TEACHING EXPOSITORY WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF FIVE TEACHERS

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TEACHING EXPOSITORY WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF FIVE TEACHERS

A Thesis

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Abstract

of

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by

Sarah T. Sullivan

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine if and how expository writing was being taught in the second, third, fourth, and fifth grades at a small, northern California private school. To report on the findings, a case study analysis was done with the five teachers at this school to probe their teaching practices concerning writing instruction. Information came from the answers to the following questions about best practices in writing instruction:

1. Are teachers confident in their ability to teach writing and expect their students to succeed?

2. Do teachers create a positive atmosphere for writing where students are able to work together and provide feedback to each other?

3. Do students write for authentic audiences rather than always for the teacher?

4. Are teachers explicitly teaching writing strategies to their students?

5. Do teachers model writing?

6. Are teachers taking a multi-genre approach with their writing instruction?
7. Are students given time to write regularly, throughout the day, and across the curriculum?

Sources of Data

Information was obtained through research of the related literature including, educational journals and publications, websites, and the state of California standards for language arts. Case study information was gathered using three primary sources of data: teacher surveys, teacher interviews, and teacher observations.

Conclusions Reached

Results of the study indicated a need for professional development in the area of expository writing for teachers at this school site. The following five dominant themes that arose from the data are the focus of an educational plan for future professional development at this school:

- Teachers are unsure of what they are teaching in the area of expository writing.
- Teachers are unsure if students are capable of writing expository text.
- There is a lack of explicit writing instruction across genres.
- Teachers must model good writing for their students as a means to foster the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing.
- Increase student motivation to write expository text.

_______________________
Marcy Merrill, Ph.D., Committee Chair

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Date

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my daughter, Esther Ryan Sullivan.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Children must be able to find and use information. While narrative is the dominant genre being read and written in primary schools, there is an increasing need for children and adults to read and write expository texts on a regular basis. Teachers must help students develop into competent writers of expository text beginning in the primary grades.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine if and how expository writing was being taught in the second, third, fourth, and fifth grades at a small, northern California private school. To report on the findings, a case study analysis was done with the five teachers at this school to probe their teaching practices concerning writing instruction. Information came from the answers to the following questions about best practices in writing instruction:

1. Are teachers confident in their ability to teach writing, and do they expect their students to succeed?

2. Do teachers create a positive atmosphere for writing in which students are able to work together and provide feedback to each other?

3. Do students write for authentic audiences rather than solely for the teacher?

4. Are teachers explicitly teaching writing strategies to their students?

5. Do teachers model writing?

6. Are teachers taking a multi-genre approach with their writing instruction?
7. Are students given time to write regularly, throughout the day, and across the curriculum?

Significance of the Study

The teaching of expository writing is an important area of research in the field of literacy. Research has shown that teachers are having students in the primary grades read and write predominantly narrative texts (Christie, 1987; Duke, 2000; Read, 2005) or are using the entire “literacy block” to focus solely on reading (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007). At the same time, when these children grow up, they will be expected to read, write, and understand expository text on a daily basis. A student cannot be expected to write informational text unless he or she has been instructed in how to do so.

Limitations

This case study examined the teaching practices of teachers at a small private school. The study was limited to five teachers who participated in a survey, an interview, and two observations each. If teachers were dishonest when completing surveys or answering interview questions, data may be skewed. It is possible that teachers’ behavior changed because they were being observed, despite the fact that they were in their own classroom setting. Another limitation is that the information gained from this case study may not be transferable to another school setting. Finally, because data was collected using qualitative methods, it is possible that the researcher’s bias may have influenced observation results.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used in this case study and are defined as follows:
Case study: Qualitative research methodology that emphasizes detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships.

Expository text: Non-fiction text written to inform or explain. “When writers are trying to inform or explain, their own personality, reflections, and questioning take a back seat to the subject matter” (Bean, Chappell, & Gillam, 2004, p. 22).

Expository text structure: The patterns used by authors to present information for specific purposes; for example, cause/effect and compare/contrast.

Genres: In the instance of written language, genres are differentiated and identifiable written text types (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007).

Narrative text: Writing that recounts events or tells a story, with the purpose to entertain.

Qualitative research: An interpretive methodology that investigates how particular people in particular social contexts interpret or make sense of the everyday.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

This study contains a total of five chapters. The subsequent chapters in this study are Chapter 2, which offers a theoretical framework consisting of a review of recent related literature. Chapter 3 will present demographic information about the participating teachers and address the methodology used for the study. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the
data and methodology used in the study. Chapter 5 includes a summary, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This study examines the teaching practices of teachers in grades two through five, particularly in the area of expository writing. The scope of skills required for effective writing instruction in the classroom can be daunting. These skills include the mechanics of grammar and punctuation, usage, developing a voice and a feel for the audience, as well as mastering the distinctions between different genres of writing. Research claims in order for students to be fully functioning literate members of our society, they will need to be able to both read and write informational texts critically (Duke, 2000). Many educators believe writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Rather than treating writing as a separate subject, these educators see it as fundamental to teaching all subjects (Nagin, 2006). This study reviewed the literature about writing, genre, expository writing, and the link between reading and writing. It also reviewed the best practices for teaching expository writing.

Writing

While being a proficient writer is an important academic skill, it appears to be even more important when students graduate and become members of working society. The National Commission on Writing (NCW) responded to a call from prominent business leaders, university presidents, and policymakers by calling for a “Writing Revolution” in public schools (NCW, 2003). NCW Commission Chair Magrath says writing must be a focus in elementary school, and that writing weaknesses of incoming
college students is costing up to a billion dollars a year for remedial training (NCW, 2003). Business leaders claim that they, too, are spending billions of dollars a year to retrain employees because of poor writing skills (NCW, 2003).

State Standards

The state of California is attempting to address this “writing revolution” through the California content standards. The standards were designed as a framework for teachers to meet the curriculum and assessment needs of their students. The content standards encourage the highest achievement of every student, by defining the knowledge, concepts, and skills that students should acquire at each grade level (http://www/cde.ca.gov). Standards for writing are included in the Reading/Language Arts framework. The framework focuses on writing, speaking, listening, and written and oral English language conventions for all learners, across all grade levels. The following are the writing applications that pertain to expository writing for grades two through five, located in the California standards by the California Department of Education.

Some examples of writing standards for elementary grades follow. Second graders are expected to write a friendly letter complete with the date, salutation, body, closing, and signature. Third graders are assessed through written descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences. They also write personal and formal letters, thank-you notes, and invitations. Fourth graders are expected to write responses to literature, information reports, as well as summaries that contain the main ideas of a reading selection and the most significant details. Fifth graders need to write responses to literature, research
reports, and persuasive letters or compositions. Interestingly, all students at every grade level write narratives.

After reviewing these standards, it appears students are expected to increase their writing of expository text with each grade level. At the same time, the amount of expository writing in the standards is minimal. For example, if learning how to write a friendly letter is the only type of expository writing taught in second grade, many text structures are being left out of that year’s writing curriculum. It does appear that narrative is the focus of California Writing Standards in the early primary grades.

