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A TEACHER SUPPORT GROUP –

ITS BENEFITS AND USEFULNESS

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in a fresh, wild way." Anne Lamott, in her book,
Bird by Bird (1994)

MY STORY AS A TEACHER

Donald Graves (1983), one of the fathers of the teaching of writing, states, " Listen to yourself and what you see in the shadows and sense just around the corner of thought" (p. 139). As both a teacher of teachers in the Lehigh Valley Writing Project, in my new role as writing coordinator in my school district, and a teacher of children, this type of searching was, and still is, ever-present in my work. Harry Wolcott (2001) suggests, "Introduce your study the way you experienced it, reaching as far back as you feel is necessary to put things in context. You know how you went about your study and your readers want to know too. Drawing readers into the account the way you were drawn into the setting offers a natural way to unfold the story, with a ready-made sequence to follow" (p. 28).

The notion of teachers collaborating to create change and increase student achievement has long been a lofty goal of school leaders. Unfortunately, everyday factors in school districts' lives often creep in to discourage this

practice. Teachers often have the desire and need for discussion and exchange of strategies, but often find themselves overwhelmed and the opportunities fade. I hoped to alleviate this problem and search for other ways to accomplish this all-important goal for the betterment of our students. One step was my search for some answers to the question: " In what ways can a writing teachers' support group work collaboratively to offer and share strategies that may positively impact student performance?" As I continued to ponder this question, others naturally emerged. "What is the usefulness of a support group for teachers of writing? What have I observed that convinces me that this type of teacher support would help teachers and ultimately student achievement? What climate and culture needs to be in place in a district for this type of professionalism to be successful? What do I need to do to accomplish this goal? Returning to the work of the respected experts in the field and previous research studies seemed the best place to begin.

As I read previous research, I was reminded of my background in the field of the teaching of writing. In some instances my experiences mirror those of Lucy Calkins (1994), Nancie Atwell (1987), Linda Rief (1992), and Donald Graves (1983), all teachers of children as well as published authors and researchers in the field. I too, am a teacher of children, and what I saw in those instances was as important and practical as the expert researchers in the field of writing.

My educational background included a degree in German, many math courses, and elementary certification, so how, one might wonder, does writing fit into this scheme? I owed that distinction to the school district where I began my career and its involvement with the Pennsylvania Writing Project (PWP). The administration in our district encouraged teachers to enroll in an introductory course in the writing process offered by fellows of the PWP, and from then on I was hooked on learning more. However, my excitement about the teaching of writing was far different from how I felt about actually having to write.

An elementary ordeal made a lasting impression on my ability and confidence to write. I remember my elementary "composition" writing as something to fear. Once a month we would be given one clean sheet of "good" paper, a topic, and the directions to write a composition using our best handwriting and grammar. Most of the time I would sit with an empty mind watching others' pens move furiously across their pages. I grew to hate "composition" day. This vivid memory was one important reason for my desire and need to learn a better way to teach writing to children. I did not want any child to have this same type of experience.

Margaret Lyday from Penn State University, Mel Bollinger from Parkland School District, and Robert L. Gilly from Northampton School District believed that the teachers in the Lehigh Valley needed a local writing project so they would not have to drive to West Chester, home of the Pennsylvania Writing Project. These educators formed the Lehigh Valley Writing Project in 1989, in affiliation

with Penn State University, and approval of the National Writing Project located in Berkeley, California. I attended the first summer institute with a group of fifteen teachers from all over the valley. Such group diversity in content areas and grade levels was one reason for its success. Our active group of professionals brought many different points of view and experiences to the table for discussion, as well as our collective reflection and shared learning. There was little in print about the teaching of writing at that time. Donald Graves' book, Writing: Teachers and Children at Work (1983) was our text, along with a few articles from professional publications. Besides writing personal pieces and working in response groups to revise our work, we conducted classroom research. Mine was implementing a writer's workshop in my sixth grade classroom.

Much of what Vygotsky(1978) wrote applied to that. He stated, " What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (p.87). Through mini-lessons and peer or teacher feedback, the student writer will improve their writing. By sharing at the end of the workshop, the student will have the opportunity to receive positive comments from his or her peers, as well as receive suggestions on the writing. By having choice in the topic, the student will have ownership of the piece and will put more effort into revising it. A student, who learns in a risk-free environment, has a stronger chance for writing improvement because they are encouraged to go beyond their grade level skills. A workshop provides this type of opportunity for the student to attempt new genres and the length and depth of their writing is their decision. Student who are

given this chance, often rise to the highest level expected by the teacher. To support this view, Vygotsky says, " The zone of proximal development enables us to propound a new formula, namely that the only good learning is that which is in advance of development. We propone that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, it awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when a child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement" (p. 90).

Writer's Workshop

When I first tried to implement writer's workshop in my classroom, it was a complete failure. I was unsure of what questions to ask during conferences, and the students would line up at my desk for help without attempting to first revise on their own. I can't blame the students, they did not know what needed revision, and I was of little help because I did not have a strong background either. I had read Nancie Atwell (1987) and modeled her approach, but it didn't work the way she suggested it would.

There was so much to learn about the workshop approach. "Writers' workshop is the heart of the writing class," Nancie Atwell states (p. 33). Some of the key ideas she suggested included:

1. There is no erasing.
2. Write on one side of the paper.
3. Save everything.
4. Date and label everything.
5. Speak in quiet voices.
6. Circulate daily and conference with students.
7. Keep a daily folder.
8. Keep the conference short.
9. See as many writers as possible.
10. Keep a status of the class sheet.
11. Don't tell writers what should be in their writing.
12. Resist making judgments.
13. Build on what writers know and have done.

The list goes on and on. It was overwhelming, and something I had to attack slowly, and a little at a time. Just trying to remember her suggestions was daunting!

I stopped and reread the book and tried again. I actually wrote conference questions on my hand to ask the students, but something was still missing. Unfortunately I did not know what it was. After another unsuccessful attempt, I attended an in-service given by a teacher who ran her workshop in a very controlled and organized manner. She had papers for everything – revision slips,

editing slips, and first and second draft slips. I tried the workshop that way, but that much organization was not my style either. That really did not work! I continued trying the workshop approach for about a month at a time, reflecting, regrouping, and then trying again. As I think back about the reason for my uncertainty, I believe it was a paradigm shift of giving up control of the classroom and allowing the students to write on their own topics and at their own pace. This was a very different way of thinking at that time. It took a while to acclimate myself to this approach, so I would try it for a short period of time, and then revert back to direct instruction. That seemed to work, and after 2-3 years I felt comfortable using a workshop approach all year long. Does a workshop run the same each year? No, because the students, their knowledge base, and their prior experience in writing are different, but I can now be flexible as a result of the experiences I have had.

Although I was confident in utilizing a workshop approach, one aspect still haunted me. My students enjoyed writing, even asked, " Are we going to write today?" These were words that I at one time believed I would never hear. However, the stacks of writing pieces would stare at me, and I was never quite sure how to assess the work. Research into evaluation practices was only in its infancy, and little of value was available in print. I remember placing the pieces into strong, average, and weak piles but had no real method of providing meaningful feedback. Content and mechanics were the only way I knew to evaluate the writing, but I knew that wasn't enough. When I put the content and

mechanics grades at the bottom of the paper, it was troubling to me. I felt the students needed more, but I did not have a handle in what was missing. Throughout my schooling, I had only been graded solely on the mechanics of the writing. Just like many of my colleagues, I often taught as I was taught. Thankfully one time-honored practice that I did not continue was the use of the red pen. I would, and still do use, another color- blue, purple, or green. After many red steaks across my own papers, I wanted a gentler response for my students. They needed more reflection from me on how to improve their work, not merely criticism, but I was at a loss. Frustrated, but with no alternative, I continued searching for the missing piece.

Vicky Spandel and Richard Stiggins were my saviors with the publication of their book, Creating Writers, Six-Trait Model Linking Instruction to Assessment (1990). One summer for five days thirty teachers read and assessed papers using analytical scoring modeled by Vicky Spandel. We scored papers according to the six traits (focus, content, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, voice, and conventions), discussed with small groups, and then listened to Vicki Spandel offer her insight into the pieces of writing. This was the missing piece! My workshop was complete. Now I had the language and the tools needed to provide the necessary feedback the students could actually use to revise. Not only was this given to me, the entire method was student friendly and every year since I have taught this to my students. We were now developing the same writer's language and were ready to move forward.

Vicki Spandel (2001), in the third edition of her book, suggested beginning the school year teaching or revisiting the writing process. This was the way that I had sequenced the writing instruction in my classes for quite a while, and it was refreshing to know that I had been doing something right. By providing the students with various methods of brainstorming and then drafting pieces, they gained practice and confidence in writing. After compiling numerous drafts in their folders, I would then begin teaching revision. By using the pieces in their writing folders, the students could concentrate on each revision skill rather than drafting a new piece. It usually took several weeks to completely teach and practice each of the traits of good writing including focus, content, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, voice, and conventions. The students were then ready to take a piece of writing completely through the process and have it scored analytically. Using the compiled data, I had a much better idea how to proceed with instruction.

Lehigh Valley Writing Project

Armed with the knowledge and experience I had gained over time, I often reflected on my failed attempts at writing workshop in the past, and my original Writing Project research paper, and I am embarrassed. There were few resources available on teacher research to read and upon which I might model my first attempt. It was difficult but extremely rewarding. Even today I explain the writing institute and the research component as one of the most challenging

experiences a teacher will ever have and the most rewarding. Thus began my journey into the world of the National Writing Project and staff development.

For the next two years I taught in the children's program, and afterwards became a co-director of the summer institute. Part of my responsibilities at the project was conducting in-services for area school districts. I have been doing that work for eleven years now and am hopefully improving each time. There was a wealth of resources on the teaching of writing available to me at the writing project, and each year I reflected and revised my teaching according to the research and practices of others I read. This expanding library was, and continues to be, a major force in my professional growth.

Analytical assessment made so much of an impression on me, that I continued sharing this method with teachers in other schools during in-services that I conducted for the Lehigh Valley Writing Project. Most welcomed Spandel's approach because it not only made sense to them, but it also has been adopted by the state of Pennsylvania as the scoring guide for the state writing assessments. What I taught my students, I taught to professionals in similar ways, with the same writing samples and activities. That was the beauty of this model. The common language it fosters also creates is its power. Since that beginning, I hungered for more and worked hard to have Vicky Spandel come to Philadelphia last year for a three-day workshop, the focus of which was instruction in the classroom as well as assessment. This further education and practice has enhanced

my knowledge base in this type of assessment and has given me great confidence to speak to teachers on this subject.

Vicki Spandel (2001) offered this advice, " The key is language. - Writers' language. And that key unlocks the door to revision. Trait-based instruction is intended to enhance a process-based approach to writing instruction, not to replace it" (p. 45).

Our school district's writing curriculum included these traits of writing to be taught in the beginning of the school year. Spandel's book, Creating Writers Through 6-trait Writing Assessment and Instruction, had been the topic of a book club that I offered for a group of elementary teachers last year. Her philosophy and lessons have become part of our school's writing curriculum. I have been using this resource and the binder of information gained through her three-day workshop to guide our assessments and decisions concerning instruction. By looking at class results, assessed in each of the six traits – focus, content, word choice, voice, sentence fluency, and conventions, I would be able to monitor increased student-writing performance, and then assist teachers in making instructional decisions. I believed this adds to the trust the teachers may have in my ability to assist them in their instructional practices. I also have become a stronger educator through these experiences.

Each summer I anxiously anticipated the time I would spend with the latest group of teachers in the institute. This work enabled me to grow professionally. I enjoyed sharing my experiences and knowledge and appreciate

the opportunity to listen and learn from theirs. This workshop supported my philosophy of education and enabled me to put into practice the best methods of instruction I could find, backed up by research from the many resources available at the Writing Project. I have had the opportunity to select numerous professional resources to read and incorporate into my collection of educational strategies. Each summer I choose one particular focus for my reading, and I feel this expands my knowledge base to share with fellow educators. The Writing Project enabled me to become an in-service trainer, which has continued to improve my teaching. This work required me to continue to read and revise the presentations that I gave for educators in school districts throughout the valley. Being a classroom teacher at the same time added to my credibility. I "walked the walk" as the saying goes.

I have seen the important changes that reading and trying research-based practices have made in the teachers who participate in the summer institute. They saw their practices in a new way and revised those practices to make them stronger. One notable summer, three veteran teachers from a neighboring school district attended the summer institute. The fact that after twenty-five years of teaching these educators believed there was more to learn was admirable and remarkable. The professionalism they brought to the other participants that summer was an inspiration for continued learning. They were great! They are still teaching and even better than before.

New Responsibilities

Although I looked forward to working with students on a daily basis, I believed that I could have a positive effect on many more students by peer coaching and improving the instruction of our teachers. This type of work drove my research. I wanted to find ways to improve classroom instruction that is aligned with the standards and assessments. By modeling lessons in the classrooms, and talking to teachers about their practices, I believed that I could help more students.

After teaching fifth and sixth grades for many years and serving on numerous committees, I needed a change. Often as I conducted in-services, I was questioned about teaching writing to primary students. This was one area in which I had little experience. I began my career teaching two years of kindergarten, but that was insufficient time in order to develop strong practices and strategies for the primary grades, so when an opportunity to teach first grade was offered to me, I jumped at the chance to expand my teaching experiences and bolster my knowledge of primary writing instruction. This provided me with the opportunity to try all I had read about writing and primary learners. What a challenge that turned out to be! I have grown to posses a special admiration for first grade teachers for all they accomplish in a year's time.

Dr. Nancy Farnan from San Diego Sate University, along with Karin Dahl, compiled writing research for the International Reading Association. In their book, Children's Writing, Perspectives from Research, Farnan and Dahl (2001)

explained that writing-as-play is evident in numerous aspects of young children's writing. This came from work done by Donald Graves. "Among the youngest members in Graves' (1981) study, much of the writing process is visible or overt. They talk about what they are going to write and often talk their way through a writing." Dr. Farnan continues, " Although children's earliest writings seem to be spontaneous and unplanned, as their writing develops, evidence of planning and rehearsal of ideas prior to actual writing begins to appear. Speaking aloud before and during composing disappear" (p .24).

