

Using Mentor Texts to Teach Argumentative Writing through Writing Conferences

By

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May, 2015

A culminating project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Literacy in Education.

Abstract

Poor student performance of writing skills has caused many teachers in America to focus more closely on teaching writing. In fact, the Common Core State Standards emphasize the importance of writing skills in elementary education. A case study with a teacher and 1 student was conducted to investigate how direct instruction impacted a student's ability to write argumentative texts on her own. The student wrote an initial argument paragraph before the study, during the study and another argumentative paragraph after the study was completed. Mentor texts were used for instruction throughout the study to find how they impacted a student's ability to write argumentative writing. The results of this study showed that direction instruction using mentor texts positively impacted a student's ability to write argumentatively.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

The Common Core State Standards place a tremendous emphasis on writing; in fact writing instruction is now just as important as reading instruction. In the past, reading instruction was seen to be more important than writing instruction. Today, the standards expect students be able to write argumentative, informational, and narrative writing pieces, with growing expectations in every grade (Calkins, Ehrenworth, Lehman, 2012). Students often score poorly on argument writing tasks because they have no authentic audience or purpose for writing; as a result students' arguments are weak.

Significance of the Problem

This is a major concern because students are expected to form strong arguments since these skills are critical to being college and career ready (Calkins, Ehrenworth, Lehman, 2012). Students often develop poor arguments because writing has not been as emphasized as reading instruction in the classroom. This research integrates reading and writing to explore how students can become better writers of argumentative texts.

Purpose for the Study

Pritchard (2009) states, "teachers being in dialogue with children...including one-on-one conversations, forms the basis of much good teaching" (p. 108). I worked with a student to explore mentor texts to better understand how an author's purpose to use persuasive strategies helps the student to write argumentatively. The student analyzed examples of argument writing to understand how an author's purpose helps her ability to write persuasively. This was taught through the common practice of one to one teacher-student writing conferences.

Background to the Study/Personal Rationale for this study

Writing varies in form, structure, and production process according to its audience and purpose. Teachers need to teach students that there are a wide range of purposes for writing, which results in different forms of writing. One of these forms is argument writing (Sluys, 2011). Using mentor texts “serves to show, not just tell, students how to write well” (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, p. 4). Analyzing examples of argument writing to understand an author’s purpose helps a student’s ability to write argumentatively. Larison (2007) states, “literature contributes to the quality of learning experiences for children when they are learning to write persuasively for a specific audience” (p. 32). In my research, it has become evident that limited research has been done in the area of writing; specifically how to use mentor texts to help a student’s ability to write argumentatively. By better understanding how to use mentor texts effectively, this research gives implications for teachers’ pedagogy of teaching argument writing to elementary age students.

Study Approach

This qualitative research study was completed in the form of a case study because the research problem calls for an in-depth exploration of teaching persuasive writing. I collected multiple forms of data, analyzed the data for description and themes and reported on that in my findings (Clark and Creswell, 2010). Discourse analysis was used as a method of analysis to collect “naturally occurring oral or written data and analyzing how language is used in the data (Clark and Creswell, 2010, p. 289).” This allowed the researcher to better analyze her student’s use of language conveyed to her through conferring. The researcher was able to examine the use of the student’s language in the context of writing argumentatively and determine whether there was transference of her teaching.

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's and Bruner's social constructivist theory. Their work indicates, "dialogue becomes the vehicle by which ideas are considered, shared and developed. The dialogue is often with a more knowledgeable other..." (Pritchard, 2009, p. 24). Pritchard (2009) also states that "the role of the more knowledgeable other in formal learning situations is usually taken by a teacher. The teacher has the role of stimulating dialogue and maintaining its momentum..." (pg. 24) Through writing conferences the researcher engaged an individual student to support her understanding of argument writing. Vygotsky also presents the concept of scaffolding, - the process of supporting learners at their appropriate level. He also addresses the notion of the zone of proximal development. In the zone of proximal development "a learner is able to work effectively, but only with support." (p. 25) One to one writing conferences provides an environment in which learning is socially constructed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this section I will discuss literature related to teaching writing, one to one writing conferences, current research in writing, and more specifically literature in teaching argumentative writing. Looking at research done in this area is crucial because it allows researchers to build on the existing research in teaching argumentative writing through mentor texts.

