’t come looking for me. I climbed in the box and lost my breath when the Doc nailed the top on. Bang – Bang- Bang. That hammer hitting the nails inside was so loud it sound like thunder was striking me right in the ears! It was cramped and hot, and I got tossed around a lot on the ship. The sun was so bright when I reached Philadelphia I could hardly see but the smell of freedom was amazing!

Yet another way this theme was made evident in my action-research was through the results of my mid-study survey. Sixty percent of my students reported writing more on their own at the halfway point of the study than they had at the start of the school year. Furthermore, a combined sixty percent of my students reported to either like or love writing as an activity at the halfway point of my action-research study. Moreover, there was a group of three to four students who regularly began leaving their journals for me to read on Monday mornings.

Students were not only writing more independently in school, but some were also seeking out an audience for work they had chosen to do at home in their free time.

According to Calkins (1994) writing does not begin with “desk work, but with life work” (p. 3). This rang especially true for my students. When I began allowing my students to explore the world around them through authentic writing
experiences, they began to communicate through writing, and according to their own responses, fell in love with writing in the process.

- **Students who are given the opportunity to write more demonstrate an increased proficiency level in writing skills.**

  The research of McCurdy et al. (2008) suggests that students can make sizeable gains in the areas of acquisition and maintenance of writing skills when they are provided with a multifaceted writing program that allows students to write more. Their research suggests that if students are not yet responding, teaching writing skills or receiving a well-written product will be difficult at best.

My classroom and the results of my study support this research. Prior to my action research study, my students rarely used writing as a means of communication, and when they did respond in the form of writing it was cursory at best.

  When designing the focus of my study, I determined that the first priority in helping my students achieve proficiency would be getting them to write more by providing them with the opportunity to respond frequently. The key in creating a proficient writer would be first to create a student that writes. This element was evidenced many times throughout the course of my study.

  First and foremost, I was able to observe my students use writing as a way to communicate with one another. This allowed for a pressure-free writing environment. The students were asked regularly to journal, not just to respond to
activities in school, but also as a way to communicate inter and intrapersonally throughout the school year. The students also responded in writing during morning work time, a time traditionally reserved for math instruction. This was sometimes through looking at a photograph, jotting down thoughts about a song that was playing as they entered the room, describing their weekend, or even setting goals for an upcoming week.

Some students kept journals and left them on my desk during the course of the research study. These journals served as a wonderful use of student-teacher dialogue in the classroom.

The students were writing on average three days a week in school. Prior to my action-research study being conducted, writing instruction was sporadic at best. The students responded to stories in an open-ended format, and it was typically conducted out of a state generated writing coach book.

After performing the various writing units and activities, the students reported writing more than they did before the study began. Sixty percent of my students reported writing more than they used to in the mid-study survey. Furthermore, eighty-seven percent of the students reported feeling like better writers in the post-study survey, while sixty-five percent of students reported feeling like more confident writers in the post-study survey.

Yet another way that my experience reflected the research of McCurdy et al. was through the analysis of PSSA writing rubrics with one being the lowest score,
and a three being the highest score. Students were moving fluidly from below
basic scores to proficient scores. When given a prompt in October, thirty-nine
percent of students scored a one, thirty-six percent of students scored a two, and
twenty-five percent of students earned a three. When given a second PSSA
writing prompt in December, students were able to achieve a much higher
proficiency level. In December, twelve percent of students earned a one, thirty-
eight percent of students earned a two, and fifty percent of students earned a three.
It was clear that after increased opportunity to write, students became more
passionate and prolific writers.
Next Steps

This action-research study has had a lasting impact on both myself and my students. It changed the dynamic of my classroom, and allowed me to gain an understanding for this class beyond any class that I have had in the past. I came to know these students as whole individuals. I was familiar with their families, their homes, their fears, their joys, and perhaps the most fun of all, I was familiar with their imaginations. My students learned how to communicate through writing, and came to value the writing process as a way to have their voices heard in a meaningful way.

