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**Attacking Writer's Block for Low Income Students:  
Increasing Writing Achievement and Motivation Through Student Choice  
and Guided Writing Groups**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative action research study shares the observed behaviors and reported experiences of a third grade teacher and her students in an urban setting when student choice is implemented and encouraged in journal writing within collaborative, guided writing groups. Seven at-risk third grade students from an urban elementary school in northeastern Pennsylvania in the United States participated in the study. Through preliminary data collection, these students were identified as requiring additional writing support. Although these students struggled in all areas of writing, the primary focus of the study emphasized the students' ability to generate authentic ideas and produce sufficient content and details within their writing. Students were provided with a packet of journal prompts and encouraged to only choose prompts that were most interesting to them to write about.

This study examines how student choice and teacher lead guided writing groups affects both student motivation and writing achievement. Methods of analysis included review of student work, conferencing, observations, reflections, interviews, and surveys. After analyzing the data, findings suggest that students are more engaged and motivated to write if they are given the opportunity to choose what they want to write about. Students are also more confident writers when participating in guided writing groups, as documented by the study.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
RESEARCHER STANCE.....	1
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	6
Problem of Practice.....	6
History.....	7
Effects of Standardized Testing.....	9
Students of Poverty.....	11
Four Block Literacy Model.....	12
Writing Instruction and Test Preparation.....	13
Writing Workshop.....	14
Mini-Lessons.....	15
Writing Process/Conferencing.....	15
Sharing.....	16
Motivation.....	17
Writing Self-Efficacy.....	18
Student Choice.....	18
Technology as a Form of Student Choice.....	20
Guided Writing Groups.....	22
Summary.....	25
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	27
Introduction.....	27
Participants.....	27
Data Sources.....	28

Surveys/Interviews.....	28
Student Journals.....	28
Conferencing.....	29
Double Entry Journal/Field Log.....	29
Procedures.....	30
Trustworthiness.....	31
MY STORY.....	35
Beginning the Journey.....	35
Selling it.....	36
Sold!.....	39
Identifying the Staring Roles.....	41
There is a Dragon Under My Bed.....	42
Favorite Animals.....	46
Kickball.....	51
Mortal Combat.....	52
United by Penguins.....	55
Sharing Ideas.....	57
My Own “Ah Ha!” Moment.....	60
Cultivating Creative Freedom.....	61
Halt!.....	64
Conclusion.....	67
DATA ANALYSIS.....	69
Analysis of Student Writing Attitude Survey.....	69
Analysis of Interviews.....	72
Analysis of Double Entry Journal.....	74
Analysis of Student Artifacts.....	75
Conferencing.....	78
Codes and Bins.....	78
FINDINGS.....	82
Introduction.....	82

Theme Statements.....	84
NEXT STEPS.....	90
Student Choice Continued.....	90
Writing Achievement.....	91
Conclusion.....	92
REFERENCES.....	94
APPENDICES	
A Principal Consent Form.....	97
B Participant Consent Form.....	98
C Interview Protocol.....	99
D Survey: Writing Attitude Survey.....	100
E Writing Rubric.....	101

## **List of Tables**

Table 5.1: Initial Survey Data .....	70
Table 5.2: End Survey Data .....	72
Table 5.3: Initial Writing Data .....	76
Table 5.4: End Writing Data .....	77

## **List of Figures**

Figure 4.1: Students Journal.....	37
Figure 4.2: Sticker Bin and Journal Prompts .....	40
Figure 4.3: Student Artifact: Christian’s Favorite Animal .....	49
Figure 4.4: Student Artifact: Nicole’s Hamster .....	50
Figure 4.5: Student Artifact: Andrew’s Favorite Thing to do Inside .....	54
Figure 5.1: Codes and Bins .....	81
Figure 6.1: Theme Statements .....	84

## **RESEARCHER STANCE**

I have encountered an overabundance of challenges teaching in an urban setting where the majority of my students are impoverished and disadvantaged. My students rely on school simply to meet their basic needs that are not being met, and often times even acknowledged, at home.

I have a lot of students who have severe social and emotional needs, and it is a constant battle to advocate for them and help them transition to a proper, alternative educational setting. Most times, our efforts are unsuccessful and denied, resulting in them remaining in the regular education classroom. This interferes with the learning of everyone involved. The constant classroom disruptions do not create a positive learning environment for anyone. Transitioning the focus from behavior, social, and emotional issues to closing academic gaps proves to be a challenging feat in itself.

Another curricular roadblock we encounter is transiency. Our school's transiency rate has gone through the roof. In one of my most recent school years, I encountered over 19 classroom changes in my third grade classroom. One student had enrolled and un-enrolled from our school three times during that year alone. Trying to maintain any type of consistency as we maneuver through the district curriculum is nearly impossible.

In addition to these students already being at a disadvantage, our list of struggles is endless. It is no secret that school districts are constantly facing

budget crises. The effects of the substitute teacher shortage have been felt across the state, and we are certainly no strangers to it.

Because substitute jobs are not as competitive as they were in years past, substitute teachers can be more selective in their options. As one can imagine, substitute teachers are not eagerly awaiting the opportunity to spend the day at our urban school. This causes a lot of necessary shifting, almost daily, within our building and our support staff. It is a very common occurrence to have our reading support staff, special education teachers, and ESOL teachers pulled for coverage due to a lack of substitute teachers. Teachers are meant to be flexible, but the flexibility has its limits. The sad reality is that our neediest students have the least amount of instructional consistency.

Taking into account the previously mentioned struggles, along with numerous others, following district mandated curriculum, although it is imperative, is of the utmost difficulty to accomplish at a mastery level.

On the contrary to the majority of the students that I teach, I have had a very positive experience growing up in our educational system. I was a straight A, honor roll, student athlete. I graduated with the highest honors, and did equally as well in college. I was continually surrounded by like-minded people who also found great success in our education system. Because I had the family, life experiences, and motivation to be successful, I was. I was very fortunate, and I will be forever grateful for that.

However, it is these exact reasons that propel me to be an advocate for my students who are less fortunate than I was: students who are not privileged enough to grow up in a loving household with the support of a family who places emphasis on work ethic and motivation. I find it incredibly unfair that not all of our young students are presented with an equal playing field, and equal opportunities to be successful. We do not celebrate their successes, or acknowledge their growth. Instead we fixate on level of “proficiency” regardless of how irrelevant that may be to many of these students. It is this idea of unfairness and injustice that has driven me to become an educator, and influenced me to focus my research primarily on my disadvantaged students from low-income families.

By then end of my research project, I hope to have found sufficient research that helps me alleviate at least one of the struggles that I endure most frequently in my classroom, which is the writing gap. Each year, my students come in alarmingly low in regards to writing, and they are aware of their struggles. In my opinion, the lack of writing curriculum combined with the lack of motivation to write has a direct effect on writing performance for my impoverished students.

Students’ find writing intimidating because of the level of difficulty they experience while maneuvering through the process. Generating ideas that relate to a given topic has become a noticeable struggle due to the lack of life experiences

that my students have been exposed to. Giving students the chance to make their own choices in regards to writing may provide them with a greater incentive. It will put them in the driver seat of their own learning, and hopefully make their work feel more authentic.

Although my every day focus is closing the writing gap for my students of poverty, the idea behind my intended study can be beneficial for all student writers. Writing performance has not only decreased in schools located within an urban setting. Being a part of the Moravian College Graduate program has given me the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from all over, including those who work in more affluent districts. I have also experienced first hand, in clinics organized by the college, those students who are not receiving their education in an urban setting. The writing gap is prevalent across the board. It does not discriminate.

Providing students authenticity in their writing experiences will, hopefully, increase motivation to write in all types of student learners. Many teachers can agree that allowing students complete freedom to write about anything they want often leads to blank stares and blank papers. Generating ideas when given endless parameters proves to be difficult for students; just as providing meaningless prompts. It is my intention to present students with numerous outlets for them to choose from in order to help facilitate ideas that interest them to write about.

I plan on evaluating and documenting my research in numerous ways. I will measure motivation by utilizing a writing attitude survey that will be presented to my students prior to implementation of my intervention, during the process, and again once the intervention is complete. I will take field notes and observe students' journal writing to monitor their growth as a writer throughout the weeks of my research. A rubric will be addressed with my students so that they know what will be expected of them, and that rubric will be used to score their journal entries prior to and at the end of the intervention.

I truly believe that not all people learn the same, therefore they cannot be successful if they are all taught and instructed in the same way. I also believe that we are a product of our lifestyles, cultures, and experiences. Students are set up to fail when success is measured by experiences and lifestyles of only those who have been privileged enough to have them. Through this research, I hope to reach students on a different level. I hope to provide comfort and confidence in my students in order to increase their enthusiasm, confidence, and ability to write. By the end of my research project, my intention is to increase the motivation and writing ability of my low socio-economic status students through student choice within guided writing groups.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Problem of Practice**

In recent years, there has been an evident gap in writing achievement among many elementary aged students, especially of those students coming from a low socioeconomic status. Not only is achievement low, but the motivation to write quality work has been depleted. Students of poverty do not have the same life experiences as their school age peers, resulting in an increasing difficulty to feel ownership and pride over their writing experiences and making writing feel authentic.

In synthesizing the following research, I've explored methods of writing instruction that have been successful, defined a few key terms that will assist my action research project in increasing poverty-stricken third grade students' motivation to write, and inherently beginning to close the writing gap. Being steered by the writing workshop approach, and through the implementation of guided writing groups, conferencing, and encouraging student choice, I intend to motivate my students to become better writers. This research inspired me to pose the question, "How can students of poverty increase their desire to write, as well as their writing scores, through working in small writing groups with their teacher on topics of their choice?"

## **History**

In order to begin formulating a solution to bridge the writing gap in elementary schools, it is important to consider the history of writing instruction. According to Hawkins and Razali (2012), there has been very little information published on elementary school writing practices in US historical work. Most information about writing curriculum pertains to secondary grades. Regardless, what we do know is that writing instruction began solely as penmanship.

At the turn of the twentieth century, writing's primary purpose referred to the physical act of putting ink to paper. Writing was simply believed to be the transition of the spoken thought onto the page. For this reason, writing required no formal instruction beyond the mechanics, such as handwriting, grammar, and spelling (Hawkins and Razali, 2012).

According to Hawkins and Razali, handwriting was the primary concern because, at this time in history, business and correspondence writing were still composed by hand, so the value of legibility was immense. "Instructional practice drew heavily on traditional approaches consisting mostly of rote learning, memorization through oral and written repetition, and copying models" (p. 307). Students were often prompted to first copy words, sentences and then eventually graduated to writing longer models correctly. They were tasked to write number sentences accurately from dictation, learn the proper rules for spelling, and proper

grammar and punctuation use. It wasn't until the 1930s-1940s that there was an apparent shift in the way writing was addressed.

Penmanship and writing eventually parted ways, characterizing penmanship as a subset of writing, and officially renaming it to handwriting. This shift coincided with several influential educational modifications, such as a secondary definition of writing. This definition, more recognizable to us in present day, “refers not to the act of forming words themselves, but instead to the actual written product produced” (Hawkins and Razali, p. 309). This form of writing instruction was utilized under the subject title of language instruction. Sentence syntax, spelling, and punctuation were among the lessons taught. On occasion, students (mostly in the upper elementary grades) were permitted to practice written composition, mostly in the form of a friendly letter. However, the majority of this written work was reproduced from viewing and copying a model (Hawkins and Razali, 2012).

Change erupted again in the 50s and 60s as curriculum guides appeared with methods books that “continued to promote the need for students to write from personal experience for authentic purposes and audiences” (p. 311). The idea emerged that children could only learn to write through authentic writing experiences, and teachers were encouraged to teach mechanics on an individual basis within the writing. This shift, focusing on redefining writing as a process, occurred in the 1980s.

“The writings of Calkins, Graves, Murray, Emig, and Flower and Hayes impacted the development of curriculum in the 1980’s immensely” (p. 312). The new definition of writing as a process paved the way for innovative methods of writing instruction that we still use today. Writing now emphasized necessity to spend ample time on individual assignments. Students would be required to interact with their writing over a longer period of time, allowing the opportunity to reflect and revise. Students also were prompted to “engage in planning/prewriting, craft multiple drafts through revision, and bring a piece of writing to publication for an authentic audience” (p. 313). This created an on-going authentic environment for writing, and an overall positive learning experience. However, in the present day we are yet again faced with major shifts in our literacy instruction.

### **Effects of Standardized Testing**

Standardized testing has been the catalyst that has forced a change in current literacy instruction across the country. According to Higgins, Miller, and Wegman (2006), “High stakes standardized testing can greatly influence the teaching of reading and writing” (p. 310). A vast majority of teachers, against their will, feel obligated to teach to the tests, putting student learning on the back burner. Schools put on demands to spend significant time preparing students to take state assessments by engaging them in test-like activities, which forces teachers to change their literacy curricula (Higgins, Miller, Wegamn, 2006). “In

an effort to raise test scores and API ratings, teachers have moved away from the well-tested foundations of writing instruction: student choice, revision, writer's craft, publication, and authentic assessment" (Brown, Morrell, Rowlands, 2011, p. 17).

Due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the emphasis on accountability and the use of test scores to make critical decisions about the academic future of children was strongly reinforced (Higgins et al., 2006). To this day, school districts around the country are feeling the repercussions of this act. High-stakes tests are very heavy on reading and math, and focus only slightly on writing. Reading and math have inadvertently become the biggest emphasis of instruction and, by default, caused writing instruction to become significantly less of a priority. Hence, we are now experiencing a major gap in writing achievement.

Although the source of the problem has been identified, a solution still remains uncertain. The consequences of not performing well on the high-stakes tests are too intimidating to warrant a change in teaching to the test. In some states, third grade students are automatically retained if they fail to achieve the standard. In other states, schools are punished and stamped with failing labels and threats of state take-over (McCaslin, Burross, Good, 2005). So on goes the vicious cycle of drill and practice math and reading skills, while writing instruction is overlooked.