One to One Writing Conferences

Sluys (2011) states, “frequent conversations about the connections between what we read and what we write are helpful. These connections will sometimes be about the structure and craft of the writing and at other times about thematic and content connections (p. xvi). One to one writing conferences are commonly practiced because the structure gives teachers the opportunity to address the needs of her writers individually. This is helpful for student writers because the teacher can work on a writing need which is specific to that student. Additionally, students overtime become used to conferring with the teacher and talk about their writing in ways that they are unable to in whole group. They may be more open to share their strengths and areas to grow as a writer. This would give the teacher an added perspective and to help build the student up in various areas of need.

Calkins, Hartman, and White (2005) state, “when a teacher confers with a writer, her interactions tend to follow a consistent pattern, one that teachers of writing have deliberately chosen...we’ve named the steps *research*, *decide*, *teach*, and *link* (p. 7). In the research phase the teacher observes and interviews the student to understand what the child is trying to do and to better understand the child’s intentions. In the decide phase the teacher makes instructional

decisions about what to teach and how to teach it to the child. In the teach phase the teacher scaffolds learning so the child can successfully apply what was taught to her. Essentially you want to push the child further through modeling, and guided practice. In the final phase, the link phase, the teacher sits down with the writer to review what the writer accomplished and reminds the student to consistently apply those skills in the future (Calkins et al., 2005, p. 7-14). This can be seen in classrooms today where teachers make it a priority to confer with their students. However, often times from my own observations I saw that teachers move on too quickly, after having taught or practiced a writing skill. In my study it is imperative that the student truly understands and is able to apply the new learning into her writing consistently. Confering consistently is important because teachers can see overtime how their student is or is not applying the new learning. Keeping anecdotal notes will help the teacher to be able to find these patterns.

Calkins, Hartman, and While (2005) also discuss the three kinds of writing conferences which are content conferences, expectation conferences, and process and goals conferences. In content conferences the goal is to help students create “richer, more detailed and complete stories” (p. 14). Expectation conferences are usually held to explain to the child what the procedures are for writer’s workshop and are usually held when launching writer’s workshop. Process and goal conferences are a common type of conference because the teacher teaches the child how to go about doing something with a goal in mind.

Student-teacher collaboration is a key element for learning through one to one writing conferences. Dr. Gillian Wigglesworth and Dr. Neomy Storch, (2012) professors of linguistics at the University of Melbourne in Australia, explore the effects of collaborative learning by presenting various studies conducted within a sociocultural framework. Their work shows that

collaboration enhances language learning. It also builds on students' background knowledge because students scaffold their thinking based on each member's feedback and contribution. Focusing mainly on second language learners, Wigglesworth and Storch draw on their large-scale study to argue that when students work collaboratively, learning is enhanced because it provides opportunities for discussion, which is using language. This study supports my research because one on one student teacher conferences provides students with opportunities to grow as writers collaboratively. Furthermore, you can provide the necessary scaffolds to meet the individual needs of the learners. As you will see later on in this literature review, collaborating in the discussion of literature helps students develop their understanding of the text and promotes their language development. I would argue that this is true not only for English language learners, but for all students because every child's vocabulary and language should continue to develop as they read and write.