My action-research also allowed me to learn many of the best practices in writing. I learned the value of utilizing writing workshops within the classroom. I learned how important motivation and engagement are as predictors of student success. Furthermore, I came to understand that students can reach high levels of success and proficiency when motivating and authentic experiences are combined and balanced with short direct instruction lessons. Finally, I learned the value in giving students increased opportunities to respond in writing. Students truly become better writers by writing.

In addition to teaching me a great deal, my action-research also highlighted how much I still have yet to learn about writing instruction. For example, I struggled throughout my study to find a proper way to balance one-on-
one conferences with my writers. I saw on a few occasions how powerful this time can be for both students and teachers, and yet would benefit from further research on its successful implementation in a writing program.

In the coming year I will continue to research the most effective ways to include writing workshop, conferences, and authentic writing experiences into my classroom. I will continue to strive to find new and engaging ways to help my students observe the world around them. I will continue to model writing and sharing my thoughts for an audience as I found this publishing step to be motivational to my students.

Furthermore, as I move forward with a new group of students next year, I will continue to provide authentic experiences. My study has brought to light how valuable building and activating prior knowledge can be for all students.

While there were many questions that I had answered as a result of my action research, many more arose in the process. One question I would like to explore further is how I could help to improve the writing fluency and accuracy of students with a Central Auditory Processing Disorder. Yet another question I would enjoy exploring further is how the use of journaling could positively impact students affected by emotional disorders. Finally, another intriguing question that arose for me throughout the course of my study is if there would be a benefit to having students track and record the progress of their own writing
analysis. I often wondered if it would be motivating for some students to know how many sentences they were writing a time.

Perhaps the fondest memory I have of completing my study was seeing how much students began to look forward to writing workshops when they were going to have time to share their work. Publishing a writing piece and sharing it publicly with an audience moved from a petrifying moment to one of pride and glory in my classroom. It was an absolute joy to see students from all backgrounds and abilities enjoy communicating with their peers through writing.

That being said, there were many areas in which I felt I could have made improvements. In the future, I would like the opportunity to provide students with more detailed instruction in the beginning of the school year. Rather than waiting for a mishap, I would likely elect to teach the fundamentals of editing for both content and mechanics earlier in the school year.

I also would increase the use of mentor texts within my classroom. While the titles I used (Henry’s Freedom Box and The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs) were helpful, I believe I could have found more opportunities to insert vibrant picture books in order for my students to study word choice, and plot structure. Lessons such as these would increase the integration of my study with the school district’s curriculum while simultaneously providing a concrete and easily accessible frame of reference for all students.
While my research study has come to an end, it has forever changed me as a teacher. I now look at writing instruction with passion and excitement. I look forward to the challenge of reaching all learners through the use of engaging and authentic writing experiences. I have been able to share many of my writing resources with the colleagues in my school, and am happy to say that several of the activities I utilized throughout the school year were used by my fellow colleagues. It has been my pleasure to participate in the action-research process, and I have been privileged to offer my thoughts and experiences to the teaching community I serve.
References


middle school students with learning disabilities in written expression.


National Association for Educational Progress. (2011). Writing As a Favorite Activity.


**Picture Books and Lesson Materials**


Scholastic, Inc.
Appendix A: HSIRB Proposal

This form must be completed for any research activity involving human participants. All researchers must read the Moravian College Human Subjects Research Policy found at p:\hsirb\MoravianCollegeHSIRBPolicy.doc

Part I: RESEARCHER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Proposer:</th>
<th>2. Department:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Melissa A. Carmel</td>
<td>MEDU</td>
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<th>3. Mailing address:</th>
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<tr>
<td>2116 Westgate Drive,</td>
<td>484-686-5343</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apt. I-1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bethlehem PA 18017</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:Maec1987@gmail.com">Maec1987@gmail.com</a></td>
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<th>7. Title of Proposal:</th>
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<td>WRITE ON: THE JOURNEY OF A FIFTH GRADE CLASS TO BRING THINKING AND WRITING TOGETHER.</td>
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Part II: SUBMITING PROPOSALS

Incomplete documentation will delay the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) review of your research proposal. Submit all of the following:

1. This Human Subjects Internal Review Board Proposal Form
2. A copy of your Informed Consent form and/or other evidence of Informed Consent to voluntary participation [See HSIRB proposed Policy #MC.116 & MC.117. Can be viewed at Public/hsirb/]
3. A copy of your instruments (surveys, tests, etc.)

