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Marie Sinchak
The College at Brockport, msinc1@brockport.edu

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Using Writing Conferences to Scaffold First Grade Students’ Narrative Writing

Marie Sinchak

SUNY College at Brockport
Chapter 1: Introduction

This study is an investigation into the ways in which writing conferences are implemented in a classroom, and how beneficial they are for first grade students. Results from this study are meant to assist young teachers who are setting up writing instruction in their classrooms.

The Problem

As many young teachers graduate from college and step into their first classroom, they feel unprepared to teach the students who come into that classroom. In particular, these young teachers are unsure of how to teach their students how to become more proficient writers. Many have heard about writing conferences, but are unsure of how helpful they are in creating growth in their students’ writing capabilities, and do not know how to facilitate them efficiently.

Teachers who are unprepared to teach writing are at risk for negatively affecting the education and learning potential of their students. Editors Steve Graham, Charles A. MacArthur, and Jill Fitzgerald (2007) explain that young students who “do not learn to write well…are less likely than their more skilled peers to benefit from the use of writing activities designed to enhance content learning (writing-to-learn activities).” (p.3) Additionally, these students continue to fall behind throughout the years and “are unlikely to realize their educational, occupational, or personal potential.” (Graham et al., 2007) Therefore, if young teachers are providing poor writing instruction, they are failing their students and have the right to learn about new ways to help their students’ learn.
Purpose for this Study

Ultimately, the aim of this project was to educate teachers about implementing writing conferences in the classroom. However, the more immediate purpose was to determine the ways in which writing conferences assist in scaffolding the narrative writing of first graders. Through this research, readers will not only be able to know how, but why writing conferences should be used in a classroom.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide the research for this project:

- How do writing conferences benefit first grade students’ narrative writing skills?
- What strategies are most efficient in conducting writing conferences?
- Does peer collaboration have a positive impact on the results of writing conferences?

Background to the Study/Personal Rationale for this Study

As a graduate student, I conversed with many young teachers who are at the beginning of their teaching careers. Throughout previous discussions with these teachers, I discovered that teaching writing is a common difficulty across the board. Educated by some of the best teaching programs, young teachers feel inadequate in helping their students become better writers. Being a young teacher myself, I find myself in the same situation. Most literacy classes mostly focus on teaching students to improve their reading, with less focus on writing. This research serves as a means to improve my own teaching abilities, as well as to pass along what I learn to other young teachers.
Theoretical Approach

Throughout this study, I grounded myself in the theoretical framework of Lev S. Vygotsky (1978) and Lucy Calkins (1994; 2005). Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development has been the baseline of many great research studies ever since it was published in 1978. Placed in a developmental level directly between what they can and cannot achieve, children are thereby reliant upon the assistance of others to achieve a task. This concept has laid the groundwork for scaffolding as we know it today, that children are assisted with difficult tasks until they are capable of completing them independently. Vygotsky’s theory has been crucial to my research because of how essential scaffolding is to implementing writing conferences and encouraging student growth as writers throughout those conferences.

Lucy Calkins (1994, 2005) is another who provided invaluable insight into writing education. In 1994, Calkins published a book, *The Art of Teaching Writing*, which thoroughly explains the writing development of young children. The book provided me with the understanding of how writing skills develop in young children, which was essential for my research. The primary school children who I worked with are just coming out of these stages of development. In 2005, Calkins published another book about the art of conferencing with young writers during writing workshop. Calkins walks the reader through the steps of running effective writing conferences with students, including a multitude of information and examples to help young teachers utilize writing conferences. This framework for writing conferences was critical for my research since my primary focus was utilizing writing conferences and examining their effect on students becoming better writers. Calkins provided the guidelines that I needed to conduct those writing conferences.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Childhood writing is a common topic of many research studies around the world. Everyone wants to know the best way to teach writing, but they are all focused on different strategies towards getting there. The goal of my research was to discover the best way to use writing conferences to scaffold writing. Therefore, I needed to look at literature that would lead me to a method to use with the students in my study. My first step was to develop an understanding of how writing develops in early childhood, which provided me with a background for the students who I worked with. Next, I investigated writing conferences themselves, striving to answer the following questions: a.) what are writing conferences? b.) what do they look like in a classroom? and c.) why should we use them? I used various pieces of literature to answer these questions. Finally, I utilized these sources to draw out the specific strategies that had proven successful and unsuccessful within writing conferences.

Writing Development

Slowing down to think about what writing really is, we realize that it is simply a form of communication. The first form of communication a baby learns is the gesture that gets her what she wants or needs. Lucy M. Calkins (1994) says that “because we attach meaning to what could be called meaningless gestures, the gestures assume meaning. Babies learn the power of their gestures by our response to them.” (p. 59) Children apply that learning experience to all areas of language as they grow up.

In her book, The Art of Teaching Writing, Calkins (1994) explains the development of writing in three stages of growth. The first stage is drawing; as they learn to write, young children will rely on drawings to maintain their ideas long enough to write them down on paper.
As their writing becomes more natural and quicker, teachers gradually encourage the children to separate their drawings from their writing. To achieve this, we should “introduce drawing as a form of rehearsal [for writing], but then we must watch for signs indicating that a child no longer needs to weave drawing and writing together.” (Calkins, 2014, p. 87) The second stage of growth is spelling and punctuation. Young children will begin to spell by representing the first and final sounds of a word, followed by “more sound-symbol correspondences, as they become more able to segment words into sounds (or phonemes), and as they gradually develop a bank of sight words (and parts of words).” (p. 89) As children begin to develop these correspondences, teachers begin to encourage invented spelling as a way for students to match sounds with letters. Invented spelling leads students into more conventional spelling. As this happens, students are simultaneously learning to separate words and add punctuation as they write. Development of spelling and punctuation occurs seamlessly and at different paces for each child.

The third stage described by Lucy Calkins (1994) in her book is the movement toward rehearsal and revision. Re-reading and revising writing is not something that comes naturally to young children because they like to finish their stories and move on to the next activity. Students learn how to revise by following the example of their teacher during writing conferences, which leads the students to fix mistakes and add more detail to their writing.

Similar research was published that supports much of what Calkins (1994) described about early writing development. In 2013, Sonia Q. Cabell, Laura S. Tortorelli, and Hope K. Gerde published an article in *The Reading Teacher* that describes how writing develops among preschoolers. The article presents four specific levels of writing development: drawing and scribbling, letters and letter-like forms, salient and beginning sounds, and beginning and ending sounds. During the drawing and scribbling stage, children do not have an understanding of the
relation between writing and speech, or that text can carry meaning. Children are at the beginning of developing their alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness skills.