Research in Writing

Compared to other topics in education, not much research has been done in the area of argumentative writing. It has once been assumed that students can naturally write arguments. However, this has not been the case and so now argumentative writing instruction has become a priority. Therefore, there is much to glean from the work that has been done regarding the overall instruction in writing. An important aspect to writing instruction first and foremost begins with the teacher. In one study, professors from Utah Valley University and Brigham University in Utah explored why teachers do or do not engage students in writing. For their findings, they interviewed 14 teachers and found that high implementers of writing valued writing and reported receiving help from mentors in teaching writing, unlike low implementers of writing. In fact, low implementers did not view themselves as good writers. On the contrary, high implementers

viewed themselves as good writers. High implementers also provided time for writing in their classroom every single day. The teachers integrated it in various content areas, even if it was just to write down what the student had learned. Low implementers seemed more secure teaching concrete skills and viewed teaching the mechanics of writing as more important than composition. This article gives a researcher the understanding of why teachers' instructional decisions about writing can differ greatly from classroom to classroom. It also emphasizes the fact that teachers need continued professional development in writing instruction for teachers of all ages, especially for teachers who feel inadequate to teach writing.

Kate Ferguson-Patrick (2007), a professor at the School of Education at the University of Newcastle studied the positive nature of peer collaboration to increase writing productivity and quality. The results of the study showed that collaboration allowed students to share strengths, encourage each other, and helped students become better writers through peer tutoring. Ferguson-Patrick emphasizes a teacher's need to reflect on her practice in order to make informed instructional decisions. Her findings indicated that when students work collaboratively there is an increase in productivity, and increased quality of writing. However, individual accountability must be incorporated. Finally, a positive correlation was found between students who were given a topic to write about, as well as a partner to work with, rather than having students self-select a partner. This supported my research because I was able to draw conclusions on how a teacher's collaboration with a student through conferring, supported or did not support the results of a student working collaboratively whether it is with a peer or their teacher. There has been an increase in peer collaboration in all areas of education because of the positive effects. In my research the student collaborates with a teacher and therefore benefits in a different way than if she were to collaborate with another student. The teacher will glean even

greater insights into what conversations to structure in order to build on the child's learning. As a child gets used to collaborating with a teacher, she will be more comfortable collaborating with other peers if that had been a struggle.

To support collaboration, the function of talk is important. In a study by Tasha Laman (2011), an associate professor at the University of South Carolina, she examines the function of talk in a writer's workshop in a 4th grade classroom. Her findings show that listening to students' talk provides teachers with important information on students' comprehension. This data should then be used to guide instruction. Focusing on student talk offers teachers a comprehensive understanding of their students as writers. When teachers merely look at students' writing samples, they can only gain a partial understanding of the writer. When a student talks about her writing, the teacher can better support the learner. This goes back to what was mentioned earlier in this literature review-that teachers need continued professional development in writing so that they can better help their students when they do have discussions about their writing. This study supported my research, as one aspect of my study was to examine my conversations with a student during one on one student writing conferences.

Argumentative Writing

Little research has been done in the area of argumentative writing as only recently more focus has been placed on it. In an article published by Issac Willis Larison, (2007) in the Ohio Journal of English Language Arts, the author indicates that students need to be exposed to a variety of genres so students can learn to question the ideas presented. Consequently, they begin to "express themselves creatively through the use of comprehension and writing strategies (p. 37). Furthermore, Larison (2007) explains that through writing, students grow in their ability to think logically and improve their ability to write strong arguments after having read a variety of

literature. Reading literature should give students the opportunity to respond to text through book discussions, brain-storming activities, constructing story charts, and writing letters. I have seen that when students are given the opportunity to read for various purposes their level of engagement increases. It can be summed up that “reading good literature helps children learn to write with a clear purpose for a specific audience” (Larison, 2007, p. 37). For years it has been assumed that students can naturally write well argumentatively. However, that was not so as teachers began to score argumentative writing on standardized tests. Truly, it was a wake-up call for teachers to spend time on teaching students how to write strong and effective claims for a specific audience. Mentor texts can be used to show students what an exemplar of effective argumentative writing sounds like. In the past, it was assumed that students can write strong arguments, however this was found to be not true. It supports the research that students need a model in order to be able to do what is expected of them.

