

Title of Action Research Project

Meaningful Writing

Name of Researcher

George R. Kirkman

Name of School and County

Ojus Elementary School
Miami – Dade County, Fl

Problem

The fifth grade students in my 2006-2007 class were not writing with the skills and creativity that they appeared to have mastered in fourth grade. Most of these students scored at or above the previous school years average score. According to the National Council of the Teachers of English, some students have come to hate writing through bad experiences. These fifth grade students did not have much enthusiasm or excitement when it came to writing assignments. What would motivate students to write and then write some more. How could I provide the spark that would give students a reason to write with excitement and enthusiasm?

Research Question

How will greater student choice of the topics and purposes for writing affect fifth grade students' attitudes towards writing and their writing assessment scores?

Rationale

The school year began in its usual way of settling students into the classroom environment and establishing classroom routines. Then came the initial pretests in all subject areas to establish some baseline data to help drive teacher instruction. The writing pretests were a bit of a shock to me. Most of the students in my class were students that I taught in fourth grade last year. Reading their papers I realized that most of the students were not apply the writing skills that they appeared to have mastered in 2005-2006. Had they forgotten so quickly? Even after refreshing their memories of the writing strategies we applied last year I did not see much difference in the next writing assessment. This experience is what led me to my question. How could I motivate students to write and how could I get them to enjoy writing more and not see it as a chore? Writing research shows that students will be more successful

and will respond to writing more positively when drawing on their personal experiences. Students might be more motivated to write if allowed to experience the different modes and genres of writing instead of being asked to strictly respond to structured prompt driven instruction. I considered whether or not modeling effective writing using visual and audio props in the different genres of writing while allowing students to write drawing on their personal experiences would motivate students to write more, and hopefully revitalizing their interest in writing.

Context

Ojus Elementary School is located in the northeast area of Miami Dade County and is a part of Region II of Miami Dade County Public Schools. The students coming to Ojus Elementary School come from the North Miami Beach, Sunny Isles and Aventura areas. The approximate enrollment of the school was 860 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. The ethnic make up of the school was 35% White Non Hispanic, 13% Black Non Hispanic, 48% Hispanic, and 3% Asian-Multiracial. Of those 860 students, approximately 23 % were Limited English Proficient students, 22% gifted exceptionalities, 2% language impaired, 4% Specific Learning Disabled . About 48% of the students were on free or reduced lunch. At the time of the study, the staff make up was 53% White Non-Hispanic, 20% Black Non-Hispanic, 25% Hispanic, and 2% Asian/other. At that time the school was undergoing expansion with the construction of a three story wing which was projected to be in use by the 2007/2008 school year. The classrooms were crowded in most cases and there were at least six classrooms in co-teaching situations. My classroom study group of 31 was made up of 19 Hispanic Students, 5 White Non-Hispanic Students, 3 Black students and, 4 Asian/ Multi Racial students. As I stated in my rationale, it appeared that students did not retain the knowledge they gained and applied in fourth grade on the Florida Writes Test. The combined average score for this test was a 4.3 out of 6. When I analyzed the data, the combined average score of the group of 31 students in my study was a 3.5 with a high average score of 3.8 and a low average score of 3.1. The high score of the combined average being from the narrative prompt. With the strategies that I planned to implement I felt that they would be more motivated to write and start to see writing as something enjoyable.

Review of Relevant Research

The challenges that face teachers are many. In my experience motivating students intrinsically towards the completion of any academic task is the key. When it comes to writing, many of my students dreaded “the prompt” and the “score” assignments. Motivation appeared to be very low to attack these assignments with any excitement. How do we start to change these student attitudes and develop students who are complete writers able to apply their writing skills and how do we help students develop a more positive attitude towards writing?

The National Commission on Writing (2003) stated that while effective models of teaching writing do exist, the teaching and practice of writing are being short changed in the kindergarten through twelfth grade school years and in the college years. To help bridge this instructional gap the report also stated that students needed more time to write in and out of the classroom and that writing should occur across the curriculum.

