

Snapshot #15

Teaching and Assessing Writing Skills: Lacomb Elementary School

Kathleen Cotton

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In a school where students like to write and assessments show that their writing is improving, it is likely that many validated effective schooling practices are in place. The document, *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1984), cites several effective practices characteristically found in connection with effective schoolwide writing programs. Major elements are listed below.

At the CLASSROOM level:

1.1 INSTRUCTION IS GUIDED BY A PREPLANNED CURRICULUM.

1.2 THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING.

1.5 LEARNING PROGRESS IS MONITORED CLOSELY.

1.12 INCENTIVE AND REWARDS FOR STUDENTS ARE USED TO PROMOTE EXCELLENCE

At the SCHOOL level:

2.1 EVERYONE EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING.

2.2 STRONG LEADERSHIP GUIDES THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM.

2.3 THE CURRICULUM IS BASED ON CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES.

2.6 LEARNING PROGRESS IS MONITORED CLOSELY.

2.8 THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITY INSTRUCTION.

2.9 INCENTIVES AND REWARDS ARE USED TO BUILD STRONG MOTIVATION.

2.11 TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS CONTINUALLY STRIVE TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS.

SITUATION

In the rural countryside approximately 40 miles southeast of Salem, Oregon is Lacombe Elementary School, the only school in the Lacombe School District. Lacombe's 274 students span kindergarten through eighth grade.

Over 99 percent white/non-Hispanic, the Lacombe student population comes mostly from middle class or lower middle class homes. The majority of community members work in timber-related industries or in metals industries in nearby Albany. There are also many dairy and tree farms in the area.

Eighteen percent of the Lacombe student body are eligible for special education services. There is a 20 percent annual transiency rate in the Lacombe district, and 27 percent of Lacombe's students receive free or reduced lunches.

CONTEXT

Since the fall of 1987, Lacombe has been involved in the Onward to Excellence (OTE) school improvement process. Developed and disseminated by NWREL, OTE involves schoolwide participation in a series of improvement activities, as guided by a school leadership team.

In the OTE process, staff members use profiles of student performance to determine the schoolwide goal(s) they wish to pursue and then develop a research-based prescription and implementation plan to reach the goal(s). As the plan is implemented, staff monitor improvement activities, make adjustments as needed, and evaluate progress at the end of each OTE cycle.

Compilation and review of their school profile during the 1987-88 school year led Lacombe staff members to select the improvement of student performance in writing as their schoolwide goal. At this same time, Lacombe also applied for and received a grant through the provisions of a state School Improvement and Professional Development program established by Oregon House Bill 2020. Written to support the school's planned OTE work, the 2020 grant has enabled Lacombe staff to pursue their writing improvement goal more intensively than would have been possible without these additional resources. Specifically, the 2020 funding has helped to support the development of the schoolwide writing curriculum, the development of a writing assessment instrument, and an array of professional development activities related to the writing process.

The implementation plan was drafted by June 1988 and refined when OTE leadership team members met during the following summer. In the fall of 1988 professional development activities began with four-hour credit classes in writing as a process and writing across the curriculum.* Staff also made use of consultant assistance to insure that the writing portion of Lacombe's language arts curriculum was congruent with research on effective practices.

Lacombe engaged the services of another consultant to help staff develop skills in assessing

student writing. They received training in a holistic scoring process, using student writing samples from fall 1988 to practice their skills and to amass baseline data on student writing performance in grades two through eight.

Throughout the year staff members also engaged in an array of individual professional development activities, including participation in the four-week Oregon Writing Project and workshops on topics such as cooperative learning in writing, whole language teaching and learning, publishing techniques, and writing assessment.

Staff development in support of the school's writing improvement goal also extended to noncertified staff. Funds made available through a local school-business partnership called Action Alliance for Excellence in Education (A2E2) enabled classified staff to receive training in several areas, including a three-hour writing-as-a-process workshop for educational assistants.

In addition to regular classroom writing activities, Lacomb staff and students have also engaged in a variety of other functions in support of the school's writing improvement program. In April 1989 a Young Authors' Fair featured an array of "stations" at which staff, parents, and community members could observe students illustrating and publishing "books," listen to them reading and telling stories, talk with a visiting author, and engage in some of the same kinds of writing activities that students pursue in their classrooms. Through the 2020 grant, Lacomb also played host to an Artist in Residence for a week and held several writing-related assemblies featuring guests who shared stories and poems and demonstrated maskmaking, bookbinding, and other skills.

Principal Eldon Wortman and the school leadership team have been careful to build incentives and rewards into the project. At an end-of-the-year banquet, staff members who had made major contributions to the writing project were recognized and given awards. In addition, the names of those staff members who serve on each year's school improvement leadership team have their names engraved on a publicly displayed plaque to recognize their efforts.

Assessment continues to be an essential feature of Lacomb's writing improvement project. A writing sample taken in the fall of 1989 was compared to a sample taken the previous spring. Using an eight-point holistic scoring instrument, staff determined that over two-thirds of Lacomb's students (68 percent) scored higher by one or more points in the spring than they did in the fall, 17 percent maintained the same scores, and 15 percent evidenced a drop in scores. In addition to these formal data, staff also point to improvements in student behavior and increases in staff collegiality since the project was launched.

Lacomb staff are understandably proud of the improvements that have taken place in their school and speak animatedly of plans for the future. Having been awarded another 2020 grant for 1989-91, staff will be working on refining the writing curriculum and assessment techniques and on extending the project's staff development component.