Sierschynski, Louie, and Pughe, (2015) education professors at the University of Washington Tacoma explored the complexity in picture books and how they foster learning in various ways to meet Common Core Standards where argumentative writing is given a higher level of attention. The writers explain the framework for analyzing text complexity and show how picture books can be valuable texts for various purposes. This study uses picture books as a mentor text to teach persuasive writing. Students can learn about argumentative writing by viewing the pictures as authors can make argument through the illustrations. I have seen students in upper-elementary grades thrive from analyzing picture books. In my research, I use picture books to discuss the text along with the pictures because the author’s purpose, and audience can be discussed by analyzing pictures in a text. It causes students to think about the words the

author uses and question why the illustrations are the way that they are. Essentially they are asking the question of how does this illustration help build the author's argument.

Mentor texts “help our young writers learn how to do what they may not yet be able to do on their own...they help students envision the kind of writer they can become; they help teachers move the whole writer, rather than each individual piece of writing, forward” (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, p. 2-3). Using mentor texts to analyze the author's purpose helps students develop strong writing skills because it serves as a model to student writers. Additionally, Sluys (2011) states through immersion in a genre, students develop an internalized sense of why an author would select a particular genre for a particular purpose, the power of a particular genre to convey a message...” (p. XV)

In another study, Strachan (2014), a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, shares four approaches to help teachers expand and successfully use the texts read in class for a variety of purposes. One approach is to include read alouds because they are a highly encouraged instructional practice. Students glean a lot from mentor texts as they become exposed to rich themes, vocabulary, and new concepts. Text should also be relevant to students' home lives so that students can relate and therefore build up their knowledge. Furthermore, teachers should always consider content and embed it in various subject areas because students can better conceptualize the theme or idea being taught. Lastly, teachers should embed real-world application projects that connect to the texts read because it gives them an even greater purpose for learning. She draws on research to explain practices and how to make them practical in the classroom.

This research is beneficial to me because I am using specific types of texts to teach persuasive writing. This article revealed the positives of using texts for a purpose therefore it supported my case study work. The more a child is exposed to mentor texts that are analyzed for a specific purpose, the better their writing becomes. Furthermore, as this research states, when students make the project relevant to their own lives students will better remember the content of the mentor text and be able to recall it quicker when there is also a writing assignment expected, in addition to an application project.

In a research study, where Aerila and Ronkko (2015) used picture books in a child-centered way, they came up with child-centered activities which related to the literature they were reading closely with the students. They expressed a concern that in order for students to connect with a text they have to be able to associate experiences from their own lives. As a result, discussions about the texts became more effective. Text-based discussions can then be used as an assessment tool because teachers can really understand how clearly the student understood the theme, main idea, or purpose of the story. Furthermore, children develop better literacy skills if you have an interactive activity following the reading.

I would argue that discussions can be an interactive activity especially if the student can make a real life connection. Discussions help teachers understand the thoughts of their students and therefore help guide instruction. Mentor texts can help students understand the author's thinking. Although this research was conducted with early elementary students, it is relevant for all elementary age students because picture books at any level can have a profound impact on a student's reading and writing development. Furthermore, when a child collaborated with a peer or an adult about the text, they gain an even greater understanding of the text because as mentioned earlier in this study, collaboration enhances student learning.

Chapter 3: Study Design

Methods of Data Collection

There were several ways I went about collecting data. In order to answer my research questions I recorded anecdotal notes. This way I was able to refer to the main points of our conferences and write down my observations throughout the study. Additionally, I recorded our conversations to have clear evidence of the dialogue between the student and me. I collected the student's writing samples to look for evidence of what we talked about during one to one writing conferences. These writing samples and dialogue were analyzed to find reoccurring themes in my research. All of this data helped me develop conclusions on how using argumentative text to determine the author's purpose helps a writer write argumentatively.