*The Writing Process*

The process approach to writing, which contains five steps that a writer goes through in order to produce successful writing includes: prewriting, writing, revising, editing, and publishing. This approach emphasizes extensive prewriting activities, multiple drafts, sharing of work with partners or small groups, and careful attention to writing (Applebee & Langer, 2009). The writing process allows students the opportunity to take ownership of their work and grow through the stages of writing (Marchison & Alber, 2001). During these stages, students can work collaboratively to assist each other with writing, revising, editing, and illustrating. As stated by Davenport and Eckberg (2001), when students work collaboratively on the writing process, they are more likely to take risks while learning to work together to complete the tasks and receive feedback from peers. The focus of process-oriented writing instruction is to stimulate students to think about their writing and reflect on their ideas. Process approaches to writing instruction in primary-grade classrooms have become widespread due to the influences of
Graves (1983), Calkins (1986), Avery (1993), and others (as cited in Read, 2005). A huge criticism about the process approach is that it focuses on narrative story, leaving little time and focus on other genres. Boscolo (2008) claims genres were basically neglected by the process approach, more interested in making students express their voices in composition than learn text structures.

Link Between Reading and Writing

Reading and writing often have separate curricula, instructional materials, and assessments, despite the relations that may exist between these two areas of instruction (Fitzerald & Shanahan, 2000). It is generally agreed in the research that there is a reciprocal relationship between skills in reading and skills in writing. There is also a relationship between the kinds of texts children are exposed to and the kind of writing they choose to do. In reviewing the research about the relationship between various language skills, Applebee (1977) found there is strong evidence that reading and writing skills are closely related. Shanahan and Lomax (1988) found an interactive model of the reading/writing relationship to be superior to either a writing-to-read or reading-to-write model.

While most theorists emphasize the similarities, there are a few who would point out the differences. Langer (1986) has noted that both reading and writing are purposeful activities that are used to conceptualize the experience of the individual. She stresses, however, that there are essential differences between the two processes.

While it is sensible to conclude that reading and writing are deeply related activities of language and thought and share a common cognitive core, surely it is equally sensible to note that reading and writing are also very different activities; from early on, they are used in different ways for
different purposes. And because they serve different purposes in people’s lives, they cannot be treated primarily as similar language activities. Their essential differences must also be understood. (Langer, 1986, p. 1)

Langer (1986) cautions that while reading and writing are similar, they should not be grouped together. According to Langer, educators must understand the differences between these two activities in order to teach them well. Similarly, research by Shanahan and Lomax (1988) suggested that teaching reading is not sufficient to teach writing, and that teaching writing is not sufficient to teach reading.

In contrast, many other theorists stress that reading and writing are similar and interrelated processes. There is a great deal of research documenting children’s early experience with the narrative genre through storytelling such as myths, legends, and fables (Christie, 1987). One of the ways children learn is through imitation, both consciously and unconsciously. If a story or even a phrase within a story makes a lasting impression on a child, it is quite possible that the child would be able to internalize elements of that story or phrase and later reproduce those elements in his or her own writing. In general, many children arrive at elementary school with background knowledge and experience with the narrative genre. Using this prior knowledge in the narrative genre, students are able to model this form in their writing. If students are capable of modeling narrative writing because of prior experience listening to and reading narrative text, students should be able to do this with expository text as well. Meyer and Freedle (1984) support this view that familiarity with expository reading will help students realize how information is organized, apply this organization to their own writing, and imitate the structures of expository text.
One research study examined how primary-aged children often integrate their reading and writing experiences. In work done by Dahl and Freppon (1995), inner-city first grade children used their favorite books to help develop themes, character ideas, and story structures in their writing. These first graders also used these storybooks to assist with spelling and language choices. While narrative texts are plentiful, research has found the use of expository texts in the elementary classroom to be very rare. Duke (2000) observed 20 first-grade classrooms in 10 different school districts to see how informational texts are used in young children’s classrooms. Her research concluded that only an average of 3.6 minutes a day were devoted to nonfiction reading. Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) identified a similar lack of informational reading in the primary school, noting that only approximately 6% of reading time was informational content. This obvious gap in expository text use in classrooms is a concern because most researchers agree that students should be in classrooms that permit access to a wide array of high quality information books (Saul & Dieckman, 2005). By broadening children’s exposure to expository text types, children will develop the ability to read such texts as writers, and begin to search for ideas they can use in their own writing (Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997).

While it is still necessary to provide separate instruction in both reading and writing, combining them can support critical thinking. As evidenced by research, writing about a text, for example, leads to different types of rethinking than rereading alone provides (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). A case can certainly be made to support a reciprocal relationship between the books that children are reading and the writing that
they create. Based on this assertion, students who see, hear, and read informational texts on a regular basis are more likely to be able to write informational text themselves. Students are positively influenced by informational text experiences and it is these experiences that lead to development in the informational genre. Informational writing is an area of difficulty for young writers. It is crucial that students are exposed to and taught common informational text structures before they can be expected to produce them independently. Research by Purcell-Gates et al. (2007) entertains the hypothesis that explicit explanation of genre purpose plus much practice in reading and writing those genres constitutes instruction that facilitates growth.

Genre

When looking at written language, genres are differentiated and identifiable written text types (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). A child’s understanding and ability to use a variety of genre styles can enhance their ability to be successful in a schooling environment, particularly in the area of reading comprehension (Saul & Dieckman, 2005). This literature review focuses on the two genres, narrative and expository. Narrative writing recounts events or tells a story. The purpose of narrative writing is to entertain. Derewianka (1990) asserted that the narrative contains the following three elements: orientation, complication, and resolution. The orientation starts at the beginning of the story, where the writer creates an image or world where the story can take place. During the initial stage the characters are introduced, along with their various personalities and their relationship to one another. Characters and setting, coupled with the atmosphere, draws the reader into the story. Due to the series of events, the story
begins to take on a complication or problem. This complication involves the main
characters and keeps them from attaining their goals. A narrative has a resolution that
solves the problems hindering the main character or characters.

Expository Writing

Unlike narrative writing, the intent of expository writing is to inform or explain.
In this genre the writer’s own personality, reflections, and questioning takes a back seat
to the subject matter (Bean et al., 2004). One common characteristic of expository texts is
that they use text structures. Research has shown that when teachers stress the presence
and function of text structures, students read strategically in order to gain information
(Saul & Dieckman, 2005).

Moss et al. (1997) make a case that as students grow up in this “Information
Age,” being literate and able to access a variety of texts will be critical to their success.
Examples of uses of expository writing are: letters, newsletters, instructions, guidebooks,
newspaper articles, magazine articles, manuals, pamphlets, reports, and research papers.

Research has shown that narrative text has been the predominant genre in
elementary classrooms in the United States. Because of this research, teachers are more
aware of the need to provide students with more experience reading and writing
expository text. More research in how to teach expository writing would help move this
notion into classrooms more often.

Expository Gap

The “expository gap” is a phenomenon where students reach fourth grade and
experience a decline in their reading and writing achievement, which may not have been
the case before this grade level. Also referred to as the “fourth grade slump,” this phenomenon has often been explained by the abrupt shift to more difficult content area reading in this grade level. One hypothesis for this decline is the lack of reading and writing of expository text in earlier grades (Yopp, 2008). Moss et al. (1997) summarized two theories that attempt to explain why children have historically struggled with expository text. One is that there is a short supply of informational texts, and the other is that there is little exposure to such text. It is asserted that when children expand their knowledge of expository text, they will improve their performance with expository text. Many scholars have suggested that providing young children with more informational text experiences in the primary grades may help to ease the difficulties that many students are having in the middle years of school (Caswell & Duke, 1998).

In order to decrease the expository gap that is occurring in the upper elementary grades, it is important to prepare students to be successful in this genre early in their academic years. Expository reading and writing should be included in childhood classrooms because it exposes children to specialized vocabulary and supports the acquisition of background knowledge (Duke, Bennett-Armstead, & Roberts, 2003). Students can learn about the world from informational text, and knowledge is essential to comprehension. Informational books are excellent sources of information about the world and can contribute greatly to children’s storehouse of knowledge (Yopp, 2008). Read (2005) supports giving primary students opportunities to write informational text and believes young students are fully capable of dealing with the complex problems that occur when reading and writing informational texts. Based on the research cited,
providing instruction in expository text will lay the foundation for students’ future reading and writing success in the upper elementary grades.

