

LEADERSHIP ACADEMY ACTION RESEARCH REPORT – 2004/2005

Improving the Writing Performance of Boys

IMPROVING THE WRITING PERFORMANCE OF BOYS

Martha Currie Elementary

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CONTEXT:

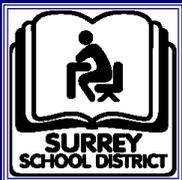
Our school has made a commitment to improve writing performance, with a focus on boys. In our efforts to expand our repertoire of writing strategies and activities, we have decided to use the Write Traits program to better teach the four components of writing outlined in the Performance Standards document. The Write Traits program is already being used in the Surrey School District. It is recommended by the District Literacy Network and has already been recognized for being an excellent writing resource. Knowing this, we would like to measure the effect that its implementation will have on our target group's attitudes towards writing and on their writing performance. Of further interest to us is the impact it will have on the teachers' writing program.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

1. *Will using the Write Traits program increase positive attitudes towards the story writing among a group of 8 boys enrolled in grades 2, 3 and 4 whose writing performance does not meet expectations?*
2. *Will using the Write Traits program improve their writing performance?*
3. *Will implementing the Write Traits program facilitate teacher planning and interventions to better meet these boys' writing needs?*

ACTION:

1. To address the first question, we conducted a pre and post program survey to determine the boys' attitudes towards writing. In addition, the teachers kept a log of observations of the boys, commencing two weeks prior the implementation of the Write Traits program and continuing throughout the study.
2. To address the second question, the teachers used the Performance Standards quick scales for story writing to measure the boys' performance before and after the study. Pre and post literary writing samples were collected. The Write Traits program was initiated in January and teachers taught one unit per month. The classes were able to complete five of the six units before the final assessment.
3. To address the third question, the researchers kept a journal to reflect on:
 - 1) their conception of teaching writing.
 - 2) their past experience in teaching writing.
 - 3) their thoughts and observations regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the Write Traits program with the target group.



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HOW DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Initial Profile

A profile of the boys was developed through surveys, teacher logs and assessment of the boys' writing. For clarity purposes, we composed a general profile that encompasses many of the boys' attributes. We called this fictional character "Francis".

Francis Before the Write Traits

Francis is an eight year old boy who says he likes writing. He sees himself as a good writer, although he acknowledges that spelling is hard for him. He finds it difficult to answer questions about his writing. For him, writing consists of being either neat or messy, and spelled correctly or not. He doesn't understand why being a better writer is important and has no clue how to improve. He is proud to say that the other children in the class see him as a good writer.

His teacher's comments and observations are somewhat different! She knows that Francis does not meet expectations for his grade level and has noted that during writing time he tends to rip up pieces of paper, go to the bathroom, sharpen his pencil, and take water breaks. He does not like to sit still for writing activities, generally preferring to socialize. When he is not actively pursuing chair rocking or pencil sharpening, he has been caught staring vacantly at the spot on the window. Perhaps meditating?

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Using the Write Traits program improved the eight boys' attitudes towards literary writing.

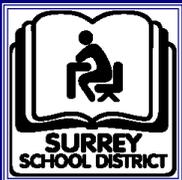
Profile of Francis today

Francis is an eight year old boy who says he sometimes likes writing. He is particularly fond of "free" write time, journals, and scientific writing, but is very clear about his dislike of reading response! He feels he doesn't write as well as most of the children in his class, and that they don't rate his writing very highly. He believes he has good ideas but says that he struggles to get his ideas down on paper most of the time. He notices grown ups and older siblings doing all kinds of writing, and he really wants to get better at it because he knows that it's important if he is to understand more, and get a good, well-paying job. His teacher has noticed that during pre-writing activities like discussing with a partner, or working in a group, Francis is right where he should be, on task and engaged in the process of building meaning. The same can be said of the post-writing activities. Editing his own work recently, he hit his head and said, "Oops I forgot to write a really good finishing sentence!"

Francis' teacher has seen improvement in his writing this year. He is generally meeting expectations for his grade in more components than before but is still having the most difficulty with the conventions. He still likes to take water breaks, and some activities cause a return of the vacant stare, but he would never miss sharing time, and seems to enjoy sharing and talking about writing with his peers.

2. Using the Write Traits program improved the 8 boys' writing performance. All of the boys:

- improved in the aspect of organization and meaning (own ideas, supporting details, able to consider the audience's reaction).
- are better able to grasp the Performance Standards language because they have used it in the Write Traits lessons.



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- have gained an awareness of importance of writing in general.
- have gained an awareness of their own writing ability.
- learned to articulate the areas they need to improve in (sentence, voice, organization, etc.).
- are now able to identify a good piece of writing.

In addition, our post interviews showed that the boys:

- can articulate various aspects of writing.
- are more detailed in their description. They can give examples of when writing is important and when it is not.
- use the jargon of Write Traits! (one said that he had trouble with sentence fluency, another said he had trouble most with conventions).
- use real life experience to justify answers.
- recognize their weaknesses and the importance of writing.
- were more aware of writing at home and around them.

Note: The students who were not identified in our focus group have demonstrated significant progress.

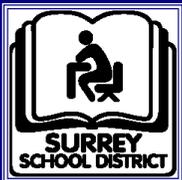
3. Implementing the Write Traits program facilitates the teaching of writing because it:

- reinforces the use of the performance standards of, for and as learning.
- reinforces the teaching of the four components of writing.
- is not exclusive; it provides a framework which allows lots of time for other writing activities.
- engages boys.
- is easy to use.
- is easy for a teacher-on-call to use.
- is easy for job-sharing partners to use.
- is not costly.
- is easy for parents to use without the teacher guide - can recommend it to parents.

4. Implementing the Write Traits program facilitates teacher planning to better meet the boys writing needs.

The Write Traits program facilitates teaching writing to boys because it takes into consideration the instructional implications of gender differences by:

- redefining writing.
- encouraging inquiry.
- capitalizing on the expertise that students bring to the class.



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- presenting a variety of texts.
- offering humour.
- proposing choice.
- allowing for frontloading.
- making reading and writing social.
- compacting and focusing lessons.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The three individuals involved in the action research report monthly to the Literacy Committee. Based on the results of this action research, the Literacy Committee made the following recommendations to the whole staff:

- that the school makes a long term commitment to use the Write Traits program in conjunction with the Performance Standards to allow students and staff to acquire common knowledge and common language to teach writing.
- that the program be implemented over the year, two units per term, to facilitate extension, and other language arts activities.
- that each classroom have their own kit to facilitate teacher implementation.
- that the implementation of the Write Traits program be included in our School Growth Plan.
- that Write Traits be used to support the teaching of the four components of writing in other schools in the district.
- that teachers and administrators have opportunities for sustainable collaboration during the day to further discuss writing strategies.

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THIS PROJECT?

- Collaboration is an immensely powerful means of creating positive change in our professional practice, thereby improving student performance.
- Action research generates excitement and involvement.
- Job-embedded professional learning is a catalyst for positive change in the classroom and in the school.
- Taking on an action research project develops an expertise that is recognized by peers and develops leadership opportunities.
- Developing a deeper understanding of the performance standards takes time and practice.