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Skills Acquired Through Personal Narrative Writing Instruction

Abstract

This study was focused on personal narrative writing instruction in the elementary grades. The purpose of this study was to determine the skills that students acquire during personal narrative writing instruction. The study was conducted in a rural fifth grade classroom and included six students of varying ability levels as well as the classroom teacher. samples. Data was collected through classroom observation, interviews, and student work. The results of this study suggested that personal narrative writing instruction teaches students how to effectively organize a writing piece, include proper mechanics, vary word choice, and how to edit and revise. Educators need to be aware that a variety of teaching strategies should be used to successfully teach these skills to students.

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Skills Acquired Through Personal Narrative Writing Instruction

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Abstract

This study was focused on personal narrative writing instruction in the elementary grades. The purpose of this study was to determine the skills that students acquire during personal narrative writing instruction. The study was conducted in a rural fifth grade classroom and included six students of varying ability levels as well as the classroom teacher. Data was collected through classroom observation, interviews, and student work samples. The results of this study suggested that personal narrative writing instruction teaches students how to effectively organize a writing piece, include proper mechanics, vary word choice, and how to edit and revise. Educators need to be aware that a variety of teaching strategies should be used to successfully teach these skills to students.

Skills Acquired Through Personal Narrative Writing Instruction

Introduction

Writing has become an important method of communication in society today. Letters, newspapers, magazines, email, billboards, text messaging, and social networking are only a few examples of the ways in which writing is used to relay information and connect with one another on a daily basis. Each of these different genres has its own unique set of writing skills and organizational patterns associated with it. As the ways to communicate through writing continue to improve and grow, it is necessary for students to have exposure to various written forms in school settings, some of which include poetry, realistic fiction, persuasive writing, and historical reports in an effort to help prepare students for the writing that they will encounter outside of the classroom. Therefore, explicit teaching of a variety of different types of writing is necessary to ensure that students are able to effectively convey ideas through a variety of written forms and successfully comprehend materials presented in different ways.

Providing students enough experiences with a wide array of written genres in their early school years proves difficult for some school districts. Though providing students with ample time to experiment with different written forms will no doubt allow them to gain the skills needed to comprehend and produce these texts, not every school takes advantage of exposing students early on to a variety of genres. Whether due to time constraints, district requirements, or a number of other reasons, certain school districts opt to focus a majority of their time teaching children to be proficient writers in just one genre of writing.

This is the case in one rural school district situated within Mabel County (a pseudonym) in the state of New York. From Kindergarten through grade five, students are primarily taught the basic skills of writing a personal narrative, otherwise described as a “story about one’s friends or one’s self” (Tracy, Reid, & Graham, 2009, p. 324). While other genres and forms of writing, such as expository text and poetry, are presented through read aloud, independent reading, and guided reading, little focus is placed on teaching the students how to produce a quality written piece in a form other than the personal narrative. Does this method foster the basic writing skills necessary for students to successfully complete writing pieces in the upper grades, especially when not all will be personal narratives? Or does it leave the students with a lack of necessary practice with other genres, putting them at risk of not reaching the level of writing proficiency expected at their grade level? Before these questions can be answered, it is necessary to first discover the skills that students acquire while writing personal narratives. This action research study was conducted to discover those skills.

After collecting data in a rural fifth grade classroom, it was discovered that the four major skills taught through personal narrative writing instruction included organization, mechanics, word choice, and the ability to edit/revise. Previous research determined that these skills are also major components necessary in other written genres. Therefore, it can be inferred that after writing instruction in the personal narrative genre, students should be able to produce quality pieces in other written forms as well, though previous research states otherwise (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Donovan, 2001). Time constraints prevented further research into whether the skills do translate between genres and if not, the causes behind the lack of translation.

Theoretical Framework

Prior to identifying the skills learned through writing in the narrative genre as well as the effect of primarily teaching only one form of writing explicitly to students, it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of literacy and how one acquires it, as literacy acquisition plays a key role in written language. Larson and Marsh (2005), both researchers in the field of literacy, have defined literacy as a social practice, “situated within specific contexts and shaped by social interaction” (p. 11). Their definition refers to the idea that literacy knowledge in children develops through interaction with others in meaningful settings. Literacy has also been defined by Jenkins et al. (2006) as “the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap” (p. 19). These abilities include understanding images and sounds, transforming them, distributing them, and adapting them to new forms (Jenkins, 2006). In combining those two ideas, one overarching definition is created: literacy is a set of skills obtained through a combination of learning, social interactions, participation with ever changing technologies, and meaningful acquisition in natural settings both in and out of school. The basis of this definition is derived from sociocultural theory and the New Literacy Studies.

Sociocultural theory suggests that community membership is the basis for learning. Both oral language and literacy are achieved in the same manner, through acquisition (Gee, 2001). Gee (2001), describes acquisition as “a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of trial and error, without a process of formal teaching” (p. 539). The idea that literacy is obtained through acquisition is also reflected in the New Literacy Studies. This theory is similar to the ideas presented in sociocultural theory, though in the New Literacy Studies this learning

and acquisition occur outside of the classroom. According to Moll and Gonzalez (2001), children enter school with a plethora of prior knowledge. This idea suggests that children are participant observers in their home. They bring with them to school knowledge of their culture and community that they have observed by participating in it (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001). At home, most children are exposed primarily to narrative text through reading. Parents who read to their children often opt to read fictional narrative stories, provide these same stories for children to read on their own, and can be seen reading this genre themselves. As the majority of books students are exposed to outside of the classroom is in the narrative genre, it can be inferred that this is the genre that students know the most about and therefore will be the easiest for them to create on their own.