I had taught writing to kindergarten children, but I was anxious to see what first graders could accomplish. Would they write as Dr. Farnan suggests? She also documented that the integration of reading and writing plays a key role in children's early writing experiences. Farnan added, " Other research shows that children write in three broad categories: here and now, the past, and fantasy. First graders also held some writing values in common. For example, keeping the audience's interest and being able to read their own writing, regardless of spelling, were most important" (p. 26). I was excited yet scared. The rewards and successes overshadowed the very hard work. However, I was now armed with real experiences I could offer and share during in-services. It meant to the teachers to hear me say, " When I taught writing in first grade, this idea worked well." Especially as Dr. Farnan has suggested, the students write better when they have the opportunity to talk about their piece first with a partner. By orally

"writing" their piece, many new ideas are added to the writing because the student had the chance to verbalize it first.

Over the past three years my professional direction changed as I moved from being a full-time classroom teacher to take on the role of district writing coordinator and part-time classroom teacher. In our school district the standards, our curriculum, and some assessments were aligned. The work now was to complete the alignment of assessments and the instruction; that was part my job. I needed to model and share best practices that were researched based. Three years ago our district developed Accreditation for Growth goals. The entire staff was part of this process and chose writing and math problem solving, as the two areas that they felt needed the most improvement. The members of the task forces developed action plans and my responsibility was to help carrying out these plans. I am responsible for helping teachers implement the action plans and increase student-writing achievement. The idea of working with teachers in this capacity appealed to me and my background provided enough support to take on this new role with confidence. Increased writing proficiency is a school district goal and the reason for my position as a teacher leader. The administration hoped that I might offer the teachers support through peer coaching and staff development opportunities. The notion of creating a writing teachers' support group fit perfectly into my job description. Since the improvement of student writing is one of our primary goals and part of our five-year plan, I have much that I would like to offer and also hard work ahead of me.

New strategies and ideas in education are encouraged in my district but these need to be supported by research. It is an important part of my job responsibilities to keep the teachers informed, and teach our students using the approaches supported by the literature in writing education. Building a professional writing resource library, with Spandel's model as only one of many texts, was another one on my goals. This professional library needed to be easily accessible and filled with teacher-friendly practical materials along with texts by the most respected teachers and researchers of writing.

Staff development and peer coaching are the major roles I play supported by the data we collect from our assessments. Student achievement through data driven accountability and research based best practices are the components of our district's mission statement, thus I need to be as knowledgeable as I can possibly be about up-to-date research and resources in the teaching of writing. New professional resources fill the bookstores, but during the school year, teachers often do not have the time to read professionally as much as they would like to do. Teachers helping teachers is the strongest model available to solve this problem. Together, educators, both regular and special education, can collaborate on instructional strategies and share newly learned information for the betterment of the students. One of my responsibilities is to read and share the information with the staff to support their instructional practice.

Action Research as a Model

Through in-services and staff development programs I would like to create a learning community among the staff. However, old habits are difficult to change, and many teachers often close their doors, perhaps thinking that idea of a learning community, too, was a new fad that would pass. I believe that as a teacher- leader, I must continue to persevere, reaching a few teachers at a time. My plate is filling up fast, and I need strategies to begin the job that lay ahead of me. I reach for the work of the experts and allow them to be my guide. Teachers around the country actively pursuing answers from research in their own classrooms are my first source to find solutions and methods to follow.

Classroom action research is a powerful means of creating meaningful change in a school. Standards, diverse classrooms, and high stakes testing make a teacher's job all the more difficult. Today our schools are filled with a diverse student population and we are required to help them all reach proficiency. My district is experiencing growth in the student population as well as the addition of English language learners. Teachers collaborating in classroom research can offer other colleagues many new ideas for reaching their diverse students and Carol Tomlinson agrees.

Each day, young life populates our schools. These young people struggle in school. They speak English or another language. They are from majority cultures, or they represent minority populations. They are male or female. They bring with them joy and optimism or trepidation and skepticism- perhaps rooted

in personality or quality of home, school, and community life. Students learn eagerly or send us loud messages that our adult enterprise is not for them. They give us the better part of their waking lives for a decade and a half of their youth. What a challenge and what a trust for us as educators and leaders! (Tomlinson and Allen, 2000)

More than ever before, teachers need to collaborate, share ideas and strategies in order for their students to be successful. Our classrooms are diverse and our charges come to us with varied experiences and knowledge. One person cannot do it all, hence the need to rely on the skills, knowledge and experiences of others to enhance our base and provide the best for our students. In her book, Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms, Carol Tomlinson (2001) addresses this need and offers solutions to provide instruction to fit the needs of the diverse learners in *every* classroom. Teachers are swamped with these responsibilities and can better serve their charges with support and help from others. Educators, in order to do the best for the students, require a vast array of strategies, which are best discovered through discussion and reading.

In Fischer, Mercado, Morgan, Robb, Sheehan-Carr, and Torres' (2000) journal article entitled, "The Curtain Rises: Teaches Unveil Their Process of Transformation in Doing Classroom Inquiry", they explained how a group of teachers from different grade levels within a school district went from resistance, when they were first introduced to classroom research, to becoming a community of inquirers uncovering unforeseen benefits of doing teacher-research. All

teachers were from the same school district and were involved in a Teacher Enhancement Program that had asked them to inquire into their own teaching practices. In becoming a collaborative community, the teachers were encouraged to share experiences and strategies. They kept journals where they reflected on their practices over the school year, as collected student work, observed student writing, and interviewed these students. The results from a group of these teachers engaging in teachers' research stated, "Peer collaboration had been of great help and significance for all of us. We were able to build a community of inquirers to support and challenge each other, as well as to broaden our perspectives and the articulation of our own inquiry. For Maria, involving a critical friend, the classroom assistant, and other mentors have helped her to make sense of her work as a researcher and to make connections between teaching and research" (p.14).

I believe the formation of this type of learning community would be an ideal strategy for our district to improve our practices. Would our teachers be ready for this approach to instruction? Do they have sufficient knowledge about instruction and assessment and the need for its alignment? Questions roamed through my mind, but also hope. I believed we could mirror this project with equal success.

The story of a program in Elkhart Community Schools in Indiana by Mettetal and Cowen (2000) also ignited my interest. Teams of 2-4 teachers participated in the STAR Project (Supporting Teachers as Researchers) in collaboration with Goshen College and the National Center for Science Teaching

and Learning at Ohio State University. Most of their classroom research projects looked at the effectiveness of a particular instructional practice, and data was collected through teacher surveys and interviews. The information collected here suggested that action research was a powerful tool for professional development and school reform. Most STAR teams found that their strategies had a positive impact on learning, but a few saw no change. Just like their students, the teachers learned best when they could construct knowledge. Action research led them through a constructive process, helping teaches to reflect on what was happening in their classrooms. "When I used what I learned, I will be a better teacher for my students", reflected one teacher (p. 4). Another stated, " Action research is good because you get to answer your own questions. It makes you think about what you are doing in the classroom" (p. 4). The conclusion to the study stated, " Classroom action research can be a powerful tool for teachers' development. As opposed to many traditional professional development programs that are pedantic and "done to " teachers, CAR (classroom action research) provides a practical assessment tool, which is helpful, meaningful, and personal to teachers. It has renewed our excitement for learning together!" (p. 5).

Another piece I read that provided additional support for such a project was from James Hammerman (1999) and the work he conducted with teachers in a project for the Center for the Development of Teaching. He worked to create "a culture of inquiry among teaching colleagues engaged in a professional development program"(p. 187). He explains that he was experimenting with

elementary and middle school teachers working together to form inquiry groups who would meet regularly to discuss and critically examine the beliefs and practices. He continued, "As teachers work together to analyze and understand each others' practice, our goal is that they begin to see themselves as a community of professionals examining issues of teaching in order to improve it" (p. 194).

Mr. Hammerman found that such inquiry into practice required the teachers to adopt new ways to interact and engendered a deeper respect for teachers as learners. He also found that the teachers who took on leadership roles in this project realized they required a deeper knowledge of the content and the pedagogy and stronger relationships with their peers as both expert and colleague. This new type of learning was complicated and took both trust and a lot of time.

I pondered these studies and dreamed of a school where teachers actually planned together, met on a regular basis to construct assessments, and observed one another to improve and support their instructional practices. I still believed this was possible, but know how challenging it can be to establish a strong sense of community.

Miller and Cross (2001), conducted another study that provided impetus to move forward with my work occurred in Florida, where a school-wide study in conjunction with the A.D. Henderson University School grades K-8 took place. The question they posed was, "How can teachers build school wide capacity to support improved student writing across the curriculum?" They examined whole-

school collaboration using research study groups of teachers who collaborated to support writing across the curriculum. They conducted this work in several phases:

(1) Design an action plan.

(2) Create action research study groups who collaboratively supported the writing curriculum through activities.

(3) Provide staff development to support teachers in changing instructional practices.

(4) Collect and analyze data to make decisions.

(5) Coordinate findings and implement actions to support school-wide writing performance.

Their research results, entitled: "Moving From I to Us: The Power of Action Research to Improve Students' Writing Performance", were presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April 2001.

After reading about the teachers in these projects, I was certain that I would be able to implement some type of program in my district. These were the same steps I needed to implement not only in my research, but also with the elementary and middle school staff that I was responsible to guide. I hoped that these findings would not only provide the support that I required, but offer some insight into strategies that would be successful, that I could utilize and incorporate into my work. If an entire school can produce improvement, then a small group

of teachers from my district could do the same. This study certainly supported the initiative that I wished to pursue with my colleagues. My research included only a handful of teachers whom I believed would be willing to take an initial risk. As I began to share the story of my study and its findings, I was reminded of the teachers from this summer's writing institute and how they must have felt at this time. They too were working on action research in their classes. Empathy is a strong teacher! Perhaps this would enable me to be a better instructor and guide for the teachers when we meet again to discuss how their work is going.

The many articles and books I have read and discussed on action research would have to be my guide and my support in this project. I have utilized these before and would rely on them again as I trod these waters of uncertainty.

Our Group of Teachers

My first task in this project was to invite several teachers to participate in a teachers' writing support group and also offer participation in my study. After sharing a letter of the expectations procuring teachers' signatures on the consent form, I was ready to begin (See Appendix B).

The teachers invited to participate are from each part of our campus- one from the high school, two from the middle school, and two from the elementary. In order to expose the teachers to a wide variety of experiences, I felt that a diverse group of grade level educators would be best for the group. I invited five

teachers whose previous interactions with me suggest that they are strong in their convictions about writing and leaders in their respective buildings. They did not know one another well at the time I contacted them, but I hoped this would not a deterrent to sharing. I hoped that they would interact with one another, and not merely share what goes well with their respective students. I knew I would need to have to do some team building.

My fourth grade colleague, Lana, (not her real name but a pseudonym) enjoys teaching writing and feels comfortable in doing so due to her strong undergraduate background. I have heard her explain to her class that teaching writing is her favorite subject. I have observed her desire and willingness to attempt new ideas, which could enable her to grow professionally plus bring her enthusiasm and energy to the group. "How can I offer anything new to these veteran teachers," she once lamented. Despite her quiet ways, she would ensure that her beliefs would be heard. Her writing philosophy includes writing every day with teacher modeling and student sharing, and she teaches with confidence. Her educational background includes current writing practices because she is a new college graduate, and has had the opportunities to read and discuss the newer findings about teaching language and literacy. She has shared with me her beliefs about teaching of writing that were developed through readings in her college classes, her teaching experiences, and the writing she does herself. We have shared our similar experiences on several occasions.

Another elementary member of the group is a third grade colleague, Cathy, a leader in the building due to her hard work ethic and dedication to her students. Her out-of-the-box thinking brings fresh ideas to every district meeting we attend. We have discussed writing on several occasions, and I often share any new strategies and information with her because Cathy is willing and eager to attempt or at least read about new ideas. I recently received two new resources on writing and she was most eager to hear what ideas the author presented. She serves on many building and school district committees, and is a strong voice for the staff.

I hoped that these two pioneers in the teaching of writing in the elementary building would mesh nicely with the strong personalities of the middle school members. I hoped that their strong student-centered beliefs would balance out the potentially more content–centered secondary mind-set.

One of the middle school educators, Rita, an English teacher, joined our group. She is often the spokes-person for the language arts staff in the middle level building. I perceive her English content knowledge to be expansive and accurate, which could bolster the group's knowledge of skills. Whenever any new teachers in the building have a question about grammar or punctuation, Rita is the one they turn to for help.

I observed Linda on many occasions and found her to be a relatively quiet and reserved English teacher. At several of our language arts department meetings, Linda rarely offered her opinion on topics up for discussion. My

purpose in asking her to be part of the group was to encourage her to share some of her knowledge of writing she acquired as a recent college graduate. I also hoped a small group setting might encourage her to communicate and share among the group.

I completed the research group with the addition of a high school colleague, Nina, who is also a Writing Project Fellow. Since I have worked with her during the summer institute for several years, I was aware of the knowledge she possessed in the field of writing. Her eloquence in speaking and mountains of writing experiences and knowledge would potentially enhance our discussions and encourage all of the participants, especially our secondary colleagues. Although now teaching high school students, she spent a number of years teaching eighth graders in another district. I hoped that this experience would mesh nicely with the group.

Even though our actual physical buildings are connected and student traffic flows back and forth, the staffs are not at all connected. I hoped to begin to solve this problem by putting teachers together in this group to listen to one another and offer and share strategies the teachers have found successful to improve student writing. Becoming colleagues who offer guidance, support, and feedback on the instructional practices they employ is the focus of my research. This must, of course, be supported by school climate conducive to shared inquiry, or its impact will be minimal. With a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and hopefulness, I began to make plans for my work. Sometimes when I am excited

about a project, especially if it involves school and writing, I have a tendency to put 110% effort into the project and expect that others feel the same. I needed to be careful. This was one leadership area that required my focus.

THE PURPOSE OF MY STUDY

The purpose of my study was to record the experiences and analyze the usefulness of a support group for teachers of writing in my district. Since one of our two Accreditation For Growth (AFG) goals was improvement of writing, along with the PSSA requirements, such an in-house support would hopefully prove valuable. Some of my additional wonderings included:

* Would this bring about sharing of best practices and impact discussions about writing that could ultimately effect student achievement?
* Would this lead to the professional growth of the teachers through sharing resources, knowledge, methods, skills, and experiences?
* Would this help create trust and rapport among the faculty?
* How would all of this fit together in the master plan of improving student writing?
* How would the culture of the school affect the success of this group?