Submit electronic copies of complete proposals to:

hsirb@moravian.edu

Questions: contact
Virginia Adams O’Connell, Co-Chair HSIRB
Department of Sociology
voconne1@moravian.edu
(610) 625-7756
Part III: SIGNATURES

<table>
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<th>PROPOSER’S Signature:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Melissa A. Carmel</td>
<td>7/16/2012</td>
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For Student Proposals
I am the Principal Instructor for this student. I have examined the procedures in this study and approve them as described.

INSTRUCTOR’S Signature:                     Date:5/8/2012

INSTRUCTOR’S Name (Type or Print): Dr. Zales

Part IV: PROPOSAL

1. This research involves ONLY the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude or achievement). (Circle one.) Yes | No

2. This research collects interviews or surveys ONLY of elected or appointed public officials or candidates for such. (Circle one.) Yes | No

3. This research involves ONLY observations of public behavior. (Circle one.) Yes | No

4. This research involves ONLY existing data, documents, records or specimens. (Circle one.) Yes | No

5. List the research funding sources, if any.

None.

6. The results of this research will be published. (Circle one.) Yes | No | Uncertain

7. Summarize the Purpose of Research, including a. objectives, b. procedures, c. design, d. what is required of subjects, and e. procedures to reduce risks to subjects. Attach additional pages as needed.

A. Objectives:
The specific research question is:
What will be the observed and reported experiences when authentic experiences are implemented in the writing curriculum in a fifth grade inclusive classroom?
This action research study is designed to bring writing prompts to life in order to teach students specific writing skills. Students will also participate in writing workshop experiences as a means to give their writing a purpose, and therefore their voice power, and their words meaning.

B. Procedures:
Week one: Descriptive/Narrative Writing
12. The students will take surveys. These surveys will help to determine student attitudes towards writing (Appendix A).
13. The students will respond to a descriptive writing probe. These writing samples will be analyzed to determine number and length of sentences, variety of sentences, and number of adjectives (Appendix B).

14. The students participate in room tours. During this activity, the students will bring a clipboard and a pencil as we tour the building. Each student will pick a room on the tour to write down everything and anything they can see. Once back in the classroom, these lists will be turned into descriptive paragraphs.

15. Each student will share the descriptive paragraph they wrote about the room tour. Students will then have the opportunity to guess the rooms of their peers. Students will then complete a Photovoice journal. During a Photovoice journal, students will look at an image (a portrait or picture) that is striking to them. It is meant to be a nontraditional writing prompt to encourage more creative thinking.

16. Students will complete an outdoor observation. Students will be given time to sit outside with their journals and write uninterrupted.

**Week two:**

1. Word Graves: students will create a word cemetery as a visual aid to help them choose stronger synonyms for over-used words in their writing.

2. Picture Book Counts: students will each receive a photocopied page of a picture book. Students will explore the number of sentences in each paragraph, and what kinds of sentences those are. We will then have a mini-lesson on sentence and paragraph structure.

3. Hershey Kisses for Aliens: Each student will receive a Hershey kiss on their desk. The students will then have to write to an alien in their journals to describe the object on their desk. The catch is they must avoid the following words: chocolate, silver, Hershey, brown.

4. Outdoor Observation Two: Today students will complete their second outdoor observation. Students will be encouraged to write about new items they see, or expand upon ideas they saw last time.

5. Letter to Miss Carmel: Tell Miss Carmel how you are feeling about writing class.

**Week three:**

1. Lunch Time Writing: Students will be asked to bring their journals to lunch and document any aspect of the hustle and bustle of this time in as much detail as possible.

2. Adjective Tree: Today students will decorate the bare tree trunk in our room with adjective leaves. This will act as a visual aid in the classroom so that students can easily choose strong adjectives for their writing.

3. Outdoor Observation Three: Today students will create their final outdoor observation.

4. Mentor Text: Students will read a story from the Trait Crate Nothing Ever Happens on 90th Street. In this story the main character is given a prompt just like the students have had: write about what happens on your street. Students will follow along as the character uncovers all the fabulous adventures on their street.