The second stage is letters and letter-like forms, when children are attempting to mimic letter shapes based upon what they have seen in books and in their parent’s writing. Then, children begin to learn conventional letters (usually letters of their name), that begin to blend into their writing. At this point, however, children are still not making connections between speech and print, so the “messages cannot be understood by adults without children’s interpretations.” (Cabell, Tortorelli, and Geode, 2013, p. 652) The third stage, salient and beginning sounds, is when children begin to make the speech-to-print connection by writing one letter in a word that sounds the most prominent, such as B for baby, or V for elevator. The fourth stage of writing development is the beginning and ending sounds stage. Children are recognizing the individual sounds that begin and end words, usually missing the middle vowels and consonants, and adding spaces between words.

Although Cabell, Tortorelli, and Gerde (2013) do not present a research study in their article, they reinforce all of their findings with examples from the classroom. Four cases are provided, which demonstrate how four different students exhibit each stage in their writing. Carmen is in the salient and beginning sounds stage and is working with her teacher to spell words. She tries to spell ‘snake’ and hears the /s/ and the /k/ sound and writes down SC. The /k/ sound matches the first sound in Carmen’s name, so she writes C because that is the correspondence that she knows. This example and others are real-life illustrations of Calkins’s (1994) stages of writing development.
Writing Conferences

Before launching into a research study about writing conferences, it is important to understand what they are, what they look like, and why they should be used in a classroom. Writing conferences are essential components of writing workshops, which are defined as “an interactive approach to teaching writing in which students learn and practice the importance of rehearsal, drafting/revising, and editing their own work.” (Jasmine and Weiner, 2007, p. 131)

Writing conferences are times during which a student’s writing can receive individual attention and assistance from the teacher and peers. They also allow teachers to maintain an understanding of the abilities, progress, and writing development of each student in the class.

Writing conferences look different in each classroom, based on the teachers’ individual teaching style. In 2005, Lucy Calkins teamed up with Amanda Hartman and Zoe White to write the book, *One to One: the Art of Conferring with Young Writers*. This book focuses on equipping teachers with the necessary tools to effectively confer with students on their writing. They bring readers through four recurring steps that teachers are encouraged to follow while conferring with students.

**Research.** The first step of the process is research, which is the time for teachers to “observe and interview to understand what the child is trying to do as a writer. Probe to glean more about the child’s intentions.” (Calkins et al., 2005, p. 7) The purpose of this step is to ascertain what progress the student has made, what the student has done well, and what the student needs to improve. Young children are not always aware of what they are doing as they write and therefore cannot explain their process. Teachers are suggested to provide a model by commenting on what the child is doing, while using language that the teacher desires for the child to adopt as she converses about her writing. As writing workshop and conferencing...
continue throughout the school year, students will become more skilled at using that desired language to discuss their thinking process while writing. During this stage, teachers must look for and point out student successes while they are writing, which is important because “even if the thing we notice was not necessarily done intentionally, our attention to and naming of the act or process will reveal it to be a useful writing skill.” (p. 9) This stage of the conferencing process is usually very quick, and should not last longer than two minutes.

**Decision.** The second step of the writing conference process is to decide what and how to teach. The priority in this stage is the students’ own intentions for their writing. No matter what the teacher is planning to teach, if a student wants to take her writing in a new direction, the teacher needs to be flexible and accommodating. The student will have “already decided he wants to show rather than tell his excitement at winning a trophy, then rather than teaching the child to develop his characters, we would be wise to use a strategy that equips the child to do what he has already decided to do.” (Calkins et al., 2005, p.10) In the long run, a student’s writing is his own, and teachers need to allow each student to claim ownership over their own writing. In addition to the decision of what to teach, the choice of teaching method is important as well; the best options are guided practice, demonstration, explaining and showing an example, or inquiry. At the primary level, guided practice is the most consistent method used.

**Teach.** The third step is to teach, which usually takes the form of a mini-lesson. Teachers must be clear with the students about what is being taught, and why it is important to learn. A mini-lesson is not a lecture that simply tells the student what to do, but rather helps “the child get started doing what you hope he or she will do.” (Calkins et al., 2005, p.11) The teaching step is where the decisions made in step two are put into action using one of the teaching methods listed above.
The final step of the writing conference process is to link what the student learned to the other areas of writing in which she could practice the new skills. The teacher is suggested to “name what the child has done as a writer and remind the child to do this often in the future.” (Calkins et al., 2005, p. 14) In doing so, the teacher is reiterating the most important parts of the lesson for the student to take away. This is the last information that the student will remember from the conference, so it should be positive and useful in other areas of writing.

One research study that supports Calkins, Hartman, and White’s (2005) conferencing process was performed by Joanne Jasmine and Wendy Weiner in 2007. Following the study, Jasmine and Weiner published a peer reviewed article in *Childhood Education Journal* titled “The Effects of Writing Workshop on Abilities of First Grade Students to Become Confident and Independent Writers.” The purpose of their mixed method study was to explore the writing process and provide support for first grade students to become independent writers through the use of writing workshop. They used mini-lessons and conferencing to scaffold their first grade class into independent writers and reviewers. Most of the time, students would conference with each other, and occasionally with the teacher. The researchers’ conclusions from the study stated that by the end, “students were working independently and helping each other add detail and edit through student/student conferences.” (p. 138) Students began to not only enjoy sharing their stories, but also became more confident in their abilities and therefore were very enthusiastic about writing workshop. The outcome of this research study directly supports the information provided by Calkins et al.