Research by the NCTE (2004) indicates that when students have more opportunities to write about the experiences that are meaningful to them, they are more motivated to write and that timely. Rygalski (2004-2005) states that precise feedback is a great way to motivate and encourage students to write more. These two components of the writing process help to create a writing friendly atmosphere that nurtures and inspires students to write.

In November of 2007 , children's literature author Gerald Sharpe , came to our school to kick off our annual student book writing project .When asked by students where he got his ideas for books and stories , he stated that he kept a writing journal with him at all times and wrote about the events of his day . His stories were derived from his personal experiences. Characters from his books were based on friends from childhood and himself and they all brought their unique characteristics with them as characters in the story. He stated that the motivation for his new book, *What Lies Beneath the Bed*, was based on his childhood fear of the dark and thoughts of monsters grabbing him from underneath his bed. His motivation to write came from writing about the things that were relevant and made sense to him. This experience led me to my question of student intrinsic motivation to write. By allowing students to choose writing topics and ideas that made sense to they would be more motivated to write.

According to the NCTE (2004), students learn to write by writing .What did this mean for teaching? It meant that students needed more in-class and out -of-class opportunities to write, including writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. Research by Langer (2002) used by the Florida Department of Education, stated that a focused approach to writing should incorporate separate, simulated and integrated experiences. Separated and simulated activities involve the introduction of a skill or knowledge item to the class. The integrated activity involves students learning to apply the skills taught. These three experiences guide writing instruction in a process that will make students complete writers.

The Florida Department of Education (2006) recommended eight best practices that were incorporated into the four instructional components of writing. They are, 1. Writing Aloud, which includes demonstrations, modeling aloud, sharing of different topics, and also the conventions of writing which should take place in a positive atmosphere. . 2. Shared Writing where the teacher and class compose aloud and participate in discussions of topics and purposes for writing. 3. Guided Writing, where whole group, individual or small group instruction takes place, the teacher guides students through the process, students write across the curriculum, peers share and provide feedback, and students write on a daily basis.

4. Independent Writing, where students work alone, choose their own topics, write in journals or writing logs and the teacher provides feedback of some kind on a daily basis. In a nutshell, students are provided with a writing friendly atmosphere that will stimulate and motivate, provide organizational instruction, and provide for student choice of topics and purposes for writing which allows students to draw on their personal experiences. Students should receive immediate non threatening feedback and then focus on the final product by conferencing, revising, editing, and finally sharing and publishing.

According to the Florida Department of Education, a classroom implementing these four components will have the following major indicators present:

- *Reading –Writing Connection- Tying books being read or studied in class to writing lessons or student research.
- *Print Rich Environment- Literacy centers, posters, and articles to use as purposes for writing.
- *Teacher Modeling- Modeling aloud different genres of writing
- *Real Purposes for Writing- Time provided to students to write from their own knowledge and experiences
- *Writer’s Craft- Teaching techniques of writing
- *Writing In Various Genres/Modes- Writing recipes, brochures, essays, movie reviews memoirs.
- *Emphasis on Revision- Thoughtful revisions over time on one piece of writing.
- *Conference/Assessment notes. Keeping a record of student writing.
- *Spelling and Vocabulary Focus
- *Sentence Structure and Conventions- Use in Mini Lessons not isolated skill sheets.

Rygalski (2004-2005) stated that her rationale for the research was based on whether writing comments on student writing would improve their attitudes towards writing. Her data suggested that students showed satisfaction with teacher comments written about their work and suggested that students would have liked more written feedback and more precise comments. She also states that students need encouragement and a voice in the type of feedback they receive. Individual conferencing and precise, timely feedback will help to fulfill the needs of these students. Teachers and students need to work together and feel comfortable discussing writing.

Bandura (1977); Bandura A, Barbaranelli C, et.al. (1996) stated that all students came to school with different sets of expectations of the purposes and functions of their learning which had a significant impact on their performance and achievement. These beliefs were based on the self-concept of their abilities and how they felt about future successes with their learning. The amount of control students had in their own learning also affected how confident they felt about future successes in their learning. If students had many opportunities to be successful, then their expectations of achieving success would rise. If they believed they could be successful, they would put more energy into completing the

task. Students would have more motivation and enthusiasm to take on the task and complete it.