The conventions of written language are obtained in much the same manner as oral language. Students acquire the skills necessary to become a proficient writer first by being exposed to models of well-produced writing pieces. Over time, they receive explicit teaching in the conventions of written language and eventually, are also taught the structure of the different genres of writing. This teaching of the structure of different written forms occurs not only through explicit instruction from the teacher, but also through exposure during everyday literacy activities.

Research Question

As students are most familiar with the narrative genre due to exposure through reading at home and at school, it can be assumed that this genre is the easiest for students to comprehend. They are aware of the text structure and the mechanics associated with this genre because of their exposure so teachers tend to teach writing primarily using narratives. It is also accepted that students are generally more motivated and invested in

their work if they feel it is relevant to their lives outside of school, perhaps leading certain school districts to the decision to use personal narratives as their primary way to explicitly teach writing skills. I was especially interested in learning the skills students obtain through writing only personal narratives and also in if/how these skills transfer into other genres of writing in the upper grades. Due to time constraints however, the idea of skill transfer from personal narratives to other written genres could not be explored fully. This action research project instead asks the following question: what writing skills are students learning through the teaching of writing through the use of the personal narrative genre?

Literature Review

There is cause for concern about the capabilities of students as writers in today's society (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Tracy, Reid, & Graham, 2009). For young children especially, "writing continues to be a challenging, abstract instructional domain" (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004, p. 17) and many students are falling behind. Few students have reached the level of proficiency necessary for their respective grade level with many students only exhibiting partial mastery of the writing process (Tracy, Reid, & Graham, 2009). Students with disabilities nationwide have exhibited an even greater lack of understanding of the writing process with most students' writing performance reaching only basic levels (Jacobson & Reid, 2010). Though research supports the need for student improvement in writing, emphasis on education reform primarily focuses on math and reading (Macarthur & Philippakos, 2010; Olinghouse, 2008).

While the importance of math and reading skills is undisputed, the need for writing improvement cannot be ignored. To be a successful, functional member of

society today one must possess the skills to communicate effectively within the discourses of home, school, family, and the workplace (Myhill, 2005) through both oral and written language. Students who do not possess proficiency in written communication are at risk for failure. It is unlikely that these students will use writing to extend their learning and will be less likely to go to college based on the heavy emphasis on writing in the application process (Lienemann, Graham, Janssen, & Reid, 2006; Tracy, Reid, & Graham, 2009). As stated by Tracy, Reid, & Graham (2009), “providing effective writing instruction to young children should reduce the number of students who fail to develop the writing skills needed to fully meet classroom demands in higher grades” (p. 323). Focusing on writing improvement in the primary grade levels is a proactive step in reducing writing problems in later school years (Lienemann, Graham, Janssen, & Reid, 2006).

In an effort to discover why students are not performing well on writing tasks in the upper grades, it is necessary to look back to the way writing instruction is presented at the elementary grade levels. A large number of school districts teach writing instruction primarily through the use of the personal narrative, though most of the writing in the upper grade levels and beyond require students to be knowledgeable in a variety of genres such as persuasive writing, research essays, and poetry. As previously stated, I was interested in what skills are obtained through writing a personal narrative and if these skills translate into the other genres seen in the upper grade levels. In a review of the literature completed by this researcher prior to the study, it was determined that there are many different approaches to teaching writing but that most approaches centered around personal narratives. The literature surrounding personal narrative writing instruction was

broken down into four main topics: the approaches to teaching writing, the overuse of the narrative genre in elementary classrooms, interest and motivation, and the skills learned through the writing process. Personal narrative writing was found to teach students the importance of mechanics, word choice, planning/organization, revising and sharing during the writing process but the over reliance of the narrative in elementary writing instruction was attributed to lack of student success in the upper grades.

Approaches to Teaching Writing

A shift in the approach to teaching writing was made in the late twentieth century (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Turner & Katic, 2009; Yi, 2009). Previously, the focus of writing instruction was on the finished and final product. This approach is known as the product-based model and it emphasizes the “correctness” of the finished piece. The idea that “students must develop transcription skills, such as handwriting and spelling, which are mechanisms for transcribing ideas into written language” (Olinghouse, 2008, p. 4) is the emphasis in this model. Conventions and grammar are of the greatest importance (Turner & Katic, 2009). In the product-based model, little attention is paid to the writing process. This model, while helping students to develop mechanics and an idea of word choice, did little in helping the students to internalize the process of writing.

More recently, the focus of teaching writing has shifted from the product-based model to the process-based model (Yi, 2009). Emphasis in this approach is placed on the composition process involving brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and redrafting (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009). The importance of grammar is stressed through mini-lessons and carried on throughout the different stages of the writing process (Weaver, Bush,

Anderson, & Bills, 2006) but it is not the main focus of this approach. Many teachers incorporate the process-based model into their curriculum through the use of Writer's Workshop. Writer's Workshop "is an interactive approach to teaching writing in which students learn and practice the importance of rehearsal, drafting/revising, and editing their own work" (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007, p. 131). Often, students are able to choose their own topic to write about (Wollman-Bonilla, 2004) while the teacher scaffolds the writing process. Scaffolding is important in that it provides students with the appropriate amount of support needed for them to complete a task that they otherwise would not be able to accomplish on their own (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004). Slowly overtime, the scaffolds are removed as the student internalizes the process and is able to repeat it independently.