## **Students of Poverty**

Students of poverty more greatly affected by the emphasis on standardized testing, coupled with the lack of writing instruction. It is argued that the use of high-stakes tests “causes poverty students to receive a curriculum that is focused primarily on drill and practice of low-level reading and math skills” (McCaslin, Burross, Good, 2005 p. 4). These mandated tests restrict students of poverty from being exposed to higher-order learning and the fullness of what we consider an overall education, including writing, science, and social studies. The majority of school time is spent on the priority areas of reading and math.

“Poverty is the largest correlate of reading achievement” (Cunningham, 2006, p. 382). You can fairly accurately assume test scores based on how many children in a U.S. school qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. Schools with a large number of students living in poverty very rarely achieve their goals for end-of-grade literacy tests. Despite this fact, Cunningham was able to identify six schools, who’s population was made up predominantly of students living in poverty, that were able to score better on their literacy tests than other schools in their districts, which had lower levels of poverty.

Cunningham found that there were 12 factors that appeared to be important for high literacy achievement. They are assessment, community involvement, comprehensive curriculum, engagement, instruction, leadership, materials, parent participation, perseverance and persistence, professional

development, real reading and writing, and specialist support. These factors were found among the six poverty stricken schools studied that were able to achieve higher standards than their less diverse peers within their districts. All six schools utilized the Four Block framework for balanced literacy.

#### *Four Block Literacy Model*

The Four Blocks framework (Cunningham, 2006) is currently widely utilized throughout schools across the United States, and several other countries. It contains a word block that instructs on sight words, fluency, phonics and spelling. Additionally, the framework includes a guided reading block that concentrates on strategies of comprehension, building and accessing prior knowledge, and strengthening vocabulary. Another block of the framework is reserved to self-selected reading, which incorporates teacher read-alouds and independent reading. Lastly, a block of the framework is dedicated to process writing and focused writing. It is within this block where the best practices of writing instruction need to be implemented to complete the balanced literacy approach, and to facilitate successful young writers.

However, we know all too well that it is often this writing block that becomes eliminated, or ignored, in many districts due to emphasis on state testing. Because high- stakes testing is not disappearing anytime soon, and with the adoption of the Common Core standards, teachers must find an instructional

balance that does not sacrifice their students' exposure to writing, just as the schools from Cunningham's study were able to do.

### **Writing Instruction and Test Preparation**

Through well-calculated research, a few best practices have emerged allowing for sufficient writing instruction in conjunction with state testing preparation. According to some researchers, the two do not need to be mutually exclusive, however difficult a task that may seem to be.

*The Global Achievement Gap* claimed that the ability to write is paramount to two of the seven survival skills named a necessity to the upcoming generation in our increasingly competitive global economy (Calkins, Ehrensworth, 2016). For this reason, it is crucial that educators find a way to incorporate adequate writing instruction back into the classroom, regardless of the demands of high-stakes testing.

According to Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2006), "students who have effective writing instruction score better on state writing tests than their counterparts who receive specific instruction in the skills assessed on the test" (p. 310). In conclusion, not only does test preparation rob students of a proper and well-rounded education, it is not necessarily proven to contribute to test taking successes. Sufficient research has been done that proves otherwise.

Attention to the social nature of language, recognition of the importance of student-centered focus, and the use of developmentally appropriate practices are

the three aspects found in effective writing instruction (Higgins, et al.). Instructional approaches that include these three features will aid students in writing creatively and communicatively, and help them to pass necessary standardized tests in writing. One instructional approach that deserves more focus, that has proven to be successful and transcends the hands of time, is the Writing Workshop approach.

### **Writing Workshop**

“Writing workshop is an interactive approach to teaching and writing as students learn and practice the importance of rehearsal, drafting/revising, and editing their pieces of writing” (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007, p. 131). Time, ownership, and response are three key ingredients that have made Writer’s Workshop a success amongst students and teachers throughout the years. It is the child-centered nature of writing workshop that enables its appeal to students (Szczepanski, 2003).

According to Calkins and Ehrenworth (2016) “to accelerate students’ development as writers, a school must set aside protected time for writing” (p. 3). Writing is a skill that grows, expands and develops with use. Young writers need to be provided with time to write in order to cultivate the skill. Speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing are strengthened and reinforced throughout the process (Szczepanski, 2003). But writing

workshop has a greater purpose than just providing time to write. It consists of student driven mini-lessons, the writing process, conferencing, and sharing.

### *Mini-Lessons*

Mini-lessons are intended to mirror what the students are doing in their writing, with the addition of being guided by standards and district curriculum (Szczepanski, 2003). It is a brief five-10 minute lesson, which can be implemented prior to writing, or at the end of the process. Mini-lessons are meant to focus on aspects of the writing process such as classroom procedures, prewriting strategies, revision strategies, editing, and writing skills. It is the teacher's job to closely examine and analyze student work to develop appropriate and meaningful daily lessons (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007).

### *Writing Process/Conferencing*

In order to accumulate ideas for mini-lessons, teachers frequently participate in conferencing with their students within the writing process. The writing process can be broken down into the four subtopics of rehearsal, drafting, revising, and editing. Conferencing within this process is a dual-purpose technique. Students are receiving feedback in the midst of their work, and teachers are accruing data that will drive their future mini-lessons (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). "Feedback is the most potent when students don't yet have mastery and when it is given just in time to learners in the midst of work" (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016, p. 4). Feedback is most beneficial when it is given

frequently, during the time that the writer is engaging in writing, with follow up opportunities for further practice.

### *Sharing*

The Writing Workshop process concludes with the final component, the Author's Chair. During this portion of the workshop, the author sits in a special chair and engages with the entire class while sharing his/her writing. In essence, the Author's Chair becomes a form of group conferencing, or peer conferencing (Jasmine & Weiner 2007). "This is a time to help students improve writing while they listen and respond through purposeful dialogue," (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016, p. 4).

The Writer's Workshop approach provides many key components that are necessary to develop young, successful writers. One of the most influential pieces this approach offers is the opportunity to bring ownership back to the writing process. "When children are encouraged to write about what they are interested in and care about and what they want to learn more about, writing no longer becomes a chore" (Szczepanski, 2003, p. 14). With the Writing Workshop process guiding my research, I would like to answer the questions, "What are the observed changes in low-income third grade writers writing achievement as student choice is implemented through guided writing groups?" and "What are the observed changes in low-income third grade writers writing achievement as motivation to write increases?"

## **Motivation**

Research shows us, and common sense tells us, “attitudes, beliefs, and motivation play a significant role in students’ literacy learning” (Brown, Morrell, Rowlands, 2011, p. 15). In a study conducted by Hall and Axelrod, the findings suggested that, “writing attitudes can influence students’ beliefs about their writing competence and in turn affect their writing achievement“ (Hall & Axelrod, 2014, p. 35-36).

We similarly know that, generally, students’ attitudes towards writing worsen as they reach the upper grades. Students enter kindergarten and first grade and find pleasure in writing. That pleasure, as Donald Graves attributes to the way writing is taught, is destroyed as students move from grade to grade (Brown et al.). The ownership aspect of the Writing Workshop approach leaves room for motivation and self-efficacy to creep back into writing instruction.

Motivation can be increased by allowing students to develop into creative and confident writers. It is the “lack of confidence and related writing anxiety” (Brown et al., p. 15) that contributes to the negative attitudes towards writing as children progress through the schooling system. “Students who view themselves as incompetent writers are less willing to engage fully in writing tasks” (p. 15). On the contrary, those students who view themselves as competent writers are more likely to pursue and attempt diverse opportunities to write. They will make greater efforts to achieve writing competence, and will put forth more effort in

writing. Writing attitudes will also affect the choices students make about writing, the strategies they choose to implement, and the risks they are willing to take on writing assignments (Hall & Axelrod, 2014).

### *Writing Self-Efficacy*

Writing self-efficacy can be thought of as students' belief in their own competence as writers. It is no surprise that students who have higher levels of writing self-efficacy experience greater achievement in writing. Their level of confidence in their own writing propels them to expend more effort and persistence in writing activities, and directly increases their level of enjoyment (Hall & Axelrod, 2014).

### **Student Choice**

If we can increase writing attitudes and motivation to write, we can increase writing achievement. In Hall and Axelrod's study, the biggest motivator for writing was topic choice.

In reference to the high stakes testing era, Donald Graves (Brown et al., 2011) argues that "the way writing is taught in schools not only denies these young writers their identities as authors, it kills the pleasure of self expression," (p. 15). Student choice, as identified in Hall and Axelrod's (2014) study, needs to be at the forefront of writing experiences. Regardless of the age group interviewed, topic choice was the most abundantly debated issue among all group sessions. Students articulated the importance of familiarity in their writing, and

the restrictions they felt when forced to write about assigned topics. Similarly, a study done in an urban setting by Eileen Kaiser (2013) noted that “several teachers observed that allowing students to choose their own topics seemed to create a space for them to explore issues and challenges in their own lives” (p. 220).

If students are granted the option to write about topics that are meaningful to them, motivation to write can be increased, as well as writing achievement. “When it is important to a writer to communicate an idea accurately to readers, he or she uses conventions of spelling and grammar with care,” (Calkins & Ehenworth, 2016, p. 4).

The writing process can be extremely challenging for some students, even when provided student choice. Some of their issues can stem from failing to generate initial story ideas that feel authentic for them to write about. This can cause them to struggle in the planning process, and all the way through the writing process. It is crucial that in these situations, teachers have the ability to provide significant interventions to aid students in generating story ideas that still remain authentic.

The At Home At School program, implemented and researched by Dunn and Finley (2010) was an arts based/integrated curriculum literacy program that employed alternative strategies for struggling writers from low-income families, shelters, and transitional houses. To help initiate story ideas, teachers provided

students with art materials such as modeling clay, paints, markers, and crayons as an option in the pre-writing phase. Students selected which outlet they would like to utilize, and built their story ideas from there. To assist the writing phase, students were presented with a writing assistance software CoWriter:SOLO to help transfer illustrated story ideas to text. Students who participated in this program displayed motivation to create their stories, and improvement in detailed, creative writing.

#### *Technology as a Form of Student Choice*

“Technology—in the form of digital tools incorporated into writing instruction—can help teachers motivate and engage young children,” (Saulsburry, Kilpatrick, Wolbers, Dostal, 2015, p. 30). It provides another element of student choice for young writers to get excited about. In this study, it becomes evident that technology has the ability to create authentic writing opportunities that positively impact young writers’ choices.

Skype and a wireless keyboard were used to help a few students research the best class pet for their classroom. Students were observed as being engaged as they interviewed a pet store owner via skype, while taking turns typing their questions on a wireless keyboard into a shared word document. The students requested to extend the activity and asked for permission to take the information they learned and create a flier, and an informative essay about their soon-to-be-acquired pet.

In another classroom involved in this study, the teacher prompted students to write about an event from their own lives. She allowed for the students to work with an iPad application called Popplet ([www.popplet.com](http://www.popplet.com)) in order to assist them through the planning process. Popplet “allows users to position text and graphics in a variety of visual formats, including webs and lists,” (p. 33). Students were reported as being excited and engaged in the planning process, focusing on their task and working independently.

As a final product, students transferred their Popplet plans to Book Creator ([www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com) and [www.redjumper.net/bookcreator](http://www.redjumper.net/bookcreator)) where they were able to create text and assemble photos into a book. In Book Creator, students had the option to import pictures or take them using the camera and insert them or manipulate them. They were also able to add text or writing tools with different colors. Sound was also available to them to add flare to their stories. Because we are “living in a technology-infused world where most of our students live digitally connected lives” it is to no surprise that the students involved in this study were eager to share their work using the Dropbox, the free on-line service, to share their work and receive feedback from other students (p. 34).

In a study done by Sessions, Kang, and Womack (2016) iPad apps were found to have “affected sequencing of events in narrative writing, influenced students to visualize the coherence of the story, and directed the decisions students made about pacing plot” (p. 224). Teachers were able to observe, and

students additionally reported, that the iPad apps motivated students to continue writing, and that they made the process of writing more social and engaging. The apps “motivated students to actively engage in learning, which increased students’ confidence and helped improve students’ writing skills” (p. 224).

These studies strongly suggests that “integrating technology and finding the right digital tools motivates our students and fits their lives. It also fits into effective instructional practices” (Saulsburry et al, 2015, p. 34). An effective instructional practice beneficial to writing instruction where student choice and technology can play a role is the implementation of guided writing groups.

### **Guided Writing Groups**

A culmination of the research cited above all comes together in the form of small group instruction, a rendition of the writer’s workshop approach, or guided writing groups. Guided writing groups can be defined as “small, temporary groups of students who share similar needs at a particular point in time” (Gibbons, 2008, p. 114). This form of writing instruction provides opportunities for “in the moment” feedback, guidance, and learning. Teachers are able to “observe students during specific writing events and provide immediate instructional scaffolding” (p. 114). The role of the teacher, as research tells us, can be very influential to the development of student attitudes towards writing (Hall & Axelrod, 2014). This is why guided writing groups, providing fluid

teacher interaction, can be so beneficial to struggling writers, and all young writers.

Collaborative discussions are welcomed and encouraged during guided writing groups. The importance of “talk” whether it be self-talk, or with a teacher and/or classmates is very influential when it comes to writing. It benefits both teacher and student to participate in, and listen to the “talk” that goes on during the writing instruction and process. Children may lean across the table to discuss their writing ideas, see what their friends are writing, inquire about spelling, or discuss common interests. Teachers who listen can “gain insights into their students as readers, writers, and learners” (Laman, 2009, p. 133). In addition, students can build confidence, and generate meaningful ideas from their peers.