I certainly had my work cut out for me in this endeavor. The ultimate goal, student achievement, may be for a future inquiry, when the necessary components for a teacher research team would be more firmly in place. However, now I was

more interested in the collaboration among the teachers and the sharing of ideas and information. Teachers everywhere have a great deal to offer one another but are often hampered by time constraints during the school day, as well as access to one another due to distance constraints of their buildings. We, in our district, are fortunate in this regard, because our buildings are connected. We can open the doors to communication between staff and students alike. Before this could take place, we would need to establish a trust among the teachers. Hopefully the members of this group would be the catalyst in the challenge to create lines of communication among levels for the success of all our students. Teachers teaching teacher, the basic principle of the National Writing Project, was one tenet I hoped to foster in these educators and create leaders among the staff to continue this type of interaction and discussion. I also understood that this was a process not unlike the writing process that we attempt to develop in our students, and that time was a requirement. One looming obstacle for me was my rush to want it to happen now.

After eleven years of working in writing, offering in-services to numerous districts in the Lehigh Valley and beyond, reading professional publications on writing such as Calkins, (1994), Atwel (1987), Graves, (1983) and encouraging the summer participants, my anxiousness and impatience with the slowness of change could be frustrating to me and potentially intimidating for the teaches with whom I would work in the support group. I needed to be reminded, that what had become second nature to me in the area of writing, was new and innovative to

others. I often made assumptions and needed to slow down in my instruction. I was reminded of this just last week while working with middle school content-area teachers. I offered a KWL type idea and was confronted with the fact that my colleagues were unaware of the KWL strategy! KWL, what I KNOW about a topic, what I WANT to know, and what I LEARNED, was one simple method of activating students' prior knowledge. However, to content area teachers who have not been educated in the teaching of writing, this technique may be foreign. This fact made me aware of the work that needed to be done in order for all teachers to feel comfortable to incorporate writing into their curriculum. On the other hand, this could be our challenge to open more doors between buildings and staff, and to generate conversations among content and grade level teachers for the good of our students.

I saw my own research as a precursor to this imitative. This would be the avenue for the idea of support groups and research groups to flourish in our district and build trust among our staff across the grade levels and content areas. My vision was for my small research idea to become an integral part of the staff development opportunities for our teachers. So much could be learned through the action research mode. Best practices could be studied and, I believe, incorporated into the instructional practices of our teachers more readily and with a better frame of mind, rather than "one more thing" for the teachers to do. However, one possible difficulty haunted me, and that was the issue of time. For this endeavor to

be realized, teachers would have to give of their time, but the district would need to share in this effort

I was also concerned about my ability to accomplish what I had set out to do. Would I be the leader I needed to be? Who would tell me when I was going in the wrong direction? How would I create the rapport with the group that was so important? Would I have enough time?

My work as a classroom teacher, even though this comprised only one period, was still a large part of my day. Of course my work was not over when the class ended. I had team meetings every day, as well as time to work with students who may have difficulty. I guessed this would be another hurdle to leap over and hopefully, not trip.

I believed my research was important to the success of the action plans the district had set for me to complete. I needed to be in the classrooms more often to guide and support teachers in their writing instruction. The strategies shared in our group could be hopefully transferred to the other classes as well.

Joanne Arhar (2001) provided support by mirroring my belief that action research is designed to improve practice. This was exactly what I hoped to do with the support group - teachers talking and sharing strategies to improve their practice. Arhar continued that action research was a process of trying out new ideas and "continuing the cycle of acting, observing, and reflecting, which ultimately takes us to other questions and new cycles"(p. 41).

As with the many and varied classroom inquiries that I had read through the writing project's summer institute, the project seemed to take on a life of its own. The initial question evolved to include sub-questions that may or may not be answered or even attempted to be resolved. Resolution would be the key to this research, but continued inquiry would be essential. I compared my attempt to create this support group to opening the doors and lines of communication of our connected buildings and staff. So often as I walked the open hall with common health room and attendance offices between the middle school and elementary school, I envisioned large iron gates. Rarely do the teachers interact or share knowledge. The hall may be open, but the minds of the staff often are. They remained in their own cocoons, wrapped in their own subject matter and philosophies. Don't they see that we share the same goals and standards for our children and that collaborating would help us all to work smarter not harder for student success? How could I help them emerge to communicate with one another and trust each other's knowledge and skills about education? This again was one of those sub-questions that may take years to resolve. But what an awesome opportunity, to create from its infancy, a powerful school of professional educators filled with the knowledge and experiences gathered from classroom research. My vision may be daunting, but without a lofty goal, one cannot move a district forward to be an outstanding place for students. This may take years to come to fruition, but a seed needed to be planted in order for a giant oak to grow. Begin on a small scale with a few teacher-leaders who communicate

and share with others building trust along the way, and continue to add a few others each time. This teacher-talk is the water for those seeds of knowledge to sprout to encircle others in their braches of hope for our students' success. At times there may be dormancy, but with continued fostering of communication through in-services, E-mails, and professional discussions and publications, our tree will grow stronger pushing open those invisible doors.

DATA COLLECTION PLAN

When I first penned the proposal for this study I had planned to include several opportunities to collect data about the workings of a support group. I planned to use a variety of data collection methods.

1. Foremost would be my journal entries with reflections on the meetings of the group as well as times I spend talking to the teachers. As Ruth Hubbard stated (1999), "When you become a teacher-researcher, you become your own most important tool. Your tapes transcripts, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews are good tools. Slowing down and being open to our impressions, living in the moment with a mindful stance- being ready to take in the world around us- is the staring place in collecting data"(p. 104). We never know where an observation or discussion will lead, and as researchers we must be on the lookout for surprises in our data, especially the aspects of our question we were not expecting to find. These are the kernels for future study and reflection.

As Arhar (2001) stated, "As a personal document, the journal is a potent tool to collect, analyze, and interpret data"(p. 147). She suggested both dialogue and researcher journals. She describes a dialogue journal as one "used to converse with someone else about the feelings, thoughts, and incidents. These interactive journals allow writers the opportunity for a one-on-one tutorial and provide teachers with curriculum ideas to extend and enrich development." (p. 148) I believed our e-mailing would serve as a dialogue journal, where writers have a conversation among the members or themselves.

Arhar states, "A researcher journal is a place to record issues that arise related to research, such as research methods; hypotheses; evolving research questions; reminders to ourselves to follow up on things, such as books to read, people to consult, and additional data to collect related to hypotheses; and analytical memos" (p. 147). My own reflections will be in a researcher journal, a special place for the researcher to reflect and think about the study.

2. Along with journals would be meeting notes and free writes on a selected topic as a precursor to our discussions. For the teacher support group I planned to conduct monthly meetings, beginning at the start of the school year, to discuss the strategies we would utilize in the classrooms in order to improve the student writing gathered from the baseline assessments. Eventually I hoped to compile our most successful lessons into a booklet for sharing with the rest of the staff.

I had hoped for each meeting to begin with a free write or even a focused free write, about an aspect of the writing process, one of the writing traits, or an enduring understanding about writing, in order to begin our discussion. I planned to record minutes from these discussions, and my own journal reflections. I even invited the teaches to write in their own journal that I provided, but I needed to be careful in putting too much stress on the journal writing expected from the group; it is my research, not theirs. Hubbard (1999) supports this notion when she states, "When we use writing for our own purposes, and in the midst of our teaching lives, we can tailor the format we choose to our work style and preferences. Donald Murray writes daily reflection at his computer in his "day book". It doesn't matter what time of the day or what kind of recording devices you choose; what matters is finding what works for you" (p. 83). I hoped that the teachers in the group would find that journaling would be pivotal to their teaching. Their reflections on how this was supporting them in their daily teaching was what I was looking for to create bonds among the teachers.

3. Another source of data would be a survey (See appendices C and D) at the beginning and again at the end of our study to assess the community-building aspect of our work as well as any instructional changes that occurred. As Hubbard suggested, " Surveys and inventories can help tap information that would otherwise be inaccessible to us" (p. 94). I was looking for more openness among the group, hoping that they would be willing to ask for guidance when needed and provide positive feedback on successes. On a survey, with no names attached, I

anticipated more willingness to share. I hoped that a response written in the privacy of teachers' own classrooms would elicit a more accurate account of their beliefs and thoughts they might be ready to share, rather than in the presence of other teachers, especially if the community building were not as successful as I would like it to be.

4. E-mails between the members of the group including discussions of classroom strategies and writing beliefs and philosophies would be another method. I hoped that the members of the writing group would use e-mailing in order to offer support, feedback, reflections, and additional ideas to one another to adapt our instruction to meet the needs of our students, and to teach in between our regular meeting dates. I would examine these discourses for evidence of community building among the teachers, and an increased willingness to offer other methods that may work. I hoped to see the teachers begin to rely on one another.

5. Also included in the data would be classroom observations to see the effect of the techniques on student work. As part of my coordinator responsibilities, I was encouraged to visit classrooms in order to assist in instruction. I planned to collect reflections on these observations in my journal in order to analyze the effectiveness of the writing strategies discussed in the meetings. I hoped that my invited presence in participants' classrooms would result in improvement in student work as related to the aspect of writing being instructed. Student reaction through conferencing about a writing piece would be

noted as well. I hoped that teachers would be accepting of my classroom visits as an opportunity for guidance and support. Despite the fact that I would not make judgments on teaching style, I worried that the participants would need reassurance in that area. Hence, I knew it would be crucial to build trust.

6. I had planned to interview each teacher about the success of the group and gather their feedback on any solutions to problem encountered. In a chapter from his book, Interviewing as Qualitative Research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences (1998), Seidman gave the advice, "Listen more, talk less. Listening is the most important skill in interviewing. The hardest work for most interviewers is to keep quiet and listen actively" (p. 69). This required determination and practice on my part because I had to squash my instinct to talk. "Interviewers-like good teachers in a classroom - must listen while remaining aware of the process as well as the substance" (p. 64). Seidman offered other tips as well: explore but don't probe, ask open-ended questions, keep participants focused, tolerate silence, and have a genuine interest in what the participant is saying.

7. I also wanted to gather information on the climate of the group and our district to see whether that had an effect on our success, so I created a school culture questionnaire. The purpose of this instrument (See appendix E) was to gather teachers' viewpoints about the functioning of the school and the impact this may have on the productivity of the staff. The main elements that I was looking for in using this questionnaire were collegiality among teachers support

from administration, open communication, decision-making and high expectations.

The plan was in place, the teachers agreed to participate, and I was ready for some insightful discussions about writing. As with any teacher researcher there were many concerns. To what extent would my plan be realized? Would my initial question be answered to some extent? Would the information I collect provide me with enough material to draw conclusions? Would my plan even be doable? Would I be able to solve the problems that are certain to arise? Even after the many years of working with teachers who conduct research on a small scale every fall in their classrooms and conducting my own teacher research I would like to have felt more confident, but I did not. Nevertheless, "Move forward," I told myself and see what results.

I distributed the first survey (See Appendix C) prior to the initial meeting and asked the teachers to bring the completed form with them. My plan for the first meeting was to use the survey as a starting point of the discussion. I thought that using writing they had already completed would make the conversation easier. I then planned to talk about classroom strategies that we had found successful and how they could be used in other grade levels. I even hoped that teachers would share some difficulties they were having so we could brainstorm solutions for them to try in their classrooms. Perhaps this was too much, but I wanted to be over prepared not knowing quite how they would respond.

The First Meeting

Our first meeting approached and unfortunately one of the teachers had a prior commitment, another one forgot the date and could not find the survey, and a third was registered for an on-line course that required her attention. I felt angry and frustrated because I had planned far enough in advance for all participants to mark the dates. This was not a good omen! Already the time factor was rearing its ugly head. Fortunately, all were ultimately able to attend the first meeting except for Cathy, who was registered for a computer course. I presented each with a journal and a special pen, hoping that they might use this journal as a safe place to reflect about their instructional practices. Perhaps I should have remembered about the first year I had attempted this feat. Yes, it was a feat, and a difficult one to complete at that. The time factor was the culprit in that endeavor. I had such good intentions at the time, but found that other more pressing issues, including tests, grades, planning, and reading required my attention.

Our discussion commenced with the survey, as planned. I would describe the group as quiet and somewhat uptight, which was to be expected. I hoped that the survey would provide some common ground as a starting point from which we could begin our work together.

On their surveys, the participants indicated that they would like to use our writing teacher support group time together to gain insights into the teaching of writing, to learn strategies that work for others, to improve their own skills, to have an open forum of communication and continuity across grade levels.

The participants indicated that practices already in place in their classrooms included modeling, peer response and editing, conferencing, and student ownership. Teachers noted that apprehensions they felt dealt with assessments, Pennsylvania System of School Assessment's (PSSA), revision and student motivation, which seemed to be ample areas that could lead to lively discussions in the weeks ahead.

I wanted especially to discuss the fourth question in the survey which asked participants what concerns they might have about working in this teacher support group. From all, the response was the lack of time, rather than the concern of confidentiality, which I had erroneously assumed would be foremost in their thoughts. This was an important concern and one worth pursuing. They all shared the issues of too much school work as well as home and graduate course work commitments that they believed would interfere with this group functioning to its fullest. The participants offered no solutions to this time problem at first; it was more of a venting discussion.

Just because the teachers did not often have the opportunity to talk across the grade levels, didn't mean that they were not interested in the happenings in the other buildings. Nina led most of this part of the conversation, offering her thoughts on general aspects of writing instruction and theory, hoping that the other teachers would share their beliefs. Nina offered ideas of modeling, teachers sharing their own writing, students working with peers for revision, and using student work on the overhead for genuine discussions of revision strategies. Lana

and Rita nodded in agreement but when it came to sharing, little was offered. Linda was observed as quiet, speaking only about her lack of teaching experience. Is it fear of what others think? Is it wanting to keep the "secrets" like recipes handed down over generations? Whatever the reason, the first meeting ended with little discussion of writing strategies and more of how time is not on our side. What had begun as an inviting lead to a great novel, ended with "The End"! Everyone had pressing commitments, and I felt as if I was imposing on the participants' time, even though the dates of our few planned meetings had been agreed upon in advance.