Best Practices for Teaching Expository Writing

Many teachers do not feel prepared to teach writing as an integrated skill with other subject matters (Nagin, 2006). In order to address the needs of teachers, many researchers have constructed guidelines for effective writing instruction. This literature review provides researched best practices for teaching expository writing. It is important that teachers are confident in their ability to teach in order to expect their students to succeed in learning. Ultimately, it will be the quality of the instructional practices that improves students’ understanding (Soalt, 2005). Therefore, the following topics are best practices for teaching expository writing, evidenced by researchers in the field of literacy.

**Positive Atmosphere**

Research has indicated that a positive atmosphere for writing where students are able to work together and provide peer feedback leads to improved writing for students. Teachers have long encouraged imaginative writing in the classroom using the process approach. In order to provide this environment, the writing classroom must be a structured, predictable room in which children can learn to make decisions and develop their own initiative (Graves, 1985). As students work through the stages of the writing process, it is vital that they feel confident and safe enough to take risks in their writing. Read (2005) supports giving primary students opportunities to write informational text as well as giving students opportunity to write collaboratively.
Time to Write

Students must have time to write regularly, throughout the day, and across the curriculum. According to research by Graves (1985), students need at least thirty minutes per day to write. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) found that, ideally, students should have the opportunity to write five days a week for at least one hour a day. Based on this research, while five days is ideal, four days seems to be an accepted and instructive use of time spent on writing in the classroom.

Research also shows writing plays a huge role in improving student learning across subjects as well (Manzo, 2008). Nagin (2006) says writing is not a subject that can be learned in a semester or a year, or even a decade. He says writing skills change and expand in difficulty throughout a student’s school career. Therefore, teaching writing simultaneously with other subjects is logical and can offset the time element in learning to become a sophisticated writer. Classrooms that use writing strategies across content areas, typically include journals for every subject: reading, grammar, writing, science, social studies and art (Nagin, 2006). In math journals, students may explain concepts that reflect on what they have learned, or they may write explanations of solutions to problems, or comparing and contrasting different mathematical concepts. Science journals can be used for students to make predictions, write observations and conclusions, or create an entry from a scientist’s viewpoint. Kolb’s experiential learning model supports the suggestion that science and writing, both based in experience and process, are natural partners in learning (Kolb, 1984). Specifically, Kolb’s paradigm suggests four components that are critical to experiential learning: concrete experience, reflective
observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. It is in the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization components that writing and science interweave. The act of putting thoughts down on paper helps students sort and clarify their ideas, and in responding to authentic questions, learners gain knowledge and strengthen their writing skills. In social studies, students may conduct family interviews, or write biographies, news articles, and journals in the voices of real people or historical figures that they are studying.

These practices suggest that writing across content areas can be used in two ways. First, they can be used as a means to teach the student to master distinct forms and conventions of writing as practiced in diverse subject areas. Second, they may be a means for the student to learn and retain content through more informal kinds of writing, such as journals or learning logs (Nagin, 2006). Considering these two ways to use writing across the curriculum practices, teachers are encouraged to bring writing into the content areas in order to improve student writing as well as content learning.

*Explicit Instruction in Writing Strategies*

According to research, expository writing is not being explicitly taught in the majority of classrooms throughout the United States, especially below grade three. Having students write in their journals is not sufficient to prepare them for the variety of writing tasks they are expected to master. Also, free-writing and grammar exercises alone are not enough to effectively improve students’ writing performance. According to research, when students do not know how to structure information, new knowledge tends to become fragmented and difficult to recall (Rosenshine, 1995). Cox, Shanahan, and
Tinzmann (1991) more specifically state that simple exposure to expository text without explicit instruction about the properties of the text will not likely result in increased skill in reading or writing exposition.

Based on this research, children need to be explicitly taught how to access expository text as well as how to write it. To achieve this purpose, teachers can explicitly teach students how to organize new material using text structures. Since there are many types or forms expository text can take, there are also many different ways to organize information. Since research shows that students are often under-exposed to content-area or informational text structures, it seems critical to provide students with an organizational tool aligned to each type of text in order to make text more accessible (Taylor & Samuels, 1983). The graphic organizers act as tools to organize information and are helpful in the prewriting stage of expository writing.

**Authentic Writing Experiences**

Research about the roles of authentic experience and explicit teaching has indicated a relationship between degree of authenticity of classroom literacy activities and student growth on several outcomes (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). Students in classrooms with more authentic reading and writing of science informational and procedural texts grow at a faster rate than those with less authenticity. Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, and Tower (2006) stress an authentic literacy approach when teaching reading and writing across genres and subject areas. These researchers operationally define this literary approach as the following:

We conceptualize authentic literacy activities in the classroom as those that replicate or reflect reading and writing activities that occur in
the lives of people outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose. Each authentic literacy activity has a writer and a reader—a writer who is writing to a real reader and a reader who is reading what the writer wrote (p. 346).

This approach encourages writing for real purposes and real audiences. Authentic writing is meant to be similar to writing which occurs in everyday life, and is relevant and useful to the writer. Whitin’s study (2007) of Emergent Literacy and Scientific Inquiry is another example of students who used their expository writing to take social action. In this kindergarten classroom a bird observation station led to participation in the project, empowered the children as contributing scientists to ecological causes, and gave them experience in recording and interpreting numerical information.

**Teacher Models Expository Writing**

Derewianka (1990) asserts if children are to write in a particular genre, they first need to become familiar with its purpose and features through immersion in the genre and by exploring sample texts. One way to model expository writing in the primary grades is to read expository texts aloud to the class. Often the text in expository books can be too difficult for some children to read by themselves, especially in the early primary grades. However, the content of the texts are still appropriate to be taught in the primary classroom. In addition to learning about the content, students can be taught about informational text structure and the comprehension strategies that are used to understand this informational text. After reading aloud an expository text, the teacher and the class can do activities to better understand the content and structure of what the students listened to and looked at. Derewianka (1990) agrees that composing a text, which is
similar to the one that was read aloud, is an excellent whole class activity. Hoyt (2002) supports the reading aloud of informational texts in the primary classroom for the following reasons:

- Reading aloud stretches and challenges the listening comprehension of students to real life issues that are outside of their experience.

- Students who see, hear, and read informational texts on a regular basis are more likely to be able to write informational text themselves.

- Reading aloud exposes children to the rich language of books, including complex language structures and sophisticated vocabulary.

Read (2005) studied informational writing processes with 24 first and second graders over the course of a month. She began her instruction with whole-class modeling. One example of an expository text that she read aloud was about praying mantises. After reading aloud a page or two, Read would ask students what they had learned so far and write down their responses. After they finished reading and listening to the book the class would reread the notes. Then, through shared writing, the teacher modeled composing and revising the text. Read (2005) concluded at the end of her study that, given appropriate instruction in the skills of writing, young students are fully capable of dealing with the complex problems that occur with reading and writing informational texts. This taught teachers that it is worthwhile to not only include expository books in the classroom, but to read them aloud, and model them for student writing.
A Multi-Genre Approach to Writing Instruction is Beneficial to Students

Research suggests that increased exposure to a particular genre is linked to increased genre knowledge. If a student is familiar with a genre, he or she is able to access that writing schema that has already been stored in long-term memory. Duke (2000) agrees that one learns how to read or write a genre through experience with that particular genre; experience with other genres may be helpful but will not be sufficient. In other words, experience reading and writing narrative stories may be beneficial, but will not render someone able to read or write expository texts. Therefore, explicit instruction and exposure to narrative text is not sufficient in teaching a student to write expository text.