“Talk” between the student and the teacher is most frequently in the form of conferencing. Calkins and Anderson describe writing conferences as “the heart of the writing workshop because they are the time when teachers provide individual instruction” (Laman, p. 136). Without conducting individual conferences, teachers would be at a loss for what kind of assistance his or her student needs. Laman stated that “conferences often became a shared thinking space where writers and their writing teachers came to new understandings” (p. 136)

The idea of “talk” should not just be limited to the teacher and the student. Within the guided writing groups, or any small group writing setting, students

should be permitted and encouraged to collaborate, listen, and connect with their peers within their groups. Laman reported that children's talk function amongst themselves helped students "share their growing writing repertoires" (Laman, 2009, p. 139). "Students would share their drafts and various strategies, or talk about what they were learning as writers" (p. 139). Peers were able to make personal and readerly connections to each other's writing. This created a real and immediate audience.

This collaboration among students, their teachers, and their written work can be harbored and given a chance to flourish within small guided writing groups. Because the students are grouped in that they share similar needs, mini lessons can be tailored to fit their academic level of need. As defined in the Writer's Workshop process, mini lessons should be reflective of the instructional needs of the students. The use of guided writing groups makes the mini lessons more efficient and specific to the small group of students.

A previously mentioned, Guided Writing groups follow the Writer's Workshop model, but on a smaller scale. The use of these fluid groups allows for the teacher to individualize instruction, and meet with students on a more personal level. It also encourages students to collaborate with their peers, and become more comfortable and confident in their own writing practices, strategies, and ideas.

## **Summary**

Building a writing block with the foundations of the Writer's Workshop approach within guided writing groups has fueled the fire behind my research. The Writer's Workshop process calls for process writing, conferencing and collaborating, mini lessons, and sharing. Students within my study will be following these guidelines, but from within a small guided writing group setting, where the teacher and peers are readily available throughout the process. Students will be provided with a plethora of options to utilize as ways to initiate story ideas, one being access to technology tools. As the research has shown us, technology is the language of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner. It's the language that children are currently immersed in, and motivated by.

Due to the intense standardized testing mandates, writing instruction has been, by default, disregarded. It is no longer student centered, and finding students intrinsically motivated to write is nearly nonexistent. Students are, more often than not, dictated what topics to write about, creating an unauthentic writing experience. For those students of poverty who lack general life experiences, the writing process becomes even more excruciating. This has produced a writing gap that needs to be repaired. These harsh facts have caused me to generate the research questions, "What are the observed changes in low-income third grade writers writing achievement as student choice is implemented through guided

writing groups?” and “What are the observed changes in low-income third grade writers writing achievement as motivation to write increases?”

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The objective of my study was for my students to have informal, authentic writing experiences within a guided writing group. Students participated in journal writing where they selected their own journal prompts to respond to. My intentions were that these experiences, over time, would promote motivation to write, and as a result, increase writing achievement. Students received a third grade writing rubric that was available to them at all times so that they were aware of my expectations. Students also participated in conferences, at least once a week, in order to go over their entries and to receive feedback.

### **Participants**

This study consisted of seven third grade students in a Title 1 school. Students were selected for this study based on the results of a writing assessment that showed them to be among the neediest of writers within the third grade class. One student has an IEP in the areas of Reading and Writing, and another student is an advanced ELL student. By mid-study, because of the transiency within the school, two of the students initially present in the study moved to different schools. All of the students come from diverse home settings, and low socioeconomic status. They are all approved for free or reduced lunch.

The building principal received a consent form, which was approved by the HSIRB, and permitted the study to take place. Each student selected for the

intervention received both a student assent form that they completed, as well as a parental consent form that was signed and returned, both of which were also approved by HSIRB.

### **Data Sources**

Using an action research model, I explored the effects of student choice in journal writing within guided writing groups. My data collection time began at the end of September, 2017, and lasted until the beginning of December, 2017.

#### *Surveys/Interviews*

To provide data on engagement and motivation, I used a writing attitude survey and student interviews to understand the feelings my students had towards writing prior to implementation of my intervention. I utilized the same survey and interview questions during the research, and again at the completion of my intervention to measure how much their feelings changed, if at all. The questions focused primarily on the students' attitudes towards writing, and their ability to write. It also focused on their interest in student choice vs. teacher-selected prompts.

#### *Student Journals*

In order to collect data on growth in writing achievement, I used student journals as pre and post assessments. Students wrote in their journals on a weekly basis, and were formally evaluated 3 times throughout the study. Students were assessed on their writing prior to the implementation of the intervention to create

baseline data, and then again mid study and post study. Students were assessed on their journal writings based on a third grade writing rubric, or an adapted third grade writing rubric to comply with any IEP's as needed.

This was the same rubric that the students received at the beginning of the study. A copy of the rubric remained in their writing folder for them to refer to at any time to self-monitor their work.

### *Conferencing*

Conferencing was a piece of my study that occurred regularly, and allowed me to help the students reflect on any strengths and weaknesses throughout the writing process. At the start of each session, I was able to take time to read through the students' most recent writing and conference with them. Sometimes these conferences turned into collaborative group conferences. I was able to record observations and insights from these conferences in a double entry journal.

### *Double Entry Journal/Field Log*

To monitor progress made in both writing achievement and motivation throughout my study, I kept a double entry journal. In the double entry journal, I recorded observations of each session within our guided writing group, as well as any insights gleaned from those observations. I recorded observations that included student actions and attitudes, dialogue, and summaries of individual conferences. This allowed me to keep accurate documentation of each individual

student's strengths and weaknesses, and helped guide my instruction in future guided groups.

### **Procedures**

Students were given journals and asked to write an entry in them weekly during our small, guided writing groups, consisting of 4-5 students. Students were offered a packet of about fifty journal prompts that they were encouraged to choose from. Each time they completed a prompt and checked their work against their third grade writing rubric, they were able to place a sticker next to the prompt, indicating that it was completed. Both the packet of prompts, student choice, and the use of the sticker reward system were intended to increase the students' motivation to write, and engagement in the writing process.

While writing, students were encouraged to refer to their world wall dictionaries to help with spelling, located within their writing folder. They were consistently reminded to apply any known spelling patterns that have been covered in class prior to that date. Students were also urged to independently self-check their work with their third grade writing rubric.

Within the guided writing groups, students participated in mini-lessons regarding the writing process, mirroring the subtopics presented on writing rubric. While working in the guided writing groups, collaborative discussions were encouraged amongst the teacher and peers. Student-teacher conferences occurred

multiple times throughout any guided writing session. During these conferences, I recorded observational notes.

Students were asked to take a writing attitude survey at the beginning, middle, and at the end of the study. This survey was centered around their feelings towards writing. Student interviews were also administered at the beginning and end of the study to help obtain a clearer understanding on the students' feelings and motivation to write.

Additionally, students wrote a pre and post journal entry to determine if there was an increase in writing growth, and if there was a correlation between motivation to write and writing achievement.

### **Trustworthiness**

It is imperative that an effective teacher establishes a level of trust and respect in a student/teacher relationship and within the classroom environment and community. Trust and respect cannot be artificially created, but can be established through carefully planned opportunities that are implemented, and constantly reflected upon. In a similar way, trustworthiness and validity within a research study must be carefully calculated, flexible, and constantly reflected upon. Action researchers are held accountable by following certain ethical guidelines, ensuring a study's validity and trustworthiness. I made sure to follow these steps in my journey of becoming an action researcher.

In taking my initial steps to achieving both trustworthiness and validity in my study, I presented my research proposal to Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB). Upon approval by HSIRB, I provided my elementary school principal with a consent form, detailing my intended research and practices. After obtaining approval to move forward with my study within my classroom, I proceeded to distribute parental consent forms to each of my students' families. The consent form made sure to accurately portray the intentions of my study to both my students and their parents, as well as explain the utmost level of confidentiality that I promised to uphold. Students would be referred to using pseudonyms, and their true identity would never be revealed. I explained that the students would not be treated any differently or penalized should they opt out of the study. Additionally, my letter informed the parents that the data and results of this study and their child's part in it would be kept in a secure location throughout the duration of my study.

Taking into consideration the young age of my students participating in my study, I provided them with a kid-friendly student assent form. Although my students were eager to participate and help me continue my journey as a life-long learner, I made sure to depict, in kid language, what was being asked of them.

Upon receiving consent from HSIRB, my elementary principal, students, and parents, I began collecting my data using a variety of tools. Hendricks (2013) states that, "credibility can be increased by collecting multiple forms of data and

triangulating data sources” (p. 124). I was able to triangulate my data by utilizing student interviews/surveys, student work/artifacts, and participant observations from a field log. Comparing the various forms of data allowed me to produce credible results that informed my action research.

While collecting data, I was careful not to let any preconceived notions or biases interfere with my data collection. I remained diligent in separating opinions from observations by continuing to be reflexive in my inquiry. As Hendricks (2013) recommends, I challenged myself to consider how any possible assumptions might be affecting my planning and/or my interpretations of the data (p. 133).

A teacher researcher group was also established to help solidify my trustworthiness and validity throughout my study. McNiff (2016) refers to this as a validation group, who’s responsible for soliciting their critical feedback on the quality of your research. According to McNiff (2016) the job of the validation group is to:

“ Consider your knowledge claims and give critical feedback regarding the validity of your claims and your research. They also judge whether you may proceed with your research or should reconsider certain elements and revise your action plan.”

I met with my teacher researcher group in person on a weekly basis, and had access to their thoughts and opinions electronically every day, as needed. It

was through this support group and their outside perspectives that allowed me to eliminate any limited biases that succeeded in seeping through, despite my best efforts. Because of all of my efforts to maintain validity and trustworthiness, and the support of my Moravian teacher researcher group, I was able to remain neutral in my findings.

## **MY STORY**

### **Beginning the Journey**

In my few years of teaching elementary age students, I have learned a few tricks of the trade. For starters, if you want students to buy into an activity, you really have to oversell it. Something as undesired as cleaning the classroom floors can seamlessly turn into a well sought after job if presented the right way, and with the right tone. As a member of the Clean up Crew in my classroom, students have an opportunity to pack up before all of their peers, a true perk of its own because, after all, in third grade being first for anything and everything is crucial. Being a member of the Clean Up Crew can also earn you a classroom “ticket” for a job well-done. After accumulating five of our classroom currency, a prize can be awarded. As you may have concluded, being a member of the Clean up Crew is not only a preferred task, but one that the students genuinely get excited for.

Getting students enthusiastic for writing can easily be compared to motivating them to clean the classroom floors. Simply presenting a writing activity warrants moans, groans, and sudden stomach aches that the nurse simply must tend to immediately. Being conscious of this, I knew I had one chance to present my writing activity to my eager group of third grade students. I also knew that I had to find a way to keep this act up for longer than just one session.

Motivating students to write one time would hardly suffice. I was on a mission for sustained writing motivation.

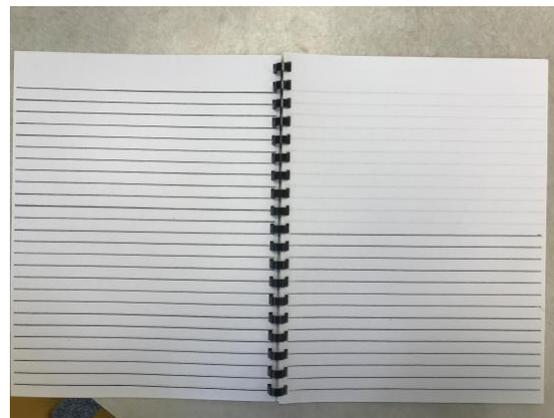
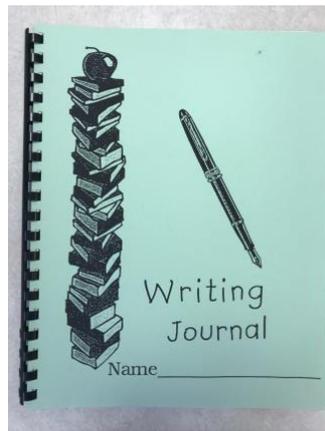
### **Selling it**

Another way to spark excitement out of elementary age students is to provide them with “gifts.” Again, a “gift” is what you make of it and how you sell it. If you make a student believe you are giving them the greatest gift ever, they trustingly believe you. On the day I was prepared to begin my study, I had quite a few “gifts” to provide my students with first.

“Ok class, I have some exciting news today!” I said with the most energetic voice I could muster up. “We are going to start a new activity that only we will be a part of. Before we get started, I have some very important presents to give.” If my overly energetic voice hadn’t caught their ears initially, the mere mention of the word presents had them locked in. “You must be very careful with these, because they will belong to you forever.” By the wide-eyed looks on their faces and exchanged glances, I know they are hooked.

I walked around the classroom and distributed a black folder, clearly filled with precious items that the students could not wait to get their hands on. Their bright eyes analyzed the plain black folder as if it were a chest full of treasures. Once I passed the folder out to the last student, I softly announced, “You may now carefully open your folder. The first thing I want you to do is take out the brand new green journal.” The students gasped in amazement, as if they had

never seen anything so spectacular. They gently removed their journals from the folder, careful not to disturb anything else that may be inside. “This is your very own writing journal. Please write your name as neatly as possible on the front cover.” Each student meticulously printed their name on the cover as I continued to circulate the room, monitoring their excitement.



*Figure 4.1 Student Journal*

Once I saw that the students were ready and anxious to continue exploring their new “gift” I asked them to retrieve the packet that was inside their black folder. “I want you to look through this packet. This packet has almost 50 different journal prompts for you to choose from to write about in your brand new green journal. You can go in any order that you would like. Take a few minutes to turn and talk to your neighbor about which prompts you like the best.”

The students’ eyes immediately scanned the page, before I was even able to finish delivering my instructions. Within seconds, I could hear the chatter of excited little voices.

“Check out number 7!” Cole exclaimed.

“I’m going to start with number 28!” Christian adds.

“I want to write about this one! A trick that I played on my mom!”

Andrew grins from ear to ear.

I gave them a few minutes to continue to brew up their excitement, while I circulated and enjoyed witnessing smiles and giggles shared as they read through the prompts together. Some students were placing check marks next to prompts that they wanted to write about immediately, even though they were not prompted to do so. Their excitement to begin this writing task was magnetic, and I could not wait to begin this journey with them.