Scaffolding is also a major component of SRSD, Self-Regulated Strategy Development, which is another method for teaching writing using the process-based model (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Lienemann, Graham, Janssen, & Reid, 2006; Macarthur & Philippakos, 2010; Patel & Laud, 2009). Using a six-step approach (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Lienemann, Graham, Janssen, & Reid, 2006; Macarthur & Philippakos, 2010; Patel & Laud, 2009), "SRSD involves explicitly teaching students strategies for accomplishing specific writing tasks" (Lienemann, Graham, Janssen, & Reid, 2006, p. 67). The six stages are the following: develop background knowledge, discuss, model, memorize, support, and independent performance. Each step offers a varying level of support to students as they begin to internalize the writing process (Patel & Laud, 2009). Through the use of SRSD, students are taught "a range of processes for setting goals, selecting strategies, monitoring strategy use, evaluating effects on performance, managing

motivation and effort, and managing time and the environment” (Macarthur & Philippakos, 2010, p. 439). Emphasis is placed on goal setting and a major component in the SRSD strategy is the student self-monitoring their progress toward that goal (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Macarthur & Philippakos, 2010). SRSD teaches students how to use writing strategies effectively and how to manage those strategies independently (Macarthur & Philippakos, 2010). Mostly, the SRSD model highlights the importance of planning before writing (Olinghouse, 2008). According to Olinghouse (2008), “skilled advanced planning, in which a writer sets goals, generates content, and organizes ideas before writing, results in more coherent writing” (p. 5) and it leads to writing pieces that are longer and more complete (Patel & Laud, 2009) than those produced without using the strategy. The incorporation of strategies such as the SRSD model into classroom writing instruction are important and useful because they teach students how to plan and organize the content of their writing piece independently, a skill that is obtained through the writing of personal narratives and is often scored on rubrics in school settings.

Scaffolds are also in place on the computer for those classrooms that recognize the benefit of incorporating technology into writing instruction. Programs such as TELE-Web offer “learning tools that provide reminders that have been customized for the unique needs of students” (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004, p. 6). Technology has become such an important tool in communication and students who are given the opportunity to work with such a widespread, motivating medium (Wollman-Bonilla, 2003) “will develop writing and composition skills that are more in line with the ways in which information and communication technologies work in today’s society” (Turner & Katic, 2009, p. 267). Writing can be revised numerous times, confirming that it is not a

linear process (Turner & Katic, 2009) and those students “who have limited access to technology or who are learning to write in linear frameworks are at a disadvantage because they do not have the opportunity to internalize the affordances of technology” (Turner & Katic, 2009, p. 268).

A third approach to writing includes aspects of the product-based and process-based models but adds another layer to the teaching of writing, the idea of audience. Audience awareness is important because it allows students to develop their own written voice, or way to communicate with the reader. The effectiveness of voice is often included on scoring rubrics in school settings and therefore is a necessary skill to be taught. This third model, known as the genre-based model (Yi, 2009), integrates “a focus on social practices (processes) and a focus on textual forms (products)” (Kamberelis, 1999, p. 407). According to Bastian (2010), genres “are actions based within specific, social, and recurrent rhetorical situations, thus making genre rhetorical in nature” (p. 30). They are used for accomplishing “particular rhetorical goals in specific communicative contexts” (Kamberelis, 1999, p. 408) and understanding “the forms, functions, rhetorical possibilities, and typical occasions of use of different genre” (Kamberelis, 1999, 9. 408), also understood to be the functions, meaning, and intention of that genre (Weith, 2005, p. 78), plays an important role in learning how to write. Yi (2009) states it best when defining writing ability “as the ability to perform writing tasks for a given purpose, satisfy a given discourse community with regard to the structure and content of the discourse, and communicate functionally” (p. 61).

Overuse of the Narrative Genre in School Settings

As it is necessary for students to learn to create writing pieces for different purposes, it can be inferred that students should be exposed to a variety of genres during reading and writing instruction in the classroom but unfortunately, in many districts, students work primarily in one genre. In school settings, the narrative is the predominate written form presented to students through reading and writing instruction (Anderson, 2008; Caswell & Duke, 1998; Chapman, 2002; Isaacson, 2004; Jacobson & Reid, 2010, Myhill, 2005; Wollman-Bonilla, 2004). The idea that the narrative is an easier genre for students to learn (Chapman, 2002) and the lack of non-narrative quality texts (Caswell & Duke, 1998), may account for the overabundance of this genre being used as a tool to teach reading and writing instruction in the elementary grades. Researchers have discovered that student schemata for narrative text is much stronger than for non-narrative text (Myhill, 2005) due to the great deal of exposure they receive to this genre throughout school. As Kamberelis (1999) argues, “children’s literary diets are not particularly well-balanced and may not be providing children with cultural staples requisite for optimal genre development and learning” (p. 452). Anderson (2008) suggests that children are at a disadvantage when not “afforded opportunities to learn a range of empowering written discourse through explicit instruction and critical language awareness” (309). This idea that children’s “literary diets” (Kamberelis, 1999) are unbalanced may be a major cause of the expository gap (Chapman, 2002) seen as students’ transition into fourth grade. The lack of exposure to reading and writing in the expository genre produces students who are unprepared for the reading and writing tasks completed in grade four and above (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Donovan, 2001). This lack

of skill and subsequent underperformance on standardized tests may be due to lack of exposure to this genre in the elementary grades and can lead to student placement in special education classrooms as a result of the “ain’t been taught” phenomenon (Anderson, 2008). Limited exposure to and experience with a variety of written forms not only affects writing performance but also can lead to student writing apprehension (Tunks, 2010). Apprehensive students “report fear of being exposed as poor writers and embarrassment because of their perceived lack of ability” (Tunks, 2010, p. 1) when in many instances, their lack of ability stems from the overuse of narratives in the teaching of the writing process.