Summary

This review of literature has focused on the need to teach expository writing in the primary grades. Experts say popular culture and the economies of the Western World depend on writing skills today in many ways hard to imagine, even a few generations ago. There is not a movie, advertising jingle, magazine, political campaign, newspaper, theatrical production, hit record, comic book, or instructional manual that does not begin with writers (Nagin, 2006). Although only a few thousand adults earn their living as full-time writers, many working Americans would not be able to hold their positions if they were not excellent writers. More than 90% of mid-career level professionals cited the “need to write effectively” as a skill “of great importance” in their day-to-day work (Light, 2001).
This review of literature has also explored the current research that has investigated the link between reading and writing and the best practices for teaching expository writing. It is important to note that children do not become great writers on their own, but instead need teachers to model the various genres so that eventually, they can become increasingly more independent. Scholars have pointed out that informational texts can play an important role in motivating children to read and write in the first place. Some young children find a way into literacy through informational texts that they do not find through narrative and other forms of text. Informational texts can capitalize on children’s interests and curiosities, and provide opportunities for children to apply and further develop areas of expertise in the area of expository writing (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007).
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this case study was to identify ways in which teachers teach children how to write expository text. In order to explore expository writing instruction, surveys were administered to a small group of teachers about their current writing practices. In addition, the five teachers were interviewed individually. Also, each teacher was observed two times during a writing lesson. Each of these methods led to the development of their case studies. Students in grades two through five were given a group survey about writing that consisted of the following three questions:

- Are you able to explain expository writing?
- How many of you do this type of writing in school?
- If you got to choose, how many of you would choose this type of writing?

This chapter will present demographic information about each of the five teachers who volunteered to participate in this research, an explanation of the methodology used to gather information about the teachers’ writing practices, and a description of how to analyze this information.

Demographic Information

The participants in the case study were five teachers from a small private school, approximately 30 miles east of Sacramento, California. The school bases its curriculum on the developmental theories of Piaget, Gardner, and Hirsch’s multiple intelligences. The school is in its eighth year of existence and is currently serving 106 students in kindergarten through grade 8.
The cost of yearly tuition to attend this school is approximately $7,000 per year. The student population is 95% Caucasian and 100% of the students speak English as their first language. According to the principal, the majority of students who attend this private school can be described as belonging to middle to upper class families. Students that attend this school on full to partial scholarships make up approximately 4% of the student population.

Subjects

Each of the five teachers is Caucasian and possesses a multiple subject teaching credential. Four out of five of the teachers are female and their ages range from 29 to 51. The teachers’ range of experience spans from a few months to 14 years, though the majority of the teachers have only taught for less than 2 years in general. Each teacher participated in the study voluntarily and all names have been changed in order to guarantee complete confidentiality.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Credential</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Grade Teaching Currently and For How Long</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Arbuckle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2 for 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Benton</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3 (Adult Education)</td>
<td>2 for 4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Catz</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1 1/2</td>
<td>3 for 1 ½ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Dixon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4 for 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Ellie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3 1/2</td>
<td>5 for 3 ½ years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A teacher survey containing 2 written responses and 12 items that could be answered either yes or no was distributed to teachers in grades two through five during the last week of November. The survey was designed to solicit information about the teachers’ practices and attitudes towards the instruction of writing.

Upon receiving the completed surveys, data was collected and analyzed. Responses to each question were tallied and counted. This information was then used to develop questions for teacher interviews. The teacher survey is located in Appendix A.

Teacher Interviews

Each teacher was interviewed separately in his or her classroom during the first week of December. Three teachers were interviewed after school and two were interviewed during a prep time, while school was in session. During each interview a total of 10 questions were asked. The researcher asked a question and the teacher responded. Questions were designed to be open-ended, soliciting responses that could not be answered with a yes or no. I would ask a question and type what the teacher said onto my laptop. When the teacher was done speaking, I would read back his or her response and ask if they would like to add or change anything that they said.

Christie (1987) argued that many teachers are unwilling to teach a variety of genres because they have trouble identifying them themselves. Donovan and Smolkin (2006) also concluded that teacher knowledge of genre is of great importance when considering how best to support children’s growing control of genres for reading and writing. In response to this research, the first interview question asked teachers to please define expository writing.
Teachers were also asked what types of writing assignments they give and if they assign writing during content area subjects. These questions are in response to research by Pressley et al. (1996). In their survey of the instructional practices of primary teachers, researchers reported that these teachers’ students wrote mostly stories, responses to reading, and journal entries. Daniels (1990) has also said the writing curriculum experienced by many American students is essentially all story, story, story, until the dreaded term paper.

Questions five and seven asked what a writing lesson would look like, and whether they ever use expository books to model writing. Research clearly indicates the value and importance of linking reading and writing experiences in the classroom. When children or adults write about what they have read, engagement with text is enhanced, recall of key ideas improves, and thinking about text deepens (Tierney & Shanahan, 1996). As Duke and her colleagues argue, the most obvious benefit of increased exposure to informational text in the early grades is that it makes children better readers and writers of informational text (Duke et al., 2006).

Two questions asked the teachers about what time they teach writing and when they would be available to be observed teaching a writing lesson. Finally, teachers were asked how their students feel about expository writing and opinions on professional development. Interview questions can be found in Appendix B and an analysis of teachers’ responses are located in Chapter 4.
Classroom Observations

Each teacher was observed teaching two writing lessons during the months of December and January. Each observation lasted between 10 and 20 minutes. During the first round of observations, I told each teacher what day and time I would be stopping in to observe him or her teaching writing. After observing each teacher once, I decided to observe a second writing lesson at a time that was not scheduled. Without a scheduled appointment I was able to observe whether each teacher was teaching writing during his or her scheduled time and in what ways. The non-scheduled observation time also provided me with a more authentic experience and a less anxiety-laden one for the teachers.

Student Survey

To see if students’ opinions about expository writing matched the answers given by their teachers, I administered a survey of three questions to four classes. Each teacher was asked to leave the room while students were being given the survey. In order to ensure that no students felt isolated, the students responded by simply raising their hand in order to answer the questions. Question one asked, “If you are able to explain what expository writing is please raise your hand.” This question is in response to research that claims the average American school child is able to write chronological narratives of fiction or personal experience, but is far less fluent and experienced with expository writing (Moss et al., 1997). After recording the number of hands that were raised I gave students this definition of expository writing: a type of writing where the purpose is to inform, explain, or describe something (Bean et al., 2004). The second question asked,
“Now that I’ve told you what expository writing means, how many of you do this in school?” This question is in response to research claiming personal narrative is what children are encouraged to do most often in the classroom (Read, 2005). Question three asked, “If you got to choose, how many of you would choose this type of writing?” Research suggests that self-efficacy beliefs are linked to motivation and interest in writing (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). An analysis of students’ responses can be found in Chapter 5.

Collection of Data

In order to gather a wide variety of evidence, information was collected from surveys, interviews, and observations. In order to gain a complete picture of the expository writing that is being taught in grades two through five at this particular school site, data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative measures to yield a description of teachers’ beliefs and practices.