Efforts to expand the parent/community involvement aspect of the project are also in process. In the summer of 1989 a large group of parents and community members joined with staff and school board members to develop statements of mission and guiding beliefs. Other efforts to increase the involvement of community people, e.g., through having them serve as the readership for students' written products, are underway as well.

As called for by the OTE process, Lacomb staff will be reviewing their teaching and assessment

practices during 1989-90 and developing a new prescription. Additional training in writing as a process will be provided to staff. In the assessment component, staff will be utilizing more focused holistic scoring, with the intent of moving toward the use of analytical assessment techniques, which involve applying more exacting criteria to students' writing samples.

"It's exciting to have such strong focus to our efforts," says principal Eldon Wortman. "It's gratifying to see everyone working toward the same goal and then to see such positive results, including the spinoffs, such as behavioral improvements in classrooms."

Nancy Sommers, Lacombe counselor/administrative intern, outgoing leadership team chairperson and author of both 2020 grants and the A2E2 grant, speaks of the effects of the writing project on students. "The children in this school have learned to really like writing, and they get upset if writing time gets pre-empted." Sommers also says, "We on the staff are in the process of a paradigm change. We've moved away from the old method of teaching spelling, then grammar, then writing--to teaching writing as a process. In the future I feel that we'll be utilizing more of a whole language approach."

PRACTICE: TEACHING WRITING AS A PROCESS

GRADE 3

As in all the Lacombe classrooms observed, the walls of Kary King's third grade classroom displayed student written and artistic products, colorful posters, classroom rules, and seasonal decorations. Ms. King asked the students to share with the observer what they were currently working on in writing. "Interviews!" they chimed. Upon being called on, one girl said, "We're going to go to the staff members and ask them about their lives." "Why do we do interviews?" asked Ms. King, and the boy she called on answered, "To get personal background to write about, like where you live or used to live and what school you went to." "What do we do after the interviews?" Ms. King asked. Students described how they will write stories about Lacombe staff members based on what those staff members tell them in the interviews. "Using complete sentences," added one student. They then described the difference between biography and autobiography.

Ms. King's students engage in 40 minutes of writing each day. Topics are usually student selected. Ms. King holds conferences with the students as they are working on their stories and, in keeping with the writing-as-a-process approach, places very little emphasis on spelling and grammar until the story content is developed. She has the students participate in prewriting conferences with one another, although she notes that this is difficult with young children, because they get off task easily.

GRADE 2

Vicki Van Noy is a second grade teacher and one of the cadre of on-site experts in Lacombe's writing improvement project. She is the OTE leadership team chairperson in 1989-90.

Ms. Van Noy's students were drafting stories on subjects of their choice. The observer approached students individually, asking them what they were working on, whether they like writing, where they get their ideas, and related questions. Some responses: "I get my words out of my tutor's book to write my story (a handmade booklet of words the student's tutor helped him compile). Then I go up and talk about it with Ms. Van Noy." "I'm writing a Garfield story;

then I'll publish it and make it into a book." "It's easy [to get ideas]. You just think of them. Usually you just write about what you know."

Asked if the students always publish the stories they write, a boy answered, "Not always; sometimes you save them in your folder and keep them for ideas for another time when you're writing."

Throughout these exchanges, the students were very animated, often acting out events in their stories as they were telling them. Several students read stories they had written, often commenting on the illustrations they had included with their texts.

GRADE 4

Prewriting conferences were underway during the observer's visit to Sandy Van Speybrock's fourth grade classroom. Ms. Van Speybrock closely monitored students' work during this inherently noisy activity, keeping them on task.

"What's conferencing? Is it helpful? What do you do after the conference." Asked these questions by the observer, the fourth graders gave an array of responses indicating familiarity with this activity and skill in making use of it. For example, "You tell each other what you want to write about and help each other with ideas." "It helps you to know more things to write about." "Then you revise your story with your partner and then with your teacher and make it into a book or a scroll. I'm writing about a pair of fuzzy underwear." "When your partner gives you ideas, you can put them down and think about it, but you don't have to put [their ideas] in if you don't want to. But usually it helps."

This writing period ended with students reading their stories aloud to the whole class.

GRADES 7 AND 8

In Tadd Gestrin's combined seventh and eighth grade class, students were engaged in writing and holding content conferences with one another. During the observation time, students responded to questions about their essay topics, which activities in the writing process they found helpful, and whether they thought writing skills would be useful to them later in life. Some responses: "Conferencing's good; he'll tell me whether it sounds good or what needs to be fixed." "Sometimes you just get blocked and you can't think of anything. Then conferencing or brainstorming can help."

Although a couple of students indicated that they saw no need for writing skills in their adult lives, most seemed to feel the skills they were building in school would be useful to them in the future.

Toward the end of the writing period Mr. Gestrin called the students to the corner of the room, where they sat on the carpet for a sharing session. Students took turns explaining what their written work is about, read it aloud, and received input from other students.

Principal Eldon Wortman, counselor/administrative intern Nancy Sommers, and teacher Vicki Van Noy welcome inquiries from interested persons about Lacombe's writing program. They may be contacted at Lacombe Elementary School, 34110 E. Lacombe Drive, Lebanon, OR 97355, (503) 258-6489.

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly, or in part, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, under Contract Number 400-86-0006. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

February 1990