5. Repeated Prompt: Students will write to their original prompt. This prompt will be used for data analysis in comparison to the first writing sample (Appendix B).

**Week four: How-to writing**

1. Writing Prompt: Pick one thing you are an expert at and describe how to do it (Appendix C).

2. Talent Show: Over the course of two days, students will get to showcase a talent they have by performing in a class talent show. After half of the class performs, they will
then write a how-to piece about their performance in their journals. If students are finished performing and journaling about their own talent, they will use this class time to react to another student’s talent in their journals.

3. Talent Show: Completion of the talent show and journaling activity.

4. Building a Tower: Today students must create a tower as tall as possible with the materials provided (straws, scotch tape, three popsicle sticks). When students have finished their building, they will reflect by writing a how-to piece in their journal.

5. Baking: students will help Miss Carmel bake in class. This will help students understand the importance of how-to writing in their daily lives, and students will then write a reflective journal on their experience, recounting the steps we took to bake our creation!

**Week five:**

1. Weekend Updates: Students will meet with a partner to share one thing they did over the weekend. Students will then write up a how-to of what their partner has done over the weekend, and will then report their findings to the class. This will serve to give the students an audience for their writing.

2. Transition Words: Today students will create a piggy bank of transition words. This mini-lesson will provide yet another visual aid to help students in their journeys to become stronger writers.

3. Trait Crate: Students will read through Dear Mrs. LaRue to guide them on their journey to write a how-to piece.

4. What can you teach us? Today students will choose one lesson from math or science that we have already done and create how-to posters to walk the class through the process.

5. Teaching Journals: Today students will write a how-to reflective journal on the mini-lesson that they taught.

**Week six:**

1. Art Class Journals: Today students will chronicle a how-to of what they have completed in art class.

2. Photovoice: today students will study an action shot of a familiar scene. Students will then write a how-to journal entry describing the action in the scene from the photo.

3. Exercise! Today students will participate in a short circuit of familiar exercises. Students will then create how-to writing pieces based on one aspect of the circuit.

4. Swimming Class Journals: Today students will create a how-to of what they have done in swimming class.

5. Repeated Prompt for data analysis (Appendix C).

**Week seven: Expository/informational writing**

3. Writing Prompt: Choose one person you care about, and tell Miss Carmel all about the person you chose (Appendix D).

4. A Game of Clue! Students will keep journals detailing the events of the game.

5. Students will turn their notes on Clue! into a newspaper style report.

6. Students will meet with a 7th or 8th grade mentor to peer-edit their Clue! reports.

7. Students will work in the computer lab to publish their Clue! reports into a newspaper.

**Week eight:**

1. Students will watch an interview with a famous children’s author. We will then have a mini-lesson on how to create interview questions.

2. Students will conduct interviews with a figure in the school.
3. Students will take their interviews and write them up into an expository writing piece.
4. Students will share their interviews with the class.
5. Writing Workshop: Students will be introduced to the roles and responsibilities of Writing Workshop.

**Week nine:**
1. Students will choose a significant historical figure from the materials made available to them in class.
2. Students will work with their writing workshop groups to begin writing expository writing piece on this figure.
3. Students will work with their writing workshop groups to begin writing expository writing piece on this figure.
4. Students will work with their writing workshop groups to begin writing expository writing piece on this figure.
5. Repeated Prompt for data analysis (Appendix D).

**Week ten: Persuasive writing**
9. Students will choose one of three writing prompts to respond to (Appendix E).
10. What “bugs” you? In this activity, students will add bugs to our writing wall as a visual aid. This activity will act as a brainstorming of possible topics for persuasive writing.
11. Students will explore editorials from magazines and newspapers. We will then discuss tone and point of view in persuasive writing.
12. Ripped from the headlines! Today students will rip headlines from the local newspaper and turn the headline into their own persuasive journals.
13. Letters to Miss Carmel or a parent. Today students will write a letter to myself or a parent/guardian to convince one of us to allow them to do something.