“Alright boys and girls, would anyone like to share out some of the prompts that excited them the most? I see that some of you checked off a few prompts that made you giggle, or were really exciting to you.” Again, before I could finish giving my directions, hands shot up from every corner of the room. The level of participation this one question sparked was more than I could have anticipated.

One by one, as students shared their favorite prompts, the enthusiasm spread. Quicker than a hand that had already shared could descend, the next would pop up. It was contagious! Reluctantly, I had to announce that we only had time to share one more prompt out loud. This awarded me with sighs of disappointment, but I was smiling inside.

“Are we going to be able to start these today?” Molly called out.

With a smile, I replied, “Not today, but we will be starting very soon.”

Now my task would be to bottle this excitement and engagement to use throughout our sessions together.

**Sold!**

“Boys and girls, do you remember your special black writing folder?”

Before I could get the words out of my mouth, seven or eight of the students already whipped their folders out and anxiously slammed them on their desks as smiles spread across their faces. “Please get those folders out. I have some more instructions for you today.” A series of cheering and shouting, “Yes!” filled the room. These directions instantly prompted chatter amongst the students.

“I want to write about the one with the dragon under the bed!” I overheard Nicole say.

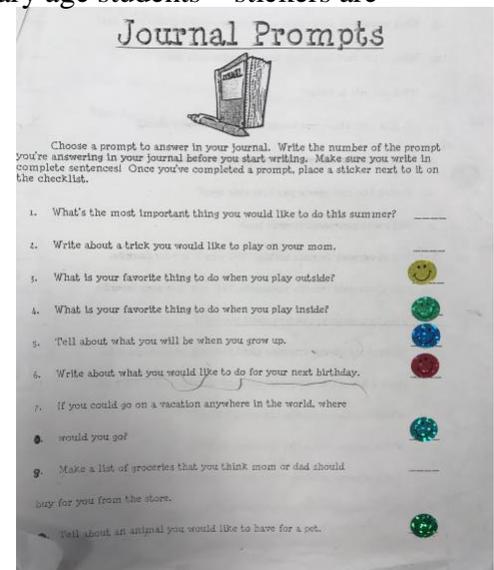
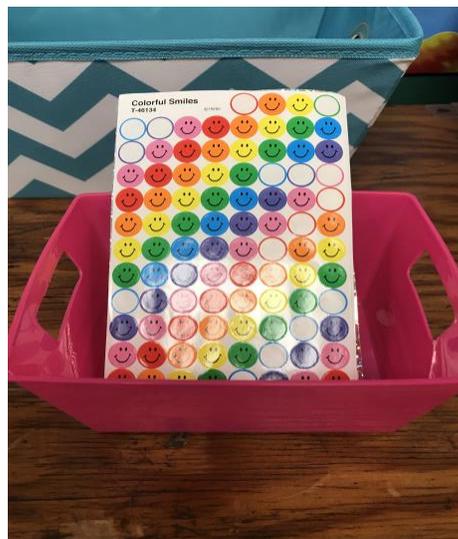
“I want to write about what I want to be when I grow up! I want to be a teacher like Mrs. Habick!” Isabel announced.

“I’m going to play football in the NFL,” Christian stated.

Although I was ecstatic to hear the level of excitement, I had to bring the class back together. “I have some more exciting news about your new journals and folders.” This got their attention instantly. “I see some of you placed check marks on the blank lines next to the prompts to remind yourself that you wanted

to write about that prompt. Those lines are not meant for check marks, although it is fine if you used it for that reason. But they are actually for these stickers!”

At this point, I uncovered a bright pink bin that was filled with hundreds of colorful, glittery, smiley-faced stickers. The sounds of awe and excitement that circulated through the room was magical. “As you finish each journal prompt, you may place a sticker on that line to indicate that it is completed. This is how you can monitor how many prompts you have finished.” The students turned and looked at each other as the grins on their faces grew and eyes widened with anticipation. Another trick to teaching elementary age students—stickers are gold.



*Figure 4.2 Sticker Bin and Journal Prompts*

I let this idea of self-monitoring through the use of stickers marinate long enough in hopes that the next part of my directions didn't upset them too much. “Now boys and girls, the only way you will be permitted to place a sticker on

your packet is if you have checked over your work using the rubric that is also tucked inside your black folder. Please get that out now.” The sticker-bliss that the students experienced just moments before served its purpose as they continued to happily remove their rubrics from their black folder. Hoping that my plan would succeed to maintain their attention and eagerness as I reviewed an otherwise boring rubric, I began to discuss each section with them. Much to my surprise, the students remained engaged and followed along as I reviewed and explained each section of the rubric. Some students were even using their pointer finger to read along with me as we discussed how they were supposed to score themselves.

I continued to explain that students were to reuse the same rubric for each journal, and to think of it more as a checklist. If they did not give themselves a three or higher in each category, then they would need to fix their work before moving on, or before giving themselves a sticker. I realized that the novelty of this would wear off relatively quickly, but knew that we would cross that bridge when we got to it.

### **Identifying the Staring Roles**

In addition to providing students with an outlet to help assist them in generating authentic ideas to write about, I wanted to help cultivate an environment where students felt like they were confident, successful writers, too.

In order to do this, I decided to implement small, collaborative, guided writing groups during our writing period.

Some of my students are able to write more naturally, without the assistance of a teacher or their peers. Other students require some additional support. Although I had a concrete idea of who these students may be, I knew I needed to take a closer look at each of them as individual writers.

After administering an initial writing assessment, I was able to identify seven students whose needs were apparent enough that they warranted additional support. According to our district grading scale, a score of four is exceeding the standard, three is proficient, two is basic, and a one is below basic. Joey, Jessica, Christian, Andrew, and Nicole all scored a one on their initial writing assessment. Nicholas and Kevin each scored a two, but just barely scraped by. Kevin has an IEP in both reading and writing, so on top of what is required as per his IEP, any additional support and scaffolding I can provide for him is beneficial. I was able to identify these seven students as having the highest need for support, and the perfect group for my intervention.

### **There is a Dragon Under My Bed**

On our first day of our guided writing groups, I called back group 1, which consists of Nicholas, Joey, and Jessica. These three students raced back to the hexagon table to sit with me. Nicholas and Joey each threw their black folder down on the table in front of the seat to the right of me, trying to claim their

territory. Both boys were giggling and grinning, as Nicholas flipped open his folder to reveal his materials inside.

“I can’t wait to write about what I would do if there was a dragon under my bed!” Nicholas shouted.

The sweet sound of excitement in his voice reassured me that I could count on his motivation to write. Jessica was still organizing her materials at her seat, and took her time making her way to our group as the two boys were already paging through their packet of journal prompts. Jessica took her seat next to me, and slowly opened up her folder.

“Joey, what prompt do you think you’d like to start with?” I asked, noticing that he had a checkmark next to a prompt on the first page of his packet.

“I think I’m going to write about the same thing Nicholas is writing about.” Both boys smiled as they exchanged happy glances.

“I know we don’t normally talk during independent work, but if you would like to share ideas about what you would do if there was a dragon under your bed, that is fine with me.” I explained to the both of them. Both boys’ jaws dropped as they looked at me, and then at each other. The chatter amongst the two of them began immediately.

“I would stand on top of my bed and wait for him to come out, and then jump on his back and scare him!” Nicholas said.

“Well I would put food outside of my bed and hide under the covers, and then when he came out to eat the food I would catch him!”

I left the boys to their collaborative conversation, with the intention of interjecting if they didn't begin writing down their ideas within a few minutes.

I turned my attention to Jessica, who still had not said a word. She appeared to be quietly reading through the prompts, as she was asked to do. As far as I could tell, none had jumped out at her, piquing her interest. I started to scan through the prompts with her, noticing that she had put a star next to the prompt which asks students to write a list of things they would want their parents to get for them at the grocery store, and why.

“Jessica, I see you put a star next to this prompt. Does that mean you'd like to write about it?”

Jessica was quiet for a moment, and then responded. “Yeah, I want to write about that one.”

For as energetic of a vibe that Nicholas and Joey gave off, Jessica was the polar opposite. However, that is Jessica's disposition at all times. She never seems excited, and never seems flustered. She always seems very even keeled, and her emotions never fluctuate. She is very quiet, and very reserved, even around her classmates. I was determined not to let her emotionless demeanor get in the way of my intended results.

“Do you want to tell me about some of the things you would ask your parents to get for you before you write them down?” I asked, hopeful. Jessica peered up at me from beneath her braids, and shook her head yes. “So what would be the first thing you ask your parents to get for you?” I prompted, again.

“Hmmm, ice cream,” she replied, simply.

“Oh, I love ice cream! I would ask for mint chocolate chip ice cream because it is my favorite. I only like the green kind, though. I love the chocolate chips inside!” I tried to elaborate in my answer, hoping that Jessica would take my lead in her writing.

A meek smile crossed her face as she said, “I really like cookies and cream ice cream. It tastes a lot like oreo cookies are inside of it, and I really like oreos.”

We were finally getting somewhere. “Why don’t you write about that first, and explain it to me in your journal just as you did to me out loud,” I say. Before I could finish my sentence, Jessica was already at work, writing about her cookies and cream ice cream.

All three students, Nicholas, Joey, and Jessica, were busy writing away when I had to interrupt them. Since their pencils started moving, they had not stopped. Even as I announced that our time together was over, Nicholas interrupted.

“Can I just finish my last sentence that I’m writing and then read it to you?” His big blue eyes blinked as if helping him plead.

As much as it pained me to turn down his excitement and evident engagement, it was time for us to report to our specialist class. “We will start with you sharing next time, Nicholas. I promise.”

### **Favorite Animals**

As soon as I announced that group 2 was to meet me at the hexagon table for our guided writing group, Kevin, Christian, Andrew, and Nicole came racing back. I could see the disappointment spread across the faces of Nicholas, Joey, and Jessica, but I reminded them that we had to take turns working in our groups. This response seemed to suffice, as they opened up their black folders and began to work independently, without hesitation.

Before she could even sit down, Nicole shouted, “I’ve been so excited to write about number 7! Do you want to know what animal I would like as a pet?”

Not wanting to let this flame of excitement burn out, I allowed Nicole to continue as she sat down with the rest of her group. They, too, seemed interested in what she had to say. “Hamster!” she exclaimed, with a smile on her face. The other three students exchanged looks, but did not say much. I wanted to keep the conversation going, and help Nicole get some more ideas to help her writing along, so I asked her to elaborate on why she would choose a hamster. “Hmm, because they are cute!” Nicole explained, but again, did not elaborate.

Christian added to the conversation, “I have a hamster and he is all different colors. He is brown, white, and tan. Some of them at the store were plain, but I really liked him.” Nicole’s eyes widened as she asked Christian more questions about his hamster.

“Nicole, why don’t you think about some of the things Christian added. I want you to give me more details about what you like most about hamsters.”

“Oh, they’re really soft, too!” she added. I could tell that the ball had started rolling now, and she put her pencil to the paper. Christian also returned to his writing.

Andrew gently tapped me on the shoulder and asked if he could share his latest writing with me. He chose a prompt that asked him to write about his favorite song. As we read through the journal entry together, we both decided that he could add some more details to his writing. I could tell Andrew was looking to me for some assistance.

“Well, how does this song make you feel when you hear it?”

A smile spread across Andrew’s face as he said, “It makes me really happy! When I hear it I want to sing along and dance.”

“It must have a happy beat then.”

“Yeah, it does. I love when it comes on the radio when I’m on the way to my baseball games.” Andrew was now beaming.

It seemed as though that minimal interaction was all Andrew needed to give him the confidence to continue on. Our conversation ended abruptly as he began feverishly writing.

Christian, who was silenced once Nicole began writing about her hamster, was now quietly working. He was writing faster than what seemed like he was able to think, which made for a perfect time to interject and check in with him. I could see over his shoulder that he, too, was writing about a pet that he would like most.

“Christian, why don’t you share your journal with me so far?”

Christian immediately began rambling, talking as fast as he had been writing. Stumbling through his sentences on more than one occasion, he realized that some of his writing was repetitive and didn’t always make sense. Together, amidst all of his writing, Christian and I only counted two details explaining why he really wanted a dog as a pet. I saw this as a perfect opportunity to open a discussion back up with the group.

“Alright boys and girls, Christian is writing about why he wants a dog as a pet, and needs your help.” Christian, again, read his story out loud. “What are some things that you can do with a dog that would be fun?” I ask the group.

Immediately, without hesitation, Kevin, who had been otherwise silent, chimed in.

“You can do so many things with a dog! You can play fetch with a big stick. You can take the dog on walks. And sometimes you can go to a dog park!”

“Oh yeah! I can use my boomerang to play fetch with him!” Christian immediately began writing again, this time with more confidence.

Kevin, Nicole, and Andrew all went back to work, silently, on their own writing. They continued to write without interruption until I regretfully announced that our session was over. It was, yet again, time to report to our specialist class. Christian, ignoring my announcement, continued to write, while Nicole let out a big “Nooo!” Although I don’t normally condone having to give directions more than once, seeing the students so involved in their writing was a joy to experience.