Positionality of the Researcher

I have completed my Bachelor's degree in English at SUNY Brockport and I am a certified elementary school teacher for grade B-6. I am also certified to teach Students with Disabilities in grades B-6. After earning my Bachelor's degree I taught kindergarten for a year and currently teaching 3rd grade. This is my 2nd year being a full time teacher. While I was a full-time college student I worked as a substitute teacher. I am currently working towards my Master's in Literacy K-12 at SUNY Brockport. I believe that literacy instruction, and writing being a major part of it, is an element of teaching that every educator must master. Therefore, as a teacher researcher this study further enhanced my, as well as other teachers' ability to teach argument writing more effectively.

Research Questions

This study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

Does direct instruction in argumentative writing impact a student's ability to write argumentative text on her own?

Does the use of mentor texts showing an author's use of argumentative writing impact a student's ability to write argumentative writing?

Participants and Setting

I selected one student from my classroom through random purposeful sampling. This increased credibility, as I did not have advanced knowledge of who the student would be. In my 3rd grade classroom I have twenty-four students. There are ten boys and fourteen girls. Twenty-four of the students are white. One student is Hispanic and one student is African-American. One student in the class has learning disabilities. The rest of the students are at grade level. This research took place in my 3rd grade classroom, in the mornings at a school that is located in a suburban area.

The student who was randomly selected comes from a family where her mother and father support her learning. She has an older brother who at home works with her on her homework and gives her more challenging work. She is a strong student in all academic areas and participates often in class. She has a strong work ethic and always asks questions when she is unclear of what to do. This student gets along well with others and is a good friend. She is well liked by others and very outgoing. She is also very capable of taking a leadership role when working in a small group setting.

Procedures

I began this study in the middle of January and finished collecting my data by the middle February. I will refer to my student participant by the pseudonym Zina. Zina met with me

approximately four mornings a week for four weeks for individual writing conferences as outlined earlier in this study. On a daily basis, students enter the classroom silently, look on the board to find their morning work assignment for the day, and begin to work on it until I ring the bell. Then it is time to start our morning meeting. While Zina's classmates worked on completing their morning work at their seats, Zina knew she was to come over to work with me, at the student desk adjacent to my own desk. This way, there were minimal distractions and we were able to focus solely on writing. The rest of the class knew they were not allowed to come talk to me unless there was an emergency. In this way, I was able to facilitate an environment that allowed me to work one on one with a student on a regular basis. To pre-assess, I had my student write an argumentative paragraph after I read an argumentative text to her. This gave me an example of what she could do on her own before I began teaching.

Our conferences varied in the sense that some days we had discussions, other days modeling, guided practice or independent practice. Based on previously collected data from conferring, I was able to determine what was necessary for our next student-teacher conference. Zina was a cooperative student who completed all her work, always put in her best effort, and had a positive attitude towards writing. I conferred with this student frequently in the beginning (4-5 times a week), and then less frequently (3-4 times a week). The student worked independently after each conference to accomplish an assignment or practice a strategy. Afterward, I analyzed all of the collected data to discuss my findings.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

I randomly selected a student from my classroom to increase credibility. The research went on for 4-6 weeks. I triangulated my data because I used multiple methods of data collection. I supported all of my research with related research regarding my research topic of writing. In

this case study, I used discourse analysis to analyze the student's writing samples and her language. I recorded to increase the validity and when necessary, quote her in my findings.

Data Collection

This qualitative research study looked at how direct instruction in argumentative writing impacted a student ability to write argumentatively. Mentor texts were used to show an author's use of argumentative writing. Data collection began as soon as it was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) using anecdotal notes, audio recordings, and discourse analysis. From this study, five themes emerged which will be discussed later in this study.

Anecdotal Notes: At every writing conference the researcher recorded notes detailing what the purpose of that conference was and anything else I may have noticed during instruction. I recorded changes for upcoming lessons and what materials I needed for the next conference.

Date:	Teaching Point:
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Figure 1: Anecdotal notes form

Audio Recordings: During most conferences the researcher recorded the conversations that occurred. The researcher wanted to see the difference in the student's discourse overtime when discussing mentor texts and argumentative writing. Recordings were anywhere from 5 minutes to fifteen minutes. The researcher recorded anything from listening to the student compare and contrast mentor texts, explain her writing, or draw conclusions about the purpose of

the author's strategies. Therefore, when writing the findings of this study, recordings were a reliable source because the researcher did not have to draw conclusions based on memory.