**Week eleven:**
1. Today students will view several commercials for familiar candies. We will discuss various word choices and aspect of the commercial. Students will be given teams to work with to journal about their commercials.
2. Students will work in their teams and will be assigned a candy. Students must then create a persuasive entry about why theirs is the superior product, and they must also create a commercial jingle to share with the class.
3. Candy Commercials will be continued today.
4. Introduction of the three-paragraph essay.
5. Students will choose topics and we will review the organizers and writing process.

**Week twelve:**
1. Students will utilize writing time and the computer lab to complete their essays.
2. Students will utilize writing time and the computer lab to complete their essays.
3. Students will utilize writing time and the computer lab to complete their essays.
4. Students will utilize writing time and the computer lab to complete their essays.
5. Repeated prompt for data analysis (Appendix E).

C. **Design:**
This is an action-research, qualitative study.

D. **What is required of subjects?**
All subjects will participate in the lessons described above in the procedures section. These procedures will be followed as the writing curriculum over a twelve week period.

E. **Procedures to reduce risk to subjects:**
Permission will be granted from building administrators, as well as the guardians of all participants. Furthermore, all students will be given pseudonyms in any published work. All student work, surveys, and other research material will be kept in a locked filing cabinet within the classroom, and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

8. This research involves the following GROUP(S) vulnerable to risk. (Circle all that apply.)
   a. Subjects under the age of 18
   b. Prisoners
   c. Pregnant women
   d. Handicapped or mentally disabled persons

If you circled any or all of 8a through 8d, explain why you need to use the group and the methods you will use to minimize risk.

All subjects in my study will be under the age of 18, as my students are in the fifth grade. Furthermore, each year I teach students with IEP documentation. These students may have any number of cognitive or emotional disabilities. In order to minimize the risk involved for these students, I will seek permission from their legal guardians, and will follow all guidelines documented in their IEP. Furthermore, I will use pseudonyms for any participants published in my final work. All sensitive information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the classroom, and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

9. This research might affect people with special vulnerabilities (for example, pregnant women, people with allergies, people taking some medications, etc.) (Circle one.) Yes | No
   If Yes, explain the methods you will use to minimize risk to these people.

N/A

10. Describe your subject pool including a. the intended number of subjects and b. characteristics.

   A. **Intended Number of Subjects:**
      26 students.

   B. **Characteristics**
      Of the 26 students, 14 are female, and 12 are male. There are three students who receive Title I reading services, one student who receives English as a Second Language (ESL) services, and nine students who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Of the 26 students, approximately 68% are Caucasian, 17% are African American, 10% are Latino, and 5% are Asian.

11. Describe the methods you will use to recruit your subjects.

   All subjects will be students within my fifth grade classroom. Participation as a subject will be decided based upon consent provided by a legal guardian.

12. This research involves deception of subjects. (Circle one.) Yes | No
   If Yes, describe the nature of the deception and your debriefing procedure.

N/A

13. Explain by whom and how the subjects will be informed of the purposes of this research project. [Make references to HSIRB Policy #MC.116 & #MC.117.]
All participants will be informed of the purposes of this research project through classroom dialogue. Parents/legal guardians will be informed through the use of the informed consent permission slip which will be sent home prior to the study beginning. Translated copies will be made available to any families who should need the permission slip in a language other than English.

14. This research collects information, which (Circle all that apply.)
   a. deals with sensitive aspects from the participant’s point of view.
   b. identifies the subject by name or number codes.
   c. might place the subject at risk of liability if made public.
   d. might place the subject's financial standing or employability at risk if made public.

If you circled any or all of 14a through 14d, explain the methods you will use to
   a. safeguard the data you collect
   b. inform subjects of available support services, and
   c. minimize the risk to the subjects.

In order to safeguard the data collected, it will be kept in a secure, locked cabinet within the classroom. Any information kept will be destroyed at the end of the study. All students will be given pseudonyms. Parents and guardians will be given the name and contact information for myself, as well as my supervisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh should they need any support services, or have any questions about their child’s participation.
Appendix B: Parent/Guardian Informed Consent

Dear Parents and Guardians:

In addition to teaching your child in the fifth grade, I am also currently a graduate student working towards my Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. A critical component of my coursework this year requires me to study my own teaching practices, and reflect upon how I can better serve my students. In doing so, I will be conducting a systematic research study on the impact of authentic writing experiences in a fifth grade classroom. My hope is that by engaging students in an interactive course of study in writing, students will be better able to create concrete connections with writing concepts, and writing will become a more enjoyable and comfortable process for all students.