The Study - *Data Tools Interventions*

In addition to the student's regular writing instruction, the study group for this project also participated in activities that gave them greater choice and ownership of their writing. A variety of data sources were used for this action research. A student writing attitude survey was given at the beginning and at the end of the project to compare student's attitudes towards writing. Student writing assessment averages from the first half of the year were compared to the writing averages from the second half of the year. Teacher observations of class activities and conference notes were also used to monitor student attitudes and the application of effective writing strategies.

The students completed a writing attitude survey that was used to measure their attitudes about writing before student choice strategies were introduced and their attitudes about writing after student choice strategies were introduced. The statements in the survey were written from a positive perspective. The higher the survey score, the better their attitude towards writing. A class average as well as high and low scores for pre and post project surveys, was recorded and compared.

The monthly writing assessment scores of my student study group were recorded and averaged. The monthly assessments were either a narrative or expository prompt written in the form of the Florida FCAT Writes Test. The student responses were scored according to the rubric established by the Florida Department of Education which gives a score of either U, 1, 2,3,4,5 or, 6 (Florida Writing Assessment Program - Florida Writes!, 2005). All student responses were read and scored by two teachers and the scores were averaged to get a final score. Writing assessments administered during the first half of the school year were given before the implementation of strategies that gave students greater choice in their writing. Assessments administered during the second half of the school year were given as students experienced activities that gave them greater choice in their writing topics and modes. The writing assessment average scores for the first half of the year were compared to the assessment average scores of the second half of the year.

Finally, teacher observations of student independent work and student writing conferences were recorded. Monitoring daily student writing allowed me to observe all students as they wrote and gave me instant feedback as to how well they were applying effective writing skills and strategies. Writing journals were reviewed weekly and feedback was given in the form of positive or neutral comments, for example, Great job!! I like this topic. Good dialogue! Comments addressing specific, critical writing needs were notated in the teacher's notes and used to help guide student / teacher conferences. These student journal reviews gave me feedback on students independent writing that allowed me to focus each student conference on the needs and direction of each individual student. Student conferences were

extremely beneficial in giving the students a voice in their writing. Through teacher guidance and probing questions, students were given the opportunity to talk about their writing and were led to discover a lot of what would make their writing better. Some of the questions I asked were: Do you have any questions for me about your writing? How do you feel about your writing this week? What motivated you to write about this topic? Do you think your writing is improving? Why? In what ways has it improved? Etc. Through these discussions I was able to give students positive feedback and suggestions for improvement. These conferences led students in a direction of self discovery as well. These conferences were kept very positive and neutral.

A very big component of the student independent work was a two week writing agenda that students were required to complete. I developed this agenda as a way to slowly get students to write more on their own. The agenda incorporated generic writing topics that students could write about drawing on their own personal experiences with Open or Free writing days that allowed students to write about whatever they chose. Along with the assigned writing, students were encouraged to write whenever they had the opportunity to put their thoughts and ideas in writing. For example, a story idea, how they solved a math problem, how their day was at school, or even a summary of their favorite TV show or movie. Students were encouraged to take chances and to respond to all Writing Agenda assignments in any writing style or form they chose. The only requirement I placed on the agenda assignments, was that they needed to complete the assigned work. Every Thursday students turned in their Writing Logs/Journals for a writing check. I read the student writing and only made positive or neutral comments or statements and lots of happy face drawings.

The final writing project for the students was to create their own illustrated story book that could be about any topic of their choice. Students created book jacket covers that included an author's page with a picture and biography as well as a story summary.

Action Plan

Sept.-May Administered monthly writing prompt and identified class average.

Dec. Surveyed students measuring attitudes towards writing.

Dec –April Students maintained writing logs / journals

Implemented strategies that allowed students greater choice in writing purposes and topics.