Apprehension and lack of ability to produce quality writing pieces in the upper grades may be linked to the use of narratives in the teaching of writing in the elementary grades. Researchers (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009) have found that writing personal narratives is used to teach such skills as mechanics, word choice, planning/organization, revising and sharing. Each of those skills is important when writing in other genres as well, so it can be inferred that students would do well writing in any genre, but such is not the case. If students are not performing well on upper level writing tasks although the skills needed are relatively the same, are students actually learning the skills necessary to become proficient writers through the use of the narrative form?

Donovan (2001) argues that it is imperative that students learn to write for a wide variety of purposes in an effort to decrease writing apprehension, increase performance on state testing, and prepare students for “writing in high school and college, and for

citizenship in a democracy” (Anderson, 2008, p. 271). According to Jacobson & Reid (2010), “unlike in elementary school, writing demands in middle school and high school generally center on expository or persuasive writing” (p. 172) and therefore it is logical to begin exposing students to these genres at an early age. Narrative writing is so predominant in the classroom that little is known about persuasive writing even though it is a staple of standards based essay testing (Wollman-Bonilla, 2004). Wollman-Bonilla (2004) argues that “instruction in persuasive writing is warranted because persuasive communication is central not only to essay writing tests but also to everyday life in a democracy to have one’s needs met, to participate politically, to protest inequities, and to convince others to take action” (p. 510). It is necessary for teachers to “recognize that persuasive writing can be the impetus for lively conversation, high interest, and growth in writing skill and attitude in the writing workshop curriculum” (Wollman-Bonilla, 2004, p. 510).

Interest and Motivation

Similar to Wollman-Bonilla’s (2004) idea that persuasive writing is a high interest motivator, Caswell & Duke (1998) suggest that non-narrative texts are more interesting to certain students and can create a better sense of engagement and motivation in the classroom when these genres are used to teach writing. A cause of this high interest motivation discovered by Wollman-Bonilla (2004) is the development of student awareness of audience. As previously stated, the genre-based model for writing places a heavy emphasis on the importance of audience in written communication (Yi, 2009). Children are especially able to demonstrate their understanding of audience awareness when engaged in writing activities that encourage “writing for a real purpose and familiar

audience” (Wollman-Bonilla, 2004, p. 504), such as the case with the persuasive genre. In a study completed by Wollman-Bonilla (2004) in which students were asked to write letters to their teacher in an effort to convince her to hold a holiday party, it was discovered that “the children’s expressed belief that their intended audiences would read the letters suggested a sense of genuine purpose for their writing as did their hopeful talk about whether these readers could really be persuaded” (p. 507). Though the persuasive genre does not become a dominant part of the curriculum until the upper elementary and high school grades, it stands to reason that such a highly motivating genre should be included, if only to provide background knowledge of the genre, in the lower grade levels. As it is known that lack of exposure to a variety of genres lends itself to poor performance and increased student apprehension toward writing (Anderson, 2008; Tunks, 2010), it is imperative that teachers begin to incorporate other non-narrative genres into their writing curriculum. As Caswell & Duke (1998) claim, “more experience with non-narrative texts in the early grades may help mitigate the difficulties many students encounter with these texts later in schooling” (p. 108).

Skills Learned Through the Writing Process

As previously stated, writing instruction in the elementary classroom is done primarily through the use of narrative text (Anderson, 2008; Caswell & Duke, 1998; Chapman, 2002; Isaacson, 2004; Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Myhill, 2005; Wollman-Bonilla, 2004). While it has been found that this can have a negative effect on students as they move from elementary school to high school and out into the workforce (Anderson, 2008; Chapman, 2002; Lienemann, Graham, Janssen, & Reid, 2006; Tracy, Reid, & Graham, 2009), there is a plethora of skills that narrative reading and writing

does teach to students. Writing in the narrative genre focuses on the “commonly occurring text structure consisting of an overarching introduction, supporting subtopics, and a conclusion” (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004, p. 9) that answer the who, what, where, when, and how questions of a story. According to Englert, Manalo, & Zhao (2004), a well formed narrative includes a “title, introduction to the paper’s topic, the provision of details related to the experience or event...detailed images related to what the story was about” (p. 11), and a conclusion, all while effectively conveying the author’s voice and audience awareness throughout. Another component of well-formed narratives, and writing pieces in general, is the successful use of conventions throughout the text. Conventions include correct use of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and word consciousness (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004) and are usually included in scoring rubrics in the classroom and in testing situations. Perhaps more importantly, the use of narratives as a tool for writing instruction teaches students the significance of brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and redrafting (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009) as well as providing feedback to peers.

Just as narrative texts have their own set of skills that are learned through exposure and practice with the genre, expository and persuasive texts have specific skills associated with them as well. According to Montelongo & Hernandez (2007), the teaching of writing through expository, or informational, text fosters “those very abilities that the elementary school students need to develop” (p. 539) which include “text structure, topic relatedness, and paragraph cohesiveness” (p. 539). It also teaches the skills needed for students to fully understand the breakdown and relation between topic,

main idea, and supporting details (Montelongo & Hernandez, 2007). The persuasive genre, as previously stated, emphasizes the importance of audience awareness and focuses on the “strategies associated with audience awareness – appealing to readers’ interests, noting readers’ concerns, and countering potential objections” (Wollman-Bonilla, 2004, p. 505). Conventions and the planning, drafting, editing, and revising of the written piece are just as strongly valued in these genres as is in narratives. These skills, discovered in this review of the literature, provided this researcher with a basis for her own study in this topic area.