The survey completed by the group was interesting to me in another way as well. When I asked what apprehensions the teachers had about writing, they all questioned specific instructional strategies. No one mentioned her own writing, whether in school with the students as a model or outside of the school walls. Even though I had witnessed two of the teachers write with their classes, they did not write about this on the survey, or mention it in our discussion. Perhaps they did not want the others to feel uncomfortable, or were just doing what many people opt to do in an initial meeting – remain quiet in order to gain a sense of the workings and thinking of the group. I had hoped they would share the joys and frustrations of their own process. What I genuinely wanted to discuss were any apprehensions the teaches may have had about their own writing, but the responses to the survey and the discussion at the first meeting did not yield that data. I wondered if my question had been unclear or if this could possibly

become a future topic, but I would have to be gentle with my inquiry into this area. As I reflected on this first meeting, I felt a sense of frustration. Most of the group seemed anxious to be on their way to other places at the end of a long school day. Our meeting ended after thirty minutes, and although I was disappointed, I can somewhat appreciate their point of view. After completing a busy day with students, many teachers want a respite from educational discussions. On the other hand, I hoped, perhaps unrealistically, that at least for an hour they would come together and talk about their practices in teaching writing. Here was a relatively rare opportunity to collaborate and share. I began to think more about the real issues behind our support group and its possibilities. Was trust of one another an underlying factor? Did they say yes to my initial request to join the group, but now regret the choice? Did they agree because of what they perceive my position in the district to be? Are they really uncomfortable in discussing their teaching practices, especially if they may be challenged or questioned? Is it possible that writing is not the strongest suit in their teaching, and they do not want others to know? Might the culture of the school and their perceptions of what may be discussed at our meetings have them concerned about the information pipeline? Whatever the reasons, I would have to explore an additional route to facilitate their teaching of writing.

One strategy that I have found useful in solving difficulties was to "sleep on it", as the saying goes. The following day I e-mailed the teachers with a suggestion. I offered to substitute in each of their classes for a period. This would

enable each teacher to visit another grade level and building within our district. I thought that if they observed another colleague teaching some facet of the writing process, they could expand their own teaching practices. I had also hoped that this would ignite discussion about instructional strategies they observed and found useful. Unfortunately not one of the teachers asked to participate. Is this the school culture and climate issue again? Are they insecure in their practice that they cannot open their doors to others or learn from a colleague? Disappointed at no response to my offer, I moved forward with different means for sharing and collaborating. I was not to be discouraged easily, despite the fact that in my journal reflection after the initial meeting, I wrote about the frustrations I was feeling. Writing about my difficulties was a remedy for them. I was able to vent in my journal, and then move forward with another plan.

The meeting that I had hoped would be filled with discussions of writing philosophies and shared strategies was hampered by outside plans, reluctance, and outright fatigue. In order for teachers who are district colleagues to be open with one another, more time would be required to build trust and create a community of learners. Just like in my classroom, it takes time and talk for that community to come together. Even though I have had the experience in building community during the summer institute and was aware of the difficulties, I had believed these district colleagues would be able to accomplish this more quickly and easily. In retrospect, I realize that team building is essential to any group effort, even when the members are acquaintances and colleagues of one another. If I were to begin

the initial meeting again, we might start by sharing commonalities about education, like years we taught, grade levels and subjects, and the experiences we had in those areas. This may have been sufficient to "break the ice" and ignite conversation in a non-threatening manner. In their article, "Creating Successful Collaborative Teams," Pat Dukewits and Lewis Gowin (1996) offer this team building technique as a way to establish trust. Another one they suggest is developing common beliefs and attitudes. I had hoped the questions in the survey would lead us there, but we needed a common ground first. Despite this error in judgment, I believed that we would still bond through other means.

Responses to e-mails

When the first face-to-face meeting provided less than I had expected, I turned to e-mails. In the comfort and seclusion of their own classroom, perhaps some of the teachers would feel freer to converse and share. Since time was also a factor in their busy lives, and scheduling another meeting on the heels of the first that actually accommodated everyone's responsibilities was beginning to appear unrealistic, responding electronically seemed a practical alternative. I asked what thoughts they had about three writing topics – modeling, reflection, and conferencing. I wanted to leave the options open and easy for them to respond. I though that if I provided several choices, at least one of them would appeal to each of the teachers. Since the first encounter was a bit stilted, I thought that general ideas about writing rather than specific lessons or topics would be a less

threatening way for the teachers to ask questions, and share examples and experiences of the topics that were successful. As I reread the single response to the initial messaging, my reflections flowed in a free verse pattern.

Questions asked …
No response.

Rethink and ask again …
No response.

Tried guilt, some begging…

First Answer-
No time,

Paper overload,

Grading,

Exacerbated,

Intensive,

Can't do it!

Dropping out!!

I'M DISCOURAGED!

Would the E-mails follow the same route as the first meeting? I feared that our sparse messaging was headed in that same downward spiral. Rita indicated to me that her school responsibilities prevented the time she would need to

participate in the project and asked to be removed from the group after our initial meeting. Her response to the first e-mail stated,

" I absolutely agree that time is the most important resource that we have. Unfortunately, the fact that our subject area is so paper intensive is what takes so much of our time. While I would love to have the luxury of reflecting on my teaching practices and the teaching practices of others, I simply do not have the time. If only we could find a way to incorporate time for professional collaboration into our in-service time or Act 48 time or something rather than giving us yet another task to accomplish, I think we, and ultimately our students, could benefit greatly."

She expressed desire to continue to read the group's e-mail correspondence, but noted that she would not be able to respond to the discussions. On a personal level I felt a sense of disappointment when Rita opted not to continue. I wondered about Rita's interest in maintaining a "read only" status as a sign of the uneasiness in sharing and listening to the ideas of the support groups that may not match her own. Was there a deeper concern about the openness and trust within the district or between buildings? I'm not sure but I would have to keep this in mind. Rita's decision not to continue in the study provided another frustration to contend with, and not an easy one!

My next e-mail was about how I understood the time factor that affects all of us, but also the impact that action research can have on the workings of a school. I reiterated that I am trying to help teachers work collaboratively for the

success of our students, as well as for the professional growth of the other teachers in our school. In order for this to occur, time must be on out side. I asked if anyone had any suggestions to remedy the time problem.

Nina responded, " Regular communication is so crucial. I wonder if we could set up an in-house forum e-mail with discussion threads we could all read and respond to periodically… there are jot spots and quiet days on this forum, but it's neat to follow the thread of discussion from person to person and reply briefly about one key issue at a time."

Others suggested Act 48 hours, common planning time, and even the use of some team time during the day.

The following day I offered another simpler statement to the group namely, "Assessment is only the beginning".

Cathy replied, "I totally agree. My kids are working on self-assessment now and it is hard work. They still think that their pieces are strong. I have been sharing my writing, and I self assess and tell them what I need to revise. We have been assessing one trait a day and sharing strategies for them to uses when they assess their own and a partners. Tomorrow we are looking at word choice. I know this is a need for many. When we continually use the language of writing and have the kids use it, the words will become part of their writing vocabulary. It is hard work and sometimes you feel that you are getting nowhere, but it will come. We used Barry Lane's binoculars today and asked questions when we are

looking for elaboration and development of content. Will they be perfect? No, but it is a start."

"Cathy's observation has been similar to mine", answered Lana. "I've been modeling with some student pieces on the overhead, then letting them work on their own. It's tough. They don't like to hear that their pieces need work, especially from some other student. Back to modeling."

Cathy added to Lana's response, "I remember a fourth grader two years ago saying, why do we waste time with peer assessment when our peers don't know anything? So we started listing how a peer had helped and the list became quite long. Sometimes students just don't realize what they know! Assessment is the first step and young students have a hard time with self-assessment, so my first steps in third grade are to assess lots of pieces together and then have partners assess with each other. They can start using the language of what makes a piece strong quite easily."

Nina then joined the conversation, "I liked hearing someone else recognize the potential for assessment as an ongoing stage in the writing process- not just the final step and NOT relegated to the role of the teacher. I like to ask students to reflect on the process each time to become more observant and to own more of the decision-making. Training kids to use the language of writers and to self-evaluate along the way has been a great improvement on how I spend my time. Whenever I have a draft in process, I find reflection prompts to yield so many neat student observations – does anyone else find the same?"

I was elated with this series of messages. Now the teachers were asking questions of each other. This is what I had envisioned would happen at our first meeting. This dialogue was exciting and fruitful. My frustration subsided a bit, and I was beginning to feel as if this type of technique would be beneficial in a school. I certainly hoped the discourse would continue and lead to sharing of writing ideas as well as frustrations with their students, and seeking advice.

The next round of e-mail discussion centered on the question, "What role does choice play in writing and to what extent?" I chose this topic because it is central to writer's workshop philosophy and also because I am aware that this is difficult for some teachers to provide for their students. This issue of control is one area that deters many teachers from utilizing the workshop approach. I wanted to open this avenue in order for members to hear other points of view, create a debate within their own minds, and lead them to consider providing this option to their classes. This also opened the door to discussion of wiring workshop strategies and components such status of the class. In her lengthy response, Cathy included, " Choice is certainly a key word in writing. Just look at your assessments in which kids have to write about a particular topic and in a particular mode, and then compare it to a self-selected topic, which has real meaning for the child. Portfolios filled with student selected topics have to be our goal."

Nina answered, "I even like to extend the element of choice to include how the student spends time in the "workshop" setting by using a strategy called

"Status-of-the-class" check up. I have a clipboard with all the kids' names on it, and when their names are called, they report what their plan is for the span of workshop time they're given. Are they choosing to draft? Do they realize they need a conference with the teacher or a peer? Are they at the revision stage? I expect that students will use the language of writers and begin to discover their own processes for writing successfully and for choosing how to manage their own time. Then If I manage my time well, I return to the check up clipboard at the end of the workshop session to get an update on what they actually achieved!"

I continued the conversation, "I have used "Status of the class" (Atwell, 1987) too, and it works well to organize the kids as well as me for workshop time. I believe that we need to have students practice writing to a prompt to prepare them for the PSSA tests that are so high stake, but the bulk of their writing should be from the workshop format, and that is where choice can produce strong writing. Choice within a topic can also be done if the teacher wants to keep within a theme, then the choice can be in the type of writing such as a journal, letter, poem, news article, informational essay, story, personal narrative, or persuasive piece."

This did provide better insights not only into the teachers' respective beliefs about writing, but over-all methods of teaching as well. I read some e-mail responses that caused me to be concerned and elated at the same time. I was thrilled that some of the participants did indeed offer choice to their students. Calkins (1994), Graves (1983), Rief (1992), and Fletcher (1998) suggest for

maximum student effort and ownership of the piece. Of course, not all the teachers aspire to emulate this practice, and may not yet have had the opportunity to read these teacher researchers. We discussed the importance of reading professionally at a Language Arts meeting, and the problem of not enough time to complete books during the school year was aired by most of the staff. When Lana shared her question about choice, I was not totally surprised, but I certainly was discouraged. Lana wrote, "I just want to clarify the question. You mean allowing students to choose their topics?" I felt that I needed to share what I had read and learned about the option of giving students choice in their writing topics.

I responded to her question, "Yes, choice in topics and types of writing may be given to students. Research shows that kids do better when they have choice in time to work through a piece as well as deciding on the topic to write about. This idea of choice also brings us back to the idea on assessment as the beginning, we discussed last week. If kids have the choice, they have greater ownership which in turn relates to greater effort to do well, which speaks to self-assessment to revise." I received no further response form Lana on the topic. I'm not sure if her philosophy is that different or if she is concerned because it is. I worried that our group might potentially lose another member. Would she go the same route as her middle school colleague? Is the middle school culture affecting the responding and sharing? Is there pressure to conform? Questions and wonderings continued to surface, and again my sense of frustration began creeping back.

The conversations we had conducted over the wire proved beneficial in that it provided the impetus I needed to compile the first edition of a pamphlet about writing distributed to all staff. It was entitled, "A Writer's Notebook", and contained ideas gathered from our e-mails. The first issue included a professional review, questions and answers about keeping records of student progress in writing workshop with suggestions for all levels of ability, and information from Joanne Hindley's (1996) book, In the Company of Children, on the practice of students using a writer's notebook in class. I felt this was a positive way to include other staff members who had not opted to participate in our sharing of ideas. In fact another teacher commented that she appreciated the pamphlet, and my sense of hope sprung once again. After the publication, my frustration level eased a bit, but I was still worried about Lana. Could we pull her back into the conversations, or did her silence indicate her intention to withdraw?

The Second Meeting

Report cards, parents' visitation, and the holidays took a toll on our e-mails and scheduled meetings. Our meeting in November had to be cancelled and the e-mails slowed down to a trickle and then stopped. The culprit of time took charge and I needed to find another avenue to facilitate the teachers and their writing instruction. If the teachers could not come to me, I would go to them.

After some thought and discussion about the problem, I offered to visit the classrooms of my two elementary colleagues, who from the beginning seemed more receptive to discussion about practices and new ideas to change that practice. We often met in the hall, or on a drive to a workshop we attended together, and conversed about writing philosophy, what was going right, and sharing new ideas. With a renewed sense of our collegial endeavor of working together toward the same goal, I would be able to visit their respective classrooms.

At the next meeting I hoped to continue sharing ideas of successes and failures tried in our classrooms, perhaps continue the discussion from the e-mails, and work together for improvement. I also planned to share professional resources as another source of best practices to use in our classes. Would these colleagues be supportive and offer their experience to one another? My memories of the summer Writing Project participants and the eagerness with which they began and ended each full day session flooded my mind as I prepared for the second meeting. I again envisioned lively discussions about writing beliefs and continued thoughtful e-mails to one another sharing ideas as well as providing advice and encouragement. I simply refused to be defeated by time.

Of course when the second meeting approached, the time issue surfaced once again. Only two teachers were able to attend - Nina from the high school and Linda form the middle school. I was pleasantly surprised by Linda's attendance at the meeting. As I mentioned, I had worried that she would not come as a result of

her last response to the "choice" conversation. Perhaps the group offered Linda the support she needed in her own personal way. Perhaps her silence was merely her personality in group situations. We had a fruitful, although short, conversation about how we learned the strategies we used in our classrooms. This seemed to provide a comfortable zone for Linda because we only discussed topics with which she had strong knowledge. Our discussion led to questions and an explanation of the summer institute. Linda was interested in the schedule and requirements. We shared the requirements of writing three pieces and participating in a response group to revise the writing, sharing a writing lesson that has been successful, and the classroom research idea for the fall. Again this topic steered the conversation away from anything that had to do with personal practices and instruction. Even though this was not the original plan, it was beneficial to Linda because she now understood the benefits the writing project could offer.