Monitored student daily writing activities for application of effective writing strategies and techniques.

Held frequent conferences with students to allow them the opportunity to talk about their writing and give feedback on their writing.

Dec. - May Students began writing creative story.

April Surveyed students again to measure attitudes towards writing.

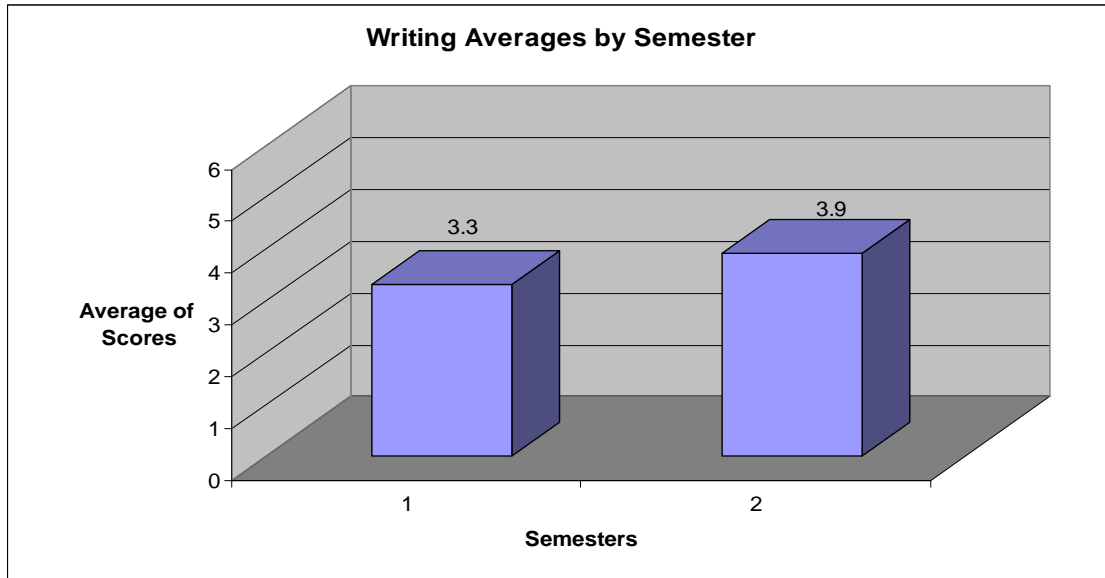
April Compared results of surveys.

May Compared the monthly writing assessment scores from before and after the implementation of strategies.

May Students presented final book project.

