



When the type of practice matters: The relationship between typical writing instruction, student practice, and writing achievement in first grade[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A substantial body of research has demonstrated the efficacy of early writing interventions that target skills and composing processes; however, much less is known about the effectiveness of classroom writing instruction outside of the context of an intervention. The goal of this study was to investigate if writing instruction and student practice predict first-grade writing achievement and if the relations between writing instruction, practice and achievement depend on student factors. Assessments of students' spelling, handwriting, vocabulary, and reading were collected in the fall of first grade, and norm-referenced and researcher-designed writing tasks were administered in the spring ($N = 391$). During the school year, four full-day observations of classroom instruction and student writing practice were conducted in 50 classrooms. The effects of writing instruction and student writing practice on spring writing achievement were analyzed using two-level, fixed-effects hierarchical linear models. Composing instruction was negatively related to contextualized spelling, but no other main effects of instruction were found. One type of writing practice, generative writing, was positively related to all three measures of writing achievement. Interactions were also found between student gender, minority status and multiple types of writing instruction and practice. These results point to the potential benefit of generative writing practice and indicate that efforts to differentiate instruction and practice may be beneficial for students. Additionally, the findings raise doubts about the effectiveness of current writing instruction.

1. Introduction

With the widespread implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), many schools are faced with the prospect of evaluating their approach to writing instruction. Before the implementation of the CCSS, there was fairly wide variation in state writing standards, and in many states components of those standards did not align with the CCSS (Troia et al., 2016). As a result of the CCSS writing standards, many school districts faced much more challenging expectations in terms of both student writing outcomes and processes (Shanahan, 2015).

In light of changing expectations, schools may question whether their current writing instruction is preparing students to meet the writing CCSS (Graham & Harris, 2015). Surprisingly, there is relatively little direct data on elementary school teachers' instructional approaches to writing (for exceptions see: Coker et al., 2016; Kim, Al Otaiba, Sidler, & Gruehlich, 2013; Puranik, Al Otaiba, Sidler, & Gruehlich, 2014). There is even less current evidence about the efficacy of

instructional approaches in the primary grades. Some of the best data comes from large-scale national assessments, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These results suggest that many elementary school students struggle to write well; for example, only 28% of fourth graders scored at or above the proficient level in 2002 (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003). Moreover, the most recent NAEP writing data on elementary-aged students is over ten years old and may not reflect schools' efforts to align their writing instruction to the CCSS. Despite limited information on the impact of writing instruction that teachers provide in the absence of a specific intervention, there is a growing body of empirical evidence on effective writing interventions for young students.

2. Effective writing instruction

Although there is far less evidence for writing than reading interventions, the recent publication of consensus reports and meta-analyses on writing signals that this body of work is large enough to be summarized (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham &

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Santangelo, 2014; Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012; Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015; Graham, McKeown, Kihara, & Harris, 2012; Santangelo & Graham, 2016). These findings point to three areas that benefit from teacher attention: writing component skills, composing processes, and opportunities for writing practice.

2.1. Writing component skills

There is solid theoretical and empirical support for the role of writing component skills in early development. In the Not-So-Simple-View of Writing (NSSVW; Berninger & Winn, 2006), both text generation skills and transcription skills figure prominently in the model. Text generation involves generating ideas and translating them into language, which depends on oral language knowledge such as vocabulary and syntax. Transcription skills are needed to put words on paper and include handwriting, typing, and spelling. These skills are thought to develop early in development (Berninger & Swanson, 1994). Fluency with transcription skills is critical to early writing development because when students struggle to inscribe letters (handwriting or typing) or to spell words, there is less cognitive capacity available for higher order tasks such as planning, evaluating, and revising (McCutchen, 2000). In contrast, when students can write and spell fluently more cognitive resources are available to generate text and to engage in writing processes.

The positive impact of writing component skills has been demonstrated in both correlational and intervention studies. Researchers investigating early writing have found that component skills predict important writing outcomes in multi-grade samples (Coker, 2006; Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, Graham, & Richards, 2002; Graham, Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, & Whitaker, 1997) and those limited to first grade (Kim & Schatschneider, 2017; Kim, Al Otaiba, Folsom, Greulich, & Puranik, 2014). Instructional studies also support the importance of writing skills. In a meta-analysis of studies with students in grades K-12, Santangelo and Graham (2016) reported that handwriting instruction had a positive effect on how much students wrote ($ES = 1.33$), how fluently they wrote ($ES = 0.48$), and the quality of their writing ($ES = 0.84$). Instruction in spelling, another important transcription skill, has been found to improve how well students spell when composing ($ES = 0.94$; Graham & Santangelo, 2014).