Why Case Study

The approach that I have taken to complete this qualitative research will be presented using case study methodology. Case study methodology emphasizes a detailed contextual analysis of personal experience and meaning. To gather rich data in this small school setting, each teacher agreed to participate. Therefore, to use case study methodology, a narrative account of the expository writing program in grades two through five at my school can be described.
Analysis of Data

With the surveys, responses were tallied into two categories, yes or no. These results were then used to develop interview questions. From the 10 interview questions, responses were categorized and patterns were identified. To make sense of the findings, categories were compared with best practices in writing instruction. In comparing best effective practices, these seven emerged from the research:

- Confidence; teachers believe in themselves and expect their students to succeed in learning (Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz, & Slate, 2000)
- Creating a positive atmosphere for writing where students are able to work together and provide peer feedback (Read, 2005)
- Students write for authentic audiences rather than always for the teacher (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007)
- Effective teachers explicitly teach writing strategies (Rosenshine, 1995)
- Teacher models writing (Read, 2005)
- Multi-genre approach (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006)
- Students should have time to write regularly, throughout the day, and across the curriculum (Graves, 1985; Nagin, 2006)

Observations were made to triangulate the responses and to see if best practices were being implemented in the classrooms. Observation information was transcribed. These observations were used to triangulate teachers’ interview responses and were highlighted as descriptive information to develop each case study. Each instrument helped illuminate the case studies to show a hierarchy of sorts. As teachers demonstrated their knowledge of writing instruction and practices these were deemed research based.
Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodology and subjects, including procedures, instruments, data collection, and analysis used in this case study. The subjects are five elementary school teachers who work in a small private school that emphasizes developmental learning through multiple intelligences. The instruments used to collect data for this case study were survey, interview, and observation. Due to the nature of case study research, quantitative and qualitative analysis was used to identify the ways in which expository text is being taught at this school site. The following chapter will report the ensuing results of this analysis.
Chapter 4
DISCUSSION

This chapter includes an analysis of the data and methodology used in this case study. First, quantitative data from the survey results is presented. Next, qualitative data from the interviews is grouped by common themes and discussed. Also, the best practices in writing instruction that were present and absent from classroom observations are shared. The following chapter includes a discussion and proposal of a plan for professional development focusing in the area of expository writing.

Survey Results

The results of the survey, which were completed by the five teachers participating in the case study, were used to guide the researcher in the creation of interview questions. The survey data was also used to make comparisons between teachers’ responses and best practices in writing instruction.

According to survey data, all of the teachers in this study claim to teach writing to their students. Teachers also say their students write on a daily basis in every second through fifth grade classroom. Although writing is happening daily, 60% of teachers report teaching students to write using many different genres and 40% of teachers report teaching expository writing in their classroom.

Similar to teaching writing, confidence to teach writing also declines as writing becomes more specialized. While 80% of the teachers in this study are knowledgeable about what writer’s workshop is, only 60% of teachers are confident in their ability to
teach the writing process/writer’s workshop. According to survey results from this case study, 40% of teachers said they were confident in their ability to teach expository writing.

When asked about professional development, 60% of the teachers reported having taken a class focusing on teaching writing throughout their career. One teacher had professional development in teaching expository writing.

It is interesting to note that while the majority of teachers in the study believe expository writing is an important skill to teach, only 40% of the teachers reported teaching this genre. Two out of five teachers believe their students begin the school year with prior knowledge and experience with expository writing. The following chart shows responses to all survey questions asked.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I teach writing to my students.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My students write on a daily basis in my class.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I teach my students to write using many different genres.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have taken a class focusing on teaching writing in my career.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident in my ability to teach writing.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am knowledgeable about what writer’s workshop is.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident in my ability to teach the writing process/writer’s workshop.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expository writing is an important skill for the students I teach.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I teach expository writing in my classroom.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My students begin the school year with prior knowledge and experience with expository writing.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had professional development in teaching expository writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident in my ability to teach expository writing.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Results

The interviews were held one week after completed surveys were submitted. The purpose of the interviews was to collect more data about teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and teaching practices about writing. Teachers also were asked about suggestions for professional development in expository writing.

Interview question one asked each teacher to define expository writing. The purpose of question one was to see if the teachers could define expository writing correctly. One pattern that emerged from analyzing the interview data was that the majority of teachers understand only part of what expository writing does, and are not able to articulate a purpose for this genre. One teacher verbalized that expository writing is, “writing with a purpose to teach or inform the audience.”

In response to question two, what types of writing assignments are given, three out of the five teachers named informal writing assignments only, while one teacher did not give any names for the writing assignments given. The following chart shows types of writing assignments the teachers said they gave to their students at each grade level, based on interview data.
Table 3

**Writing Assignments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second Grade Morning</th>
<th>Second Grade Afternoon</th>
<th>Third Grade</th>
<th>Fourth Grade</th>
<th>Fifth Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Independent writing in response to a topic</td>
<td>• Journaling</td>
<td>• A variety</td>
<td>• Free response questions to something read or discussed in class</td>
<td>• Personal Narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Morning Message</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Stories or comic strips</td>
<td>• 3-5 Paragraph Essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Journaling/Free Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Research Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Creative Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing/Fiction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question three asked each teacher about the time of day he or she teaches writing. Over half of the teachers in the study did not report having a specific day or time when they teach writing. The second graders seem to write during some part of their reading rotation every morning and Mrs. Arbuckle teaches writing one half hour every Tuesday morning. In the afternoon the second graders have their content subjects and Mrs. Benton does not have a specific writing time, “just some time in the afternoon.” The third and fourth grade teachers did not have a specific day or time for teaching writing as well. Like the second graders, who have a designated time for writing, the fifth grade works on their writing one half hour every Thursday afternoon. Mrs. Ellie also has a 15 minute mini-lesson on Monday morning.

The purpose of question four was to find out if writing assignments were given during content area subjects as well. Mrs. Arbuckle only teaches during the mornings and explained that she teaches math, writing, and reading. During that time period, she referred me to her co-teacher Mrs. Benton about content area writing since they job share. Mrs. Benton explained earlier that she only gives journaling assignments during these
afternoons. In third grade the students are given “essay questions about the subjects they are learning.” Mr. Dixon said it would be the Missions Project in social studies and gave an example of how a rainbow is made for science. Fifth grade students are given writing assignments in content areas as well.

In order to find out how teachers are teaching, question five asked what I would see if I came into each classroom during a writing lesson. There were a variety of answers given to the teachers. One teacher thought his room would be quiet with students writing in journals, unless they were sharing their stories. Another teacher mentioned every step of the writing process could possibly happen during a writing lesson. In the third grade classroom, students might be brainstorming or doing writer’s workshop. Second graders in the afternoon would have their journals out and a visual or starter prompt on the board. In the morning, these second graders have whole class instruction ranging from brainstorming to editing.

Question six asked each teacher how they believe their students like expository writing. One teacher stated that her students were not ready for it. A second teacher said her students love expository writing because they love journaling. Two teachers believe their students like fiction or creative writing better. Finally, one teacher thinks they like it but is not quite sure.

Question seven asked the teachers if they ever use expository books in their classroom to model students’ writing. None of the teachers surveyed use expository books to model how a student can write. Two teachers stated that they read aloud from expository books but do not directly use them to model writing.
When responding to question eight, all of the teachers expressed a need for professional development in expository writing. All five teachers also would like materials that they can take and implement in their classroom. Over one-half of the teachers would like a specialist or someone from outside of the school to come in and speak as well. The best time for professional development is during the Monday staff meeting, according to 80% of the participating teachers.

Case study information was gathered using three primary sources of data: teacher surveys, teacher interviews, and teacher observations. The following section will describe the demographic information about each teacher participating in the case study. Cases are presented in alphabetical order by teachers’ pseudonyms and by ascending grade level, beginning with first and ending with fifth. Besides demographic information about each teacher, the teachers were described using seven qualities of an effective teacher of writing. These seven qualities are: confidence, creating a positive atmosphere for writing where students are able to work together and provide peer feedback, students writing for authentic audiences rather than solely for the teacher, explicitly teaching writing strategies, modeling writing, taking a multi-genre approach, and students having time to write regularly, throughout the day, and across the curriculum.