**How will this change a typical writing unit my child receives?** The writing units students complete during the time period of the research study will be systematically designed and delivered in order to increase active student engagement in the writing process. Students will be given the opportunity to interact with their writing prompts, rather than reading them and responding in the traditional sense. Students will be actively engaged in each writing lesson, and the results of the writing prompts will be carefully scored and studied in order to monitor student progress. I intend to create a more student-centered approach to writing instruction in my classroom.

**Is this research confidential?** The results of my research will be published in my graduate thesis; however, any and all material that relates to your child’s identity will be kept in the strictest confidence. He or she will be given a pseudonym, and all paperwork will be kept in a secured file cabinet.

**What if I don’t want my child to participate?** Please be aware that you are under no obligation to agree to have your student participate in this research. Furthermore, parents and guardians may choose to withdraw their child from the study at any time with no penalty. However, due to the fact that writing is a part of the assigned curriculum, all students will complete the same work whether or not they serve as research participants. Only data collected from participants will be included in the research study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding my research study, please feel free to contact me at 484-373-6250. You may also contact my Moravian College advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, at 610-861-1482 or by e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu. You may also contact the principal, Mr. Anthony Tarsi at 484-373-6250.

**Consent to Participate in Classroom Research Study**

Please check the appropriate box below and sign the form:

- [ ] I give permission for my child’s data to be used in the study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my own records.
- [ ] I DO NOT give permission for my child’s data to be used in the study.

I have read the above information, and understand it.

________________________  ___________________________
Students Name (please print)  Signature of Parent/Guardian

________________________
Date

I would like to sincerely thank you for your cooperation and efforts in allowing both your students and myself to continue in this journey of learning.
Appendix C: Principal Informed Consent

Dear Mr. Tarsi:

In addition to teaching the fifth grade, I am also currently a graduate student working towards my Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. A critical component of my coursework this year requires me to study my own teaching practices, and reflect upon how I can better serve my students. In doing so, I will be conducting a systematic research study on the impact of authentic writing experiences on the overall quality of writing. My hope is that by engaging students in an interactive course of study in writing, students will be better able to create concrete connections with writing concepts, and writing will become a more enjoyable and comfortable process for all students.

How will this change a typical writing unit my child receives? The writing units students complete during the time period of the research study will be systematically designed and delivered in order to increase active student engagement in the writing process. Students will be given the opportunity to interact with their writing prompts, rather than reading them and responding in the traditional sense. Students will be actively engaged in each writing lesson, and the results of the writing prompts will be carefully scored and studied in order to monitor student progress. I intend to create a more student-centered approach to writing instruction in my classroom.

Is this research confidential? The results of my research will be published in my graduate thesis; however, any and all material that relates to your child’s identity will be kept in the strictest confidence. He or she will be given a pseudonym, and all paperwork will be kept in a secured file cabinet.

What if a parent doesn’t want their child to participate? Please be aware that parents are under no obligation to agree to have their student participate in this research. Furthermore, parents and guardians may choose to withdraw their child from the study at any time with no penalty. However, due to the fact that writing is a part of the assigned curriculum, all students will complete the same work whether or not they serve as research participants. Only data collected from participants will be included in the research study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding my research study, please feel free to contact me at 484-373-6250. You may also contact my Moravian College advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, at 610-861-1482 or by e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu.

Consent to Participate in Classroom Research Study

Please check the appropriate box below and sign the form:

☐ I give permission for you to carry out the action-research study.

☐ I DO NOT give permission for you to carry out the action-research study.

I have read the above information, and understand it.

________________________  ___________________________
Students Name (please print)  Signature of Parent/Guardian

_________________
Date

I would like to sincerely thank you for your cooperation and efforts in allowing both your students and myself to continue in this journey of learning.

Sincerely,

Melissa Carmel  Fifth Grade, Wilson Area Intermediate School
Appendix D: Initial Surveys

Directions: Please circle the picture or words that best describe how you feel about each statement or question.