Discourse Analysis: The audio recordings as well as anecdotal notes allowed for reliable discourse analysis. The researcher was able to better understand the student writer and her growth overtime because the conversations were analyzed. Therefore that increased the validity of this study.

Data Analysis:

The very first thing I did when we began the study was go over the possible strategies an author may use to persuade his audience. I asked her to share what she had seen authors do, and what she has done to persuade an audience, regardless of whether it was written or orally. This was a scaffold in that it helped to build her background knowledge and made argumentative writing relevant to her. It also gave me an idea of her prior knowledge. Before we read our first text together called *I Wanna Iguana*, I wanted to have an understanding of what my student can do independently with argumentative writing. Therefore, I summarized what the story was about. Zina then wrote on the same topic-about something she really wanted. I did not model argumentative writing beforehand and this was evident in her writing. She did not use evidence from the text to support her opinion, and did not have an audience in mind. However, her writing helped me to structure the rest of our conferences because I knew what I needed to teach her from that point on. Then I read the book to Zina and modeled through a "think out loud" by stopping as I read, to show her what aspect of the text I was focusing on. The purpose was to help her do likewise in future texts. I began by stating that the purpose of reading the text was to notice techniques used by the author to persuade someone to do something in the text. While reading, I pointed out various techniques such as repetition, appeal on emotions, and so on. The

USING MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

result of modeling was seen in our conversation after the reading. I explicitly stated, “I noticed the author used repetition to persuade because the author wrote that phrase over and over again every couple pages.” Another statement I made was, “the author has his character use true facts to support his argument” and “each time he wrote a letter in the book the author had the character end his letter a different way.” I always concluded with “I think this is effective because...” I reminded Zina to think back to her own writing on wanting a necklace and in her mind compare how she made an argument, to how the author constructed the boy’s argument in the book. I modeled recording what I noticed and what I thought the author’s purpose was for that strategy. I modeled by filling out a t-chart for her before having us do one together. The purpose of the t-chart was to help us, as readers, reflect on the strategies an author used. I shared this with her to help her understand the purpose. On the left hand side I wrote down the writer’s technique and on the right hand side I wrote down the author’s purpose for using that technique. Since I intended to scaffold her learning, I continued to think aloud during the next book that we read together, focusing specifically on the author’s purpose for every strategy we came across. Afterwards, I filled out the t-chart with Zina adding in her input. The purpose of the t-chart was to help Zina focus specifically on persuasive strategies and then to reflect on reoccurring themes. More importantly, she was able to reflect on the author’s purpose from the beginning of the study. Here is an example of Zina filling out a writer’s technique/author’s purpose t-chart.