This roller-coaster ride, with its frustrating lows, and only occasional highs, made me wonder if I had somehow failed to plan for these unexpected issues, or was the culprit merely time? Whatever the reason, I was in one of the lower loops of this journey, and now had to proceed back up a steep incline to the top. My energies were beginning to run on fumes, approaching empty.

I tried one more time to engage our group in a discussion via e-mail. "Now that the hectic ness of conferences and report cards is over, I am hoping that we can chat a bit more. Students need feedback as they work through their

pieces, and we can help one another by sharing some of the question and comments we offer our students. What kinds of reflective questions do you offer to your students as you conference with them on a piece of writing?" I wrote.

Nina was the only one to reply, " I believe in asking kids to reflect A LOT! It really gives me a window on kids' learning and even surprises them sometimes when they recognize and verbalize about their own style. Often I ask questions related to the 6-trait rubric about word choice, organization, etc., but I also ask them to score their own final drafts and then answer some reflective questions such as: What lessons have you learned about writing__(whatever genre)? What are you discovering about your strengths /weaknesses? What do you still need to work on as a writer? Asking these questions periodically and revisiting them is interesting for the class and edifying for me." I was thankful for Nina's thoughtful response.

Classroom Visits and Conferencing

Since the teacher-talk was waning, I decided to concentrate on the teachers in the elementary school. I was able to visit their classrooms with great ease and a welcoming attitude. I went as another pair of hands to assist in writing workshop. Children always make us smile, and I was hoping a classroom visit would bring encouragement to my work. I was not to be disappointed! I especially enjoyed the opportunity to work with my colleagues and their students. What an exciting

and enthusiastic part of my day when I shared writing time with two teachers and their students. Just watching my colleagues' enthusiasm, coupled with the student response and writing, offered the encouragement I needed to see that our discussions were perhaps impacting instruction.

I had the opportunity to observe a lesson in Lana's classroom one Friday and then have lunch with her to talk about writing. I was excited about how Lana's students responded to her lesson, which involved revising a boring piece of writing about a favorite meal. Lana instructed the students to add sensory details and strong verbs. The day I was there, the students were sharing their revisions. I could not help but be impressed by the work they had done to strengthen their pieces. Lana had written some of the strong verbs and images on the board for everyone to see before asking students to write on the back of their own papers for future reference. "Using a writer's notebook to capture the words that a writer wants to use in another piece, would be a good suggestion for Lana's students," I thought.

The students appeared enthusiastic and confident about their writing. All who did so, shared willingly and those who did not have an opportunity showed their disappointment. "Lana was certainly correct about the strength of her students' work", I wrote in my journal. "One thing that I noticed about Lana was her positive support of the student work and efforts. She used a great deal of praise and offered suggestions where necessary. She repeated the strengths of each piece as she wrote the words on the board. This classroom certainly offered a

risk free environment where students felt confident to try anything in their work. She told me that she loves to teach writing and incorporates it into her content areas as well."

I asked Lana to have lunch with me so we could talk about writing and the support group. She believes that a writing teachers' support group is useful to all teachers, but she thinks that the group should consist of teachers from the same building, rather than the two elementary teachers, two middle level teachers and one high school teacher who compromise the current group. Lana expressed difficulty incorporating the ideas brought to the discussion table into her own classroom situation because the ideas would be too difficult for her fourth graders. I assured her that with some more experience she would be able to adapt almost any lesson to another grade level with some modifications. I told Lana that once she felt comfortable teaching writing, she would be able to take any idea from any grade level and incorporate some aspect of it into her class. She looked at me apprehensively but I believe she will see that in time.

I also had the pleasure of visiting Cathy's lively third grade class. As the first grade teacher of some of Cathy's students, I remember their enthusiasm. Cathy clearly works hard on using writing workshop. Cathy presented a mini-lesson on sentence combining with the use of conjunctions. She modeled an example, and then asked the children to use that idea in their own writing. During class, I participated in conferences with three children. The topics in our writing conversations included the correct use of dialogue, adding details through

questioning, and the over use of pronouns. After our conference, each student continued to revise his or her piece.

Afterward Cathy and I chatted about the students' writing. " They go on and on with a story and can't seem to end their piece," Cathy shared. She added how another student had this problem and together they had worked to fix it. This conference took a great deal of time for that one student, but in the long run this student is now better prepared to end a piece on her own.

"One part of the writing process that would help these children would be to complete a stronger brainstorm and plan before they write. It would help them arrive at some type of conclusion to their piece based on the ideas written and thought through beforehand," I entered in my reflection journal after the class. "Students do not like to plan and think before they write. I noticed this especially with younger children. However, as student writing becomes more complex in the different genres, plan and thinking, and note-taking before drafting, is crucial." I planned to share my suggestions with Cathy in the e-mail I sent thanking her for the visit and offering suggestions about our discussions.

Later that morning I visited Lana's class once again. She modeled her own piece of writing about a personal experience and listed the main ideas of the piece. Afterward, she chose the one she thought was the most interesting or exciting as the new lead. She chose one of the student's pieces and modeled this technique again. She then guided the students to do the same. After a time Lana shared two more students' lists. This lesson worked so well, and Lana was so

pleased, that I hoped I could convince Lana to share this idea in one of our future writing support group meetings or through e-mail.

These classroom visits were valuable because they afforded me the opportunity to observe the teachers guiding students through this writing process. After each classroom visit I was able to have a conversation about the lesson and about the children with whom I was able to conference. We discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the students' work and strategies to help them. One technique I offered was to have the student talk about the piece aloud with a partner before drafting. Then the partner could ask the author questions to elicit more details, which could be written down as a list. The author would then revise his or her piece by adding the notes from the list. Often students "play the movie" of their writing in their heads but do not get all the words on the paper, or they assume the reader understands what the piece is about. By verbalizing the idea first, along with being asked questions (Lane 1999), the writer has a better idea of what to include in his or her first draft. With these classroom visits, our conversations, and e-mail correspondence, I was anxious for our next meeting. I hoped the teachers would be willing to talk about the lessons and the successes, and we as a group could begin a dialogue about instructional practices.

Final Survey

There was no meeting scheduled for December due to the short time before the holiday vacation. I had hoped for one final meeting when we returned in January, but the group members indicated once again that there was insufficient time. Before the teachers left school for the holiday break I asked the group members to complete the anonymous ending survey (See appendix D), and asked them to return it to me when school commenced. Based on the responses I received, the surveys indicated that a lack of time along with after school commitments prevented the support group from reaching its potential.

One responded, "Dialogue was tough to begin and sustain, e-mailing was not participated in by all." Was this problem a result of my inability to facilitate and foster stronger conversation? Did the school climate enter into this mix? I am not sure. I have observed the elementary teachers and the high school teacher in meetings, and they are willing to enter into the conversation, even if the issues are a challenge. However, I have observed a different type of discussion in the middle school.

In response to my question on ways we might attempt to rectify this situation, the answers were similar. One participant replied, "Possibly early meetings at 7am, or have the district provide substitute time, or hold meetings during individual's planning time." Another stated, "Since few seemed willing to give up their after-school hours, it would have to be worked into their school schedule or be integrated into flextime, or in-services." Still another answered,

"Maybe voluntary participation, regularly scheduled meetings well in advance, and all take turns with the e-mails, perhaps each suggesting a topic for the week." I felt a bit discouraged by this last comment since the number of meetings and responsibilities had clearly been stated in the initial letter. This was cause for concern, and it only fueled my frustrations with this project. I wondered if this notion might be too much for this staff to tackle until trust and confidence are in place. If that is true, I must determine how to help alleviate this problem?

When asked how the group could function if the obstacles were removed, one respondent indicated, "The general sharing of collective knowledge, experiences, and resources would greatly enhance the teaching ability of those on staff. Each faculty member could share their classroom experiments; teaching techniques or ideas learned from conferences, in-service sessions or other classes, such as graduate level education courses. If the district allowed meetings of K-12 teachers, curriculum could be examined for areas of strengths and weaknesses." Another stated, "Increased communication can certainly aid both new and experienced teachers in sharing and shaping the K-12 vision, resulting in better support, efficiency, creativity for teachers, and students when clear expectations are communicated." These thoughts mirrored mine because communication is key.

I then asked how such a group would benefit our staff? Responses included the ideas that it provides an opportunity to talk, determine and analyze the best ways to improve instruction for our students. One response was most

encouraging, "Our district is small-so contained- how exciting to open the doors (literally and figuratively) to this type of supportive professional development that directly answers our questions and impacts our children." Perhaps my thoughts about not being ready for this type of endeavor were a bit hasty. Maybe some teachers are ready and want this interaction. What is preventing it from happening? That may be the burning question! I was finally filled with some hope and encouragement with the "yes" responses to the question of participating if the barriers and obstacles were removed. "I'm eager and interested in hearing, sharing and helping to shape a quality K-12 program," offered one participant. "I feel you must learn from colleagues in your district, hearing successes and challenges," added another. Unfortunately one responder took me down the hill again, when she stated, "I would, but I think it needs to come from administration and be mandatory to some degree. Total participation would make it most beneficial, and based on the results of requesting volunteers, the chances of a majority of teachers getting involved in a non-required group activity is not probable." Does this revert back to the burning question from before? Is the school climate at play again? Is it the culture of the district or a particular building? These are some of the questions I must attempt to answer before I move forward.

School Culture Questionnaire

To begin to answer these questions, I distributed a school culture questionnaire (See Appendix E). The group members appeared willing to address topics when sufficient time was provided to complete the task. School climate issues seemed to continue to surface throughout the study and I was curious to find out if this was truly the case. I asked the participants to rate each statement using 1(almost never), 2 (half the time), and 3 (almost always). In many areas the teachers responded positively.

However, when it came to collegiality and planning together and observing one another's teaching, the members indicated these were areas that only occurred on a limited basis. The time factor again was a concern when the teachers responded that demands on their time and energy interfered with instructional planning. Perhaps this is an administrative issue and will need to be resolved through those means. Or was this a reason not to give of their own time, and expect the district to provide everything in the areas of professional improvement?

The teachers also responded that the flow of information only occurred half of the time. Again some teachers wanted to put all the responsibility of their own professional growth in the hands of the school on school time. Some demanded much from the district, but at times were not always willing to do their share. Was this happening with my study group? Did they expect me to provide

all the parameters to make this project work to their specifications? Or was this again an excuse for not participating fully?

These were school culture issues that I had noticed throughout the study. Where would this problem lead? Would I need to resolve these issues before I could plan for further studies? Would I be able to resolve them or would I require assistance from the administration? Always more questions than answers.

DATA ANALYSIS

In revisiting Living the Question by Hubbard and Power (1999) much of what I read pertained to my own inquiry process. These researchers stated, "We all need space to think, and the brain can sort enormous amounts of information at an unconscious level if we aren't cluttering it with mundane responsibilities" (p. 65). This is what teacher-researchers need when they feel so overwhelmed. By taking a respite and looking at what data they have, they can refocus and move forward with more enthusiasm. I read this and it helped me my task into perspective.

Hubbard and Power added, "Perhaps the most important advice we can give you regarding data analysis is never to allow yourself to become too comfortable with your findings.... Pay attention to those feelings of discomfort, because they provide clues to the major breakthroughs in understanding possible through your research" (p. 138). This quote was exactly how I was feeling. The discomfort was running rampant, and at an all time high, mostly because I felt that

our group did not achieve the goals I had envisioned. Time was certainly a key; not only time to get together, but time to even begin creating the community that is a vital starting point to this type of endeavor. After this brief refresher, I was ready to begin my work. From working with teachers conducting classroom inquiries every fall and reading their findings, I knew that resolution was not the goal, but arriving at some conclusions and projections for continued and future study would be the expectation. As Arhar (2001) stated, "Analysis means taking things apart. To get it right, we carefully look at data, find the parts, and develop them. But getting it right also means looking for holes, the patterns, the secrets, the mysteries..." (p. 191).

I built analysis into the design from the beginning by reading through the journal every two weeks to notice patterns and recall important ideas, as Hubbard and Power (1999) suggest. Arhar (2001) added that interpretation of the data is not a separate part, but is rather an on-going process while the study is in progress. Although this was not an easy task, it was beneficial because I would forget all that was collected and written over time. I found it difficult to divorce the analysis from the data collection. They naturally go hand-in-hand; your mind makes connections and draws conclusions as you write what you're learning along the way.

In my journal entries I raised numerous questions that I felt I needed to address, not only now, but in any future study I may undertake. It would be imperative to spend a longer period of time on community building among the

participants before any meaningful discussion of instructional strategies could occur. Although this issue never was stated outright, its underlying effects were felt when teachers were reluctant to share and visit one another's classrooms. In the future, I would have to instill trust among the teachers with several activities that would include sharing and talking freely with one another. From the school culture statements I realized that our teachers may require a stronger collegial bond across buildings.