After analyzing the skills taught through writing in the narrative genre, the expository genre, and the persuasive genre, one question begs to be answered: Why are students unprepared to write in non-narrative genres if many of the skills learned through narrative writing can be transferred into non-narrative writing forms as well? Jacobson & Reid (2010) discovered that through the use of the SRSD model, students were able to internalize the writing process in such a way that they were able to carry the skills they learned through writing narratives into other written forms. These skills include those required to effectively plan, draft, edit, revise, and redraft a written piece (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009) in an effort to produce a well-formed finished product.

The knowledge and proper use of writing conventions is another skill required for both narrative and non-narrative genres (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009). Mechanics play an important role in the writing process. Proper punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and word consciousness are stressed and subsequently scored

(Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004) beginning when students enter school and should easily translate from one genre to the next.

Another skill that is necessary in the production of a well-formed writing piece is its overall structure. For a piece of writing to be considered complete and of good quality, it must include not only the appropriate mechanics, but also complete sentences and a proper sense of paragraphing (Anderson, 2008). Most genres used in both the discourses of school and the workplace expect formal pieces of writing. As in the narrative, expository, and persuasive genres, these formal writing pieces include an introduction and a conclusion (Chapman, 2002) along with a topic sentence, supporting details, a strong sense of organization, voice, and awareness of the intended audience (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004; Kamberelis, 1999; Montelongo & Hernandez, 2007; Wollman-Bonilla, 2004).

As all of these skills are necessary to demonstrate writing ability in a variety of different genres, it stands to reason that if a student has had much exposure to and is a proficient writer of one genre, then that student should perform fairly well as a writer of other genres as well. Jacobson & Reid (2010) make the claim that “strong writers must know how to plan, generate content, organize, address an appropriate audience, revise, and improve their written composition” (p. 157). Research suggests that narrative, expository, and persuasive genres all foster these same skills (Anderson, 2008; Chapman, 2002; Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Kamberelis, 1999; Montelongo & Hernandez, 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009; Wollman-Bonilla, 2004) but ironically, research also suggests that students

do not show the same proficiency with the expository and persuasive genres as they do with narrative.

While analyzing the literature surrounding the topic of narrative writing in the elementary grade levels, it was determined that writing instruction in this genre teaches proper use of mechanics, word choice, planning/organization, main idea, detail development, revising, and sharing. It was also determined that students show great difficulty when writing in other genres once they reach the upper grade levels, even though the skills needed to produce both narrative and non-narrative texts are similar. While it was thought that different genres require knowledge of a unique set of skills to produce a quality written piece, review of the related literature suggests that the skills are not unique but are instead shared by a variety of written forms.

Methods

Context

The research for this study was completed in a rural school district in western New York State. In the 2008-2009 school year there were a total of 2,249 students enrolled in the school district with an average class size of 21. 30% of the 2,249 students in the school district during the 2008-2009 school year were eligible for free lunch and 12% of the students were able to receive lunch at a reduced price. A majority of the students in the district during that school year were Caucasian (82%), followed by African American (9%), Hispanic (8%), and Asian (1%). The classroom in which the study took place is a one of seven fifth grade classrooms in a building that houses students in grades 3-5. There are 22 students in the class who are taught by a teacher with over twenty years of experience.

Participants

This study focused on six of the 22 students in the class. Sam (all names are pseudonyms) is a ten-year old Caucasian female student who enjoys both reading and writing. Tim is a ten-year old African-American male student who enjoys learning and is consistently on task. Jacob is a ten-year old Caucasian male student who enjoys writing and especially enjoys sharing his ideas aloud with the class. Little Girl is a nine-year old Caucasian female who enjoys being creative. She frequently creates her own writing pieces and illustrations for her stories. Britney is a ten-year old Caucasian female who is relatively shy but enjoys sharing her ideas with her close friends in the classroom. She sees herself as a “good writer” but is often pulled into a small needs group by the teacher during writing time for extra help. Lastly, Ashley is a ten-year old Caucasian female who, despite being easily distracted by items in her desk and conversations around her, does fairly well in writing and can often be seen writing stories of her own during free time. The classroom teacher Mrs. Davenport, who has agreed to be a part of this study as well, is a woman with over twenty years of teaching experience with a majority of her time spent teaching at the fourth and fifth grade levels in this same school district. Her classes are predominately composed of Caucasians, followed by African-Americans and usually consist of a majority of female students.

Researcher Stance

As a researcher, I was a passive observer in Mrs. Davenport’s classroom. A passive observer does not have the responsibilities of a teacher. They do not interact with the subjects participating in the study. Instead, the role of the passive observer is to focus only on data collection (Mills, 2011). As a passive observer in the classroom, I was

present during the scheduled writing time block only for the purpose of observing and collecting data. Acting as a passive observer allowed me to focus completely on my research without any behavioral interruptions or questions from students. It allowed me to totally take in what was happening in the classroom. As a passive observer though, I was not present daily and was only able to capture small snapshots of the writing process.

Method

During this study, I visited Mrs. Davenport's classroom on three separate occasions. As this study is being used to determine what skills elementary students learn through the writing of personal narratives, I observed the students during their one hour writing block in the afternoon, focusing on which skills were presented during the lesson and how. I watched the students as they took what they had learned during the lesson and applied it to their own writing pieces.

In addition to observing Mrs. Davenport and the participating students during their writing block, I also conducted three separate interviews with the students as well as Mrs. Davenport. The interviews were completed individually and took place on each of the three times I visited the classroom. Two of the interviews were tape-recorded (Appendix A and Appendix B) and transcribed while the third was completed through written response (Appendix C). These interviews took place on the same day as the observations and serve as a way for the researcher to determine how the students feel they are benefiting from writing personal narratives. During the interviews, the students and the researcher discussed the skills that they have learned through personal narrative writing, how the students feel about writing in primarily in only one genre, and if the students feel they are prepared for writing in the higher grade levels and why.