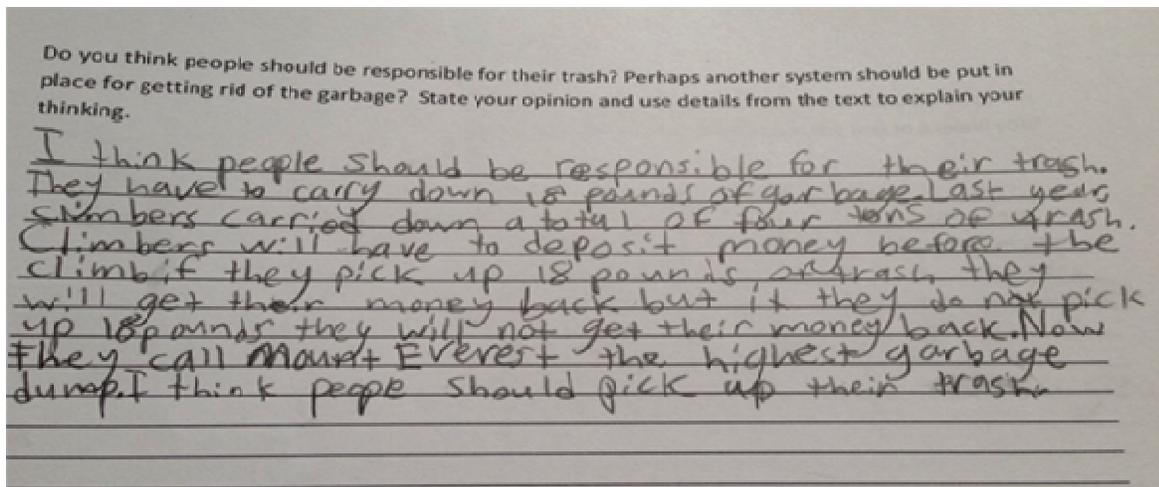
Figure 2: T-chart

Writer’s Technique	Author’s Purpose
Repetition	to make his point stronger and help make it stick in the readers head
Different way of signing each letter	to make the mom feel bad for her “hard

Questioning	working” and “loving” son Makes you think more about the character’s problem
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During the study, I continued to have Zina write persuasive paragraphs before having a one-on-one student-teacher writing conference to teach a specific technique or read a mentor text. I wanted to see the difference my direct instruction would make in her writing. After studying fiction mentor texts we moved onto informational texts which were in the form of an article. Zina responded to the articles by writing her argument. I gave her a writing prompt and she had to argue her point. Here is an example of a prompt I gave her. As seen in her work below, we had worked on stating clear claims in the beginning of her arguments. She explicitly stated her argument in the first sentence.