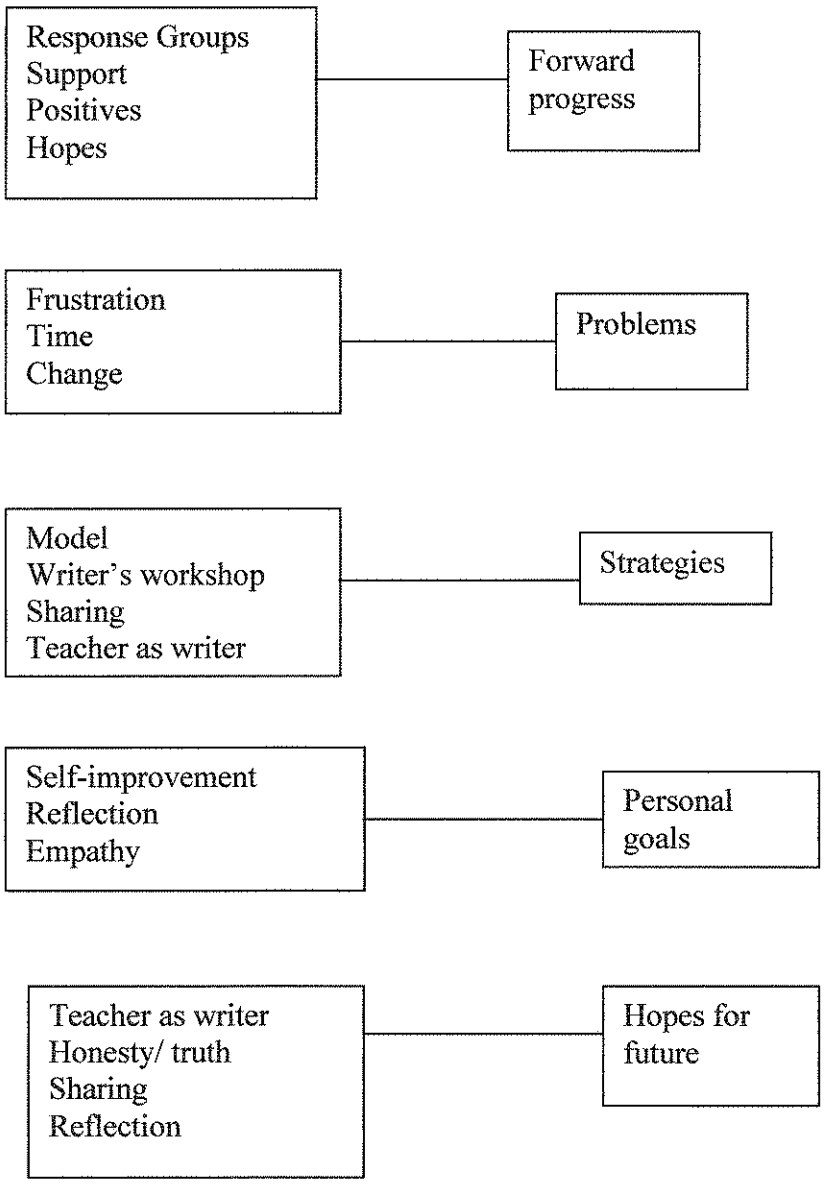
The lack of time was an ever-present statement throughout my journals, the teachers' comments in the e-mails, in discussions that I had with individual teachers, and in the surveys. It seemed that we could not remove ourselves from its control of our situations. In order for time to play a less important role, I would require the help of the administration of the district to provide some in-school time, or develop another solution with the help of the group members.

The time problem led to much frustration for both the teachers and me. I was frustrated with the lack of meeting attendance and discussion of instructional practices. The electronic conversations provided some peek into the writing practices and beliefs of the participants, but I had hoped for much more. At times I felt that all I was writing about were the problems of time and lack of response and how frustrated I felt.

Returning to Arhar's idea of taking things apart, I noticed these repeated statements in my data, but by rereading my notes, I was able to garner many more that were more positive and hopeful. I created lists of the repeated words that

continued to surface, as well as their recurrence. These were the codes that emerged from my data that I then categorized into groups called bins. Here were the main threads that wove throughout my data. What did these reveal about the workings of a support group? Would they indicate needs for improvement as well as positive results? Immersing myself into this data would help me decipher the information.

Codes:



Synthesis and Themes

As I reflected on the codes from the initial data and the interview responses conducted as a participant check, themes and conclusions emerged.

Arhar called grouping these codes or ideas together a process of categorizing, which could be themes, dilemmas or issues (p. 194). She defined synthesis as the process of putting the parts back together. She continued to explain that by finding patterns and looking for confirming and disconfirming data we develop themes. What patterns did I notice about the ways in which the support group was beneficial to the teachers involved? Many stood out as issues that would need to be resolved for a support group in a school to function effectively.

Five major themes emerged from the data. These were the main ideas that flowed throughout the study from the actions of the teachers as well as what they stated.

The issues of time to talk, share, plan and collaborate as professional colleagues needs to be resolved. This was evident throughout the initial and ending survey results, as well as the e-mails and the few meetings we were able to have. The time factor again was a concern when the teachers responded in the school culture questionnaire that demands on their time and energy interfered with instructional planning. Perhaps this was an administrative issue and needed to be resolved through those means.

Denise Fischer, Maria Mercando (2000), and the other teachers in the New Mexico project shared their perspectives on the issue of institutional barriers noting that, "Pioneer teacher-researchers have had to push the boundaries at the institutional level both inside and outside the schools. At the school, the support of teacher-researchers in terms of time availability is very minimal or non-existent. We feel that there is increasing demand on our time being devoted to activities different from either teaching or doing research. The time necessary for reflecting and writing about our inquiries is simply not available. The school structure and organization keeps us working in isolation, which precludes a sustained collegial dialogue that may support our inquiry endeavors"(p.12).

The time issues affected both of our meetings. Some teachers forgot, 'others had other commitments', and I felt that our writing support group meeting was not a high priority for some. The teachers whom I had asked to participate agreed to help with the study, but I'm not sure how much vested interest they had in joining and participating in a support group to the extent necessary for its success.

Regie Routman (2002) in her article, "Teacher Talk," discusses the importance of on-going professional dialogue to develop a reflective school learning community in order to create meaningful and lasting changes in teaching and learning. She says, "It's not easy to make a commitment to weekly professional meetings, but it is one of the best ways to develop thoughtful practice school-wide and to improve teaching and learning" (p. 32). She offers guidelines

for weekly professional conversations, which include: 1.) Make meetings voluntary and invitational, 2.) Survey the staff for interests, 3.) Begin on time, 4.) Post an agenda, 5.) Take minutes and distribute them to the entire staff, 6.) Read and discuss professional books and articles, 7.) Have a curricular focus, 8.) Encourage a knowledgeable teacher or co-teachers to facilitate, 9.) Request that the principal attend as a learner and equal group member, and 10.) Allow time for sharing ideas. As I reflected on these guidelines, the time that I had to accomplish this task was too short. For this endeavor to be successful, time is needed. However, that on-going dialogue was difficult for some participants due to the time that was required for such a commitment. As Rita said, "I absolutely agree that time is the most important resource that we have. Unfortunately, the fact that our subject area is so paper intensive is what takes so much of our time. While I would love to have the luxury of reflecting on my teaching practices and the reaching practices of others, I simply do not have the time. If only we could find a way to incorporate into time for professional collaboration into our in-service time or Act 48 time or something rather than giving us yet another task to accomplish, I think we, and ultimately our students, could benefit greatly."

After sufficient time had elapsed, I returned to the group members for a final reflection, and conducted interviews with the teachers and asked them what did not work with the support group. I was curious to see if the initial reasons remained. They again indicated insufficient time in the school day, the fact that our schedules were different and there was no common planning time or even

time before school available, along with family and personal commitments as the major stumbling blocks to the minimal success of the support group. This time issue was certainly a sticking point and will need to be addressed in future endeavors. As stated earlier there were some suggestions for a solution offered, but the group members felt that there needed to be coordination with administration in order for the time issues to be resolved. However, there was a comment made by two of the teachers in the interview about the lack of investment and low priority of the project on the part of some of the participants. "It is easy to forget an event when you have no real desire to see it through", one of the teachers stated. These types of comments that the teachers revealed in the later interview were stronger than their initial ones. Reflection on the process of the project revealed more details to its problems and created an impetus for changes and improvements that would be needed in the future. John Dewey maintained that reflection is an important aspect of learning from experience. He wrote in Experience and Education (1938), "To reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of the intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind" (p. 87). Reflection encouraged new issues to emerge, which can be dealt with in the future. Effective professional development requires time and resources if it is to take root, along with conversation and reflection on the part of the group members.

Community building activities must be introduced and strong ties established in order for direct and honest collaboration and productive conversations with colleagues about the art of teaching.

The teachers involved in this project began, as I did, with hope and enthusiasm. The hope for more collaborating was still strong, especially among some of the staff. The elementary and high school teachers in the group seemed most open to sharing and willing to discuss successes and difficulties. These teachers are professionals who already utilize modeling, peer revision, and conferencing in their classrooms. They possessed a desire to improve their practices and agreed "teachers working together are a powerful tool at our disposal." This aspect of school culture is vital to school improvement, but when roadblocks caused delays and difficulties in moving forward, teachers became discouraged and the process slowed down. In a later interview with Nina she added to this when she said, "The culture produces teachers who are defensive and guarded. There were some heavy hitters and lightweights in the group who seemed ill at ease, so the energy did not flow. There was no sense of community between some members, no sense of commitment." The culture of the group in the areas of collegiality and professional improvement must be solid and strong, even if the climate of the district on a whole is different. This would open the doorway to the trust and honesty that would be fundamental to the effectiveness of the group.

Both Cathy and Lana expressed the importance of building trust between the group members and these types of activities. After further reflection, issues of lack of trust among group members and no sense of community were offered as frustrations. Nevertheless, the teachers still felt a need and desire to continue with the support group with modifications to the initial meeting plan.

In order for me to create the environment conducive to open discussion and sharing, I should have spent much more time on the community building aspect that is needed to create this risk-free environment. Just as it is important to create a risk free and safe environment in our classrooms for our students in a writer's workshop, the same holds true for our teachers' community, especially when the collegial climate of the school in not uniform among the staff. Openness and ability to offer ideas are vital. Dukewits and Gowin offer specific strategies for building collaborative teams. They stated, "Schools with collaborative cultures encourage stakeholders to trust each other, share information, and work together to serve students effectively. Developing collaborative culture takes time and commitment, but members of many school teams are taking on this challenge in an effort to make their school a better place to work and learn for adults as well as students" (p. 12). They suggested establishing trust, developing common beliefs and attitudes, empowering team members, effectively managing meetings, and providing feedback about team functions.

Teachers want to improve their practices and listen to others and their ideas. In the initial survey, the teachers indicated that they would like to use our writing teacher support group time together to gain insights into the teaching of writing, to learn strategies that work for others, to improve their own skills, to have an open forum of communication and continuity across grade levels. Carl Nagin (2003), in the text Because Writing Matters, cited research that teachers want research-based strategies through professional development. "The path to change in the classroom core lies within and through teachers' professional communities; learning communities which generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their efforts to reflect, examine, experiment, and change" (p. 58).

When asked how the group could function if the obstacles were removed, the responses included in the final survey included, "The general sharing of collective knowledge, experiences, and resources would greatly enhance the teaching ability of those on staff. Each faculty member could share their classroom experiments; teaching techniques or ideas learned from conferences, in-service sessions or other classes, such as graduate level education courses. If the district allowed meetings of K-12 teachers, curriculum could be examined for areas of strengths and weaknesses." Dewey states, "The general conclusion I would draw is that control of individual actions is affected by the whole situation in which individuals are involved, in which they share and of which they are co-operative or interacting parts" (p. 53). Our writing teacher support group is like

this – co-operative and interacting – but with the same goal in mind, improving student writing.

Teachers want to plan with one another and share strategies they find to be useful and successful. "As a new teacher and a huge fan of writing, I'd like to see an exchange of ideas," reported Lana. Cathy echoed this same sentiment when she said, "I hope to gain insights about how other professionals teach writing. I hope to learn strategies that work. I hope to improve my own skills when it comes to the teaching and assessment of writing." Nina continued, "I hope to gain a sense of continuity among grade levels, new angles for teaching writing, and different observations and support for the new class I teach." These sentiments were echoed time and again as I talked to the teachers, whether in a group, or after a lesson. Through our e-mails and other short meetings, we also engaged in lively discussions about the teaching of writing. Questions were posed and ideas shared. Teachers with prior knowledge and expertise offered strategies that had worked for them.

This information culminated in the publishing of the first of many pamphlets entitled, "Writer's Notebook" (See appendices F, G, and H). This publication was disseminated to all staff in hopes of spreading what we had all learned. My hope was that our group members would continue to offer other strategies that had been successful in the classrooms and ask questions, which could be the beginning of another type of dialogue among the staff. The times that

I spent in the classrooms observing students at work was truly beneficial to those teachers, because we celebrated the success and pondered over other ways to adjust the instruction. These ideas, too, made their way into the newsletter. Also provided were opportunities to share resources from the best in the field. Books were exchanged, as well as lesson plans.

Teachers desire professional development resources, but within a time frame that is practical. During one language arts meeting when I was describing the books that I had purchased for the middle school professional library, Linda and Rita both had the same sentiment, "I would like to be able to read this, but my duties do not allow time for it." Teachers often do not have the time to read professionally in order to find fresh ideas, and the opportunities to attend conferences are few. So the chance to work together with a group of colleagues is important, where ideas that other might have had the chance to discover could be shared. Our school district utilizes Charlotte Danielson's Components of Professional Practice (2001) as part of the evaluation process for the staff. The fourth domain is devoted to professional responsibilities. Included in that portion are reflection on teaching and making substantial contribution to the profession through such activities action research, mentoring new teachers, and pursuing professional development opportunities. A teachers' support group could provide a basis for these components to be accomplished.

Can a writing support group of teachers working collaboratively in a school district be beneficial to one another? Yes, I firmly believe they can, but the

right conditions must be in place to make the task easier as a result of the inevitable constraints placed on the teachers. It can benefit them in many ways – provide support through shared ideas and strategies, be an open forum for discussion of writing related topics, lend empathetic ears for listening to difficulties and successes, be a place to offer new techniques learned and read, and offer an opportunity to read professionally and grow as teachers of writing. The opportunities are endless! Jay McTighe and Fran Prolman (1999) offered advice on how to accomplish this task. They suggest six attributes to collegiality that has a strong correlation to student achievement:

1. *Teachers talking specifically about teaching and learning would broaden their practices.* Our group was able to accomplish this on a limited scale through our electronic conversations. Nina lamented, " E-mails frustrated her the most because some voices became silent." If this type of inquiry extended over an entire school year, perhaps more specific topics could be explored or as Nina suggested, "Have themes through the e-mails such as pre-writing, revisions strategies, and sharing student work to get the conversation going." Perhaps every school year I could add more teachers to the e-mail list and include more of their conversations in the monthly newsletters, giving credit to the teachers who share.

2. *Teachers planning and designing together* would be an ultimate goal. Talking to one another, sharing our knowledge and experiences, would help our students. I was able to work with one teacher at a time during the study, but as a

whole group this activity was not accomplished. I would like to add this component to the monthly grade levels meetings, creating a written lesson plan so the teachers could use the strategy in their classrooms whenever they want. Cathy suggested that teachers needed to make this a priority, but questioned how would we accomplish this?

