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Using Inquiry in Teacher Professional Learning to Build Efficacy for Writing Instruction

Jacqueline B. Koonce, Melissa Brooks-Yip, and Kathleen Gibson

As instructors and leaders of pre-service and in-service PreK-3 teachers, we noticed areas of need when it came to early writing instruction materials and professional development. I (Jacqueline) teach early literacy development courses to pre- and in-service teachers at a university in the southern U.S., and Melissa leads professional learning for teachers through the professional learning network, The Study of Early Literacy (SOEL) in the Midwest. In voicing our concerns about the scarcity of materials for early childhood and elementary teachers on teaching writing, we decided to first reflect primarily upon Melissa's group of teachers in SOEL because their subgroup focused on improving the teaching of writing in early elementary classrooms. Also, these same teachers enacted an inquiry model entitled, SOEL Teacher Action Research (STAR), where they interrogated a research question about an issue in their practice that they wanted to improve upon and/or build as a strength in their classrooms.

Action research, or practitioner research, based upon inquiry and usually done by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others for themselves, informs how they teach and how their students learn (Mertler, 2017; Mills, 2011). The purpose of teacher action research is to better understand what is happening in classrooms in order to improve instructional quality or effectiveness (Mertler, 2017). Because the SOEL teachers not only participate in professional learning, but also led their own action research, we thought highlighting these teachers' action research and learning would help researchers and practitioners alike.

While working with these teachers, Melissa noticed many of the early childhood and elementary teachers expressed low teacher efficacy when it came to their own comfort level in writing and teaching writing. The teachers also shared that they believed their discomfort with writing contributed to

lower motivation in their students' willingness to write. Over the course of time that the teachers participated in SOEL and completed their action research projects, Melissa noted the teachers reported improved teacher efficacy and that they had a positive impact on student motivation and achievement through their action research projects.

Literature Review Need for Pre- and In-Service Writing Instruction

Although there is a dearth of recent research literature on teaching writing in the elementary classroom and teachers' self-efficacy in teaching writing, there are some notable studies and reviews that shed light on this topic. First, however, it is important to establish the need for effective writing instruction in elementary classrooms. While the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) does not report writing scores for younger children, the scores for older children suggest that students of all ages need more concentrated instruction in writing (Mo et al., 2014). The preparation and professional development of teachers, then, needs to be further studied. The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges was formed in 2002 to give attention to this need to assist teachers, students, and families in writing instruction. In fact, the commission issued the report, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution* (Sterling, 2003), in order to highlight the need for greater attention to writing for all 21st century students.

Mo and colleagues (2014) also discussed the "neglected r" stating that many elementary classrooms devote little time to the teaching of writing but had great hope that the adoption of the Common Core State Standards by many states would cause teachers and curriculum developers to change this practice. Writing instruction is important for students in order for them to extend their learning through writing, become less likely to suffer from lower grades, more likely to successfully

complete a college degree, and compete in the job force (Mo et al., 2014).

However, there have been strides in the teaching of writing through the formation of the 45-year-old National Writing Project (NWP). This program has sites in each of the 50 states and has shown to significantly improve students' writing of teachers who received the NWP's professional development (Gallagher, Woodworth, Arshan, 2015). The NWP continues to grow and deserves commendation for its impact on students' writing and teacher efficacy. However, in spite of its efforts over 45 years, student writing continues to suffer and some teachers still have low self-efficacy in teaching writing (Cremin & Oliver, 2017). As such, conversation and calls to action are still needed to bring back attention to this "neglected r."

Furthermore, in spite of these national concerns, little attention is also given to writing instruction in many teacher education programs. Instead, many of these programs spend the majority of the time on reading instruction (Myers et al., 2016). Therefore, it is imperative to prepare teachers to teach reading *and* writing as well as continue this instruction through professional development once these teachers have their own classrooms.

The Importance of Teacher Efficacy in Writing Instruction

Equally important to the knowledge of how to teach writing are the beliefs and attitudes teachers have about teaching this skill. Beliefs and attitudes have been connected to teacher actions (Myers et al., 2016), so addressing teachers' epistemologies about teaching writing is central to improving writing instruction (Cremin & Oliver, 2017; Ng et al., 2010). Myers and colleagues (2016) also stated that when teachers believe they have the knowledge to implement courses of action to improve student achievement, they are more effective at improving student motivation to learn. Whitacre (2019) and Curtis (2017) also found that their participants' efficacy impacted their writing instruction and ability to engage students.