1. I feel like I am a good writer.
   - I'm in the middle!
2. I enjoy writing.
   - I'm in the middle!
3. I understand how to pre-write and use graphic organizers.
   - I'm in the middle!
4. I can fill graphic organizers in on my own, without any help.
   - I'm in the middle!
5. I know what narrative writing is.
   - I'm in the middle!
6. I am good at narrative writing.
   - I'm in the middle!
7. I know what persuasive writing is.
   - I'm in the middle!
8. I am good at persuasive writing.
   - I'm in the middle!
9. Miss Carmel teaches writing so that I can understand it.
   - I'm in the middle!
10. Miss Carmel helps me understand how to improve my writing.
    - I'm in the middle!
11. I understand what it means to be descriptive in my writing.
   I'm in the middle!
12. I understand what transition words are, and I could list several of them.
   I'm in the middle!
13. I know what informational writing is.
   I'm in the middle!
14. I am good at informational writing.
   I'm in the middle!
15. I know what how-to writing is.
   I'm in the middle!
16. I am good at how-to writing.
   I'm in the middle!
Appendix E: Descriptive Writing Probe (Baseline Assessment)
Number________________ Date________________

Peek outside your window, or look out your front door. Write one paragraph describing everything you see happening on your street! Be as detailed as possible! Have fun!

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Appendix F: PSSA Scoring Rubric/Guidelines

SCORING GUIDELINES FOR CONSTRUCTED RESPONSES

3 POINTS: The response provides a complete answer to the task; a statement that offers a correct answer as well as text-based support; provides specific, appropriate, and accurate details, (naming, describing, explaining, or comparing) of examples.

2 POINTS: The response provides a partial answer to the task; indicates some awareness of the task and at least one text-based detail. The response attempts to provide sufficient, appropriate details but may contain minor inaccuracies.

1 POINT: The response provides an incomplete answer to the task indicating either a misunderstanding of the task or no text-based details. The response provides insufficient or inappropriate details or examples that have a major effect upon accuracy.

0 POINTS: Unable to score; the response provides insufficient material for scoring. All aspects of the response are inaccurate.
Appendix G: Mid-Study Survey

Number____________________  Date_________________

Please complete each of the statements below as honestly as possible. When you are answering reflect on your feelings about writing in the beginning of the year with how you are feeling about writing now!

Fill in the blanks:

1. I feel ______________ about writing because ____________________.

Read the statement and circle the answer that best matches how you feel:

2. I am writing on my own (without a teacher helping me or telling me to):
   More than I used to  the same amount as I used to  less than I used to

Circle one statement based on your current feelings:

3. I hate writing  I like writing  I love writing

You may use the space below to tell Miss Carmel anything else you feel she should know! You may also use this space to explain any of your above answers if you wish!

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Appendix H: Final Descriptive Writing Prompt

Number_________________ Date_____________

Write a descriptive paragraph about the street you live on. Remember to make this your best writing!

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Appendix I: Persuasive Essay Graphic Organizer

Name: ____________

Paragraph # 1
Introduction
Attention Getter:

Paragraph # 2
Main Idea:
Detail # 1
Detail # 2
Detail # 3

Paragraph # 3
Main Idea:
Detail # 1
Detail # 2
Detail # 3

Paragraph # 4
Main Idea:
Detail # 1
Detail # 2
Detail # 3

Paragraph # 5
Conclusion
Concluding Thought:

Thesis Statement From Main Idea:
Appendix J: Persuasive Essay Outline Format

Five-Paragraph Essay Outline

I. Introduction
   Thesis Statement

II. Support
   Topic Sentence
   Reason A
   Reason B
   Reason C

   Topic Sentence
   Reason A
   Reason B
   Reason C

   Topic Sentence
   Reason A
   Reason B
   Reason C

III. Conclusion
   Thesis Statement (stated in different words)
Appendix K: Final Survey

Number__________________                                         Date___________

Directions: Circle the answer that best indicates how you feel about writing compared with how you felt at the beginning of the year.

1. I feel like….
   A better writer                 the same kind of writer               a worse writer

2. When I am asked to write now I feel….
   Confident                          neutral                                     anxious (nervous)