Observation Results

Mrs. Arbuckle
Mrs. Arbuckle is a 41-year-old Caucasian female teacher. She has a Utah multiple subject credential for grades kindergarten through grade eight. Mrs. Arbuckle has been working in education for 14 years. She worked for four years in Special Education, where she was assigned to a student and worked with him/her in the whole class setting. She taught first grade for five years. Mrs. Arbuckle has been teaching at this private school for five years. She spent three of these years as a kindergarten teacher and is now teaching second grade for the second year. This is the first time Mrs. Arbuckle is working part-time and is teaching second grade in the mornings only. When asked how she feels about writing, Mrs. Arbuckle responded, “It is an important way to communicate and express yourself.”

Confidence

Mrs. Arbuckle is an experienced teacher. She has been teaching longer than any of the other teachers participating in the case study. According to survey data, she is the only teacher in the study who has had professional development in the area of expository writing. Mrs. Arbuckle is knowledgeable about writer’s workshop and believes learning the writing process is an important foundation for her second grade writers. She keeps her classroom neat and orderly and she reports having high expectations for her students to succeed.

Positive Classroom Atmosphere
Mrs. Arbuckle’s classroom is an inviting place for her students to write. There are pillows lining the floor of the classroom library and students are encouraged to use clipboards and find a comfortable place in the room to write. In the back of the room there is a large table with four chairs for students to write at as well. One side of the table is full of paper, pencils, markers, staplers, and tape. In the center of the room there is a large round table. This table is where Mrs. Arbuckle sits during writing time when she conferences with her students. Students are able to move freely around the room and share work with one another while writing is taking place, not just during sharing time. The only student writing that is on display is a group of word family lists that students wrote during the first month of school.

*Authentic Audience*

Every Friday morning, Mrs. Arbuckle’s class writes a letter home to their parents. The letter explains four things that students learned or participated in during school that week. Students take the letter home and a parent must sign it in order to show that it has been read. Students then bring the letter back and place it inside their portfolios. This weekly letter writing activity provides the second graders with an opportunity to write to a person other than their teacher.

*Explicitly Teach Writing Strategies*

Mrs. Arbuckle did explicitly teach her students how to create a pre-writing web diagram during an observed descriptive writing lesson. As students contributed their ideas by raising their hands, Mrs. Arbuckle wrote down suggestions on the white board. After every child gave one response she said, “Look at our web. We have nine good
details in the room. Details help people know what our room looks like.” Students were then asked to write about the room using the details that were inside of the web.

During the observed letter-writing lesson, Mrs. Arbuckle asked the students to remember what they remembered about the week. Students contributed ideas and Mrs. Arbuckle recorded them on the board in a list. Students used this list to write four sentences about their week in school.

*Time to Write*

The second graders begin the day writing the morning message into their journals. This is a Daily Oral Language assignment, where the students copy what is written, fix mistakes, and fill in blank spaces with the correct letter, word, or punctuation. Students also write on a daily basis in class during writer’s den time. During this time, the students write about a specific topic throughout the week.

After observing Mrs. Arbuckle teach two writing lessons, the following five of seven best practices in writing instruction stood out: confidence, creating a positive atmosphere, writing for authentic audiences, explicitly teaching writing strategies, and giving students time to write regularly. It was not obvious that Mrs. Arbuckle models writing or has a multi-genre approach in the classroom with her students.

Mrs. Benton

Mrs. Benton is the afternoon second grade teacher. She is a 35-year-old Caucasian female. Mrs. Benton has a California Multiple Subject credential. She has taught adult education for three years and has been working for three years for the University of Phoenix, teaching online communication courses. Mrs. Benton completed her student
teaching and a three-month-long substitute teaching position in Sacramento County. She has been teaching pre-school in the morning and second grade in the afternoon at this elementary school for the past four months. When asked how she feels about writing she responded, “I love writing.”

*Positive Classroom Atmosphere*

Mrs. Benton shares the same classroom with Mrs. Arbuckle. As noted earlier, there are many places in the second grade room for students to move around and have their own space to write. The atmosphere of the room is very positive and welcoming. Students’ artwork from a previous social studies lesson is hanging on the windows. During an observed science lesson, the students moved their desks into a semi-circle in the front of the room in order to share ideas and communicate effectively with one another.

*Authentic Audiences*

Mrs. Benton teaches content area subjects to the second graders. During the first observed lesson, students were asked to write about their holiday traditions in their journals. Students began by writing a title at the top of their page. Next, they shared ideas about what holiday traditions they each participated in with their families. Mrs. Benton then wrote the following sentence starter on the board: I like my tradition because… Students were directed to write in their journals and then draw a picture. This is typical of most of Mrs. Benton’s writing assignments. While being interviewed she claimed, “The only writing assignment that I basically give is journaling. Teaching science and social studies, the kids get a topic and they write about it in their journals.” What was unique
about this lesson is that the following week, the students stood on stage and read what
they wrote to the entire school during the Festival of Lights celebration.

During the second observed lesson, students also wrote to an authentic audience.
Prior to this observation, students had been preparing for their first opportunity to
participate in the Science Fair. Each student now had to bring in their science experiment
and write the steps they used to complete their experiment. After writing a final draft that
had been edited by the teacher for grammar mistakes, the students cut apart their writing
and glued it onto a folder that would be displayed next to their experiment. Participating
in the Science Fair gave the second graders an opportunity to write for someone other
than their teacher.

While Mrs. Benton showed evidence of having a positive atmosphere for writing
and assignments where students wrote for authentic audiences, it was not obvious she had
the following five best practices for writing instruction in the classroom with her
students: confidence teaching writing, explicitly teaching writing strategies, modeling
writing, having a multi-genre approach, or having time where students write regularly
and throughout the day.

Mrs. Catz

Mrs. Catz is a third grade teacher. She is a 51-year-old Caucasian female. She has
a California Multiple Subject credential, which is currently not a clear credential. Mrs.
Catz is in the middle of her second year of teaching at this elementary school, her first
teaching job.

*Positive Atmosphere*
During my first observation in the third grade classroom, the students were sitting at their desks with their Spellwell notebooks open. Spellwell is the spelling and vocabulary program that is used in the first through fourth grades at this school. It consists of a series of notebooks that are assigned as homework in each classroom. Because teachers were not allowed to assign homework that week due to evening performances in which students participated, the observed writing lesson was for students to complete the homework assignment that would have been given for that night. The teacher was sitting at her desk while students with questions were lining up to ask for help one at a time. Students who remained at their desks were allowed to speak to their neighbor and share what they were writing in their notebooks. The majority of students in the room looked happy. They were smiling and sharing correct answers with one another. Students were able to move freely around the room and speak to one another. Student writing hung on the walls.

*Model Writing*

During the second observation, Mrs. Catz was standing in the front of the room and each student was sitting at a desk with a piece of paper and a pencil. “Grammar Writer’s Workshop” was written on the white board in the front of the room. Mrs. Catz informed the class that today they would be learning how to write words in a series. Mrs. Catz asked the students to make a list of the presents they had just gotten for Christmas. She then called on students to name one item off of their list and she wrote them on the white board in a series using commas. Mrs. Catz then asked her students to do the same thing with their own lists. Students worked independently writing about their Christmas
experience. They used the example on the board to transfer their own list of presents to a sentence, using commas when appropriate.