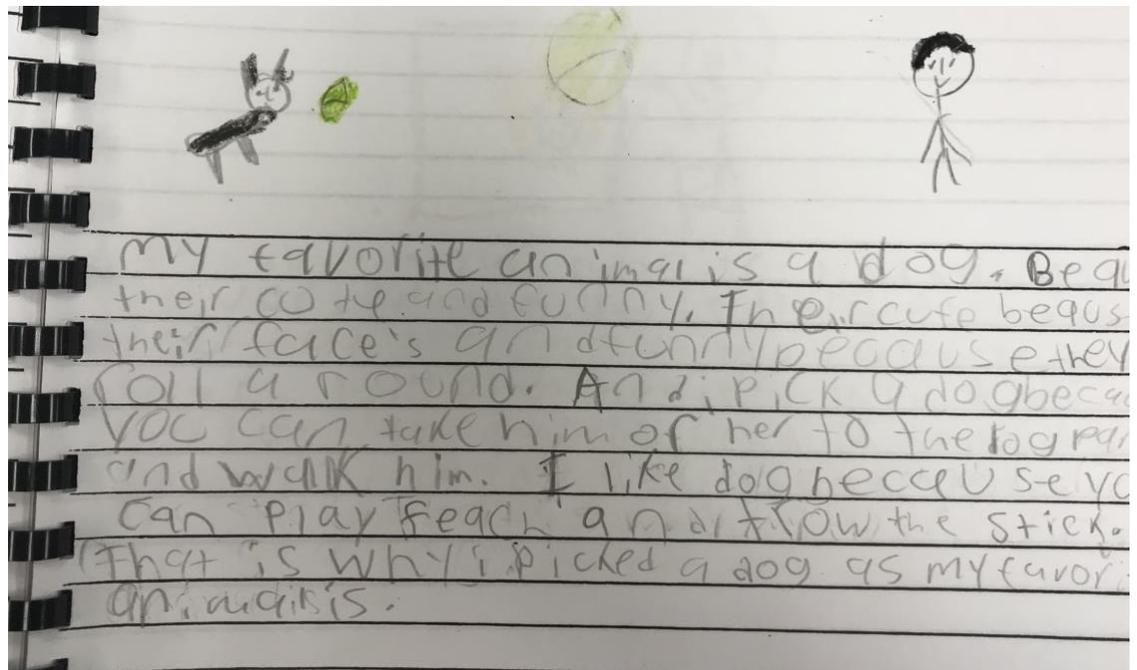
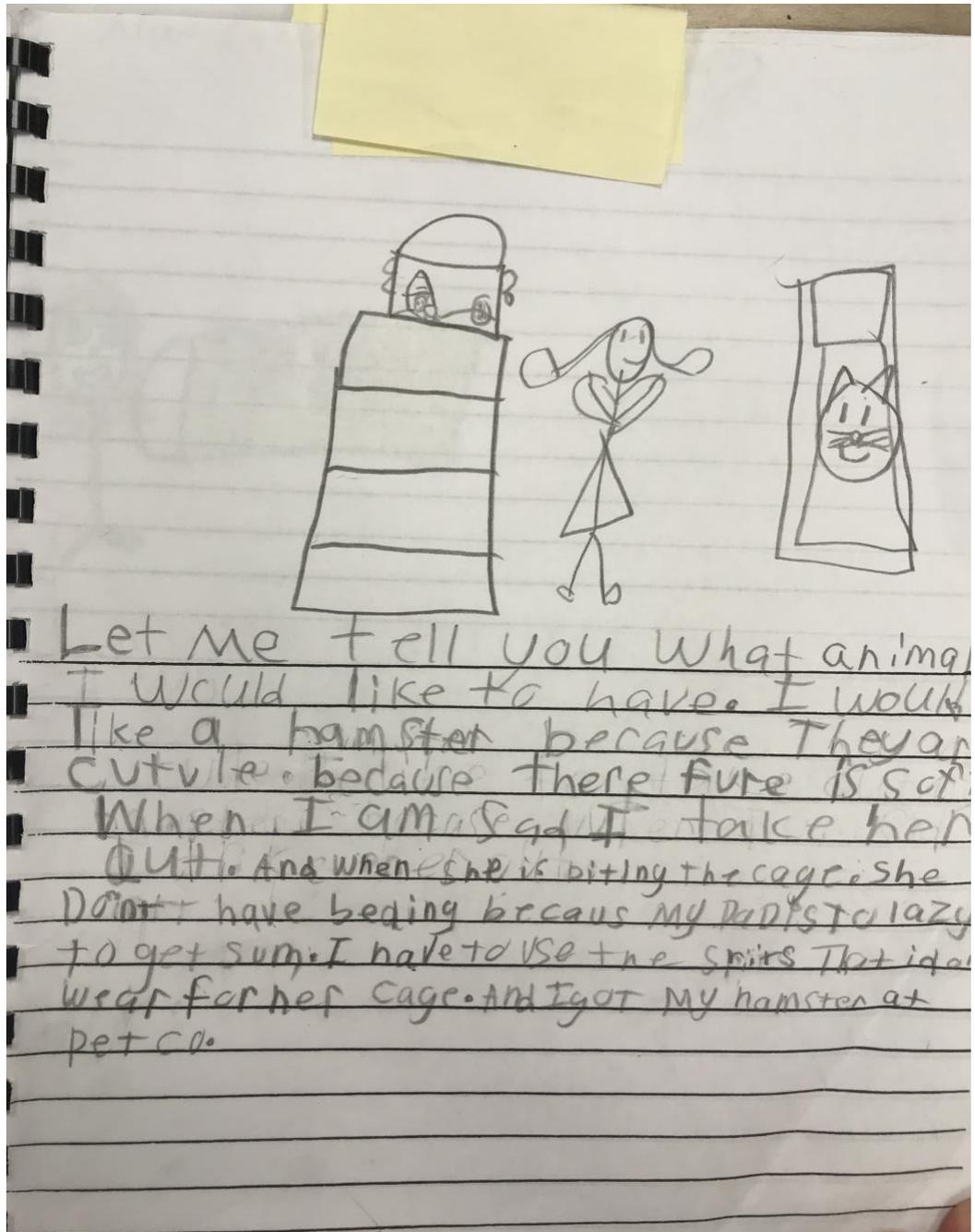


Figure 4.3 Student Artifact: Christian's Favorite Animal



Let me tell you what animal  
I would like to have. I would  
like a hamster because they are  
cute. because there fur is soft.  
When I am sad I take her  
out. And when she is biting the cage, she  
Don't have bedding because my dad is lazy  
to get some. I have to use the spits that i do  
wear for her cage. And I got my hamster at  
petco.

Figure 4.4 Student Artifact: Nicole's Hamster

## **Kickball**

Before the students could find their seats at our writing table, Nicholas blurted out, “ Can I please read this one to you?” Nicholas thrives off of individualized attention. His one-on-one conferences with me have been a joy for the both of us. He takes such pride in his work, and responds very well to constructive criticism. He has easily been adding sufficient content and details to his written work once we conference and discuss out loud, and I didn’t see today being any different.

“I like playing kickball because.” Nicholas stopped at the period he has in his writing. “I like to play kickball. I like to play baseball.”

Realizing this would be an important teachable moment, I stopped Nicholas there, before he hardly had a chance to get started. I repeated, “I like to play kickball because,” and presented this fragment.

“That’s not a sentence!” Nicholas realized, before I could go any further. After a little erasing and conversing, Nicholas and I decided together that it would be best for him to direct his focus on just kickball. This was a perfect opportunity to initiate a collaborative conversation between our guided writing group, as I know that kickball is a hot topic amongst third graders.

“I really like to play kickball because I like to bomb the ball when it’s my turn to kick.”

The expression, “bomb the ball” has become widely used and understood as kickball lingo in the world of eight and nine year olds. This statement makes Joey smile and look up from his writing, but he remained hesitant to interject. This is abnormal behavior for Joey, especially given the relaxed atmosphere that we’ve created in our group. I made another attempt to invite Joey into our conversation, but received the same reaction. Joey had previously been reprimanded by another teacher, and was evidently still affected. He continued writing without any reluctance, but it became abundantly clear that he would not be participating in our group discussion, regardless of how interested he normally is in kickball. As far as problems go, this was a good problem to encounter.

However, this did not deter Nicholas from continuing to share out about his favorite aspects of kickball. After each reason, his smile grew a little wider, and his pencil moved a little more confidently. Before we knew it, it was time to end our session together. “Can I please finish showing you my other details back here at this table again with you tomorrow?” It was becoming increasingly more and more difficult to contain Nicholas’s enthusiasm, and explain to him that I had to meet with other students, too.

### **Mortal Combat**

“Look! I wrote about Mortal Combat! I was writing about what I like to do inside. Can I read it?”

Andrew has been getting more and more accustomed to the calm and cozy nature of our group, and for the first time, he took it upon himself to open up a collaborative conversation amongst the other students. I made my approval clear to Andrew, and he confidently began reading his work to his group members.

“I like the scorpion,” Andrew added, and then continued on to another detail. Seeing this a great opportunity to open up a discussion amongst the group, I jumped in.

“Andrew, can you tell us why you like the scorpion?” I questioned, evidently piquing Christian’s interest as he shouted out.

“He is a ninja with super cool weapons!”

Andrew beamed, realizing that his classmates were engaged in his writing. Nicole added how much she likes the scorpion’s mask. The next thing I knew, we had a full-fledged conversation about what Andrew could add to this one detail about the scorpion. I tried to disappear to the background of the conversation, reveling in the debate that was unfolding.

The dialogue that transpired between the guided writing group during this session showed all of my intentions for this study starting to come to fruition. The students truly listened to one another, and shared details that were helpful to Andrew’s writing. It was not a conversation that was imposed upon them by me, or by any aspect of our curriculum. It was an authentic conversation about a topic that they chose to talk about, and in turn, they were able to generate genuine

thoughts, feelings, and ideas. As the conversation commenced, Andrew was able to add his classmates' ideas to his writing, as well as some additional details of his own, with a newfound assurance. His writing no longer seemed like a list of reasons, but now flowed with more valid content and details. Witnessing the success of the intervention was not only beneficial for the students, but for myself, too. It gave me continued confidence that I was cultivating an environment where my students could not only enjoy writing, but could be motivated and engaged in the writing process.

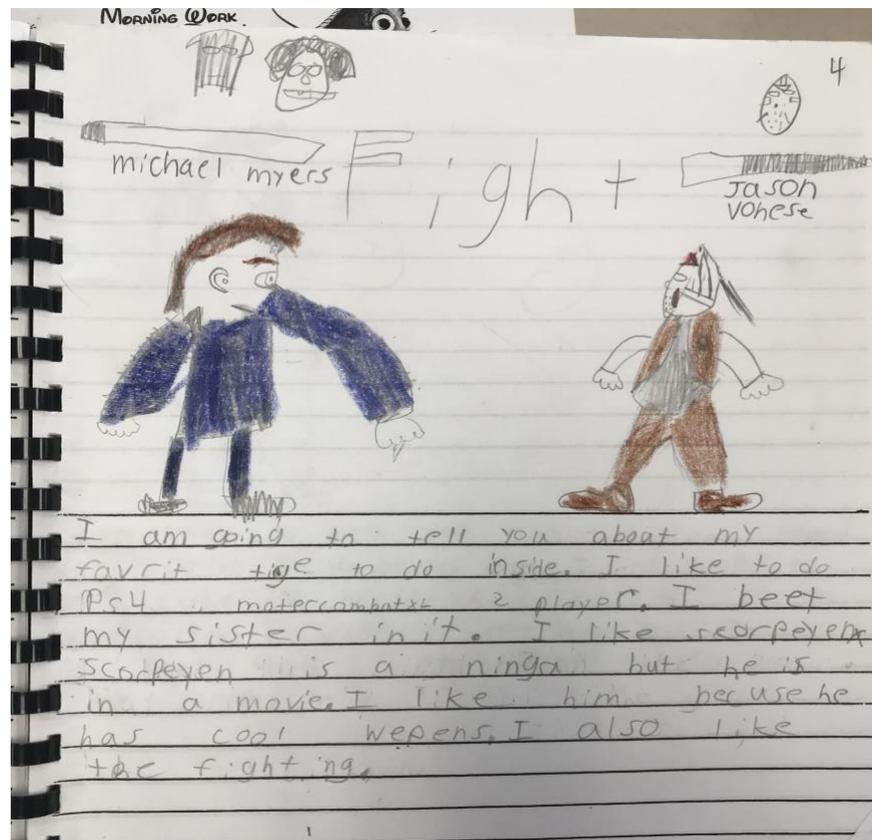


Figure 4.5 Student Artifact: Andrew's Favorite Thing to do Inside

## **United by Penguins**

The students were now able to sense when I was going to announce that it is time for our writing groups. They waited with anticipation, and before I could get the words out of my mouth, Nicholas and Joey shouted out, almost in unison, “Is it our turn today?” My slight nod sends them into a race across the room to retrieve a seat closest to me. Both students enjoy sitting closest to me because they thrive on individualized attention. However, it is Jessica that sneakily finds herself seated on the left side of me, leaving Joey and Nicholas to fight over the remaining seat on my right.

“How about you sit next to Mrs. Habick today, and I’ll sit here next time,” Nicholas tried to compromise. Joey nods in agreement, and our group is seated and complete. The two of them begin conversing immediately, and to my delight, their conversation revolves around their most recent writing. Not wanting to disrupt the on-task behavior, I turn to Jessica who was seated quietly to my left.

Jessica was silently rereading her work, but I noticed that she seemed to be experiencing what we commonly call writer’s block. Jessica is not a student who is overly outgoing, or someone who enjoys drawing attention to herself. She is a quiet, reserved girl by nature, and I have been trying to make her feel more comfortable to speak up during our writing groups.

“Jessica, can you read to me what you have so far in your story?” I asked, hoping to spark a conversation to help alleviate the apparent writer’s block.

Jessica, in her meek and mild voice, began reading her story to me. She was writing about the best movie she had ever seen, which, unfortunately, I was not as familiar with. However, it did catch the attention of both Nicholas and Joey, who had evidently seen this particular movie. Up until this point, our group interactions typically remained separated. Nicholas and Joey naturally gravitated to one another because they have similar personalities, interests, and socialize with one another outside of our group. Jessica, who is subdued, shy, and reserved at most times, tends to keep to herself. However, I was hopeful that the “Penguin” movie could be a defining moment for our group.

“Nicholas and Joey, do you like this Penguin movie, too?” I proposed, giving them both an invitation to our conversation.

“Yeah!” they both answered, together. This prompted the beginnings of a smile on Jessica’s face.

“Jessica, what do you like best about this movie?” I asked, hoping to ignite the flame within our group’s conversation.

“Well, my favorite part is when the Penguin loses the egg while he is standing on the sand.” This provokes giggles from both Nicholas and Joey.