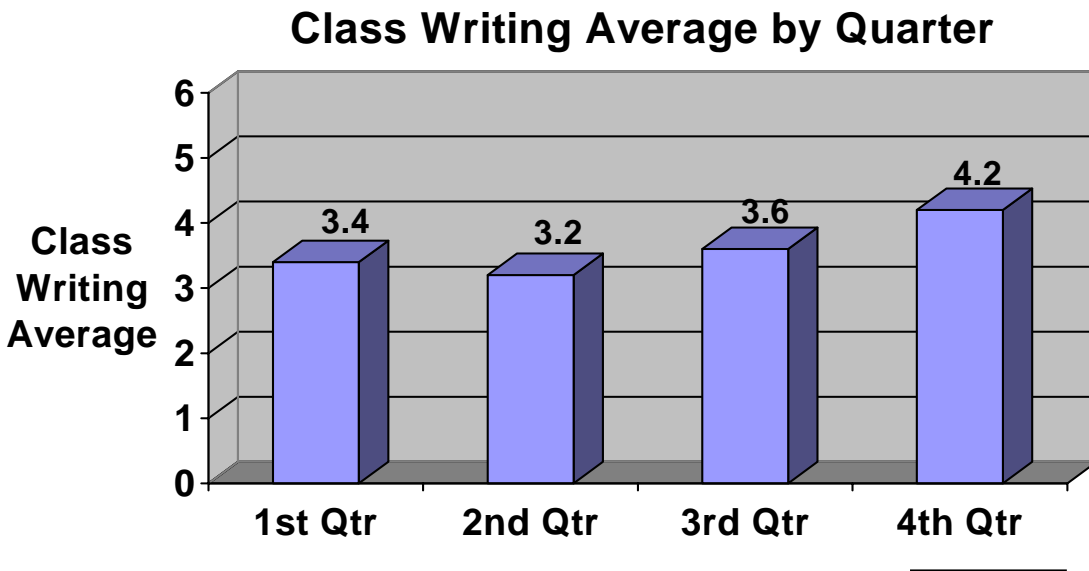
Data Collection

Fig. 1 Semester Comparison of Writing Averages



There was a six tenths of a point gain in the average of the second semester writing scores after students were given greater choice in their writing .

Fig. 2 Quarterly Comparison of Writing Averages



The writing averages for quarters one and two showed no gain while quarters three and four showed a steady gain after students were given more choice in their writing.