2.1.1. Composing

The processes involved in composing have also been important components in theoretical and empirical investigations of writing. The NSSVW identifies the importance of composing processes such as planning and revising as parts of an individual's executive functions (Berninger & Winn, 2006). In addition, self-regulation processes, such as goal-setting, monitoring, and evaluating, are also included with these composing processes. These executive functions contribute to a writer's ability to coordinate the writing process during composing.

Interventions designed to teach students components of the composing process have been found to be effective. A meta-analysis focusing on elementary school found that the self-regulated strategy development model, which includes direct instruction in the writing process and self-regulation strategies targeting goal setting, monitoring, and evaluating, had a large effect size ($ES = 1.17$; Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012; Graham, McKeown, et al., 2012). Other approaches designed to teach the composing process also demonstrated a positive effect on writing quality ($ES = 0.59$). These results aligned with those from a meta-analysis with studies of older students (Graham & Perin, 2007). Neither of these meta-analyses included studies on composing instruction in first grade due to the lack of research, but there is limited evidence that composing instruction is effective at this grade range (Zumbrunn & Bruning, 2013).

2.1.2. Opportunities for writing practice

In addition to instruction in skills and composing, students also

benefit from frequent opportunities to write. Practice writing has been identified as a way to improve writing quality, even though the evidence is less robust (Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012). In both skills and composing interventions, students engage in writing practice as a component of the instruction. Frequent writing practice has also been identified as a characteristic of effective literacy teachers (Graham & Perin, 2007). In addition, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Practice Guide recommends at least 30 min a day should be devoted to writing practice beginning in first grade, although the authors note that there is relatively little evidence to support this recommendation (Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012).

This selective review highlights several broad practices that may support writing development. For these practices to be effective, they must be widely applied in classrooms. However, data on teachers' instructional activities and student writing practice is sparse.

2.2. Current state of early writing instruction

Surveys with teachers (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012) and observations in kindergarten and first grade (Coker et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2013; Puranik et al., 2014) have revealed, on average, modest amounts of writing instruction occur. Furthermore, large classroom variation is common. Time allocated to writing instruction varied from 1 min a day in kindergarten, (range: 0–8.86 min; Puranik et al., 2014) to 26.4 min a day in first grade (range: 5.50–74.25 min; Coker et al., 2016). Across the primary grades, teachers reported an average of 21 min a day for instruction (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Most kindergarten instruction was used for handwriting (Puranik et al., 2014), but more diversity was found in first grade with 32.55% for skills instruction, and 54.4% for composing instruction (Coker et al., 2016). A wide mix of composing and skills activities were also reported by teachers across the elementary grades (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Richards et al., 2012).

In general, more time was allocated for practice than for writing instruction in kindergarten and first grade. During the daily 90-min block for kindergarten literacy instruction, approximately 8 min was for writing practice (range: 0–20.58 min; Puranik et al., 2014). Across the entire day, Coker et al. (2016) found students engaging in some form of writing practice for 125 min out of approximately 405 min in the school day.

Teachers also provided time for varying types of writing practice. In first grade 40% of practice time involved either copying words or filling in an a one-word response (Coker et al., 2016). Another 25% of practice time was used for generative writing, which required students to create the content and produce connected text. Similarly, first-grade teachers reported having students complete worksheets, copy individual words, or engage in handwriting practice for at least 100 out of 180 school days (Richards et al., 2012). Although these were the most frequent practice activities, Richards et al. reported that students wrote a wide range of texts; however, many received very little attention on average.

2.2.1. Efficacy of current instructional practices

Available data reveal wide variation around the amount and type of writing instruction and practice in the early grades. In light of this extensive variation, it seems likely that many teachers are not following current recommendations for writing instruction and practice (e.g., Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2015). This could hinder students' ability to meet the writing CCSS, but it is difficult to predict because there is little data on whether the frequency and type of early writing instruction and practice contribute to student writing achievement.

2.2.2. Student characteristics

There is also evidence that student demographics, such as gender and ethnicity, are related to writing achievement and might also impact the efficacy of writing instruction and practice. In the 2002 NAEP

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