“Yeah, that is a really funny part!” Joey adds.

“It makes me laugh when it falls off the little rock,” Jessica continues, smiling.

Not wanting to let this opportunity pass us by, I make every effort to keep the conversation going. “How does that part make you feel?” Jessica stops to think for a minute, as Joey and Nicholas idly wait for her response, too.

“It makes me happy because I can’t stop laughing.”

Joey and Nicholas both consider this response, as Nicholas chimed in. “You should write about that part in your story. It is a really funny part. Is that your favorite?” Although Jessica is still not overly vocal, she shakes her head enthusiastically enough that the beads in her hair tap against each other. She puts her pencil to her paper, as if signaling that she is taking Nicholas’ writing advice, and does not stop writing until our session is once again over.

The conversation that Jessica partook in may have been minimal, but I was hopeful that the depth of this interaction would extend into our future group sessions. Jessica finally appeared comfortable with the level of interaction that occurred, and happy to be a part of it. The amount of details that she was able to confidently add to her writing exceeded that of which she had produced previously. But most importantly, she seemingly enjoyed the interaction that transpired. This was not only a victory for our writing intervention, but also for Jessica socially, too.

### **Sharing Ideas**

I was the last to join our group today, and as I did so, I took a moment to observe what each of the students had chosen to do in my absence. Christian and

Kevin were busy comparing all of the prompts that they had completed, and were showing each other the stickers that they accumulated in doing so. They were finding prompts that they share in common, and discussing what they wrote about. Although they were not currently writing, I was happy to allow this conversation to develop a little further. To hear them talk confidently and enthusiastically about their work is a joy to witness.

Andrew and Nicole had silenced themselves, and were already wrapped up in identifying the next prompt that they would tackle today. When Nicole sensed my presence, she looked up and instantly wanted to tell me a story. I attempted to redirect her, and asked if she planned to write about the story that she wanted to tell me. She dropped her head and replied with a nonchalant, “No.”

Nicole is a very social student, and as most of the other students in my group, loves to be given attention. I did not want to deter her from feeling comfortable striking a conversation with me, so I decided to use this as an opportunity to pivot back into a discussion that we could write about.

Before I got a chance to ask Nicole a question, Andrew presented me with one instead. He had been absent from all conversation up until this moment, so I allowed him to continue.

“Can I write about a prank that I want to play on my mom, instead of a trick like the prompt asks?”

Taking notice to the genuine interest that the group shows as Andrew asks this question, I took the opportunity to involve them, as well. “Why don’t you tell us what prank you want to play on your mom?”

Andrew goes on to explain how he plans to put an egg in his mom’s drink. The group erupts in laughter, and Andrew beams with confidence. “How do you think she’ll react?” I question.

“Oh, I would throw up!” Christian exclaims, before Andrew had a chance to answer.

“I would definitely spit it out right away,” Nicole added.

Meanwhile, Kevin ponders a little as the rest of the group giggles. Eventually, he shakes his head and responds with a smile. “I would ground my son or daughter and send them to their room forever!”

Andrew, seemingly pleased with the responses from his group members, began feverishly writing. He did not pause to reread his work or consider what to write next. The ideas seemed to be spilling out of his mind right onto his paper. There was no shortage of details as he wrote consistently and confidently.

A blanket of silence fell on the entire group as each of them picked up their pencil to write. Almost as if it was an unspoken agreement, I noticed Nicole, Christian, and Kevin all writing about a prank that they would play on their own mothers, too.

### **My Own “Ah Ha!” Moment**

It was after this last group session that I had an epiphany. Reflecting on what just transpired between Andrew and his group members, I realized that this is what I hoped would be the result of our group sessions all along. I was never concerned with solely creating “better” writers, but I wanted to help my writers create more authentic and personal writing. Thinking back on the conferencing and collaborative conversations that we have been having all along, I noticed that most of our conversations revolved around the content and details the students added to their writing, and very little about the conventions, spelling, and proofreading. My priority since the beginning of this intervention has been helping students to generate authentic ideas to write about. Since I came up with the idea of my study, I’ve always wanted my students writing to feel genuine to them, and I wanted them to feel confident in the content and details that they were putting on the paper.

During this session, I could have stopped Andrew multiple times to remind him to add a period at the end of his sentence, or a capital letter at the begin of his next sentence, but his excitement was too electric to contain. It was during this session that I realized that I was witnessing, for the first time in a long time, my students actually enjoying the writing process, and producing writing of actual substance. I had been observing this all along, but it was not until now that

I had my own epiphany, as their teacher, of what I was truly looking for during this study.

During our writing groups, my students weren't regurgitating nonsense that was meaningless to them just to fill space on the paper. They weren't asking me if they "wrote enough." For the first time in a long time, they were writing naturally, authentically, and excitedly.

### **Cultivating Creative Freedom**

I entered our next session with a newfound confidence in myself as a teacher, and certain in the direction that our guided writing groups had been going. Knowing that they no longer needed any introductions to commence our sessions together, Christian shouted out, "I've been waiting to write about number 22!" The motivation that their excitement continued to show never ceases to bring a smile to my face.

"Mrs. Habick, can I write about something not on the list of prompts?" Nicole asks. This is not something that has been brought up to me previously, and it catches me off guard. Of course, I want students to be able to generate ideas on their own. The packet of prompts that I have provided was only meant as scaffolding to assist them in producing their own ideas to write about. I was not expecting them to have the confidence to do so at this point in our time together. Nonetheless, I was happy to give Nicole the green light.

“Can I write about the time that I got robbed?” Nicole’s gaze turned to Christian, Kevin, and Andrew, looking to see if she got their attention. I’m silenced for a moment, caught off guard by her request. Nicole is the only girl in this group, but is not shy and finds ease with inserting herself into conversations. I’m unsure if something occurred prior to our writing group that may have triggered this memory, but I’m fairly confident that she blurted this out in hopes to get the attention of her male group members.

Christian, Andrew, and Kevin often engage in conversations amongst each other because they share common interests, such as sports and video games. Nicole, although she seemingly does it with ease, finds herself making the extra effort to include herself in their conversations. I decided that this may have been her attempts to create a conversation revolving around her, for once.

I didn’t want to discourage any of the group members from attempting to come up with ideas to write about independent of the packet of prompts, but I realized that this may not be the best option for Nicole. We discussed if this is a happy memory, and whether or not it will make her feel good to write about it. She responded negatively to both, so we decided to go a different direction with her writing.

At this point, all four students seemed to be a little distracted. Remembering that it is Halloween the following day, and knowing how excited the students were for the party and parade that we have in school, I wanted to take

advantage of this chance to still capitalize on Nicole's initiative to come up with her own topic to write about. If, like Nicole, the other students are starting to feel confident enough branch out and write about their own ideas, I wanted to make sure that they understood that I supported and encouraged that. I did not want them to feel trapped within the boundaries of the packet of prompts, even though Nicole's idea was politely dismissed.

"I know everyone is excited for the Halloween parade and party tomorrow," I began. This was all I needed to say to spark some energy within the group.

"Can I wear red lipstick to school tomorrow because I am going to be Princess Aurora?" Nicole immediately added.

Instead of directly answering Nicole, I opened up a discussion to the group. None of the students hesitates to share their excitement and anticipation for tomorrow, and were eager to give an abundance of details about their costumes.

I suggested that, even though it isn't one of our prompts, that the students write in their journal all about their costumes. Each student had already had a chance to share out loud and answer questions about their costumes, so all the ideas were fresh in their minds. A smile crossed their faces, and the confident writers that I have come to know over the last few weeks were well on their way to another detailed journal entry.

## **Halt!**

I could not be happier with the level of engagement and motivation that I've been experiencing from my students, but they have become so absorbed in the freedom to pick their own topics to write about that it has become somewhat of a sensory overload for them. The excitement and anticipation of selecting a new topic to write about dominates their attention. Although the positive aspects of this far outweigh the negatives, I still needed to draw some attention to the other parts of the writing process. This has proven to be difficult to balance. I did not want to stifle the motivation and creativity that we have fostered in our journey together.

During this session with my guided writing group, I decided to incorporate another step of the writing process that had been finding its way to the back burner as of recently. Given my newfound epiphany as of recently, the primary focus of our sessions together continued to be generating meaningful topics to write about, and adding sufficient details that are authentic, genuine, and true to the author. During this particular session, I decided to take a step back and ask the students to reread and self-reflect on their work that they've already completed, putting a halt to any new writings for the day.

Joey and Nicholas found themselves seated and ready to work before I was able to make my way back to the hexagon table. As per usual, they were intently sifting through their packet of prompts, waiting for one to jump out that

piqued their interest. Jessica, moving at my pace, arrived at our group as I was preparing to deliver some potentially devastating news to all three of them. I had to delicately announce that we would not be writing anything new today until our previous writings were acceptable. This is a concept that we have gotten away from as of recently, and I was partially to blame.

I have been so consumed by the newfound, contagious zest for writing that the students were experiencing and sharing with me, that I had become too relaxed when it comes to editing and finalizing our work. My intentions for the group were not shifting, but even if the primary focus is going to remain on one aspect of writing, the other pieces cannot be completely disregarded.

“Joey and Nicholas, I need you to put your packet of prompts away. I want all of you to get out your rubric from your black folders,” I tried to say as carefully as possible. The looks of displeasure and disappointment said more than words ever could.

“I really wanted to write about what I want to be when I grow up!”  
Nicholas moaned.

Although I do not relish in the idea of displeasing my students, I couldn't help but revel in the fact that they are still so enamored by something as simple as a few pieces of paper, stapled together, with random story ideas.

“I lost my rubric,” Jessica stated.

I was unsure if this was her attempt to get out of today's lesson, but I handed her an extra one without hesitation.

"I think I would give myself a two," Nicholas said confidently, waiting to see if this appeased me.

We have reviewed our writing rubric enough in our small groups, and as a class, to know that a two is considered "basic." Students are to strive for at least a three, which is "proficient," or a four, which is "exceeds the standards."

"Nicholas, if you are giving yourself a 2 in each category on the rubric, that means you have to do some editing. You want to be able to give yourself a three or a four in each category before you can consider your work complete."

Nicholas dropped his head, seemingly signaling that he knew I would say that. The students are very familiar with each subcategory of our rubric, and what is expected of them. Although we discuss and review the rubric almost daily, we have been doing a less than stellar job utilizing it.

Nicholas' honest scoring of a two sparked a discussion about one of the rubric subcategories called, "style and voice." As we debated what it means to use interesting words in our writing, I asked Nicholas to read his most recent work out loud. As he read, a sly smile crossed his face. He appeared to be recognizing his own lack of interesting words in his writing.

"Nicholas said, that he has a 'big' piece of cake. Is big an interesting word?" Joey couldn't contain himself from blurting out.

“Oh, how about enormous!”

Nicholas lights up as he yelled, “Gigantic!”

“Huge,” even Jessica chimed in.

I nod my head in approval. Nicholas was already erasing and giving his best attempt at phonetically sounding out ‘enormous’ on his paper. I asked the students to read through the most recent work that they have. I tasked them with finding at least three boring words to change into interesting words for our session today.

### **Conclusion**

As my study wrapped up, I continued to see the same trends that were observed in previous weeks. Although the students’ conventions and style were not yet at a third grade level, they were becoming more confident, motivated writers. I no longer felt like I was pressuring them to write about topics that didn’t feel natural to them. They were not just writing details that they thought I wanted to hear. The students were genuinely excited about their work, and animated in their opportunities to share.

The journey that this study took me on really allowed me to get to know my struggling learners better as writers, and where their specific struggles truly lie. Although I went into this intervention with an idea and a plan to implement it, it was the students who really took the lead. The intention of my intervention was to increase writing achievement through student choice, guided writing groups,

and motivation. As I followed my students down this path, I found myself learning and adapting, too.

Writing achievement is a very broad topic that consists of a lot of moving pieces. For low-income, at-risk students who are severely struggling with writing all around, this study was far too short to tackle all of their issues. Instead, we got to the root of their issues, which was generating ideas to write about, and focused mostly on this area.

As children of poverty, my students are not always fortunate enough to have the same life experiences as their age appropriate peers. Because of lack of life experiences, they have less opportunities to find relatable topics to share about through the writing process. Struggling with the first step of the writing process can almost ensure that the student will struggle the whole way through. Throughout this intervention, I made it my priority to get my students confidently through that first step, generating authentic ideas.

## DATA ANALYSIS

During the data collection process, I made sure to collect multiple forms of data. This gave me the confidence that I needed to drive my study, and allowed me to reflect and make adaptations that were necessary. Through my multiple sources of data collection, I was able to make accurate meaning of my data, and gain insights on the progress of my students as the study evolved.

### **Analysis of Student Writing Attitude Survey**

At the beginning and the end of my intervention, I utilized a student survey and interview questions to help gain a better understanding of my students' thoughts and feelings about writing, and the ability to choose what they want to write about. After administering the initial Writing Attitude Survey (Appendix D), I received the following results listed in the table 5.1 below.

The results of this survey made it very clear that my students were very hesitant to refer to themselves as good writers. However, they also didn't feel as though they were terrible writers, either. The responses were similar when being questioned about their excitement to write. Few students responded that they were excited to write, however, few also agreed that they were not not excited to write. The ambiguous responses helped me to predict that my students were not very *confident* in their feelings about writing, or their writing ability.

	Agree	Sometimes	Disagree
Question 1 “I am excited to write.”	2/9	4/9	3/9
Question 2 “I feel that I am a good writer.”	4/9	4/9	1/9
Question 3 “I feel happy about sharing my writing with my teachers and my classmates.”	5/9	4/9	0/9
Question 4 “I like to choose what I write about.”	8/9	0/9	1/9
Question 5 “I like when Mrs. Habick chooses what I write about.”	5/9	4/9	0/9
Question 6 “I do not feel like I’m a good writer.”	2/9	2/9	5/9
Question 7 “I am not excited to write.”	1/9	2/9	6/9

*Table 5.1 Initial Student Survey Data*

The results of this survey made it very clear that my students were very hesitant to refer to themselves as good writers. However, they also didn’t feel as though they were terrible writers, either. The responses were similar when being questioned about their excitement to write. Few students responded that they were excited to write, however, few also agreed that they were not not excited to write. The ambiguous responses helped me to predict that my students were not very *confident* in their feelings about writing, or their writing ability.