Fig. 3 Pre and Post Survey Comparison of Writing Attitude Survey Average Score

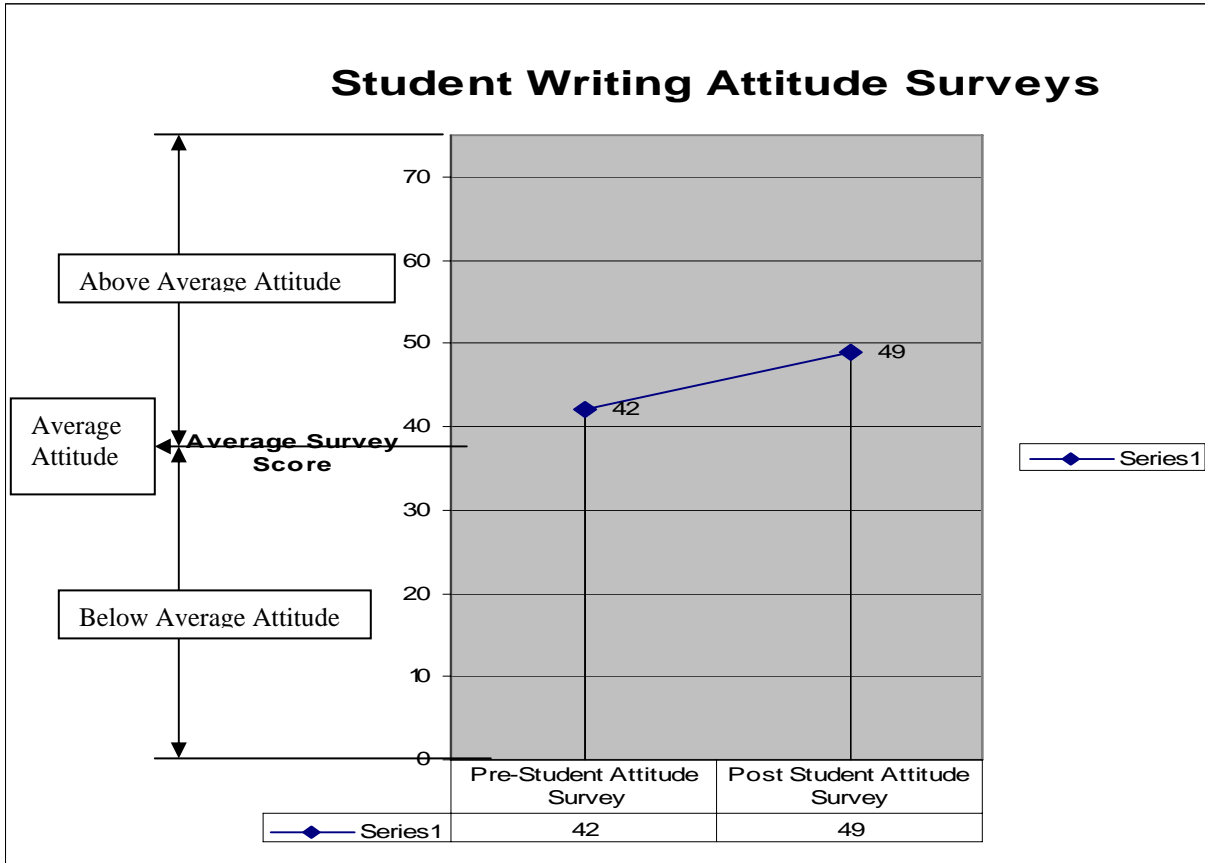


Fig. 4 Pre and Post Attitude Survey Comparison of High and Low Scores

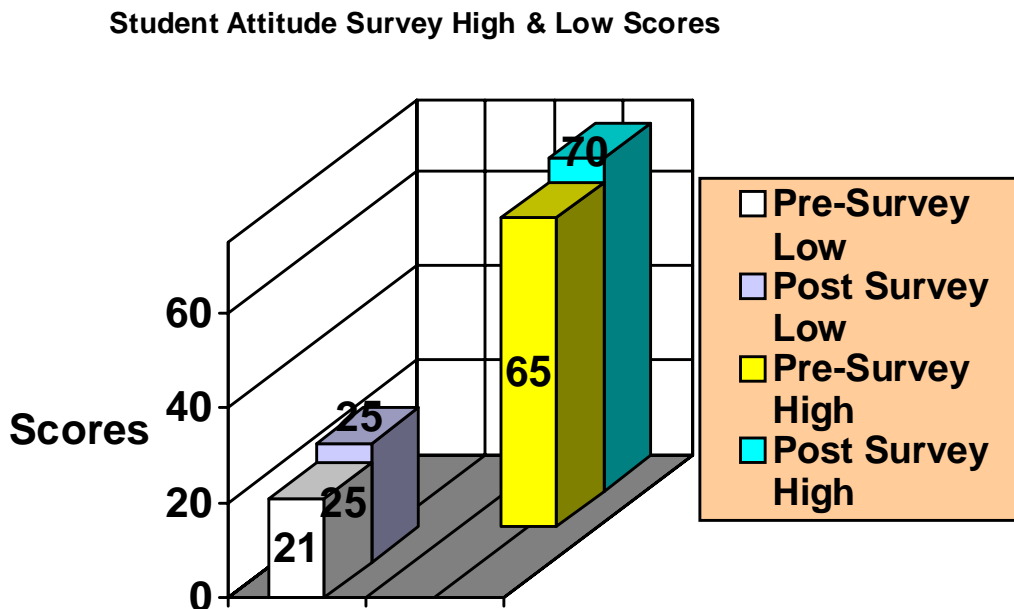


Fig. 5 Individual Student Writing Scores with Class Average

Mr. Kirkman Grade 5 2006-2007	Aug.		Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
	Pre	Pre			Mid						Post
	Test	Test			Term						Test
	Exp.	Narr									
1. S.G.	2	3	3	3	1		4		3.5		5
2. M.P	3	2	1	3	0		3		3		4
3. G.F.	4	4	4	4	4		4		5		5
4. J.M.	3	4	4	4.5	2		4		5		3.5
5. G.S.	4	3	2	1	3		4		4		4
6. S.G.	4	4	3.5	4	4		4		4		4.5
7. T.V.	4	4	1	3	0		3		5		2.5
8. J.G.	4	3	4	5	4		4.5		4.5		5
9. D.P.	3	3	3	5	3		3		3		3
10. J.B.	3	3	3	5	4		5		5		5
11. G.A.	4	3.5	4	4.5	4		5		3.5		5
12. N.V.	3	4	3	5	4		5		5		4.5
13. C.M.	3	1	2	2	0		3		4		4
14. G.F.	3	3	3	5	3		4		4		5
15. J.M.	5	3	4	4	2		4		4.5		3
16. R.N.	5	3	2	4	4		4		4		5
17. J.G.	5	3.5	5	5	5		5		5		5
18. A.N.	4	4.5	4	3	4		0		3		4.5
19. L.G.	4	5	3	4	4		4		3.5		4
20. J.R.	4	5	3	4	5		5		5		4.5
21. P.C.	4	3.5	3	3	4		3		3		5
22. N.G.	5	5	3	3	4		4		3		4.5
23. J.F.	2.5	1	0	2	3		2		2.5		2.5
24. J.T.	3	1	2	2			0		3.5		3
25. J.P.	4	5	3.5	5	5		5		4		5
26. Y.M.	3	3	3.5	3	2		4		3		4.5
27. J.F.	3.5	2	2	2	2		3		4		4.5
28. E.T.	2	2	3	3	3		4.5		4		4
29. A.S.	2	3	3	2.5	3		3		4.5		5
30. S.S.	2.5	3	3	3	3		3		4		3
Average Score	3.52	3.23	2.92	3.55	3.07		3.63		3.97		4.23