Along with the interviews and observations, samples of the students' writing were also collected and analyzed. The samples were compared to a rubric (Appendix D) listing skills that personal narrative writing has been found to foster in past research. These skills include spacing, conventions, mechanics, voice, organization, planning, and revising.

Quality and Credibility of Research

While conducting this research, it was important to ensure the study's credibility. Credibility has been defined by Mills (2011) as "the researcher's ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained" (p. 105). In an effort to ensure credibility, I practiced triangulation throughout this study. Triangulation refers to the process of collecting data through several methods rather than relying only on one (Mills, 2011). In this study, I collected data using three different methods, including observation, interviews, and the study of student work samples. Each of these was well documented through observation journals, audio-recordings, and copies of student work. I also collaborated with my critical colleague. My critical colleague was there to help me to organize the data I collected throughout my research and was used to help reflect on how my research was progressing.

Transferability, defined by Mills (2011) as "the researcher's belief that everything is context-bound" (p. 105), was also ensured throughout the study. Through the collection of detailed, descriptive data as well as the context of the study, comparisons can be made between my research study and other contexts to which my study may be relevant. Along with transferability, it was also important to ensure the dependability of

the study. According to Mills (2011), dependability refers to the “stability of the data” (p. 104). Here, I again made sure that I practiced triangulation throughout my study, collecting data using at least three different methods. My critical colleague was also used to help ensure dependability as they examined my collection process, analysis, and interpretation and provided me with feedback.

Along with credibility, transferability, and dependability, I also ensured confirmability throughout the study. Confirmability, the “neutrality or objectivity of the data collected” (Mills, 2011, p. 105) was ensured once again through triangulation, because each collection method can be compared to one another. I also practiced reflexivity, where I continue to look back to my research questions as I analyze the results of the study. I kept a journal where I was able to record my reflections about my research questions and the data that I received.

Informed Consent and Protecting Participant Rights

Before I began my research, it was necessary for me to collect informed assent from those participating in the study as well as their legal guardians. I first explained the purpose of my study and how I would be collecting data to the students in Mrs. Davenport’s classroom and asked if there were any students interested in participating. Those students who expressed interest were given an assent form that discussed the study in more depth and asked for the student signatures to begin conducting my research. I then sent home with each interested student a parental consent form explaining the study and ensuring each parent that if they allowed their child to take part in my study, their identities would be known only by me. All identifying marks would be removed from their child’s work samples and only pseudonyms would be used when writing up my

findings. Each parental consent form also included the rights guaranteed to them and their child if they chose to be a part of my research. The consent forms required that the legal guardian give permission and their signature in order for me to begin working with their child.

Data Collection

As previously stated, there were three forms of data collection used throughout the duration of my study. I worked as a passive observer in Mrs. Davenport's classroom, which allowed me to focus solely on observing how Mrs. Davenport and the students interacted during their writing block. I was also able to fully focus on the skills presented during writing time and how those skills were then incorporated into student writing pieces. During my observations I took detailed field notes that I was able to refer back to when analyzing data. Along with the observations, I conducted a total of three interviews (Appendix A, Appendix B, & Appendix C) with the students, asking them to detail what skills they have been learning as well as if they believe these skills will help them to write in other genres in the higher grades. These interview sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed so that they could be replayed when assessing the results of the study. Lastly, I collected samples of student work and compared those samples to a rubric (Appendix D) that detailed specific skills students have been found to learn while writing personal narratives. These were used to help me determine what students are actually learning and I was able to review these while analyzing my results.

Findings and Discussions

After collecting data on three separate occasions through work samples, interviews, and observations of the participating students, it was necessary to analyze

what had been discovered and determine any reoccurring themes that could be seen across each of the three collection methods. The following four themes were consistently present across all of the data sources: organization, mechanics, word choice, and editing/revising. The discovery of these four themes confirms what the literature surrounding this topic previously stated; through personal narrative writing instruction, students gain an understanding of the proper use of mechanics, word choice, organization, editing/revising, and sharing (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009).

Organization

The first major theme identified after analyzing all of the data was organization. It was one of the major skills emphasized in the classroom during writing instruction. While acting as a passive observer (Mills, 2011) in Mrs. Davenport's classroom, I was present for a set of mini-lessons that focused specifically on organizational skills. During my first observation, Mrs. Davenport modeled to the whole group how to choose appropriate writing topics and organize them into two categories: positive and negative. From this list, she then modeled how she narrowed down her own list of topics until she had chosen only one to write about. After modeling how to choose a topic, she then guided the students as they narrowed down the ideas on their own lists. During my second observation, Mrs. Davenport again used the modeling strategy to remind students how to properly plan the events, also considered main ideas with added supporting details, that they will include in their personal narratives. Using a graphic organizer that included spaces for the story topic, four events, and supporting event details, she showed the class the proper way to fill in each section using her own story as a guide. The

students were then allowed to complete event one, event two, and the supporting detail portions of their graphic organizers. A similar graphic organizer poster was taped to a classroom wall, which could be used as a guide if students were in need of some extra help. These mini-lessons helped the students to understand the importance of planning a story and how to organize each specific event into a paragraph with supporting details. Samples of student writing taken after instruction in the use of the graphic organizer as well as samples of final copies obtained before the lesson, suggest that this planning method leads to well thought out ideas, inclusion of supporting details, and knowledge of paragraphing. In a related study, Englert, Manalo, & Zhao (2004) similarly discovered that these elements are necessary to create a personal narrative.