3. *Teachers observing one another teaching* was one avenue that was pursued but not embraced by the members of the group. I offered my services as a substitute for one class period where any one of them could spend time in another writing classroom. There was an element of trust and confidence needed to accomplish this and perhaps that is why this was not successful. In order for our group to function as a community, time to know and trust one another was required. This type of community building doesn't happen over night and again time was our enemy in this aspect of collegiality and school culture. The teachers welcomed me into their classrooms, but no one took my offer to visit others. This was a disappointment for me. This is an excellent method to improve instructional practices and I was able to model lessons for grade level teachers last school year, as well as teach a writing lesson while first and second grade teachers observed writers' workshop in a colleague's room. I would like to extend this opportunity into the intermediate grades, and even possibly the middle school. I had given the teachers a set of areas to explore while they were in the classroom so that we could debrief at our regularly scheduled meeting.

4. *Teachers sharing their expertise* did occur on a limited basis through our e-mails. Learning from one another is valuable because teachers can share the positive and negative aspects of the lessons. Veteran teachers can offer their expertise to the new teachers to ease the many difficulties especially during the first few years. One way for this to idea to be expanded in the future would be to invite teachers to share in grade level meetings or even at faculty meetings.

5. *Teachers acting as "critical friends"– raising questions, giving support, and providing feedback* is key. The term "critical friends" has a supportive ring to it. It can perhaps be added to our future inquiry process. Little of this support occurred due to lack of time to develop it thoroughly, but teachers who might volunteer to be a critical friend might attend an after school meeting or even before school begins. This type of professional development occurs at the high school level on a regular basis due to the direction of the principal. Perhaps that will become more systemic as the years go by. John Dewey (1938) supports this notion of colleagues talking and sharing when he states, "The development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid to give. The essential point is that the purpose grow and take shape through the process of social intelligence"(p. 72).

6. *The staff systematically examines multiple sources of data to guide adjustments to instruction and assessment.* This is the action research component that is not fully in place at this time. As a staff we look at PSSA and Terra Nova results, but there is no real analysis of the data to affect instruction as of yet. At

the elementary level, the quarterly assessment results are also studied, and some teachers do utilize them to guide instruction. This component of our district's mission statement is currently in the process of being revised and will be more fully implemented in the near future. However, I would like to expand our support group to include some type of action research. Maybe only a few teachers would be willing to attempt a research project in their classrooms, but we would need to work closely together to talk and share results.

What does the future hold for my district based on what I learned through my study? What will our district need to do in order to make progress on this front? What do I need to do in my job capacity in order to foster improvement and meet our goals?

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The future looks bright and the will to see it through is strong not only for me but the district's vision as well. Our goal is to improve student writing, not only in English class but across the curriculum as well. For this to occur, professional development is essential, and can have many different looks. We must search out-of-the-box, be creative, and be open to new ideas to accomplish our goals.

As far as my role in all of this, I have a great deal to accomplish. I will first begin with reading and searching for the best research-based practices concerning leadership, as well as continue my education in supervision. It is necessary for me to guide in a manner conducive to establishing trust and openness among the teachers. I believe my job responsibilities play an important part in this type of support group in a district. I must be able to provide the leadership and forward thinking needed to create a community of teacher researchers in their own classrooms and among each other. By fostering reflection about our practices, we as a staff can only improve. I believe my role is pivotal in the area of writing, in order for the staff to reach our writing goals.

As I reflected on the student writing I observed, I was able to see students in action using some of the strategies we shared via e-mails, and they were doing well. However, if I really want to know the effects of our strategies on student achievement, I would have to proceed with a deeper and longer research study of student work and collect data on their writings scores over a longer period of time to see if growth has occurred. This is a feasible option because my job involves exactly this type of task. I plan to gather anchor papers for each trait in each grade level which will make scoring student writing easier for the teachers, especially teachers new to the district. Mac Lean and Mohr (1999) told me that teacher research is inquiry that is intentional, public, systematic, voluntary, ethical and contextual. "Teacher research is a worthwhile use of your time, and we know that many teachers, including the two of us, have budgeted professional and

personal hours to make our teacher research possible." they contend (p. 34). These educators who write for the National Writing Project, offer three ways to make the most of teacher research time.

1. Make the most of the time you spend on research by conducting your search with colleagues. They also suggest adding both positive and negative findings as well as any administrator's classroom observations in order to present a more balanced picture.

2. By integrating your teaching and researching there is not an addition to your already overloaded schedule. In fact the research will help focus your teaching, and think and design lesson plans.

3. Research requires time to reflect, think and write about teaching as a whole. Whenever possible, talk to others about your research which will give voice to your knowledge and perhaps the district will provide time for you to write if they value teacher professional growth.

I believe that by following this plan I could enhance and expand my work into a research study that could involve other teachers in small research groups that would benefit the entire district.

Carl Nagin (2003) supports my plan of action when he says, "Effective professional development requires time and resources if it is to take root. It can involve a broad range of interventions and formats, tied to specific curricular aims, unfolding over a one-to-three year cycle, with clearly defined short-term goals. Ample research from the last decade shows that staff development is both a

crucial element in school reform and a catalyst for change in building a school culture that supports a high level of adult and student learning" (p. 57). Our district's goals are set – improve writing achievement. We have local assessments in place and have been in-servicing teachers on writing instruction. The groundwork has been laid for the future.

When I reflect upon the five phases of the plan put together by the teachers from Florida in the A D. Henderson University School, I can't help but wonder where our district is in that continuum. We already have action plans in place, for the goals and for myself at each building level. We have provided some staff development to support teachers in changing instructional practices, but a good deal more is necessary. Data-driven accountability is part of our mission statement, and regular assessments are part of the elementary school, and we are preparing to extend them into the middle level. I feel confident that we are on the right track to achieve the same success as the school in the study. However, one phase of their plan that is not presently part of ours, is to create action research study groups who support writing through collaboratively planning and sharing. I believe we have a strong start in the right direction for success. Perhaps my small study can be a catalyst to implement more extensive work over the entire school year, with our writing goal as the target.

Regie Routman (2002) says, "Knowledgeable, well-informed teachers make a greater difference than do specific programs" (p. 1). She cites Goldberg's study (2001, p. 689) on teachers effectiveness, "My research and personal

experience tell me that the single most determinant of success for a student is the knowledge and skills of that child's teacher." Routman continues, " When teachers are well-informed - by learning theory and relevant research, as well as by careful reflection on their own experiences - they can make confident decisions about teaching practices. And one of the most powerful approaches to developing this kind of confidence is ongoing professional conversation among colleagues, built into a school's professional development expectations for staff" (p. 32). Keeping all this mind, my plans for the future of a teachers' support group to function effectively and encompass collegiality and professionalism include:

1. Teachers talking specifically about teaching and learning to broaden instructional practices. Asking themselves questions such as: Why am I teaching this way? How will this activity or lesson contribute to students' literacy and growing independence? How do I know whether my students are learning?

2. Teachers planning and designing lessons together. Carl Nagin (2003) supplies this data from the National Staff Development Council, which urges that at least twenty-five percent of teachers' time should be given over to improving their expertise and to collaborate with colleague (p. 61). Routman adds, " I facilitated language arts support groups for teachers, which took the form of conversations – informal, nonjudgmental, exploratory dialogue, often with a common goal in mind. These weekly conversations, along with professional study, gave participating teachers the research, practical ideas, and confidence to move forward in a variety of areas' (p. 32). Article after article that I have read

suggests this same scenario for student growth and teachers' improvement. How can my plans not include this?

3. Teachers observing one another. Nagin(2003) offers a professional development laboratory. "In this model," he states, "Experienced practitioners are selected by the district staff in consultation with the principal. They in turn accept a limited number of teachers as visitors to their classrooms. Each visiting teachers spends three weeks of intensive observation and supervised practice in the resident teacher's classroom" (p. 61). Although this model seems extreme, the basic tenant of observation as a key to building successful teachers is vital.

4. Teachers sharing their expertise. Nagin (2003) shares a 1996 National Commission on Teaching and America's Future's report that makes the case, "Teacher expertise is the most significant factor in student success. It cites studies showing that teacher qualifications account for forty percent of the difference on overall student performance and that teachers quality is more powerful than a student's socioeconomic background in student learning"(p. 59). Talking and sharing all they have acquired over years of practice, study, and reading is vital to the students in out charge.

5. Teachers acting as "critical friends" – raising questions, giving support, and providing feedback. Deborah Bambino (2002) is part of a Critical Friends Group and the National School Reform Faculty that sponsors training and workshops for building collaboration and reflection among colleagues. They acknowledge the complexity of the teaching profession and provide structure for

teachers to improve their teaching by giving and receiving feedback. They encourage teachers to submit lesson plans and response journals and which will encourage conversation among staff and in turn will help teachers brainstorm innovative solutions to problems. Bambino states, " The work is *critical* because it challenges educators to improve their teaching practice and to bring about the changes that schools need, but the process is neither negative nor threatening. The work involves *friends* who share a mission, offer strong support, and nurture a community of learners" (p. 27).

6. Teachers systematically examining multiple sources of data to guide adjustments to instruction and assessment. This is actually already an important part of our school district's mission. Teachers look at standardized and local data, and we are in the process of encouraging teachers to utilize their own classroom data to drive instruction and assessment. This is a major paradigm shift for much of our staff. However, more and more research supports this approach.

7. Teachers reading and discussing researched-based practices and philosophies is one area that will be a challenge for me. I have begun to move in this direction by building a professional library in the middle school team rooms as well as the elementary library. At in-services we offer teachers articles to read and discuss about pertinent topics, and whenever a relevant seems to be of importance, I make copies for the entire staff. Perhaps I will try the after school book clubs again. The district purchased the books, which was an incentive. Whatever the method, this is essential to teacher growth.

8. Teachers reflecting in journals; this is one activity I have tried. It takes a great deal of persistence to keep up the practice but it is valuable information that is collected. Routman (2002) describes a school she had visited to help in the staff development process, "Most change that occurs in our schools is only surface level. This surface level is not surprising. How can teachers be able to understand the "why" of their practice when so much is piled onto their teaching? There was no time for the reflection that is vital for all meaningful and lasting change" (p. 35).

9. Teachers conducting classroom action research in small groups. The STAR groups mentioned earlier in the paper, are a prime example of what can happen when teachers work toward a common goal, in our case writing achievement. I envision two to four teachers who decide on an issue they all feel need improvement in their classrooms. In the beginning of the year, they met to discuss the strategies and lessons, supported by research that they will utilize during the school year. They develop a plan of data to collect, which will most likely be student work. At the end of the school year, they will meet again to analyze their findings and celebrate the success, as well as remedy the failures. This information can then be shared with the entire staff to use in their classes. This is so powerful as a means to initiate meaning and supported change in a school. What more effective data than that which comes form their own staff and students!! Mettetal and Cowen (2000) recommend, "Although a few adventurous teachers are willing to attempt classroom action research on their own, we find

that participation is much greater when teachers are given extensive support, and this is best done through a district-wide action research initiative" (p. 4).

10. Teachers working in lesson study groups (McTighe, 1999) is another collaborative technique. This idea follows our district's belief in the Understanding by Design philosophy that includes four elements of school culture – collegiality, continuous improvement, atmosphere, and inquiry and reflection. In the final interviews that I conducted, Lana expressed sentiments related to this when she said, "The topics were too broad for me and too far ahead of my third grade students." She would like to see a group of perhaps intermediate teachers working together. This would enable the ideas shared in lesson study groups to be more relevant to the age of the students they teach.

Scott Willis wrote about a conversation with James Stigler, a researcher and author of the now famous video component of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Stigler wrote about the implications of the TIMSS findings in his 1999 book, The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom (Free Press). In his article, Willis shared, " Today, people believe that professional development should be targeted and directly related to teachers' practice. It should be site-based and ling-term. It should be ongoing – part of a teacher's workweek, not something that is tacked on. And it should be curriculum-based, to the extent possible, so that it helps teachers help their students master the curriculum at a higher level"(p. 6). He offers three

things teachers need to expand their power in the classroom: 1) they need to learn how to analyze practice. They need to think about teaching and learning in a cause and effect way, 2) teachers need to be exposed to alternatives, and 3) teachers need judgment to know when to employ which method. Lesson studies can focus on collaboration among teachers to meet these goals. This is a shift from teaching in private to realizing how much a teacher could learn by letting the teaching be public and talking about it with colleagues.

This is one of the endeavors in which we are not currently involved. It requires teachers to act as "critical friends" when discussing and designing units of study. It,too, is a process where teams of reviewers give friendly, non-judgmental feedback on a unit. They may ask questions, praise the strengths, and offer suggestions for improvement of the unit all with the goal of what is best for student achievement. This process will certainly take a risk-taking group of teachers who can look beyond themselves for the good of the district and the students. This requires trust and community, both, which will need time to develop in our school culture. But can you imagine power and confidence a staff would have all the elements of collegiality were in place?

11. Teachers trusting one another and focusing on desired outcomes, although last on this list, are key to accomplishing many of the other initiatives.

This is my vision for the future and where I would like to see my small study move our district. These plans are daunting, but I believe they are the most effective means to produce meaningful dialogue among teachers and, in turn,

affect student achievement in writing. Routman sums it up when she says, "Ongoing, on-site professional development through reflective, self-guided, weekly conversations about teaching practice is a necessity for sustained growth and transformation for both students and teachers" (p. 35).

However, these are my visions, but what about the teachers'? From the responses in the interviews, several ideas emerged for a more effective type of support. Overall systemic change in the teachers' schedules was necessary to facilitate any meeting time, either before school with a breakfast club, or after school. They suggested that the support groups include teachers from the respective grade levels and buildings where trust and collegiality may already be in place. My role would be to coordinate the groups, and perhaps bring them together for sharing. I could also elicit from each of the groups any ideas to pass along in the monthly pamphlet on writing. These offerings are viable and worthy of consideration if I want this idea to continue next school year. Change takes time and patience, but in the end, success for students and stronger teachers will be the result.

Another solution could be "Friday Forums" as offered by Jill S. Hudson. She supports her plan with recent research that says, " Professional development is most effective when it is embedded in the teachers' practice" (Ball & Cohen, 1999). "More appropriate and effective professional development occurs when teachers are investigating and learning about their practice while in practice" (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998; Putnam & Borko, 1997; Stein,

Smith, & Silver, 1999). The usual way is release time, but that creates more work for the teachers, because they must plan for the day they will be gone. Some schools have also tries late arrivals or early dismissals, but this causes difficulties for parents. A new way is Friday Forums, without creating more work for teachers, taking time away from students' learning, or imposing a hardship on parents. During Friday Forums, held only 6-8 times a year, students attend assembly programs and a specialty class of their choice. The forums are centered on topics and community, non-teaching faculty, and parents supervise the classes. Everyone wins with this idea. Students have the opportunity to explore issues of interest to them, 'parents do not have to find day care', people share their talents and interests with the students', and teachers receive professional development with no strings attached. This sounded very much like the solution that Cathy offered during one of our discussions. There are logistical challenges, but with effort and desire, these challenges can be addressed.