Writing conferences are essential in the environment of an elementary classroom due to their positive effects on the development of student writing. One major effect is the engagement and motivation brought to students who are uninterested in writing. Researchers have found that
classrooms that incorporate engaging writing activities into their everyday routine foster an environment in which “students are constantly being motivated to try hard, believe that the skills and strategies they are learning will permit them to be excellent writers and readers if they use them.” (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, Reffitt, & Raphael-Bogaert, 2007, p.14) Classrooms such as these encourage the students to value writing, understand their own competence for writing, and engage in meaningful writing activities. (Boscolo & Gelati, 2007)

For writing conferences to function properly, they need to be realistic and engage students in learning. To do so, teachers need to incorporate authentic writing tasks that lead students to enjoy writing as a means of expressing themselves. Interest is key in developing these tasks. A student’s personal interest can be defined as “a relatively enduring disposition to attend to objects and events and to re-engage in certain activities over time.” (Boscolo & Gelati, 2007, p.207) However, interest in a topic does not mean that writing about it will bring motivation; writing itself must be a meaningful experience. Purpose and challenge motivates students to do their best writing. Pietro Boscolo and Carmen Gelatin (2007) described in their research how they provided motivation interventions in a school. To focus on narrative writing, they presented the students with opportunities to prepare a booklet of stories for a gift, write a funny story for a pen pal, or to write the plot of the next school play. The researchers immersed the students in collaborative construction of their written pierced, with multiple opportunities to share with peers and receive feedback. These tasks provided students with a purpose for writing and a means which fostered a growth in their interest.
Strategies that Work (and don’t)

Abundant research is available to support the use of scaffolding strategies in teaching students to become better writers. One of the most prominent theorists in education was Lev S. Vygotsky (1978), who introduced the world to the Zone of Proximal Development, which was defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.” (p. 86) In other words, each student is situated in a level of development, between what they can achieve on their own and what they cannot do at all. The place in between is what the child can achieve with the assistance of others. The Zone of Proximal Development has become synonymous with Scaffolding because the student relies on the assistance or collaboration of others, until he or she can achieve the task on his/her own.

Guided Practice is one teaching method that is commonly used in writing instruction. Guided practice sets a child up to complete an activity with adult assistance until she is able to perform the task and practice independently. Teaching the student a new skill to learn requires precise, quick prompts to refine the student’s attempts as she tries the skill on her own. During writing conferences, the teacher needs to provide the student with room to safely try the skill and correct any mistakes: “when learners are new at anything, their first efforts will be approximations and we, as teachers, need to cheer their progress and support their willingness to try something new.” (Calkins, Hartman, and White, 2005, p. 78) Therefore, positive reactions and gentle hints are what students need when they are taking risks, to help them gain confidence to practice and become proficient on their own.
Another effective strategy to use in writing conferences is questioning. Active questioning is a direct way to ensure the understanding of students, and are also “important prompts for learning and for maintaining students’ engagement in writing center conferences.” (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014, p.38) Also, questioning encourages the construction of student knowledge, the deepening of understanding, and self-efficacy—which refers to a student’s perspective of his own abilities. When a person has high self-efficacy beliefs, he will take on challenging tasks, be confident, set difficult goals, take risks, and ask for help when necessary. (Bayraktar, 2013)

In 2014, Thompson and Mackiewicz investigated how much questioning was occurring in tutoring scenarios and what effect those questions had on the students. The researchers created five categories of questions: knowledge deficit, common ground, social coordination, conversation control, and leading and scaffolding. The knowledge deficit questions are those which seek information genuinely unknown by the teacher or student. Common ground questions are for the teacher’s assessment of what the student “needs, wants, knows, and understands about an assignment.” (p. 42) The social coordination questions refer to directions or actions made within the conference, such as: “could you read the paragraph on page 2?” Conversation control questions are meant to guide the flow of conversation and the attention of students. Finally, the leading and scaffolding questions are already planned by the teacher, meant to bring the student to a learning conclusion. The study found that the common ground and leading and scaffolding questions were most used by the tutors, while the knowledge deficit questions were most used by students. Additionally, “although known-information questions are often criticized because they curtail the length and elaboration of students’ responses, these restrictions can sometimes benefit students by simplifying immediate responses and limiting the
confusion that comes from mentally shifting through too much information.” (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014, p. 61) Therefore, both types of questions should be used with a balance of each other, as both are beneficial to students in different ways.

Feedback within writing conferences can produce positive results in students’ writing, but can also cause more harm than good for other students. In some cases, teachers focus more on grammatical concerns than the writer’s content and intention, and therefore “give their weaker students little chance to take authority over their own papers.” (Gulley, 2012, p. 16) In addition to losing authority over their writing, misunderstanding their teacher’s feedback is easy to do, which leads to confusion and frustration for both parties. One researcher, Beth Gulley (2012) performed a study with 70 college students, each receiving one of three types of feedback. Twenty-two students received oral feedback during a writing conference, Twenty-four only received only written feedback via email, and twenty-four received a combination of both feedback types. Results from the study revealed that collectively, the students made improvements to their writing after receiving feedback, but that the type of feedback provided was actually irrelevant. This research had many limitations, since many variables were left unaccounted for and unknown, such as the internal or external influences that affected each student’s writing outside of the feedback method. No documentation was found of differentiation in the feedback which could cause miscommunication and misconceptions among teachers and students. Overall, feedback is a positive and essential tool to be used in conferencing, but needs to be approached with care and clarity so as not to overwhelm or confuse students.

While many research studies have shown successful examples of writing conferences and strategies which were used to help students become better writers, there are still others that have failed. The failed studies often teach us the most. Raylene Kos and Cheryl Maslowski (2001)
performed a research study with a class of second graders. In January, the researchers conducted interviews with the students to ask them which part of writing they thought was most important. Most students responded with the assumption that handwriting, spelling, and mechanics were the most important. For the next five months, the researchers met with the students in writing groups to discuss idea generation and organization of writing. At the end of the five months, another interview was conducted and little change was found in the students’ perceptions. What was the problem? The researchers did not explicitly address any misconceptions with the students. The researchers simply taught them about idea generation and organization of writing, without helping the students to understand what the most important part of writing actually was. This failed study is now able to teach its readers about the necessity of explicit teaching and clear expectations.

Another failed study with a lesson to teach is “When Writing Conferences Don’t Work: Students’ Retreat from Teacher Agenda,” written by Jodi Nickel (2001). Reading this article clarified how the questioning strategy, which the teacher thought would help her students, was actually driving them away from her conferences. For example, students became easily frustrated when their teacher kept asking (what they believed to be) obvious questions about their writing and encouraging them to change or add pieces. The teacher did not understand her students’ purposes in writing their stories, and asked things of her students which were too difficult for them to comprehend why they should comply; for example, making changes to a story that the student did not see any problem with in the first place. At the end of the article, the teacher encouraged her readers to be careful of teacher power (taking away ownership of writing from students), to be mindful of what questions are asked, to allow the students to request conferences instead of forcing them on students, and to demonstrate for the students.
Understanding where students are coming from and where they are currently at in their writing development is very important for a teacher. Writing conferences benefit this ongoing evolution of skills for young writers by providing individual attention and assistance through scaffolding and guided practice. However, despite the multitude of resources available to help teachers facilitate writing conferences, all situations and students are different. Some of the studies that I reviewed experienced negative results due to unexpected reactions to strategies used in writing conferences. These setbacks, while perceived as negative, were only building blocks for those teachers to improve their instruction.
Chapter 3: Study Design

Methodology and Design

While examining how writing conferences can be used to improve first grade students’ narrative writing skills, I used a qualitative research design in the form of a case study. Case study research can be defined as a “set of qualitative procedures used to explore a bounded system in depth. A system can be a program, event, or activity involving individuals…bounded means that the researcher separates out the case in terms of time, place, or other physical boundaries…” (Clark & Creswell, 2015, p. 292) This design and methodology requires the collection and analysis of multiple forms of data, which includes a description and acknowledgement of themes.

Positionality of the Researcher

As a graduate student, I am currently a substitute teacher in three school districts. Throughout my time as a substitute, I have come across many situations in which I was unsure of the best way to help students become better writers. Those experiences led me to formulate this research study, so that when I finally get my own classroom, I will be the best that I can be for my students. The first grade classroom in which I conducted this study is one that I was previously familiar with, as I completed my undergraduate student teaching with the teacher, and have remained in contact with her ever since. While I am unfamiliar with this year’s group of students, I am familiar with the teacher’s expectations and procedures for her writing workshop; this research project did not disrupt the flow of the classroom or the learning of the students.
Participants and Setting

Throughout my research, I worked with three girls from the same first grade classroom. They were purposefully selected based upon the criteria that they were not classified as students with disabilities, were not excelling above the grade-level benchmarks, and were subjectively deemed (by their teacher) as needing assistance with their narrative writing. On the first day that I met with them, I gave the girls the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms to use for confidentiality purposes. They chose Emily, Peyton and Bob; I will be using those pseudonyms for the entirety of this report.

**Emily.** The very first day that I met Emily, I could tell that she was a shy girl, as she barely spoke the entire time. As I continued with the writing conferences, Emily began to become increasingly comfortable with sharing her thoughts. Emily lives at home with her mother and father, an older brother, and a younger sister. She has a very close relationship with her mom, whom she frequently wrote about in her journal. Academically, Emily performs well in reading and writing, but struggles with math. She gets frustrated with herself when things get too difficult.

**Peyton.** A sweet and friendly girl, Peyton was more outspoken in our conferences than her friend Emily, and enjoyed laughing and participating in the lessons. Peyton lives at home with her mother, father, and younger sister. Throughout our time together, she did not talk or write much about her family, but more about the friends with whom she spent time with. Peyton loves to read and solve math problems; she is one of the highest achieving students in her class for math. She enjoys and responds well to challenges.

**Bob.** Bob is a very excitable girl who loves to make jokes, tell stories, and laugh with her friends. She lives at home with her mother, father, and older brother. During our conferences, she
was always eager to tell me about what her family’s activities; family adventures were common
writing topics in her journal. In school, Bob receives additional help in math, which she finds
challenging. She struggles with reading and spelling also, but she enjoys writing stories and
creating her own pictures.

This study took place in the students’ first grade classroom, located within an elementary
school in a suburban community in Western New York State. The school contained 979 students
from Pre-Kindergarten to sixth grade in the 2013-2014 school year, with seven first grade
classrooms. I conducted my writing conferences in a classroom that has a 60 minute block of
time for writing every day, which consists of a mini-lesson and independent writing. During the
independent writing time, the classroom teacher checks in with individual students to provide
any support is needed. My conferences were conducted in the classroom during this scheduled
writing time.

**Procedures**

This study took place over a period of five weeks from January 12, 2015 through to
February 13, 2015. A total of eight writing conferences were conducted during this time, each
lasting approximately 20 minutes. Not included in the count of writing conferences was my first
meeting with the three students, when I administered the Garfield Writing Attitude Survey and
explained what we would be doing throughout the five weeks.

After meeting with the students for the first time, assessing their responses to the survey,
and remembering their excited reactions to the questions about keeping a journal and diary, I
decided to structure my conferences around the use of journals. I provided each student with a
composition notebook, and during each writing conference, they wrote a journal entry about
something that happened recently in their lives.

At the beginning of each writing conference, I taught a mini-lesson that focused on a
specific skill or concept of sentence fluency. Each day’s lesson topic was determined by needs
that were seen in previous writing samples. Table 3.1 lists the concepts that were addressed in
each writing conference.

| Day 1 | What makes up a sentence |
| Day 2 | Simple and Compound sentences |
| Day 3 | Run-on Sentences |
| Day 4 | Run-on Sentences |
| Day 5 | Transitions |
| Day 6 | Peer Review (How To) |
| Day 7 | Starting Sentences |
| Day 8 | Review and Final Writing Assessment |

Following each mini-lesson, I asked the students to brainstorm topics that they would want to
write about in their journal that day. When each had decided, they began to write. While the girls
were writing, I wrote down notes of my observations. As each student finished writing, I would
converse with them individually about their writing and how they could make it better, while
making sure that they were applying what they learned from the lesson. After each conference, I
filled out a writing rubric for each student to track their progress, and reflected on each lesson in
my researcher’s journal.
Criteria for Trustworthiness

Following the collection, analysis, and interpretation of my research from this study, steps were taken to assure validity and trustworthiness. I used triangulation to provide the classroom teacher with the information that I gathered, as she was in the room during the writing conferences, and knows the abilities and qualities of each student. Therefore, she had the opportunity to review the data and interpretation to ensure its accuracy. Transferability was also used, through the inclusion of details about essential aspects of procedure for the study, to provide others with the opportunity to conduct it with similar participants and conditions.

Data Collection

Throughout the study, data was collected through a variety of methods: a writing attitude survey, rubrics, note-taking, audio recording, and student writing samples. When I first began working with the students, I administered the Garfield Writing Attitude Survey (see Appendix A), which is set up with 28 questions about how an individual feels about writing. Each question is paired with four pictures of Garfield, looking very happy, somewhat happy, somewhat upset, and very upset. The person filling out the survey has to circle the picture of Garfield that best represents how he or she feels as a response to each question. Each picture of Garfield is assigned with a number that is used to score each individual’s responses to get an overall perspective on their attitude towards writing.

Before I began working with the three students, their classroom teacher provided me with two narrative writing samples written by each student in September and November of this school year. I scored each, using the 6+1 Writing Traits Rubric for Kindergarten thru Second Grade. I found that sentence fluency was a common area in which all three students had room to grow.
This became the focus of my project; to help all three girls grow in their skills for sentence structure, sentence variety, connecting sentences, and sentence rhythm—all of which are components for sentence fluency.

In addition to the survey and rubrics, I made notes of my observations in a researcher’s journal as a means of subjectively documenting each student’s progress. It also served as a forum for me to express the questions and wonderings that I developed during the conferences, which helped me to plan for future conferences and make necessary changes in my teaching.

Each writing conference was audio-recorded and transcribed to preserve all conversation, questioning, peer talk, and teaching points that occurred throughout the conference. This was done to ensure that nothing would be forgotten, and that student-researcher dialogue would be documented accurately. These recordings and transcriptions exist purely as a supplemental tool to the other collected data.

**Data Analysis**

**Garfield Writing Attitude Survey.** While scoring the survey, I used a Scoring Sheet provided specifically for the survey (see Appendix A). Each response earned a certain number of points; response of Very Happy received 4 points, Somewhat Happy received 3 points, Somewhat Upset received 2 points, and Very Upset received 1 point. After recording the points for each question and calculating a total, I found its percentage out of 112 points possible. The mean score was 56 points, which provided an average comparison for the scores of the students. Emily received a score of 60%, just above the average. Her responses totaled a 68 out of the 112 possible points. Peyton, scored an 88%, with a total of 99 points, which placed her 43 points above the average score of 56. Bob scored at 63%, with a total of 72 out of 112 points. This
score placed her with a writing attitude of above average, being 16 points higher than the mean. Table 3.2 depicts each student’s scores and distance from the mean.

Table 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points (Out Of 112)</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Distance From Mean (56)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EMILY</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEYTON</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOB</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These scores provided me with a basis for how each of my students felt towards writing. Based on the scores, Peyton had the best attitude towards writing, followed by Bob and then Emily. Looking closer, each student responded to the questions in different ways. Emily’s lower score resulted from the fact that she always responded to the questions with Somewhat Happy or Somewhat Upset, while never choosing either extreme. At the same time, Peyton responded many times by circling the Garfield images which signified Very Happy and Very Upset. Out of 28 questions in the survey, Peyton answered with Very Happy to 10 of them. While Emily stayed away from the extremes, and Peyton favored them, Bob chose a mixture of all responses. She had 7 Very Happy Garfields, 4 Somewhat Happy Garfields, 12 Somewhat Upset Garfields, and 5 Very Upset Garfields.

The responses provided by the students were very helpful in determining how they liked to write and what they liked to write about. A result of these determinations was the installment of writing journals into the process, due to the exclamations of excitement in reaction to questions about diaries and journals. In addition, the purpose of the survey was to assess each student’s attitude towards writing. Emily’s nonchalant demeanor towards writing (as exhibited in her Somewhat Happy or Upset answers to the questions) informed me that she would be
compliant in the project, but neither excited nor angry about it. Peyton’s extreme answers of Very Happy or Upset indicated that she would be happy to participate in the project, but that she would not be happy with it if we were to be writing about science or social studies. While she had mixed responses of the two extreme emotions, Peyton’s 88% score showed that the positive responses occurred much more often than the negative ones indicating an overall positive attitude towards writing. Bob’s mixed responses made it difficult to assess her overall attitude towards writing, but she exhibited excitement during the survey which made it clear that she was happy to participate in the project with me. Knowing this information helped me to move forward in my work with the girls, as I knew more about what would engage them and what would not.

6+1 Writing Rubric. To score the writing samples that Emily, Peyton, and Bob wrote during each writing conference, I used the 6+1 writing rubric for K-2 narrative writing. After scoring the September and November writing samples provided by the classroom teacher using the entire rubric, I scored the rest of the writing conference samples using only the rubric for sentence fluency. Tables 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5 contain the scores that each student earned for each writing sample. The sentence fluency part of the rubric is made up of four areas on which the writing is judged: sentence structure, sentence variety, connecting sentences, and sentence rhythms. The tables show each day’s individual scores for these four areas, then total and average scores for that specific day. Using the rubrics and tables allowed me to track each student’s progress throughout the length of the study.
Table 3.3
Emily’s Rubric Scores
(Sentence Fluency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sept.</th>
<th>Nov.</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Day 6</th>
<th>Day 7</th>
<th>Day 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Structure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Variety</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting Sentences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Rhythms</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1=Beginning, 2=Emerging, 3=Developing, 4=Capable, 5=Experienced, 6=Exceptional
(1-3=Not Proficient, 4-6=Proficient)

According to Table 3.3, Emily increased her average in sentence fluency from 3.0 on our first day to 3.75 on our last day together; an overall improvement of 0.75. The September score indicated that she was in the emerging stage, whereas the final assessment indicated that she was in the developing stage, but close to capable, which is appropriate for a first grade student. The table shows that on our first day together, the area of connecting sentences was the lowest score that Emily achieved on Day 1, and by Day 8, she had increased her score in that area by two points. This area underwent fluctuation from the beginning to the end of the writing conferences, while sentence variety was stable throughout.
Table 3.4  
\textit{Peyton's Rubric Scores}  
\textit{(Sentence Fluency)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sept.</th>
<th>Nov.</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Day 6</th>
<th>Day 7</th>
<th>Day 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Structure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Variety</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting Sentences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Rhythms</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1=Beginning, 2=Emerging, 3=Developing, 4=Capable, 5=Experienced, 6=Exceptional  
(1-3=Not Proficient, 4-6=Proficient)

According to Table 3.4, Peyton began the writing conferences scoring an average of 2.5, and ended with a 3.5 average, which is an overall improvement of 1 point. On Day 6, she even earned a score of 4.0. Peyton was in the emerging stage of writing when the writing conferences began, and was in the developing stage on the last day. On the very first day, Peyton’s lowest score was in the area of connecting sentences. This area remained consistently low for four days until its score began to climb on day 5, which was the day that transitions were taught to the girls. By the last day of writing conferences, Peyton’s score for connecting sentences increased by 3 points to a score of 4. While that score was gradually improving, Peyton’s scores in sentence structure and sentence variety remained generally consistent.
### Table 3.5
*Bob’s Rubric Scores (Sentence Fluency)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sept.</th>
<th>Nov.</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Day 6</th>
<th>Day 7</th>
<th>Day 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Structure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Variety</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting Sentences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Rhythms</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1=Beginning, 2=Emerging, 3=Developing, 4=Capable, 5=Experienced, 6=Exceptional
(1-3=Not Proficient, 4-6=Proficient)

According to Table 3.5, Bob began the conferences with a score of 2.75 and finished with a score of 4.0, making an overall improvement of 1.25 points, while achieving a score of 4.25 on day 6. Bob moved from the emerging stage to the capable stage within the eight days that we worked together. While she maintained consistently high scores throughout the writing conferences in the areas of sentence structure, sentence variety, and sentence rhythms, Bob made the most growth in the connecting sentences. She moved from a score of 1 on the first day to a score of 4 on the last day, which is an increase of 3 points.
Chapter 4: Findings

Throughout this study, I have been gathering information to answer the question of how writing conferences can assist in scaffolding the narrative writing of first grade students. As I have invested myself in this pursuit, three major themes have been unearthed by my research and analysis: a.) Student interests yield the best writing b.) Peer Review Strategy Assists in Students Producing Better Writing, and c.) Writing Conferences Promote Student Growth in Sentence Construction.

Student Interests Yield the Best Writing

One particular finding from this study was that students produce their best writing while writing about topics that interest them. Many times, when students are not engaged, they will lose focus easily and not care about the quality of their writing. These students might fool around in class, distract other students, and rush to finish their work. Students who are interested, however, will participate in lessons, focus well, and give their best effort because what they are writing about is important to them.

At the beginning of the study, results from the Garfield Writing Attitude Surveys revealed that Emily, Peyton, and Bob all responded positively and negatively to the same types of questions. An example of this was when all three girls responded positively to questions such as: a.) “How would you feel keeping a diary?” b.) “How would you feel writing poetry for fun?” c.) “How would you feel about becoming an even better writer than you already are?” d.) “How would you feel writing about things that have happened in your life?” and e.) “How would you feel if you wrote about something you have heard or seen?” While the girls liked to write about topics that interested them, they would not like to write about those which they find
uninteresting, such as school topics. This is seen in the Somewhat Upset and Very Upset responses to questions such as: a.) “How would you feel about writing a story instead of watching TV?” b.) “How would you feel writing about something you did in science?” c.) “How would you feel about writing something from another person’s point of view?” d.) “How would you feel if you could write more in school?” and e.) “How would you feel about writing down the important things your teacher says about a new topic?”

Responses such as these provide teachers with the opportunity to understand what types of writing interests students and what does not. Of course, writing needs to be taught, regardless of student preferences, but understanding student interests and motivation helps teachers to engage those students in the writing. As was discussed in the literature review, another means of engaging students in the writing process is through the use of questions. Questioning by the teacher draws the student’s interests and attention, while questioning by the student depicts the extent of the student’s investment in the writing process.

Throughout the writing conferences, I consistently measured the engagement of all three students subjectively, based on their questions. Emily was typically the most engaged, as she was constantly asking questions about how we could improve our writing by adding details. One day, we were discussing how to transition from one thought to another, and she kept asking questions, looking for more information about the example that we were using. Bob was always interested in participating, but was not always consistent with remaining focused on the task at hand. For example, one day when I was in the middle of explaining what Earth Day was, Bob interjected with the comment that, “In spring, I routine in my figure skating class,” which had nothing to do with what we were discussing. At the same time, Peyton participated in the discussions more by adding ideas and answering questions than by asking questions herself. When we were working
on correcting run-on sentences, Payton was so excited about participating that she quickly took charge and had a lot of ideas about how to fix the sentences. On day 4, I wrote in my research journal that:

*Peyton was very eager—leaning on the table with her marker, ready to jump in to show where she thought a period or comma should go.*

*She was right some of the time but is still learning.*

*I have noticed her using commas more in her writing,*

*which shows me how she is applying what she is learning.*

All three students exhibited differing levels of interest in unique ways. Bob’s appearance of unfocused indifference would appear to have a negative impact on her, however I was informed by the classroom teacher that Bob had expressed how she was going to be sure to use periods so that she did not have run-on sentences. Although it seemed as though she was uninterested in the lessons, Bob showed evidence that she was applying what she had learned to all areas of writing in her life.

As I discussed earlier in the literature review, interest is key in the process of motivating students to write. In order to encourage that interest to last, teachers must engage their students in purposeful writing tasks which provide an adequate challenge for each student. The use of journals allowed the students to indulge in their excitement about diaries. So I provided the girls with the opportunity to practice writing in a diary, and each day that I worked with them, they were eager to start writing. Motivation also came with knowing that they would be sharing their entry with friends.

The heightened interest level of Emily, Peyton, and Bob was reflected in the scores earned on the writing rubric. While viewing the scores for all three students, I noticed specific
days when all three girls scored high or low. Through further analysis, I found that the day which yielded low results was the day that the students were unfocused and uninterested in writing. Concurrently, the day that yielded the highest results for all three girls was the day that they were all focused and excited about writing. This finding can be seen in Tables 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5. The day that I taught about peer review was Day 6, when Emily, Peyton, and Bob were excited about learning and writing, which earned them the average scores of 3.0, 4.0, and 4.25 respectively. I taught starting sentences on Day 7, when I needed to conference at an unusual time, so the students were less focused and less interested, which earned them the low scores of 2.75, 2.25, and 3.0 respectively. Therefore, high interest yields higher results than normal, while low interest yields lower results.

**Peer Review Strategy Assists in Students Producing Better Writing**

Providing students with the opportunity to learn and utilize peer review strategies helps them produce better writing. Allowing students to detect errors in their classmates’ writing strengthens students’ ability to do the same in their own writing: “children have opportunities to work together to solve problems they will face when they write independently.” (Roth & Guinee, 2011, p. 335) Throughout my study, Emily, Peyton, and Bob were provided with many opportunities to experience guided and independent review of others’ writing. In doing so, they gained insight into what they should be contributing to their own writing. A result of fixing run-on sentences as a group was that all three girls were very conscientious about not having run-on sentences in their narratives.

Jasmine and Weiner’s (2007) research study about implementing writing workshop in first grade resulted in similar findings to my study regarding peer review. They claimed that
“peers determined if the story made sense, not the teacher; thus, students began to value
classmate suggestions.” (p. 137) I found this to be true in my own study, as most of the questions
that the students asked of each other were clarification questions that were meant to add more
detail to the story. One day, I captured the following moment in my audio recordings of Emily
reviewing Bob’s writing:

Emily: why did you go to your friend’s house?
Peyton: I didn’t go to my friend’s house, she came to my house!
Emily: Why did she go to your house?
Peyton: I don’t know!
Emily: Just say ‘cause she wanted to see you!
Peyton: okay!

Conversations such as these were common among the students, as they strove to help their
classmates provide as much detail as possible. In this example, Emily was more concerned with
knowing why something happened, but did not pay attention to sentence construction or
conventions in Peyton’s writing. In addition, the girls came to a hasty decision about what
Peyton should write, instead of conversing about possibilities about how they could help the
narrative to make sense.

The above conversation was the first peer review that the students had experienced
independently. There is value in understanding when details need to be added to a piece of
writing. When I first met them, Emily, Peyton, and Bob used little detail in their writing, so
throughout the writing conferences, I encouraged them to ask questions about their writing,
which gradually caught on. The writing became increasingly more detailed, until the point when
the students were telling each other that they needed to add more detail. As first graders, detail in
a story is the most tangible piece that they have to work with, but to look at a story and identify structure or conventional errors is much harder. As a result peer review is not often used with students who are as young as first grade, though it can and should be utilized at that age. During my study, I found that peer conferencing jumpstarts the process of thinking critically about writing, which has a positive impact on first graders.

Writing Conferences Promote Student Growth in Sentence Construction

Writing conferences are beneficial in improving student writing, especially with the construction of sentences. Mini-lessons allow teachers to focus on one specific area of need that is exhibited in prior writing samples, but sentence construction encompasses all areas of writing that could be addressed. Even if the mini-lesson was about word choice or ideas, sentence structure and fluency would still be addressed in an indirect way.

At the beginning of the study, the lowest scores earned by all three students within the sentence fluency trait was in connecting sentences. All three students began the conferences with a score of 1 in that area; an example of which can be seen in this writing sample by Peyton:

Today I was at art. I mayd a mittin.

(Today I was at art. I made a mitten)

It was speshel becus I colered it.

(It was special because I colored it.)

I had Luch. I sat next to my BFF Emily. I like my friend bob.

(I had lunch. I sat next to my BFF Emily. I like my friend Bob.)

The following is an example of what Emily wrote on that day:

Yestureday when I got home from school
(Yesterday when I got home from school)

my mom was cleaning my room. mom found

(my mom was cleaning my room, Mom found)

my kechane with a Bear on it And it said my name on it.

(my keychain with a Bear on it and it said my name on it.)

In both writing samples, it can be seen that no attempt was made to use specific words to transition from sentence to sentence or thought to thought, except for the one-time use of the words “because” and “and.” Six conferences later, Bob earned a 4.0 score in connecting sentences; an example of which can be seen here:

I went hiycing with my Brothr and my Dad to,

(I went hiking with my brother and my Dad too.)

We fowd a opid spays and played a snowbol fyi,

(We found an open space and played a snowball fight.)

And when we were done playing we herd sows in the wood’s.

(And when we were done playing we heard sounds in the woods.)

We went back home and ate dinner and I got hot choklit.

(We went back home and ate dinner and I got hot chocolate.)

This improvement is a direct result of focused instruction and guidance in sentence construction. The one-on-one attention that students receive during writing conferences allows teachers to provide specific feedback and lessons about ways in which their writing can be improved. As the same writing qualities (such as sentence fluency, connecting sentences, sentence structure and rhythm) are consistently emphasized time after time, students will increasingly include those qualities in their writing. This was clear in the writing of the students with whom I worked. By
the end of our time together, all three students were writing sentences that flowed smoothly, with transitions and proper structure.

During our conferences, we spent a lot of time working with run-on sentences that needed to be fixed, which allowed Emily, Peyton, and Bob to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which sentences should be structured. This led to the students practicing the use of punctuation and transitions in their own writing. The more often they practiced this learning, the more deeply imbedded it became, which led to automaticity in sentence formation while writing. Automaticity reduces the amount of stress that weighs down upon the student, which can “free up cognitive space to attend to higher-level functions such as awareness of audience needs, what constitutes good writing, or how to navigate the process of writing.” (Saddler, 2007, p.166) Reaching the point of automaticity allows the student to change focus from sentence construction to the development and implementation of ideas. As a result of the writing conferences, Emily, Peyton, and Bob found themselves at an early stage of automaticity, which allowed them to focus on the content of their writing.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

Discussion

Summary of major results. The purpose of this research study was to teach young teachers about how to utilize writing conferences in the classroom, as well as answering the question: how do writing conferences benefit first grade students’ narrative writing skills? To explore an answer to the question, I conducted writing conferences with three first grader students, using strategies that I gained from extensive research. I collected data through an attitude survey, writing samples, and research notes, which I analyzed to find common themes among all three students in relation to the writing conferences. All three students who I worked with made improvements in their writing throughout the study, especially in the area of sentence fluency.

Student interests yield the best writing. Through the analysis of the Garfield Writing attitude assessment, I developed an understanding of how important student interest and motivation are in the writing process. The questioning strategy was particularly helpful in revealing the extent of each students’ interests, though how they answered my questions and the type of questions they asked each other. The girls’ level of motivation was reflected in their writing scores and my written observations of their behavior. The lessons taught when interest was high led to the students’ best writing.

Peer review strategy assists in students producing better writing. The use of peer review during writing conferences led to better scores on the writing rubrics for all three students, and increased their motivation to produce their best writing. As first grade students, they were just being introduced to the concept of peer review, which allowed the girls to gain an additional
perspective of how sentences and stories needed to be constructed. Transferring this understanding into their own writing helped the students to become better writers.

**Writing conferences promote student growth in sentence construction.** The results found in the 6+1 writing rubric showed a significant improvement in the area of sentence fluency, and specifically within connecting sentences. All three students exhibited a similar process of development throughout the writing conferences, continuously building upon what they had learned until they reached a level of automaticity in their writing.

Additional questions that guided this research study were a.) What strategies are most efficient in conducting writing conferences? and b.) Does peer collaboration have a positive impact on the results of writing conferences? I have come to the conclusion that the best strategy to use in conducting writing conferences is questioning, which brings students to a deeper understanding of what is being learned. Peer collaboration is also a strategy that yields improvements in the results of writing conferences, as critiquing the work of a peer raises the students’ awareness of accurate writing skills, which is brought into the students’ own writing.

**Relating the results to literature.** The results of this study have provided additional knowledge to the existing research regarding writing conferences. In the literature review, I discussed strategies that work and do not work in writing conferences. As I conducted my own writing conferences, I applied those strategies that were proven to work, and saw them improve the writing of my students. The results from my research study are similar to those of Joanne Jasmine and Wendy Weiner (2007) in their article “The Effects of Writing Workshop on Abilities of First Grade Students to Become Confident and Independent Writers.” The researchers’ use of mini-lessons, conferences, and peer collaboration was very similar to my own work with students. For example, whereas my study realized the importance of student interest
and motivation in writing, Jasmine and Weiner’s study found that the students were so engaged that they did not want writing workshop to end. Their study also utilized peer collaboration, which improved the students’ writing, as did mine. Another similarity between the two studies is that Jasmine and Weiner based their mini-lessons on the needs of their students, just as I did. The main difference between our studies is that mine was limited to three students who wrote new pieces of writing every day, whereas the other study was focused on the steps of the writing process, building a piece of writing up through editing, peer review, and multiple drafts.

**Personal reflections.** The entire process of researching, conducting, and assessing writing conferences has led me to make decisions about how I will teach writing when I have my own classroom. I will use writing conferences, and will work to develop a community of peer collaboration among my students. During the study, I was challenged by the fact that the students had no prior experience with peer collaboration, so I would like to make that a consistent part of learning in my classroom.

**Implications for Practice**

The results from this study are not meant to sit silent, but rather to be heard by young teachers who are looking to implement writing conferences in their classrooms. To begin with, teachers should provide students with abundant opportunities to write about their interests. Since students are expected to learn and experience certain types of writing that may not be interesting to every student, it is unrealistic to constantly cater to student preferences. However, student engagement plays such a major role in writing development; writing based on interests should be encouraged whenever possible.
First grade teachers should begin to expose their students to peer collaboration early in their education. Throughout my study, I was able to see that although Emily, Peyton, and Bob were inexperienced with peer review, they were capable of asking questions and providing feedback to their classmates. When teachers involve their students in peer review from a young age, the students will be able to continuously grow in their abilities to critique others’ work as well as their own. They will learn how to communicate productively with classmates, ask the right questions, and collaborate to create better writing.

Writing conference groups should be organized based on the needs of the students, rather than on ability. Within conferences, mini-lessons introduce or reinforce concepts that are areas of need for the specific students in that group. This allows all students to receive differentiated instruction according to individual and group needs. Groups will continuously change as the needs of the students change, providing students with the chance to collaborate with more classmates.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the lack of adequate time to fully assess the extent of the influence that the writing conferences had on the students. For example, near the end of my time with the students, I introduced peer review. However, I was only able to see the results of that lesson that day and during the two following conferences. However, due to variables, such as student focus, interest, energy levels, and classroom distractions, two conferences were not enough to fully assess how the students were applying that lesson. Even the full five weeks of the study was not long enough to assess long-term effects that writing conferences have on students.
Another limitation that I came across throughout my research was that I was not a regular teacher for Emily, Peyton, or Bob. This limited the amount of authority that I carried with the students. My role as visiting researcher meant that I had no control over the students’ grades or standing in the class, which meant that the students had the opportunity to not take me or the project seriously. Additionally, the fact that I was not a regular teacher for them meant that I did not have the opportunity to observe the effects of the writing conferences on a daily basis.

**Future Research Needs**

Considering the time limitation, I would recommend that future researchers utilize writing conferences on a regular basis for an extended period of time, such as ten to twenty weeks, as a way to determine the long-term effects that they have on students. The five weeks of my study was too limited to gain evidence of an enduring improvement of the students’ narrative writing skills.

In addition, a future researcher studying the effectiveness of writing conferences at an older elementary grade level would be beneficial. Due to the first graders’ inexperience with peer review, I was unable to ascertain the full extent to which peer collaboration assists with writing conferencing. Older students, however, are more likely to be familiar and experienced with peer review, and will therefore be able to participate in such exercises with greater depth and understanding.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight how writing conferences can be used to improve first grade students’ narrative writing skills. These findings illuminate how student interest and peer
review play major roles in helping students in their skills of sentence construction. Young teachers will be able to use this research to implement writing conferences into their classroom’s learning environment as a way to create proficient writers among their students.
References


Appendix A: Garfield Writing Attitude Survey

1. How would you feel writing a letter to the author of a book you read?

2. How would you feel if you wrote about something you have heard or seen?

3. How would you feel writing a letter to a store asking about something you might buy there?

4. How would you feel telling in writing why something happened?
5. How would you feel writing to someone to change their opinion?

6. How would you feel keeping a diary?

7. How would you feel writing poetry for fun?

8. How would you feel writing a letter stating your opinion about a topic?

9. How would you feel if you were an author who writes books?
10. How would you feel if you had a job as a writer for a newspaper or magazine?

11. How would you feel about becoming an even better writer than you already are?

12. How would you feel about writing a story instead of doing homework?

13. How would you feel about writing a story instead of watching TV?

14. How would you feel writing about something you did in science?
15. How would you feel writing about something you did in social studies?

16. How would you feel if you could write more in school?

17. How would you feel about writing down the important things your teacher says about a new topic?

18. How would you feel writing a long story or report at school?

19. How would you feel writing answers to questions in science or social studies?
20. How would you feel if your teacher asked you to go back and change some of your writing?

21. How would you feel if your classmates talked to you about making your writing better?

22. How would you feel writing an advertisement for something people can buy?

23. How would you feel keeping a journal for class?

24. How would you feel writing about things that have happened in your life?
25. How would you feel writing about something from another person’s point of view?

26. How would you feel about checking your writing to make sure the words you have written are spelled correctly?

27. How would you feel if your classmates read something you wrote?

28. How would you feel if you didn’t write as much in school?
# Writing Attitude Survey

**Scoring Sheet**

- Student's name
- Teacher
- Grade
- Administration date

## Scoring Guide

- 4 points: Very happy Garfield
- 3 points: Somewhat happy Garfield
- 2 points: Somewhat upset Garfield
- 1 point: Very upset Garfield

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**Full Scale Raw Score:**

**Percentile Rank:**