Along with direct observation and the analysis of student work samples, the students themselves spoke of the importance of organization in their writing pieces. Ashley, when asked during an interview to recall the writing skills that were being taught in the classroom, announced that the students were working on narratives. She then proceeded to describe a personal narrative as “a paragraph that you put one, two, and three, and four” (personal interview, October 28, 2010), stating that those are the “events that happen during your narrative” (personal interview, October 28, 2010). While Ashley did not correctly describe a personal narrative, she did inadvertently suggest that the organization of the narrative is something that is heavily emphasized in Mrs. Davenport’s classroom.

Mechanics

The use of proper mechanics is another heavily emphasized skill in Mrs. Davenport’s classroom and it is also the second reoccurring theme discovered after

analyzing the data. According to the student interviews, the proper use of mechanics includes five sub-skills: neat handwriting, correct spelling, knowledge of sentence structure, and the proper use of capitals and punctuation. It was then determined by tallying the number of times each sub-skill was mentioned in an interview, that the students believe correct spelling is the most important of the five sub-skills. For instance Sam, when asked which skills are the most important for a writer to have, was quick to reply that the ability “to spell and do punctuation” (personal interview, October 28, 2010) were necessary. Similarly Tim expressed correct spelling as an important skill because without that a story “can’t be good and it will be messed up in the spell” (personal interview, October 28, 2010). All six of the students participating in the study suggested during their individual interviews that overall proper mechanics was a skill that was either valued in their classroom or was necessary to become a successful writer.

The value placed on proper mechanics was not only discussed during interviews but observed during an editing/revising whole group mini-lesson as well. While the mini-lesson was intended to show the significance of the editing/revising step in the writing process, its secondary purpose was to demonstrate the importance of proper mechanics. The students were having a difficult time reading the sentences placed on the overhead projector due to the lack of proper punctuation, spelling, and capital letters. The students took turns suggesting how to correct misspelled words, add effective punctuation, and replace unnecessary capital letters. At the conclusion of the mini-lesson, Mrs. Davenport suggested that the paragraph was much easier to read after the changes had been made.

Word Choice

While the proper use of mechanics can make a piece of writing easier to read, the third theme that was discovered while analyzing the data that can improve writing quality was word choice. Five of the six students involved in the study mentioned word choice as a means to improve the quality of a written piece. When asked what helps the students the most during writing time, Little Girl stated “learning more words because when I learn a more about words the more words I can use in my writing” (personal narrative, October 22, 2010). She mentioned how “those words are more explainable and more bigger words” (personal interview, October 22, 2010). Her statement can be interpreted as the idea that the greater the person’s vocabulary, the more equipped they will be to effectively describe the events in their story. Comparable to Little Girl’s opinion, Sam expressed how a larger vocabulary allows for the use of “more interesting words to make our sentences better” (personal interview, October 22, 2010). Similarly Tim stated that the quality of a writing piece is improved through the use of “better words” (personal interview, October 22, 2010), otherwise understood to mean more detailed, descriptive vocabulary.

The importance the students placed on varying word choice in their writing was not only evident during interviews, but in the classroom and in their writing samples as well. Samples taken at the conclusion of the initial observation day included markings on rough copies indicating that words had been crossed out and replaced in favor of an interesting synonym. It is assumed that the less desirable vocabulary was not included in the final written piece. Likewise, it is assumed that final copies provided for analysis with no accompanying rough draft had originally included words that were changed in

favor of others that would improve the fluency and quality of what had been written. According to Jacob, while editing/revising their personal narratives, the students are able to “make it [their narrative] better by looking in a thesaurus” (personal interview, October 22, 2010). Approximately two-dozen of these books were observed in the classroom, although throughout the duration of the study, no student was witnessed using the thesaurus as a reference. In addition to the thesaurus, a “Jar of Words” poster was fixed to the wall at the front of the classroom. Included in the “Jar of Words” were synonyms to commonly used words that had been discovered and submitted by the students. Clearly seen throughout the entire classroom, it is assumed that the students frequently use the “Jar of Words” rather than the thesaurus as a reference because it is more easily accessible. Regardless of which reference the students more often use, the ability to include detailed, descriptive words is a major skill acquired during personal narrative writing instruction.

Editing and Revising

Along with organization, mechanics, and word choice, an all-encompassing fourth and final theme was discovered: editing and revising. The importance of the editing and revising skill was clearly evident across all forms of data collection. The focus of mini-lessons, observed on samples of student work, and referenced sixteen times during interviews, the ability to effectively edit and revise emerged as the most valued skill developed through personal narrative writing instruction. Mrs. Davenport indicated that editing and revising might have emerged as the most important skill because it is the area that the students in her classroom generally struggle with. Tim, recognizing his own weakness, stated in an interview that editing and revising was his least favorite aspect of

writing “because it’s the part that’s most hardest” (personal interview, October 22, 2010). According to Mrs. Davenport, editing and revising is difficult for students because “they can find other peoples’ mistakes but they can’t go back and find their own mistakes” (personal interview, October 22, 2010). Soon after the participating students were observed correcting errors found in a sample paragraph during a mini-lesson, the same students then asked Mrs. Davenport to look over their work for any mistakes. This observation supports Mrs. Davenport’s claim that the students have difficulty correcting their own writing pieces. Sam confirmed in an interview that Mrs. Davenport is always there to help check narratives for correctness when stating that “Mrs. Davenport sometimes help[s] us to make sure we get everything right” (personal interview, October 22, 2010). It was not determined why the students have difficulty finding their own mistakes. Regardless of the reason, Mrs. Davenport acknowledged during an interview that the students often seek her out to correct their work when she acknowledged, “It’s really hard to not take the piece yourself and make it your writing” (personal interview, October 22, 2010).

Despite the difficulties shared by Mrs. Davenport and the students when editing and revising, they all see the value in learning how to effectively execute this skill. Confirming the realization that editing and revising are important skills for any writer, Tim stated, “Without those your story will, can’t be good” (personal interview, October 28, 2010). Britney offered support for Tim’s statement when she announced that “when you’re done with your writing you need to check it over” (personal interview, October 28, 2010).

After analyzing all of the data collected during the study, it was obvious when looking at student work samples, listening to interviews, and observing in the classroom that four main skills are taught through personal narrative writing instruction. While this study focused on only one classroom in one school district, the results of similar research (Englert, Manalo, & Zhao, 2004; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Turner & Katic, 2009) support the findings. These four overarching themes are also major components of scoring rubrics found at Bailey School as well as rubrics discussed in similar studies. According to this research, organization, mechanics, word choice, and editing/revising are the four major skills that develop when the teaching of writing instruction primarily centers on the personal narrative genre.

Implications

Prior to this study, I understood of the importance of writing instruction in the elementary grades, but I did not believe that the skills being taught were going to be of any benefit to a student in the upper grade levels. I believed that practice with only one written form would foster skills only relevant to that particular written genre. What I did not understand and later discovered through a review of related literature and the subsequent research study, was that the skills learned while writing a personal narrative are similar to the skills emphasized in other genres of writing as well.

The findings of this study suggest that writing instruction based primarily on the creation of personal narratives teaches students four main skills: organization, mechanics, word choice, and revising/editing. In this study, a variety of whole group and small group mini-lessons taught mainly through the use of modeling by the teacher, allowed the students to understand how each of the four skills were necessary to produce a well

written personal narrative. What educators need to be aware of though is that each student is unique and may need other, more constant reminders present in the classroom to help them incorporate these basic skills into their writing. Teachers should display, as Mrs. Davenport did, posters and exemplary examples around the classroom in easily accessible places for the students to look at during writing time. It is not enough to assume that modeling a skill for students will influence them to incorporate the necessary skills in their writing.

Educators should be aware though that even a student who has mastered the writing process and effectively incorporates all of the necessary skills into their personal narrative writing may have difficulty transferring these skills to another genre. A review of the literature suggested that other written forms including persuasive and expository writing require the same four skills to produce a quality written piece; it also suggested that students typically do not write as well in those genres. In further studies, I would like to research the causes of this lack of writing skill in those genres. If organization, word choice, mechanics, and the ability to edit/revise are important skills in all three of those genres, it should be inferred that students would perform well on any of those writing tasks, but literature suggests that this is not so.

I would like to take this research to my own future classroom so that I could potentially follow the students as they progress through the upper elementary grades and perhaps discover why students have such difficulty transferring the skills they learn from one genre to the next. Ideally, the research study performed in Mrs. Davenport's classroom would have continued over a longer period of time in an effort to discover why

writing other genres are difficult for students, but time constraints prevented this from occurring. If I were able to repeat this research study, I would try to include this aspect.

I would also ask that more classrooms participate in the study. My research project centered around six students from one classroom in one school district. If I were to repeat this study I would include classrooms from other districts as well as I would be able to gain a greater understanding of how organization, mechanics, word choice, and revising/editing are taught and which strategies best help students transfer those skills from one genre to another.

Conclusion

Due to familiarity with the narrative genre and the abundance of narratives in the classroom, personal narrative writing instruction is a necessary first step to teaching the writing process to students. Through the use of multiple teaching strategies, personal narrative writing instruction allows elementary students to acquire the basic skills necessary for producing a quality piece of writing. Organization, the proper use of mechanics, word choice, and the ability to edit/revise are the four main skills taught through the use of the personal narrative genre. Similarly, these four skills are also four of the major skills needed to produce well-written pieces in other genres as well, although students find transferring these skills between the genres to be a difficult task. Further research is required to fully understand the cause of this difficulty. Once the cause is determined, educators can work toward helping students apply the skills learned through personal narrative writing instruction to writing in other genres, ensuring student success in the upper grades and beyond.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions 10-22-10

1. How do you feel about writing?
2. What do you like most about writing and why
3. What do you like least (not like) about writing and why?
4. Do you see yourself as a good writer or a poor writer and what makes you feel that way?
5. What do you think helps you the most during writing time to become the best writer that you can and why?
6. Is there anything you would like to see changed about writing time that would help you to become a better writer and why?
7. What kinds of things are you learning about during writing time this year?

Appendix B

Interview Questions 10-28-10

1. What new skills have you been working on during writing time since I was last here?
2. What do you think is/are the most important skills a writer can have?
3. Would you like to write stories other than narratives and why/why not?
4. Do you feel prepared for writing in the upper grades and why/why not?

Appendix C

Interview Questions 11-2-10

1. What skills have you been working on since I was last here?

2. How has your teacher been teaching you these skills?
3. Does your teacher teach you about organization? If so, how?
4. Does your teacher teach you about editing/revising? If so, how?
5. Does your teacher teach you how to add your own voice to your story? If so, how?
6. Does your teacher teach you how to add exciting vocabulary words to your story? If so, how?
7. Does your teacher teach you about the importance of partner opinions? If so, how?
8. Did the lesson today help you? Why/how?

Appendix D

Student Work Rubric

	Plan/Org.	Mechanics	Voice	Word Choice	Revise & Edit
Sam					
Tim					
Jacob					
Little Girl					
Britney					
Ashley					
Mrs. Davenport					