In another study, Brindle and colleagues (2015) found that teachers were positive about their efficacy in teaching writing; however, they were not "overly enthusiastic about these beliefs" (p. 949). In fact, on the researchers' survey, the teachers only slightly agreed that they liked to teach writing and felt capable teaching writing. They also slightly agreed on statements about their own writing practice and its role in their lives. Conversely, Brindle et al. (2015) stated that their findings on elementary-school teachers' efficacy in teaching

writing mirror those findings by other scholars (e.g., Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Graham et al., 2001), but need to be replicated, as do their findings about attitudes.

In their review of the literature on teachers as writers, Cremin and Oliver (2017) discovered that findings in 22 papers revealed that teachers have limited views on what counts as writing, have low self efficacy, and negative writing histories. Conversely, the authors added that university teaching and professional development have the potential to improve teacher efficacy.

Consequently, the findings from all of the aforementioned studies suggest that pre- and in-service writing instruction should also address teacher efficacy in order to enhance student motivation and achievement. The findings also support the need for professional learning networks, like SOEL, whose aim is to enhance teachers' pedagogical knowledge in writing and to address teacher efficacy in the teaching of writing, regardless of purchased curricular programs, in order to improve student motivation and achievement.

What follows are specific details about SOEL, the importance of action research, and how SOEL teachers' action research projects impacted their teaching writing to PreK – 3 students and their own teacher efficacy.

The Study of Early Literacy, a Professional Learning Network for Teachers

The Study of Early Literacy (SOEL) began in 2013 as a professional learning network for teachers of PreK - 3 across 14 school districts. Influenced by the network model of professional learning, the National Writing Project, and the Teacher Action Research process, when developing SOEL, I (Melissa) started with the basis that good teachers, effective teachers, matter much more than particular curriculum materials, pedagogical approaches, or "proven programs." Investing in the development of effective teaching through professional development planning, is the most "research-based" strategy available (Allington, 2010 as in Brooks Yip et al. 2015).

Research on raising student achievement consistently points to an effective teacher as the most crucial element in a student's success (Routman, 2012 as in Brooks Yip et al. 2015). For any professional development experience to be worth the very little time and money available in education today, teachers must be in the center of their own learning.

Unlike other professional learning opportunities, a teacher network like SOEL allows teachers to join a community and actively participate in their learning year after year. SOEL is ongoing professional learning each school year. Regardless

of purchased curricular materials each teacher has in their district, SOEL focuses on strengthening the pedagogical content knowledge in teachers in early literacy instruction. The focus in SOEL is not on any curricular programs, but rather instruction aligned to state standards. Each summer, new SOEL members join by attending the SOEL Summer Institute. During the school year, SOEL teachers meet six times to gain new learning through professional book studies, guest researcher lectures, networking with educators across school districts, and building efficacy for instruction by conducting their own SOEL Teacher Action Research (STAR). SOEL teachers follow the Teacher Action Research process by:

- creating a question to solve their own problem of practice in literacy instruction,
- explaining the context for the question to themselves and peers,
- reading related research supplied by the SOEL network,
- considering their own classroom context such as demographics of students and the community,
- determining how to study the question (through formative and summative assessment, interviews, surveys, observations, student work...) and
- determining which data sources they will use.

The entire STAR process is supported by local university researchers and the network of teaching and literacy coach peers.

SOEL Increases Teacher Efficacy

In the spring of 2017, we partnered with Hanover Research to administer and analyze a Teacher Efficacy Survey of SOEL educators. Hanover Research only administered and analyzed the survey; they did not take part in other areas of this work. This survey was designed specifically for the SOEL program and not for other programs. Our survey questions, the research method used for measuring SOEL teacher efficacy, centered on the network model of learning and also researched best practices in early literacy instruction over the last two to three years (see literacyessentials.org). Hanover helped to analyze the survey, and reported our key findings as:

- Teachers with more years of experience in SOEL expressed higher levels of self-efficacy. When compared to teachers with less than one year of SOEL experience, teachers with one or more years of SOEL are more likely to report self-efficacy in: (1) assessment for reading instruction; (2) writing instruction; (3) utilizing literacy instructional

materials and opportunities; and (4) SOEL learning and networking

- 90% of SOEL teachers with one or more years of experience reported they were able to “figure out a student’s instructional needs based on informal assessment” and were able to “monitor students’ progress using formative assessment”
- 68% reported that they set aside *A Great Deal* of time each day “for students to write”
- 80% strongly agreed that they have “shared successful strategies with other colleagues.”
- 70% strongly agreed that they have implemented new strategies and shared results with colleagues” while also “developing professional relationships with educators outside their school”

While we learned that the longer a teacher is in SOEL, the higher their self-efficacy is for literacy instruction, overall, our efficacy survey showed us that writing instruction was the area in which all SOEL teachers exhibited the lowest overall level of self-efficacy. Only 55% of our respondents reported that they “provide opportunities for students to write for a variety of purposes and audiences” either *Quite a Bit or A Great Deal*. An even smaller percentage of respondents reported that they “provide opportunities for students to study models of text for a variety of audiences” or “for a variety of purposes,” 46% and 43% respectively.

SOEL with a Focus on Early Writing Instruction

In the 2017-2018 school year, SOEL tripled in size, which pushed the need to further differentiate based on teachers’ learning needs. As the efficacy survey had shown us, a subgroup of SOEL teachers decided to focus their professional learning on early writing instruction. Following the SOEL STAR process, and reading books on early writing instruction, such as *Talking, Drawing, Writing* by Martha Horn and Mary Ellen Giacobbe, *Write Now! Empowering Writers in Today’s K-6 Classroom* by Kathryn Ganske, and *Reading, Writing, and Talk: Inclusive Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, K-2* by Mariana Souto-Manning and Jessica Martell, SOEL teachers started the year on a mission to become better teachers of writing in their PreK-3 classrooms.

Following is one SOEL teacher’s STAR project focused on writing instruction with her early elementary students. Reflection is important in education, but not if it does not contribute to learning (Jaegar, 2013). The reflection that follows shows the hard work of one of the teachers in developing innovative practices to improve her writing pedagogy, student

motivation and engagement, teacher to teacher collaboration, parental involvement, and student achievement in writing through her inquiry-based action research project.

A Teacher’s Focus on STAR: How can blended writing increase student engagement in the writing process?

During the 2017-18 school year, I (Kathleen Gibson) joined a network of literacy-focused professionals in SOEL, who inspired me to reflect on my practice and engage learners in the area of writing. I developed my STAR question with a focus on blended learning and student engagement for my group of first-grade students. My research was focused around the following question: *How can multimodal forms of published writing increase student engagement and empowerment throughout the writing process?*

As writers, I put an emphasis on empowering students by implementing an authentic audience with a blended twist. Throughout each unit, we began and ended by asking ourselves what are we/did we write about, why are we/did we write about it and what is/was our tool for publishing? Revisiting these questions as we followed through the writing process, I, and my students, were able to understand their audience, purpose and publication method and how all of these things worked together to enhance engagement in writing.

I utilized the “Triple E Framework” (Kolb, 2017) to develop ways to enhance, engage and extend the instructional strategies that you would typically see as pencil, paper and booklet methods. Using Seesaw provided families with real time progress of their child’s writing. Families reflected and shared that, “Seesaw is an amazing way to share writing with parents. Seesaw also encouraged student talk and enhanced the school-home connection” (First Grade Parent). We used the recording tools within applications like Seesaw to practice what we wanted our stories to sound like. To enhance the writing process students reflected on writing rubrics through the writing process, in the end they were able to evaluate and reflect not only on their writing, but on their peers’ writing. They specifically looked for transition words such as first, next and last. The use of these transition words then reflected in their ability to retell stories they read.

During our personal narrative writing experience, students were able to transform their own writing to animation to resemble the stories they experienced throughout the year. A coding application brought their stories to life. We used the “Hour of Code” time and resource to provide us with volunteers in the classroom to help support students in this process.

During our Informational writing unit, our Media Specialist helped students choose texts to support a topic students wanted to research. Oftentimes as teachers we ask ourselves, “How can I possibly fit another thing into my day?” This was a true collaborative process where the Media Specialist and I planned together and checked in frequently regarding content, rubrics and student support. This collaboration made it possible to try something new in writing instruction, and find additional time in the school day.

To support Narrative, Informational and Opinion writing standards, we chose technology supported applications that students were easily able to share with families, friends and community members. The blended approach gives students opportunities to put literacy elements of listening, reading, writing, viewing, representing and speaking into practice, and were held accountable by themselves and their peers (see Table 1.)

Students reflected on their experiences based on how they felt as a writer and how the publication of their final product help them to feel like a writer. Reflections showed that students felt successful when they were able to share their writing with their families, their 4th grade buddies and the community. The data showed that students were drawn to Google Slide presentations for How-To books because they were able to use pictures and present their slide to the audience. The Google slides help students to identify the sequence of their How-To writing, they were able to see each slide as a step, therefore sequencing their ideas to help their readers understand the process. They also enjoyed using Do-Ink Green Screens to teach about their research topic because it felt like they were really in the animals’ habitat.

When looking at the demographics of my first grade classroom, it was made up of eight emergent bilingual students and a number of reluctant writers. Through these blended approaches, I was able to connect these students to their writing in the forms of listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing. As I saw my students grow, improve and feel successful, my action research helped me feel more confident in the teaching of writing.

Discussion

Like Kathleen Gibson, many of the teachers who completed the SOEL STAR Project reported that student motivation and achievement increased in literacy learning. Probably the most compelling data is the difference in the percentage of students who made their reading growth goals in NWEA comparing SOEL-trained teachers to others. Non-

Table 1

Technology Support Applications

What did we write about?	Why did we write about it?	How did we publish it?
Personal narratives	It helps us remember and so readers can learn about us	Scratch JR.
Opinion writing	So we can tell other people how we feel. So people can learn from us. We can tell people something that's wrong and how they can help us fix it.	Seesaw
How-to books	So that you can teach people how to do something they might not know how to do.	Google Slides
Research or expert topic	So that we can teach people about a topic	Green Screen via Do Ink

SOEL teachers averaged 58.1% of their students who met their reading growth goals. SOEL teachers averaged 69.7% of their students, 11.5% more. In addition, teacher action research presentations also revealed that they felt more comfortable and confident in teaching writing to their elementary students. As previously mentioned, the Hanover survey on teacher efficacy revealed that SOEL teachers with more years in this network had higher teacher efficacy than those just entering the program. Therefore, it is difficult to attribute cause to the action research project alone in raising efficacy because time in the program seems to be the most contributing factor. However, it was evident during the STAR presentations and the conversations that followed that the SOEL teachers, who completed the action research, felt more empowered and effective in the teaching of writing. These findings are similar to Myers and colleagues (2016) who found that student motivation increases when teachers are confident that they have knowledge to implement courses of action to improve achievement. The SOEL Professional Network helped to increase the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teachers through the professional book studies, guest researcher lectures, networking, and the SOEL Teacher Action Research (STAR). The lessons learned from SOEL can also be applied to university methods courses in order to help pre-service teachers develop efficacy in teaching writing to students.

Conclusion

All in all, Kathleen Gibson and her SOEL colleagues reported improvement in their pedagogy and the students' engagement and achievement through their SOEL Teacher Action Research and their enhanced knowledge through the other components of the SOEL Professional Network. We believe that more research is needed on professional development with action research for improving the teacher

efficacy and writing pedagogy of elementary teachers. While SOEL is a strong, solid program, hearing the findings of similar programs will contribute to the reliability of the findings.

In the meantime, Melissa and her colleagues will continue to strengthen the SOEL program, and together, we aim to promote this kind of professional development globally in school districts and teacher preparation programs. This strong emphasis on growing knowledge and empowering teachers through professional development has the potential to improve the writing experiences of elementary-school students. We hope that this work and others to come will ameliorate the need to say, The Neglected "R"... as the Sterling (2003) national report was partially named, and instead, have writing attended to and given equally important attention as teaching reading. True reading-writing integration is what students deserve.

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Kathleen Gibson is an elementary teacher in the Washtenaw Intermediate School District in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is a teacher-leader in that she helps other teachers with their writing pedagogy in her school.