However, in order for this to come to fruition, the district must make a commitment to find solutions and provide time during the school day. Teachers who participate in professional development are better prepared to provide appropriate learning activities for students, instill the idea of life-long learning in students as well as staff, and result in higher student achievement in writing – our district goal.

I began this story with a quote by Anne Lamott (1994) who in her book, Bird by Bird, says, "All good writers write terrible first drafts. This is how they

end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts" (p. 21-22). This could become a motto for our students, who would often rather write one and only one daft. Nagin adds, "We cannot build a nation of educated people who can communicate effectively without teachers and administrators who value, understand, and practice writing themselves" (p. 60).

Hubbard and Power (1999) expanded on that sentiment,

"That's why teachers write - not to transform the field, or to be famous, or to get a book published. We write to understand our classrooms, our students, ourselves. Wrestling with words on the page, we finally understand why our research and teaching matters, and what we need to carry away from one year into the next. We see our classrooms anew, in ways not possible without the intense reflection writing demands"(p. 183).

The story of my search for greater understanding of a topic important to me filled these numerous pages, but I write because it does matter to me.

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Appendix A:

Principal's Consent Form

Dear Mr.:

I am working on my Master's action research project for Moravian College. The study will be conducted from September 2002 until January 2003. The project will include forming a writing teachers support group to collaborate on strategies that can be used for instruction in our classrooms. The focus of the lessons will be determined by data collected from classroom student writing samples that will be scored using the PA domain-scoring guide. The support will meet once a month, beginning in September after the initial baseline writing sample is scored, to determine the areas of need and share ideas for lessons to target those areas. This idea of using data to determine instruction is part of our district's mission statement. The group will also use e-mails to offer additional ideas and support to the participants of the group. The purpose of the support group is to assist teachers in utilizing best practices to address the needs of our students.

I am asking for your permission to conduct this research in the school. I am asking the teachers to complete an initial and ending survey on working with a support group, e-mail members of the group offering ideas and support, allow me to observe a few of the determined lessons in order to analyze student response, participate in an individual interview, and collect reflections from the group written at our monthly meetings. The names of the group members will be kept confidential, by using pseudonyms, in the research paper that I must submit in the spring.

My hope is to create a strong group of teachers who rely on each other for guidance and support in a non-judgmental manner, and create a booklet of best writing practices to share with the staff in order to improve student-writing performance based on the needs of the students through the data collected. Names of the teachers who submit lessons and strategies for the booklet will only be used if permission is granted.

If you have any questions about this action research project please call Dr. Joseph Shosh at Moravian College, 610-861-1482, or e-mail at jshosh@aol.com.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Danielle Gilly

Name_____

Date_____

Signature_____

Appendix B:

Participant Permission Form

Dear

I am working on my Master's action research project for Moravian College. The study will be conducted from September 2002 until January 2003. The project will include forming a writing teachers support group to collaborate on strategies that can be used for instruction in our classrooms. The focus of the lessons will be determined by data collected from classroom student writing samples that will be scored using the PA domain-scoring guide. The support will meet once a month, beginning in September after the initial baseline writing sample is scored, to determine the areas of need and share ideas for lessons to target those areas. This idea of using data to determine instruction is part of our district's mission statement. The group will also use e-mails to offer additional ideas and support to the participants of the group. The purpose of the support group is to assist teachers in utilizing best practices to address the needs of our students.

I am asking for you to complete an initial and ending survey on working with a support group, e-mail members of the group offering ideas and support, allow me to observe a few of the determined lessons in order to analyze student response, participate in an individual interview, and collect reflections from the group written at our monthly meetings. The names of the group members will be kept confidential, by using pseudonyms, in the research paper that I must submit in the spring.

My hope is to create a strong group of teachers who rely on each other for guidance and support in a non-judgmental manner, and create a booklet of best writing practices to share with the staff in order to improve student-writing performance based on the needs of the students through the data collected. Names of the teachers who submit lessons and strategies for the booklet will only be used if permission is granted.

I will provide you with a copy of this permission form. If you have any questions about this action research project please call Dr. Joseph Shosh at Moravian College, 610-861-1482, or e-mail at jshosh@aol.com.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Danielle Gilly

Name_____

Date_____

Signature_____

Appendix C:

INITIAL TEACHER SUPPORT GROUP SURVEY

1. In what ways can working with a writing-teachers support group help you?

2. What types of writing instructional practices and activities do you currently utilize in your classroom?

3. What types of support do you hope to gain from this group of writing teachers?

4. How do you utilize the six-traits of good writing, as presented by Vicki Spandel and our Write Source materials, in your classroom?

Appendix D:

FINAL TEACHER SUPPORT GROUP SURVEY

1. In what ways did working with a writing-teachers support group help you?

2. What types of writing instructional practices and activities do you now use in your classroom as a result of working with the group?

3. What types of support did you gain from this group of writing teachers?

4. How do you now utilize the six-traits of good writing, as presented by Vicki Spandel and our Write Source materials, in your classroom as a result of the support group?

5. What new or different strategies did you learn from the support group?

Appendix E:

School Climate and its relationship to my study of teacher inquiry/support groups

Rate each statement 1(almost never), 3 (half the time), 5 (almost always)

1 3 5 1. We talk in concrete and précis terms about things we're trying in our teaching.

1 3 5 2. We have productive observations of one another.

1 3 5 3. We plan lessons and make materials together.

1 3 5 4. We teach each other things we know about teaching.

1 3 5 5. We all recognize that teaching is inherently difficult and ask for and give assistance for problems with students and teaching issues. We know we will get it without being judged.

1 3 5 6. Teachers and administrators encourage me and back me up when I try new things.

1 3 5 7. This is a curious school. We are always searching for new and improved ways to teach.

1 3 5 8. There is a close relationship in this school between job performance and recognition of that performance.

1 3 5 9. We offer comfort and help when needed and join in celebrations together.

1 3 5 10. Good teaching is taken seriously here. This shows up in serious attention to teacher evaluation and letting me know clearly how I stand in relation to the expectations of the district. I get prompt and useful feedback.

1 3 5 11. We are protected from unreasonable demands on our time and energy that interfere with contact time with students and instructional planning.

1 3 5 12. Meetings are worthwhile and productive.

1 3 5 13. Priorities for use of money and time show me that the development of staff is a top priority.

1 3 5 14. I feel trusted and encouraged to make instructional decisions on my own.. and my boss backs me up when I do.

1 3 5 15. I feel our decision-making processes are fair and legitimate.

1 3 5 16. I feel I am consulted about decisions to be made in this school and that I am listened to and can influence policy.

1 3 5 17. People speak honestly and respectfully to one another. We are not afraid to disagree and can do so without jeopardizing our relationships.

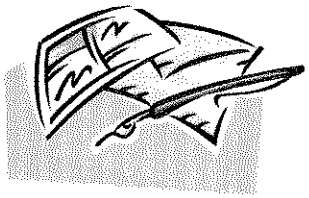
1 3 5 18. Conflicts between individuals are resolved quickly and intelligently.

1 3 5 19. The information flow keeps me informed about what's going on in the school.

1 3 5 20. We have annual events and celebrations to look forward to each year.

Professional Resources

Over thirty years ago when the National Writing Project was in its infancy, few resources were available to teachers. Today, the market offers a wealth of books and articles to support educators. One of the best is by Ralph Fletcher, What a Write Needs. Fletcher addresses the craft of writing– creating character, voice, leads, endings, and unforgettable language—to name some of the topics discussed in the book. He provides plenty of anecdotes, student samples, and an extensive book list., all written through his voice as a writing teacher. The Heinemann book is reader-friendly and offers helpful ideas for the classroom teacher.



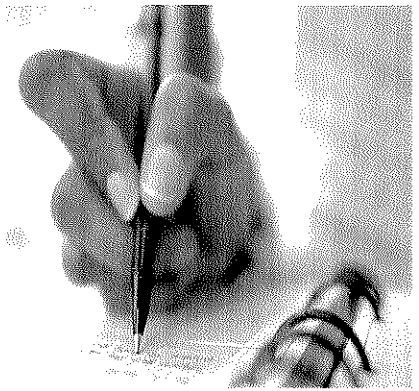
A Writer's Notebook

January 2003
Issue 1

Any ideas, questions, books or practices to share, send them to Danielle Gilly, via e-mail.

Saucon Valley School District

A Writer's Notebook



January 2003
Issue 1

Welcome

Welcome to "A Writer's Notebook", a monthly newsletter for all teachers of writing. Included in each issue will be strategies to use in your classroom, helpful tips from teachers, the best resources for professional reading, upcoming conferences and workshops, and many more features to help improve students' work.

The Influence of Writing on Reading

Research by Marie Clay on the Writing – Reading Interaction. Marie Clay observed that " writing plays a significant part in the early reading progress." (Clay,1975,p.70) She, along with Carol Chomsky ,documented children's emerging writing and noted that it contributed in a variety of ways to their understanding of print. Chomsky found evidence that children wrote before they are able to read.

A Strategy That Works

One of the best practices that I have read and reread in texts for writers of all ages is the use of a writer's notebook, not only for students, but teachers as well. As stated by Joanne Hindley in In The Company of Children,

"A writer's notebook can be many things: a place to make mistakes, to record overheard conversations, to experiment, to record beautiful language, to tell the truth, to record memories, to remember a word, to describe a picture, a person, or an image. A notebook is a tool to hold onto things. Students should view notebooks as a document of their lives."

Have students choose a special notebook and write in it everyday for 5-10 minutes. This will become a source of writing ideas for your students, and mini-lessons for you. Every week read a few and respond to the writer, looking for positives and helping with needs. Soon you and your students will value the thoughts written in the notebooks.

Questions and Answers:

Q. What are some ways to keep anecdotal records of students' progress in writer's workshop?

A. You need to decide what works best for you and your classroom, but here are a few ideas you might want to try:

1. A color-coded folder for each writing group with pages inside for conference notes, skills taught, improvements noted, writing topics, pieces completed, and other pertinent information. Thanks, Allison.
2. A status of the class grid with a code to record each child's progress in the writing process, for example: R-revising, D-drafting, etc.
3. A flip chart with a card for each student.
4. A binder for each student with all their pieces in order of completion that can be checked for mini-lessons and strengths. Thanks, Carol.
5. A conference notebook with daily notes.
6. A daily conference sign-up sheet to keep track of whom you have worked and who needs to be seen next, can also be helpful.

If anyone has other methods that have worked for them, please send them to me and I will include the ideas in the next issue. Happy Writing Danielle

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Professional Resources

Scaffolding Young Writers A Writers' Workshop Approach (2001) by Linda Dorn and Carla Soffos is an excellent book for first, second, and third grade teachers. It offers a chapter on designing productive mini-lessons, giving several examples, as well as suggestions of literature to support the lesson.

The authors organize the mini-lesson into four categories:

1. Organizational (What to do): Procedural knowledge for implementing writing workshop and its guidelines.
2. Strategies (How to do): Conceptual knowledge of the thinking process.
3. Skills (Specific what to do): Knowledge of grammar and punctuation rules.
4. Author's craft (How to write): Creative knowledge.

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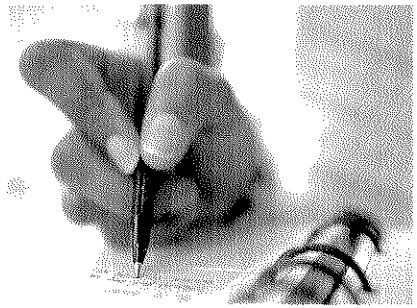
If you have any ideas, questions, books or practices to share, please send them to Danielle Gilly, via e-mail.

Saucon Valley School District

A Writer's Notebook



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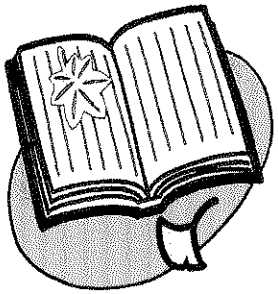
A Writer's Notebook

One of the traits of good writing that often causes both teachers and students difficulty is VOICE. Georgia Heard (2002) describes voice in this manner: "When I talk with students about voice, I describe it as the personality behind a writer's words. It's actually more than that-it's the heart, eyes, tongue, and hand of the writer. It's the writer's way of telling a story or a poem, the way that only that writer can tell it. Voice can also include the voices of the different people we are inside, or the characters that speak to us in our heads and stories."



Ralph Fletcher (1993) speaks of an 'inner writing voice" that everyone possesses. It is our job to help the writer develop that inner voice.

Voice is difficult to teach step-by-step. Voice is what develops over time as students' writing fluency increases. "Helping young writers find their inner voice starts with time – giving young writers the regular time they need. A five-minute journal write while the teacher takes lunch count, probably isn't enough," says Fletcher. "They need sustained time."

Both Heard and Fletcher offer several ideas and strategies to assist teachers in teaching voice.

1. Students should write every day. The only way to develop voice is to become comfortable with writing and letting the words flow without being self-conscious.

2. Students should write regularly about personal experiences and interests so that the words come from their hearts.

3. Encourage students to write letters to the newspaper or politicians about issues they are concerned about. Letter writing can help students come to know their own voice.

4. Voice is connected to a real audience. Create a classroom where writers have a wide, sympathetic audience for their writing — not just sharing sessions with their peers. Provide the opportunity to go public with their writing in other ways beyond the classroom: complaint letters, articles in the newspaper, contests, pen pal letters, or opinions about school issues.

Other techniques that work well are:

1. Ask your students to choose a piece of writing they have already worked on, an excerpt from their writer's notebook, or a poem, and experiment with different points of view. Changing the point of view can help students see their writing in a new way.

2. Ask students to write through a mask. This means taking on the persona or "mask" of another character, person, or even a form of nature.

3. If your students are writing memoir or personal narrative, ask them to write a personal monologue instead. This is a genre that strengthens writers' voices by helping them write with more feeling. The narrator in the piece is guided by his or her inner voice: how she feels; what he sees; what her questions are; and what he remembers.

Voice is more than passion and charm; it is central to the learning process. When students write with voice, they put an indelible stamp of their own personalities on the information—they make it their own.