Although half of the students agreed to appreciating a prompt selected by the teacher, the large majority admitted to enjoying to choose what they write about. This gave me the reassurance that I needed to move forward with my intervention. In promoting student choice, I was hoping to create and cultivate more confident, engaged, and motivated writers.

I administered the Writing Attitude Survey (Appendix D) for a second time at the end of my study. The results of the survey are listed in table 5.2 below.

The results of this survey show that students have an increased desire to write. Every student either agreed to being excited to write all the time, or some of the time. No students reported not being excited to write, as they had in the initial survey data. All participants indicated that they enjoy choosing what they write about, which is an increase from the initial survey data. An increase in confidence is also displayed in questions two and six. All students reported that they feel that they are a good writer, at least some of the time, and no student agreed to not feeling like a good writer. This signifies a growth in confidence and motivation since the beginning of the study.

	Agree	Sometimes	Disagree
Question 1 “I am excited to write.”	4/7	3/7	0/7
Question 2 “I feel that I am a good writer.”	4/7	3/7	0/7
Question 3 “I feel happy about sharing my writing with my teacher and classmates.”	4/7	3/7	0/7
Question 4 “I like to choose what I write about.”	7/7	0/7	0/7
Question 5 “I like when Mrs. Habick chooses what I write about.”	1/7	6/7	0/7
Question 6 “I do not feel like I’m a good writer.”	0/7	2/7	5/7
Question 7 “I am not excited to write.”	0/7	1/7	6/7

*Table 5.2 End Student Survey Data*

### **Analysis of Interviews**

Once I identified the students that would be benefiting most from the intervention, I asked them each a series of interview questions. I conducted this interview (Appendix C) at the beginning of the study, and again at the end of the study.

Prior to the intervention, most students were hesitant to express their feelings about writing. They reported writing to be “a lot of work” or “too long” and that was the extent of their responses. None of the students admitted to any

positive feelings about writing. However, similar to the survey, the students were tentative to admit to disliking writing. I was able to conclude, again, that the students did not have any confident feelings about the writing process. It may not be a preferred task because of the lack of confidence.

Every student that was interviewed did admit to enjoying conferencing with the teacher. This was the response that I was expecting, as most students repeatedly ask to share their work with the teacher. The students thrive off of individual attention, and their responses matched just that.

Almost all of the students that were questioned seemed confused by the idea of selecting their own prompts and ideas to write about. Therefore, this particular portion of the interview resulted in vague responses. Upon explanation, most students agreed that they would probably want to write about their own topics and ideas, but agreed to this cautiously. It was evident that the students were not comfortable selecting their own topics, possibly because they had never been given the opportunity to do so.

By the end of my study, I was able to conduct a concluding interview (Appendix C), which was identical to the initial interview, to gauge any change in feelings from the beginning. Again, like the survey, the students' responses showed a greater appreciation and confidence in writing.

When asked about his favorite part of writing, Joey responded with, "That there are 44 prompts to pick from and they are great ideas to choose from." He

also replied that he enjoyed having topics available because, “It is easier because if you don’t have ideas, there are ideas here for you!” Kevin, with similar feelings as Joey, replied with “I like it because I get to make my own decisions. I like to be able to write anything. There are some things in the journal packet that I do not want to write about, and I don’t have to do them.”

Most student responses were positive towards the writing process in the final interview. They also seemed assured in their responses, and had more to share than the initial interview. Everyone reported being happy about having topics available to them, and again, being able to conference with the teacher.

### **Analysis of Double Entry Journal**

My double entry journal was the backbone and skeleton of my data collection. I recorded observations from every session in my log, and reflected on why I may have observed what I did. I was able to record students’ actions and reactions towards writing, the dialogue between each of them during their collaborative conversations, as well as dialogue and notes from our conferencing sessions. Everything I observed, overheard, or reflected upon was dumped, sometimes illegible to anyone else, into my double entry journal. My observations were recorded on one side of the log, while my reflections were chronicled on the opposite side. Each session was recorded chronologically, so that it detailed my study from start to finish.

Reviewing my double entry journal allowed me to make parallels between what was occurring in each of our writing groups, and the data that I collected in both the surveys and interviews. It fueled my predictions that guided writing groups, collaborative conversations, and student choice would increase motivation to write and achievement in writing.

### **Analysis of Student Artifacts**

In the beginning of my study, I collected an initial writing sample to determine a baseline for each of my students. Upon reviewing the student work, I narrowed down my focus to nine of my highest need students. However, being in the transient school that I teach in, two of the students moved within the first two weeks of the study. Using a third grade writing rubric (Appendix E), each student was evaluated in six different categories on a one to four scale.

As my study evolved and the students took me down their path of highest need, the focus of our intervention concentrated primarily on one of the six categories most. Throughout our eight weeks together, our main objective became generating ideas, and writing sufficient and meaningful content and details. The writing process cannot occur without these fundamental principals in place.

Because the study took this direction, I recorded data on the students writing as a whole, as perceived from the third grade writing rubric (Appendix E),

and also independently in the rubric area of content and details. Their results are detailed in in table 5.3 listed below.

	Initial Writing Score	Content and Details
Nicholas	2	1
Joey	1	2
Jessica	1	1
Kevin	2	2
Christian	1	1
Andrew	1	2
Nicole	1	1

*Table 5.3 Initial Writing Data*

All students received either a one, which is defined as “needs improvement,” or a two, which qualifies them as “below basic.” The guided writing sessions that occurred from this point forward revolved around increasing student motivation to write, with the intention of increasing their confidence and incentive to compose and provide appropriate content and details in their writing.

Although I do not have copies of every single journal entry from every single student that I worked with detailed in my data collection, I was able to monitor student progress by observing their writing. I only met with three-four students per session, which allowed me to review each of their journal writing

every time our group met. It was during this writing process that I could see if students were writing fluidly, or continuing to struggle with generating ideas. I was also able to observe which students were writing with sufficient content and details, utilizing conventions, and self-monitoring as they wrote.

By the end of the study, all students were observed to be writing more appropriate content and details within their writing, even if their scores did not necessarily reflect that. Reviewing their journal entries each session gave me irreplaceable insight that was then transcribed in my double entry journal. Although the physical scores on the writing rubric did not increase by much for every student, the observations and insights gleaned spoke volumes of the true progress that was made. The scores from the third grade writing rubric (Appendix E) are listed in table 5.4 below.

	End Writing Score	Content and Details
Nicholas	3	3
Joey	2/3	3
Jessica	2	3
Kevin	2	2
Christian	2	3
Andrew	2/3	3
Nicole	2	2

*Table 5.4 End Writing Data*

Although scoring a three, “proficient,” or a four, “advanced” is ideal, the growth that was displayed by the scores of my seven students over eight weeks is beyond satisfying.

### **Conferencing**

I did not keep a formal conferencing log, but the topics and dialogue observed from the conferences were recorded in my double entry journal. It was through conferencing with each student that helped initiate the collaborative conversations between the group. What would start out as an individual conference, would often evolve and voluntarily open up to the whole group. This allowed for students to receive input, feedback, constructive criticism, and further ideas from their peers. It also allowed me to record evidence of any dialogue that indicated increased motivation and confidence was occurring.

### **Codes and Bins**

In order to determine what my bins were, I had to first discover what my codes were going to be. During my observations, I was conscious of what I was looking for and hoping to find. Although, some additional codes became apparent as I was collecting data, too.

My intervention was centered around the idea that providing students with the element of choice would increase their motivation to write. In addition, providing scaffolding in the form of guided writing groups was also implemented with the intention of increasing writing achievement, as well as the motivation to

write. While I was collecting data, I was monitoring the signs that proved or disproved this theory.

During data collection, I was able to record numerous instances of motivation and engagement. These pieces of data became my codes that I was eventually able to sort into the two bins of Motivation and Engagement. At the start of each session, students did not require a prompt to start working. The instant they sat down at our guided group, they opened their journals and began scanning for a new prompt to write about. In addition to not requiring redirections, students were observed actively writing and drawing pictures. They were meticulous in their work, and were eager to share with both their classmates and myself. My double entry journal is inundated with student quotations displaying motivation to write, such as their constant questioning as to whether or not they would get the opportunity to work in their journals that day, and the echoes of displeasure when I would have to announce that our writing block was over.

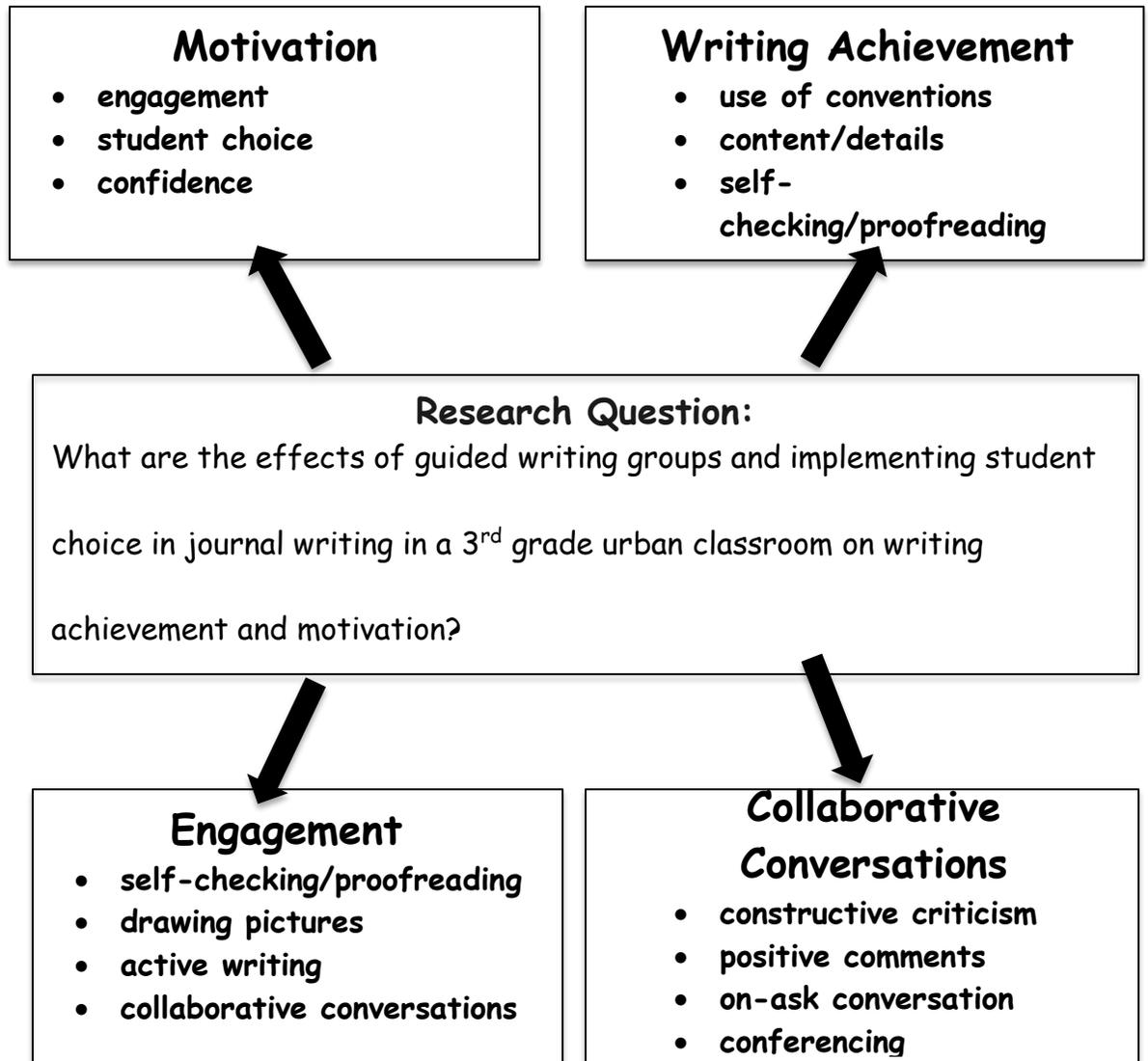
In addition to the data I was able to collect in my field log, I conducted surveys and interviews. The surveys showed that students were excited to write when they were given the opportunity to choose what they could write about. The interview answers also showed many parallels to the surveys and data collected from the field log. All students answered the interview questions with

excitement, agreeing that student choice and our guided writing groups motivated them to write.

In my field log, there were also numerous instances of students providing constructive criticism to one another, as well as positive comments and on-task conversations about their writings. Because I found this type of conversation productive, engaging and motivating, I encouraged students to participate in it. As I continued to document all of these instances of collaborative conversations within our guided writing groups, I realized that a new bin had been created.

My fourth bin, Writing Achievement, was an obvious choice for me because so much of my data collection focused on whether or not the students were becoming better writers through this process. In analyzing my codes, I realized that there were numerous instances of students increasing the content and details that they were including in their writing, while use of conventions and self-monitoring were less frequent.

With the creation of all four of these bins, Motivation, Writing Achievement, Engagement, and Collaborative Conversations, the answer to my research question was starting to take shape in Figure 5.1 below.



*Figure 5.1 Codes and Bins*

## **FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of my study was to explore the effects of guided writing groups and student choice on the motivation to write, as well as writing achievement, within my class of third grade low-income students. Initially, I knew that there would be a lot of moving pieces to my study. Teaching students of poverty to write is a daunting process, and it is in desperate need of major transformation.

As Vygotsky (1978) said, “That children’s learning begins long before they attend school is the starting point of this discussion. Any learning a child encounters in school always has a previous history” (p. 84). Teaching at risk children, their previous learning experiences outside of the school always have to be taken into consideration. They may not always be academic learning experiences, but often times traumatic life experiences that can have a negative impact on their scholastic abilities.