Two out of seven best practices of writing instruction stood out when observing Mrs. Catz teach. While Mrs. Catz showed evidence of a positive classroom for writing and modeling writing to her students, it was not obvious she that she was confident in her teaching of writing. Students did not write for authentic audiences or learn writing strategies from Mrs. Catz during observed lessons. Mrs. Catz did not show evidence of a multi-genre approach and it was not clear if students have time to write regularly, throughout the day, and across genres.

Mr. Dixon

Mr. Dixon is a 29-year-old Caucasian male. He has a California Multiple Subject credential. He has been teaching for one year at this school, and this job is his first teaching assignment. When asked how he feels about writing he responded, “I like it, writing is a great way to express yourself.”

*Explicitly Teach Writing Strategies*

During the first observed lesson, Mr. Dixon reviewed with his students how to create a web diagram as a pre-writing strategy. He asked his class to write a letter to Santa Claus. He created a web diagram on the board and filled it in with examples of three things he wanted Santa Claus to bring him for Christmas. Students watched their teacher fill in the web and occasionally were asked to call out answers to what should go inside of the circles. Students did not copy what their teacher was writing on the white
board. They observed what their teacher wrote and were asked to create their own web diagram before starting a rough draft letter to Santa Claus.

*Time for Writing*

Mr. Dixon makes time for his students to write on a daily basis. When asked what time his class writes, he responded, “Anytime between 10:30 and 3:00, no particular writing time. If we are free writing we will do that after lunch.” Based on this response, students seemed to have time to write, but it is unclear if this time is regular and is happening throughout the day.

Two out of seven best practices of writing instruction stood out when observing Mr. Dixon teach. While Mr. Dixon showed evidence of teaching writing strategies and giving students writing time, it was not obvious the following best practices occurred in his writing instruction with his students: confidence, creating a positive atmosphere for writing, writing for authentic audiences, modeling writing, and a multi-genre approach.

*Mrs. Ellie*

Mrs. Ellie is a thirty-two year old Caucasian female teacher. She has a California Multiple Subject credential. Mrs. Ellie has been teaching fifth and six grades at this elementary school for three and half years. Prior to this, she was a substitute teacher at R.L. Elementary School in Santa Rosa for first through sixth grades. When asked about writing she responded, “I feel writing is an important part of the teaching curriculum and students need to be taught the entire writing process.”
Confidence

Mrs. Ellie is confident in her ability to teach many genres of writing, including expository text. She is currently teaching her fourth year with this particular age group and believes her teaching has improved with each year.

Positive Atmosphere

The fifth grade classroom is a positive place for students to write. There is a couch against one wall that kids are free to sit in during writing time. During an observation, a few students left the room in order to peer conference in the hallway. After Mrs. Ellie had given instructions to her class, she walked around the room, stopping to give feedback to students individually. Her students were working on various assignments individually or with peers.

Authentic Audiences

During the second observation, students were editing the final drafts of their science fair projects. The students in the room seemed very excited to share their experiments with students from other grade levels, parents, and the principal. Students had gathered their materials and collected all of their data at home. During this observation, the energy in the room was very high as students were walking around and checking out their classmates’ experiments. Each student had to peer edit another students’ writing. After this, students lined up at the door so they could type the final draft of their science fair report in the school computer lab. Writing would be displayed on a file folder at the science fair later in the week. Participating in the science fair gives the fifth graders an opportunity to write for an audience other than their teacher.
Multi-Genre Approach

During the first observed lesson, Mrs. Ellie began by saying, “We only have 15 minutes. What can you work on?” She then called on students who were raising their hands and wrote down the following three assignments on the board:

- Holiday tradition 3-paragraph essay
- Current event
- Free write in journal

She reminded students that if they are currently in the revision process, to read out loud to a partner and to take out any worn-out words. A few students were using dictionaries. The three writing options that students could choose from were evidence that the fifth graders write across genres.

Time

Mrs. Ellie reported that her students write on a daily basis. She has a specific time each week for a fifteen-minute mini-lesson. She says that she uses this time to teach various writing strategies. Also, every Thursday at one o’clock students are either being assigned or are working on their current writing assignment.

When observing Mrs. Ellie, five out of seven qualities of best teaching practices were seen in her classroom. Mrs. Ellie showed evidence of the following: being a confident writing teacher, having a positive writing atmosphere in her classroom, writing to authentic audiences, teaching writing across genres, as well as giving students time to write regularly. It was not obvious that she models writing and explicitly teaches writing strategies in the classroom with her students.
Conclusion

Data from surveys, interviews, and observations from this case study gleaned interesting information about teachers’ writing practices in second through fifth grade at this school. Though 80% of teachers were not able to articulate a definition of expository writing, observational research revealed that these teachers asked their students to write in that genre. Another pattern that emerged from doing this research was that informal writing assignments were often assigned, while writing lessons did not include direct instruction of expository text structures. Analyzing results of the interviews, 100% of the participating teachers voiced a need for professional development in the area of writing.

The best practices in writing instruction that were observed most often during teacher observations were creating a positive atmosphere for writing, writing to authentic audiences, and giving students time to write regularly. Teachers who modeled good writing and had students write in many different genres were seldom observed. Further discussion of these findings will take place in the following chapter, as well as a plan for professional development focusing in the area of expository writing.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent and in what ways expository writing was being taught in the second, third, fourth, and fifth grades at this small, northern California private school. Writing is a complex process; therefore, it seems teaching writing could be a difficult task, especially to an educator who is new to the profession or has had little to no professional development in this area. At this school, participating teachers seem to have difficulty with little professional development in writing, exemplified by the findings from this study. A claim made by Allington and Cunningham (2007) is that most beginning teachers know little about the actual teaching of reading or writing, and many tend to be familiar with only a single instructional model for such lessons. Based on the research cited in the review of literature it is clear that expository text is an important genre, which can be taught at every grade level. This chapter, Chapter 5, contains the summary, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

Conclusions

In this study five teachers from a small private school in Northern California were studied in order to look at their writing instruction habits, particularly in the area of expository writing. While each teacher has merit in many of his or her teaching practices, this particular study focused on expository writing instruction.

The initial goal of this case study was to identify how many minutes are devoted to the teaching of expository text each day, as well as how effective that time is spent at
this school. In the initial survey fewer than one-half of the teachers claimed to teach
expository writing at all. Based on this initial response, the aim of this research morphed
into a case study of teachers’ writing practices.

The following five dominant themes that arose from the data are the focus of an
educational plan for future professional development at this school:

- Teachers are unsure of what they are teaching in the area of expository
  writing.
- Teachers are unsure if students are capable of writing expository text.
- There is a lack of explicit writing instruction across genres.
- Teachers must model good writing for their students as a means to
  foster the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing.
- Teachers must increase student motivation to write expository text.

First, teachers seemed to be unsure of what they are teaching in the area of
expository writing. Pressley et al. (1996) surveyed primary teachers who were considered
effective by their supervisors and found that these teachers’ students wrote mostly stories,
responses to reading, and journal entries. It is interesting that ten years later, similar
findings were found at this small, private school. Findings indicated that elementary
teachers tend to teach many academic subjects in the course of a day. While a teacher
may be considered effective overall, he or she may not be an effective teacher in the area
of writing. At the same time, a teacher may be very knowledgeable about teaching the
writing process and have very little knowledge or experience teaching exposition. The
implication is that professional development in the area of writing, with an emphasis on
expository writing, is needed at this school site.
The second theme that arose from the case study data is not all participating teachers believed students were capable of writing in the expository genre. Teachers must be aware that students are capable and benefit from writing across genres as early as kindergarten through the grades. Many children are fascinated with the world around them, from wriggling worms to science experiments to dance and sports. Enabling students to write about these topics is an excellent way to increase motivation for writing independently. At the same time, expository writing can open up worlds that children have not yet experienced. Yopp (2008) argues that writing about informational text should be included in early childhood classrooms because it supports the acquisition of background knowledge. Christie (1987), who argues that children have no necessary predisposition to create narratives or any other forms, argues against the premise that it is developmentally inappropriate to teach children about expository writing.

I found that as this case study progressed, the participating teachers began to discuss expository writing with one another. A few weeks after all of the case study data had been collected, one teacher stopped me in the hallway to tell me that her students were successful with this genre of writing now. Prior to this case study, this participating teacher believed her students were too young to learn how to write expository text. It is my belief as a teacher and a researcher that children will be able to write what they are taught to write. Therefore, based on the research from this study as well as the other researchers in their area, it seems clear that children in the primary grades are capable and should be taught how to write expository text.
The third theme is a lack of explicit writing instruction across genres, despite students’ opportunity to write on a daily basis. It is commonly agreed throughout the research that many children come to school with a wealth of knowledge concerning narrative because the structures of story are common in their everyday lives. The structures and purposes of exposition are different from the structures and purposes of narrative. Research suggests that teachers must clarify these differences for students. Cox et al. (1991) more specifically stated that simple exposure to expository text without explicit instruction about the properties of the text will not likely result in increased skill in reading or writing exposition.

It is my belief that the participating teachers who are not explicitly teaching writing across genres are unaware of how to do so. The Curriculum Guide for this school lists types of writing that should be occurring at each grade level. There is no mention of how to teach or use text structures under reading or writing, and there has been no professional development in reading or writing in the past three years. Based on data collected, teachers, for the most part, asked their students to write independently in journals or respond to topics independently. Neither of these assignments actually involved a classroom teacher teaching writing. Thus, professional development in the area of expository writing needs to focus on explicit instruction of specific text structures and strategies used to identify, write in the style of, as well as respond to this genre of writing. It seems likely that educating teachers about this genre will raise teacher expectations and increase the quality of writing for students.
Data from this case study revealed the following fourth theme: it is critical for teachers to model good writing and to foster the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. During interviews, none of the teachers claimed to use expository books to model students’ writing. It is generally agreed in the research that there is a reciprocal relationship between skills in reading and skills in writing. The best way to help students recognize the structures that authors use is to have them become authors themselves. As students struggle to organize their own ideas in print, they learn about organization (McGee & Richels, 1985). Also, participating teachers did not choose expository books to read aloud to their students. This is unfortunate because reading expository text to students is an excellent way to activate or increase prior knowledge of a subject.

It seems clear that students should not be expected to write informational text well until they have seen, heard, and read a variety of informational texts. Pajares and Valiant (2006) claim, “If there is one finding that is incontrovertible in education and in psychology, it is that children learn from the actions of models” (p. 167). When a teacher chooses a book out of the classroom library to read aloud to the class, he or she is modeling not only reading but also text selection. Having students model a type of writing that has been read aloud by the teacher is a research-based strategy that enforces the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. So, from studying the literature it is apparent that modeling is an effective teaching strategy and should be included in any future professional development at this school.

Increasing student motivation to write expository text is the fifth theme from this case study. As evidenced by this research, the participating teachers were not able to fully
define expository writing and therefore were unable to explicitly teach expository writing. This lack of teacher understanding of expository writing appears to be linked to students’ attitudes and motivation about this genre of writing. It was interesting that when students were surveyed, their interest in writing expository text was similar to the answers the teachers gave about their students’ disinterest in this genre. At the same time, the students did not know what the term expository text meant, but once they heard a definition they responded favorably to using this genre in school.

If a teacher is not modeling expository writing and not explicitly teaching students how to write successfully in this genre, it appears student interest in this writing is likely to decline. Therefore, it seems that an increase in teachers’ knowledge and confidence in this genre will lead to an increase in student knowledge and confidence as well. If students are confident in their ability to write expository text, student motivation to write in this genre is likely to increase as well.

Recommendations for Practice and Further Study

No two schools will ever be identical in quality of staff, student population, teacher involvement, and administration. Because of the complex environment of each school, case study research is valuable to any institution that is interested in learning about the teaching practices that are taking place in the classrooms. This case study looked at five teachers in a small private school. It would be interesting to replicate this in a public school or another private school that offers professional development in writing. Also, replicating this study over the entire course of a school year would bring more case study data in which to draw conclusions. More interesting would be to
research these same teachers in five years, as a way to see how professional development and more years of teaching experience changes their teaching practices.

Four of the five participating teachers in this case study have been teaching fewer than four years at the elementary level. Also, there has been no training or professional development in expository writing at this school since the beginning of this case study. Therefore, a need for ongoing professional development in best teaching practices has been identified. It is interesting that many of the teachers, just by participating in the study and being asked to look at their writing instructional practices, have changed. After being surveyed and interviewed, many teachers were concerned that they did not know what expository writing was and were not teaching this genre of writing. At the culmination of this case study, one teacher was proud to be hanging her students’ writing in the hallway. Another teacher informs me every time her students are working on an expository writing assignment. This genre of writing has become a topic of interest and discussion throughout the school.

Conclusion

Participating teachers made specific requests when asked how they would design professional development in the area of expository writing for themselves. The following teacher suggestions for future professional development will be presented to the principal of the school for consideration. Teachers request the following:

- Materials, such as children’s books that go with lessons;
- A specialist from outside the school that could provide staff development, as well as give specific feedback on lessons and suggestions for improvement;
• Grade-specific examples that could be implemented into the curriculum; and

• A teacher friendly packet with information about best practices for teaching expository writing.

A review of the literature shows that expository writing is a vital skill and is central to academic and job success. Four out of five participating teachers at this school are concerned about their lack of knowledge of expository writing. Professional development, focusing in the area of expository writing, will enable teachers to deliver more effective instruction in order to improve the quality of writing for every student.

The Appendices follow the last chapter of the study and include the following: (a) Teacher Survey Questions and (b) Teacher Interview Questions. A bibliography of references used in the preparation of this case study comprises the final section.
## APPENDIX A

Survey Questions for Teachers

### Survey Questions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I teach writing to my students.</td>
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<td>My students write on a daily basis in my class.</td>
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<td>I teach my students to write using many different genres.</td>
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<td>I have taken a class focusing on teaching writing in my career.</td>
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<td>I am confident in my ability to teach writing.</td>
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<td>I am knowledgeable about what writer’s workshop is.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am confident in my ability to teach the writing process/writer’s workshop.</td>
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<td>Expository writing is an important skill for the students I teach.</td>
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<td>I teach expository writing in my classroom.</td>
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<td>My students begin the school year with prior knowledge and experience with expository writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have had professional development in teaching expository writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am confident in my ability to teach expository writing.</td>
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APPENDIX B

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. In your own words, will you please define expository writing?

I’m impressed that all of the teachers surveyed, including you, said you teach writing every day.

2. I’m interested in hearing about what types of writing assignments you give?

3. What times of the day do you teach writing?

4. Are your students given writing assignments during content area subjects as well?

5. If I came into your classroom during a writing lesson, what would I see?

6. How do you think your students like expository writing?

7. Do you ever use expository books in your classroom to model your student’s writing? If yes, can you tell me about it.

Think about professional development opportunities you have had in the past. Help me to design a professional development in expository writing.

8. What would you like it to include?

9. When would be the best time to receive professional development in expository writing? (examples would be after or before school, Saturday, during the school day, at a staff meeting)

10. When would be a good time for me to come in and observe you teaching a writing lesson?
REFERENCES