0=Unscorable

Data Analysis

All the data from this action research project indicated that when students were given more choice in their writing, they became more motivated to write and take chances. Their writing assessment scores clearly increased after writing strategies were implemented that allowed students the opportunity to choose the topic and the mode of their response. The monthly writing assessment average for the last five months of school rose to 3.9 out of six compared to an average score of 3.3 for the first five months of school (Fig.1). The third and fourth quarter writing averages increased to a high average of 4.2 out of six after a pattern of decreasing scores the first two quarters (Fig.2). Students were incorporating more figurative language, dialogue, and fabulous descriptions. The student writing survey average score rose from 42, which falls into a low positive attitude range, to 49 out of a possible 75 points, a rise in the positive attitude range of seven points (Fig.3). These numbers show that while the class started in the low positive attitude range, their attitudes became more positive about writing at the end of the school year. The high score of the attitude surveys rose from a 65 on the pre-attitude survey to a 70 on the post attitude survey. The low score for the group rose from 21 on the pre-survey to 25 on the post survey (Fig.4). This data clearly illustrated that student's attitudes towards writing did improve after strategies to allow more student choice in writing were implemented.

The most satisfying result of this research was the obvious change in student attitude from the majority of the students. Students responded to guided writing with poetry, narrative verse and with greater enthusiasm. Students voiced ambitions of becoming writers. When students first started to keep their writing journals, they responded to writing tasks with very predictable responses. Most responses were in the expository form and were very structured. As students received feedback on a personal, non-threatening level and took more of a voice in what makes their writing better, the writing slowly became less predictable. For example, during a conference with a student, he asked if he could write about the time he got a burn on his leg while riding on the back of a motorcycle with his dad to address a guided topic that asked students to write about a special family event. My response was a very positive yes. While most students wrote about birthday parties, holiday celebrations and Mother's Day, this student wrote about the burn from the motorcycle and how he received it. It turns out his father died coming to the United States from Cuba in a raft. The burn reminds him of his dad and the special times they had. This response was unlike any other I had read up to that time in the school year. Students were starting to tell stories, responding to writing tasks with poetry, and were taking more chances with their writing. Students started to include more dialogue and figurative language, which was used in appropriate context. They actually looked forward to the sharing days and the conference days as well as having their writing published on the class writing display board. I believe that a big part of this dramatic change and improvement in student writing style and use of conventions, is directly linked to student teacher conferencing and dialogue. I asked students if they had any questions about the writing in their journals and from the answer to that one question, I would lead the student to

other questions they might have about their writing. As the year progressed, I did not have to guide students to questions about their writing as much.

Sample conference:

Teacher-“Are these people talking in this sentence?”

Student: “Yes”

Teacher- “Can you let a person reading your paper know that people are talking?”

Student – “Yes, by using quotation marks but I’m not sure how to use them.”

Teacher- “Let’s fix this sentence together”

The next conference with this student was much different. The student initiated the questioning by asking if he used the quotation marks correctly and if the other sentences looked O.K.

The writing attitudes of this fifth grade class became more positive and they slowly took more ownership of their writing as well as more of the responsibility for the improvements they were making.