Additionally, my students are often not raised with the same life experiences as their school age peers. This fact alone can single handedly cause an increased difficulty in accessing background knowledge on common topics that may appear in age-appropriate English and Language Arts curriculum. The

lack of knowledge can lead to lack of confidence, which will naturally result in a decreased motivation to write.

Simply giving students the choice to write about whatever they want to write about does not always solve the problem. Often times, it leads to blank papers and blank stares. Generating ideas is a secondary problem that I have observed amongst my young writers. For this reason, I decided to implement guided writing groups where collaborative conversation was welcomed and encouraged. I was hopeful that by giving students numerous prompts to choose from, coupled with the opportunity to discuss and stir up ideas with their peers, motivation and confidence to write would find its place back in our classroom. Additionally, I was optimistic that this form of intervention would also lead to an increase in overall writing achievement.

## Theme Statements

★ Providing student choice by giving students options to choose from in the form of journal writing increased overall motivation to write, as well as confidence and engagement in the writing process.

★ Promoting collaborative conversations within guided writing groups increased engagement in the writing process. Students were motivated to write and share ideas with their classmates within their groups.

★ Students benefited from the many resources available to them within their guided writing groups, such as the option for peer interaction and teacher conferencing, which resulted in an overall increase in writing achievement.

★ Students' independence increased as they utilized the given writing prompts to help generate their own authentic topics to write about.

*Figure 6.1 Theme Statements*

*Providing student choice by giving students options to choose from in the form of journal writing increased overall motivation to write, as well as confidence and engagement in the writing process.*

As Dewey (1938) states, “When education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator, but takes on that of leader and group activities” (p. 59). Giving students the creative freedom to pull from their own personal experiences assisted them in generating genuine and authentic topics to write about. This process respectively gave students the confidence that they needed to take risks and write without hesitation. I gave up my roll as the “boss or dictator” and let the students take control.

In addition to giving students the creative freedom they needed, I did so in a way that still provided them with the scaffolding they yearned for to be successful. Many students are uncomfortable with total freedom. They work best within certain parameters. Because of this, I provided students with a list of almost fifty journal prompts that they could choose from to write about. If one of the prompts triggered an independent idea for them, they were encouraged to take a risk and act upon their own idea.

I found that all of the students were enthusiastic and eager to embark on this journey with me once they realized that they were in control, but not alone, during the writing process. My students required no redirections or pleas to write

once they realized that they were in the driver's seat. Each time our sessions began, they eagerly paged through their packet of prompts. Their overall demeanor, quotes that I overheard, and reactions to the prompts showed me how much their motivation increased throughout this process.

***Promoting collaborative conversations within guided writing groups increased engagement in the writing process. Students were motivated to write and share ideas with their classmates within their groups.***

Students are used to working in silence, and working independently. It is very rare that they are given the chance to work collaboratively, especially during the writing process. Writing is typically an independent task where students are left to their own thoughts to put down on paper. It can often be an intimidating, daunting, and lonely process.

Encouraging students to discuss their writing topics not only provided them with confidence, but it also acted as an additional form of scaffolding for those students who still may not be producing authentic ideas on their own. Often times, something one student shared frequently initiated ideas for the surrounding group members, too. The more they discussed, the more content and details become apparent. All that is left to do is to take the conversations that they've just participated in and replicate them on paper. For students who struggle generating ideas, this process was critical.

Allowing for these cooperative conversations between group members provided students with another feeling of outward freedom in the writing process. It helped empower them to be creative and produce ideas that they may have otherwise struggled with. The feeling of freedom may be intimidating at first, but as the students became accustomed to it, they were able to blossom. This newfound freedom presented to my students was equally as beneficial to me, as their teacher. As Dewey (1938) states, “Let me speak first of the advantages which reside potentially in increase of outward freedom. In the first place, without its existence it is practically impossible for a teacher to gain knowledge of the individuals with whom he is concerned” (p. 62). During this intervention, I was able to learn a significant amount about each of my students as individual writers, which allowed me to better instruct them.

***Students benefited from the many resources available to them within their guided writing groups, such as the option for peer interaction and teacher conferencing, which resulted in an overall increase in writing achievement.***

The low-income, at-risk students that I teach require significant scaffolding to be successful. Part of our time spent in the guided writing groups was introducing them to the different resources that were available to them, such as peer interaction and collaborative conversations, as well as conferencing with the teacher.

In our eight week study, I found myself focusing primarily on student abilities to generate authentic ideas and write significantly on those topics. Attempting to show growth in all areas of writing achievement was an unrealistic goal in such a condensed period of time, so the focus shifted to the area of highest need.

The students thrived on having collaborative conversations with their peers in order to stimulate ideas and details to elaborate on within their writing. Students that previously would fail a writing task simply by failing to ever initiate the task were now writing confidently and enthusiastically with assistance from their peers.

In addition to the success the students were experiencing participating in collaborative conversations with their peers, they were also taking advantage of me as a resource to conference with. Students were completely animated and passionate about the work that they would share with me. They yearned for my approval, and sincerely accepted my feedback and constructive criticism. However, they would not just look to me for “the answers.” Conferencing became a place to share and continue to grow as a writer, and improve their writing piece through open, honest conversation between teacher and student.

***Students’ independence increased as they utilized the given writing prompts to help generate their own authentic topics to write about.***

In the beginning of the study, students relied heavily on the packet of prompts to produce ideas to write about, as intended. This process took the pressure off of them to decide on an independent topic to share about, and also gave them a plethora of options to explore. As our journey evolved, I found that students were using the prompts to spark additional ideas, independent of the given prompts, to write about. They became much more secure in their ability to be creative and generate their own prompts to respond to.

Although this newfound, increased independence was not put to use during every session, it showed growth, progress, and confidence. Students depended on their packet of prompts during the majority of our time together, but were not hesitant to stray from the confines of them.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Although the time frame for my study has ended, I plan to continue to implement the interventions that I have found to be successful. This study has allowed me to explore and learn more about my students as not just writers, but learners, too. It also granted me an opportunity to learn and reflect on my own teaching practices.

### **Student Choice Continued**

As my study unrolled, I planned to expose my students to a variety of options of student choice. As students exhausted one option, they would have another one to turn to. I couldn't have known then that their excessive enthusiasm with simple journal prompts would take them through the duration of our study. Because they were so enthralled with the packet of prompts provided to them, I never had the opportunity within our eight week study to present them with the picture prompts or the technology resources that I had originally planned to.

As the year continues, and the students start to tire of the journal prompts, I intend to implement my original plan of offering multiple layers of student choice to maintain student engagement and motivation. I want to continue the progress we have already accomplished through the outlets of student choice. My students have become more motivated to write, and more confident writers. Instead of staring at blank papers, unable to generate ideas, the students now

confidently utilize their given resources to write about topics that are meaningful to them.

One additional outlet that I had intended to use with my students, and plan to in the future, is the option of writing in response to a picture prompt. Students will be provided with a basket full of a variety of different pictures. Similar to the journal prompts, students can choose to make up a story surrounding the picture, or use it to joggle their memory of a story that they would like to share. I will offer little direction, and the students will have total creative freedom.

Additionally, I plan to introduce the students to a website that the district has provided called, World Book Online. It is kid-friendly, online encyclopedia that allows students access to anything from famous people, to geography and animals, and everything in between. Students can search for topics that are interesting to them and read age appropriate articles, view pictures, and watch videos. I would encourage students to explore a topic of interest to them and then continue to write about it.

Providing all of these resources at a single time may result in a sensory overload and indecisiveness. However, staggering the implementation of different resources ensures that students will always have something stimulating them to write.

## **Writing Achievement**

I realized early on in my study that it was unrealistic to take my most struggling writers and show growth in all areas of writing. I quickly learned that what I was truly looking for in my low-income, at risk students was to help them improve their ability to have authentic, confident, and positive writing experiences. I was most concerned with assisting them in generating ideas, and being able to formulate a sufficient amount of content and details in their writing. The majority of our conversations and conferences consisted of their thoughts and ideas about a particular topic of interest, and how to take those thoughts and transfer them onto paper. This resulted in other parts of the writing process being put on the back burner.

As my students continue to become more confident writers, and no longer require as much scaffolding with their content and ideas, I plan to instruct more in depth on the other components of writing achievement, starting with conventions. Continuing with the guided writing groups, our opportunities for conferencing will focus more on conventions, and less on the actual content of their writing.

## **Conclusion**

This study has inspired me to utilize the intervention of guided writing groups, collaborative conversations, and student choice not just for the remainder of this year, but in all of my future years teaching. Every new class of students

has a unique dynamic with individual needs, but this intervention can be tailored and adapted to the needs and demands of any student.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Principal Consent

Dear Lisa Lynch:

I am currently working towards my Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. A critical component of my coursework requires me to study my own teaching practices, and reflect upon how I can better serve my students. In doing so, I will be conducting a systematic research study on the impact of implementing guided writing groups that allow for student choice in journal writing. These interventions are being put in place in order to help better engage all of my students, and increase motivation and writing ability.

The primary purpose of this study is to increase writing achievement. Students will be provided with the opportunity to participate in a guided writing group, lead by the teacher, and will be granted the ability to choose from student selected prompts. Within these guided writing groups, students will have the ability to conference with the teacher on a weekly basis.

The results of my research from this study will be published in my graduate thesis; however, any and all material that relates to my students' identity will be kept in the strictest confidence. They will be given pseudonyms, and all paperwork will be kept in a secured file cabinet.

Parents/Guardian's will be made aware that they are under no obligation to agree to have their student participate in this research. Due to the fact that it is my obligation to manage my classroom to best fit the needs of each and every student, these interventions will become a standard part of my classroom routine in writing. However, only data collected from participants will be included in the research study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding my research study, please feel free to contact me, or my Moravian College advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, at 610-861-1482 or by e-mail at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu).

**I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this research study, that I have read and understand the consent form, and received a copy.**

Please Sign: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to sincerely thank you for your cooperation in advance.

Sincerely,

Amy Habick

## Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Dear Parents and Guardians:

In addition to being your child's teacher, I am also currently a graduate student working towards my Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. A critical component of my coursework this year requires me to study my own teaching practices, and reflect upon how I can better serve my students. In doing so, I will be conducting a research study on the impact of implementing guided writing groups that allow for student choice in journal writing. These interventions are being put in place in order to help better engage all of my students, and increase motivation and writing ability.

The primary purpose of this study is to increase writing achievement and enhance motivation to write. Students will be provided with the opportunity to participate in a guided writing group, led by the teacher, and will be granted the ability to choose from self selected prompts. Within these guided writing groups, students will have the opportunity to conference regularly with the teacher.

The results of my research from this study will be published in my graduate thesis; however, any and all material that relates to your child's identity will be kept in the strictest confidence. He or she will be given a pseudonym, and all paperwork will be kept in a secured file cabinet or a pass code protected computer.

Please be aware that you are under no obligation to agree to have your student participate in this research. Should you wish to decline, there will be no repercussions for your student. These interventions will become a standard part of my classroom routine for all students in my English Language Arts class. However, only data collected from participants will be included in the research study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding my research study, please feel free to contact me at 610-865-5881, or at [ahabick@basdschools.org](mailto:ahabick@basdschools.org). You may also contact my Moravian College advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, at 610-861-1482 or by e-mail at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu). You may also contact the principal, Mrs. Lisa Lynch at 610-865-5881.

### Consent to Participate in Classroom Research Study

Student Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent/Guardian \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to sincerely thank you for your cooperation and efforts in allowing both your child and myself to continue in this journey of learning.

Sincerely,

Amy Habick

## **Appendix C: Interview Protocol**

### Interview Questions:

1. How do you feel about writing?
2. When I say it's time to write how do you feel? Why?
3. What's your favorite thing about writing?
4. What's your least favorite thing about writing?
5. Do you like having the topics available?
6. Do you like conferencing with the teacher?
7. Do you like being able to write about anything, or would you rather have me tell you what to write about?

## Appendix D: Survey: Writing Attitude Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Writing Attitude Survey

1.) I am excited to write.



agree



sometimes



disagree



2.) I feel that I am a good writer.



agree



sometimes



disagree

3.) I feel happy about sharing my writing with my teacher and my classmates.



agree



sometimes



disagree

4.) I like to choose what I write about.



agree



sometimes



disagree

5.) I like when Mrs. Habick chooses what I write about.



agree



sometimes



disagree

6.) I do not feel like I'm a good writer.



agree



sometimes



disagree

7.) I am not excited to write.



agree

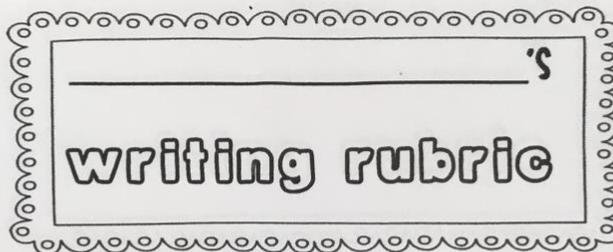


sometimes



disagree

## Appendix E: Writing Rubric



	needs improvement	fair	good	excellent
<b>convention</b> Student uses accurate punctuation and capitalization. Student writes most sight words correctly and uses best guess spelling.	1	2	3	4
<b>sentence fluency</b> Student has a variety of sentence lengths. Few choppy or run-on sentences. Sentences are complete and make sense.	1	2	3	4
<b>organization</b> Student has a beginning, middle, and end. Student uses transitional words. Student has an opening and closing.	1	2	3	4
<b>style and voice</b> Student tries interesting words. Shows own personality in appropriate ways	1	2	3	4
<b>content/ideas</b> Student stays on topic, and is thorough with interesting details. Uses "showing" or "descriptive" detail effectively.	1	2	3	4
<b>writing process</b> Student applied the writing process to create a finished product. Student attempted some editing, and/or use resources such as a dictionary.	1 needed a lot of guidance	2 needed some guidance	3 very little guidance	4 independent writer



Total: