

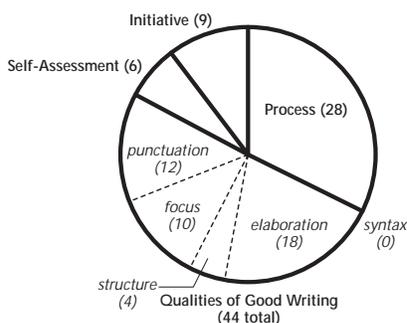
A Second Grade Writing Colony
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As a second grade teacher in an inclusive classroom that serves students with disabilities as well as English language learners and students from a low income neighborhood, I searched for ways to teach writing that would best help the students reach state standards. I wondered how formative assessment could guide my instruction and thus help students meet and go beyond second grade writing standards. I wondered how my involvement in an intensive staff development experience, both at my school, P.S.126, and with Carl Anderson of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, would inform my teaching. How would this staff development centered around assessing student work, conferring with student writers, writing mini lessons, planning units of study change me as a teacher and, in turn, increase student achievement?

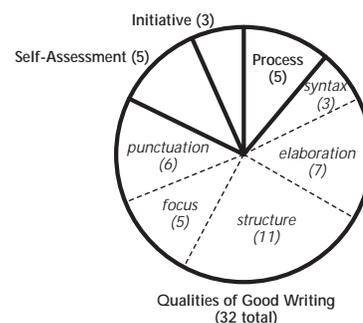
SEPTEMBER: 53 total conferences



OCT & NOV: 87 total conferences



DECEMBER: 45 total conferences



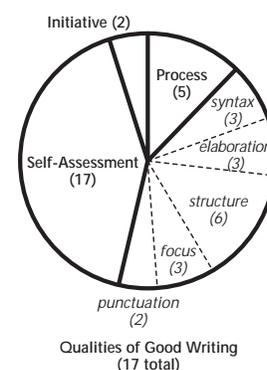
Our Story

Initial assessments of narrative writing in September showed the class average was below standard and nearly half the class was "at risk" for not meeting the standards for narrative writing. The students were scoring low in nearly all the qualities of good writing, and they were also scoring low in their ability to talk about their process. Their talk and writing about their own writing was short and mostly based on content. They needed help assessing their own work. I attended staff development meetings throughout the fall and winter, learning assessment and conferring techniques to help the students. As I recognized areas for improvement in the student writers, I gave writing conferences to match their needs. The conferring data represented in the pie charts shows how staff development improved my ability to recognize areas for improvement in student writers. As time passed, my conference repertoire broadened.

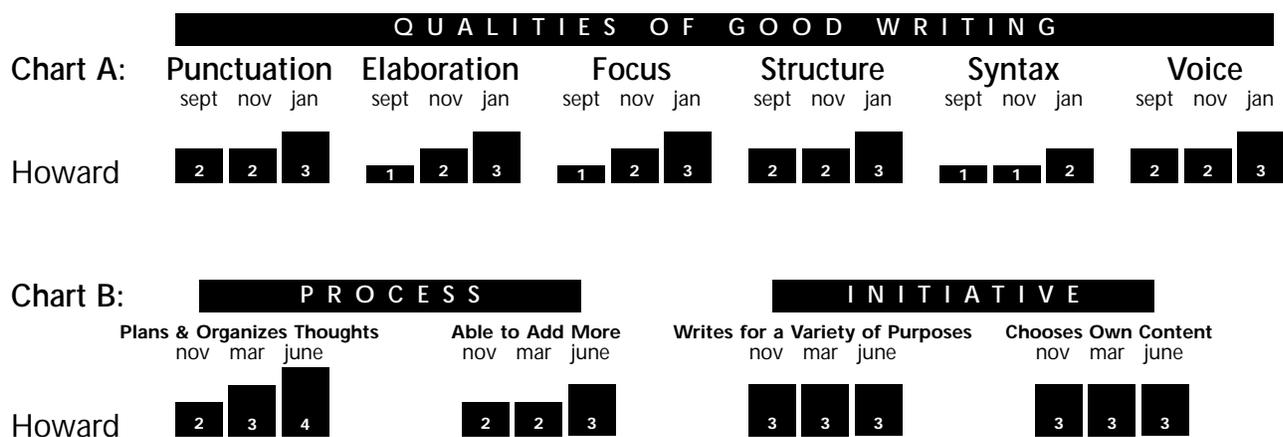
JANUARY: 56 total conferences



FEBRUARY: 41 total conferences



With each new piece of information, both from the children and my colleagues, I planned instruction, whole class mini lessons, small group meetings and individual conferences to best fit the needs of my students. By the end of January, only two students were still in the “at risk” category. Many students had reached grade level standards and those who were in the “approaching” category were on course to reach the standards. Students were able to talk about their writing for a longer period of time and moved beyond content in their conversations. I continued to attend more staff development meetings, workshops and informal conversations at school to help me understand more about assessing student writers. More intense instruction was designed based on their needs, and improvement was noticed again in March. The data shows that careful planning based on the needs of students, as noticed in their writing samples, improves student achievement. Howard’s data, shown below, is representative of the majority of the class.



Policy Implications

I sincerely hope there will always be conversations to enter. Professional development time for teachers to have these kinds of conversations on an ongoing basis is rare. It is rare for a principal to cater lunch for her staff to talk about children’s writing. It is rare for a school to have at least two staff developers that come on a regular basis to discuss the teaching of writing with teachers. It is rare for a school to have five teachers immersed in study in a leadership group at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Professional development that is initiated and often led by teachers is crucial and critical for student achievement. This time needs to be set aside for teachers to meet regularly so that their conversations about students can guide their planning and instruction. I am lucky to work at a school with an administration and staff that are committed to this kind of work. This kind of support for conversation changed our school and could change others. Specifically, those with the power to make decisions for schools and school districts need to make the following changes happen:

1. Teachers need to be compensated for this professional collaboration time.
2. Money needs to be set aside in school budgets to pay for staff developers to work with teachers.
3. Structures need to be set in place to build capacity. Teachers need to have a place to share what they are learning so the change can spread throughout the school.

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