Student responses to monthly writing assessments were more creative with more consistent application of the conventions of writing. These positive writing behaviors carried over to their end of year writing projects as well. For the first time in four years, students in my language arts class wrote, edited and, produced their final Ojus Book on their own. I felt that these were some of the best written stories and final student products that I have read in terms of completeness, creativity and, application of the conventions of writing.

Student written responses to short and extended response questions across the curriculum also became more detailed and complete.

Conclusions

After analyzing all the data collected during this research project, it was apparent that “Meaningful Writing” was successful in giving students a better attitude towards writing and also improved their writing assessment scores. I believe that this research showed that a complete program of instruction must include frequent opportunities for students to just write. While students need to learn the process of writing, a key component of their growth and progress in writing is to have more choice in their writing, especially with independent writing tasks. Students clearly need lots of feedback on what they are writing and how they are applying the conventions of writing, as well as the process of writing. These independent writing tasks are a great way to give students non - threatening, positive feedback and to give them the opportunity to voice what they think makes their writing better. This research showed that students slowly took more ownership of their writing and as this project progressed through the school year their attitudes towards writing became more positive. Giving students more ownership of their writing through independent and guided independent writing activities will allow students the freedom to take more chances with their writing. Students were more motivated to write and approached their writing with more enthusiasm.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the data collected during this project and the conclusions one could draw from this data, I believe that the following suggested policy recommendations are meaningful and valid.

The results of this project showed that the district should insure that independent and guided independent writing take place on a daily basis at school and at home.

On the district or school level, curriculum should be developed that gives specific strategies and recommendations that allow for greater student choice and input in their writing.

Teachers should make an effort to conference with students regularly and provide students with positive feedback and recommendations, which should also include the student’s opinions and ideas of what will make his / her writing better.

Policy should be put into place that insures the class size is maintained at a number that allows the teacher to give frequent and detailed feedback on writing.

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Appendix A

STUDENT WRITING ATTITUDE SURVEY

Date _____ Age _____

Mr. Kirkman

Please circle the number and the corresponding words that best describe your feelings for each question.

Circle One

1. I like writing stories .

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

2. Writing is fun.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

3. I like to write in my spare time.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

4. I enjoy writing notes and letters to people.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

5. I like writing at school.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

6. I have no trouble thinking about what to write.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

7. It's fun to write things at home.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

8. I like to share my writing with others.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

9. Writing is my favorite subject in school .

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

10. I wish I had more time to write at school.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

11. I like to read.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

11. I think I'm a good writer.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

12. I like to write / type on the computer

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

13. How often do you write at home?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

14. I like to draw

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot

15. What are your favorite things to write about? List in order of your 1st choice through your 5th .

1st _____

2nd _____

3rd _____

4th _____

5th _____

Appendix B

Writing Notebook Assignments

Weeks Of:

Week 2

Students are **expected** to complete the scheduled writing assignments listed below by **Notebook Check** of each week. Students should also have any daily assigned classroom writing assignments such as short answer responses to reading, Bill of Writes, etc. **Students are encouraged to take the time to write some of their own stories or journal entries along with the weekly required writing assignments. The objective of this writing agenda is to hopefully motivate you to write more and enjoy your writing experiences. Each Log entry should be dated. Free writing topics are open to written responses of any type. The Choice is yours.**

Friday : Work on News Report / Metaphor assignment due Tuesday 10/09/07. Make it as perfectly written as you can.

Monday: Work on News Report / Metaphor assignment due Tuesday 10/09/07. Make it as perfectly written as you can.

Tuesday: Write about a favorite friend. Why is this person your favorite friend?

Wednesday: Free writing on a topic of *choice*

Thursday: Writing Notebook Check No required writing.

Friday: Write about the things that make you happy? What makes you sad? Describe your feelings.

Monday : How do you celebrate your birthdays? Do you have a cake? Do you have a party? Be creative and give details.

Tuesday: Free write topic of *choice*.

Wednesday: Free write topic of *choice*

Thursday :Writing Notebook Check No required writing

Friday : Write about a time when you were really scared. Was it during a scary movie or maybe a thunderstorm? What scared you and why?