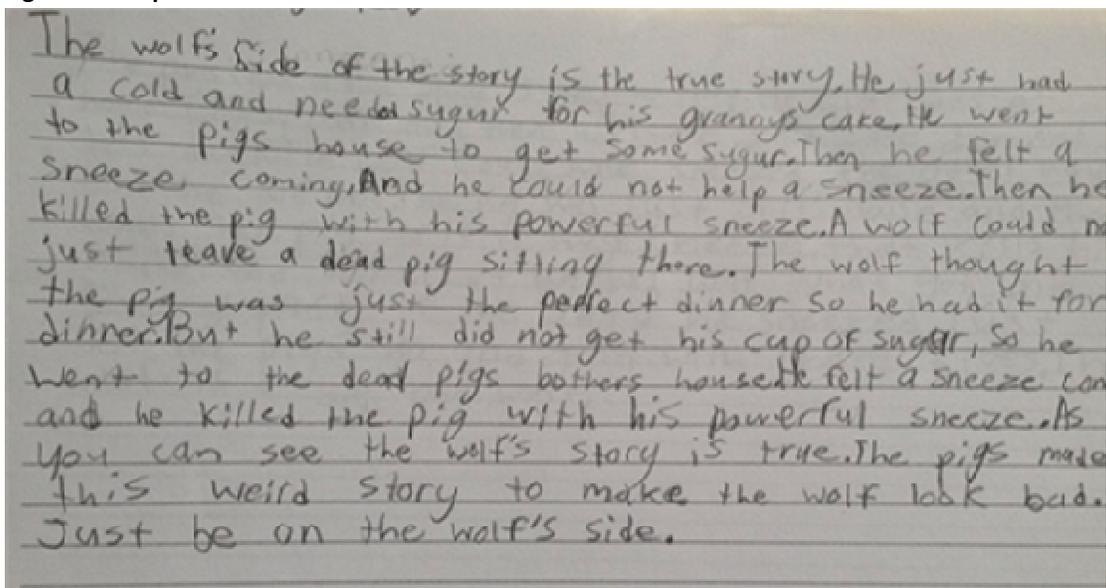
Figure 3: Sample of student work



USING MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

To do this, I had to provide scaffolds for Zina. For example, before moving onto non-fiction texts, we read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. I explained the background of the story to Zina and asked her to compare and contrast this story with the original story of The Three Little Pigs. Afterward, Zina and I discussed the similarities and differences. She noticed that the wolf “had a good reason for going to each pig’s house” and that “his argument is pretty convincing and he may not be the big bad wolf after all!” We went over the possible techniques an author could use, especially if we had seen it in a previous book we read. Then we re-read the book to look for persuasive techniques the author used. Through a think aloud, I showed how I was led to believe what the author’s point of view was. For a 3rd grade student, point of view is a fairly new concept. I began to scaffold Zina by using mentor texts to model argumentative writing. By the end of the study Zina was able to confidently share and apply the techniques she saw an author use. She would say phrases such as, “just like in the last book we read, this author also uses repetition to persuade his audience...” Zina was able to build on previous learning because the information came to her gradually and she was able to apply it to her writing immediately. Her work is shown below.

Figure 4: Sample of Student Work



The wolf's side of the story is the true story. He just had a cold and needed sugar for his grandpa's cake, he went to the pigs house to get some sugar. Then he felt a sneeze coming, and he could not help a sneeze. Then he killed the pig with his powerful sneeze. A wolf could not just leave a dead pig sitting there. The wolf thought the pig was just the perfect dinner so he had it for dinner. But he still did not get his cup of sugar, so he went to the dead pig's brother's house. He felt a sneeze coming and he killed the pig with his powerful sneeze. As you can see the wolf's story is true. The pigs made this weird story to make the wolf look bad. Just be on the wolf's side.

I also explained that the story is told from the perspective of the wolf. I chose to use it because she already knew the story of *The Three Little Pigs*. This new book was an engaging way to introduce point of view in an argumentative text. This was a text Zina was already familiar with so we were able to discuss point of view more effectively. Zina said, “when I compare both stories, I would say the wolf had a more convincing argument because his reasons sound very realistic.”

Compared to other students in her class, Zina was a strong writer. She was especially strong in having her voice come through in her writing. From the beginning of this study, I saw that her voice did come through. I saw how her voice began to shine even in argumentative writing with more modeling and guided practice. However, I saw a lack of detail/evidence to support her argument. This informal assessment helped me to structure the purpose for reading *Dear, Mr. Blueberry*.

One of the most interesting aspects of using *Dear, Mr. Blueberry* was listening to Zina explain how she could improve her writing. After reading this mentor text, I would ask Zina how she could apply what she learned to her own writing. One example is after reading *Dear Mr. Blueberry*, I was surprised to hear her say not only what she learned about argumentative writing but also that she “should be more descriptive and use better words.” She did this independently because I did not tell her to focus on a particular strategy the author used. I wanted to see what she could come up with on her own.

When a teacher begins a new topic, students must have some background knowledge in order to successfully understand the new topic. When we started reading non-fiction argumentative writing, we began reading about trash being left on mountains by hikers. I did not talk about pollution, the environment, and trash before we read the text. This became evident in

our conversation afterwards because Zina was unable to discuss the techniques the author used, in detail and then explain how they were relevant to the subject of the text. I saw that our conversations were not very effective and decided to back up and share some background knowledge on the topic. I concluded by asking, “why would somebody want to share their opinion on this topic?” This sparked Zina’s interest as she recalled reading about a similar issue in her class last year. I saw that her engagement in our conversation increased and she was able to expand on why the author used the techniques that he did. She stated that “the reason someone would want to share his opinion on the topic is because if it is important to him, he thinks other people should know about it and have the same point of view that he had on the environment. It is only through direct instruction that I was able to get this information because in a whole group setting I would not have been able to have such conversations.

In another instance, we talked about using facts to make a strong argument. One of her writing pieces in connection to a text was to write about cats. She did not have very much background knowledge about cats so we went online to find facts. We found an informational text, read it, and then she rewrote her argumentative piece to include facts about cats. Together we discussed the changes she made. This was effective because she was able to explain how using facts made her argument stronger because she was using facts that, in her words, “are not from my own mind so it gives the reader another perspective.” As I analyzed Zina’s writing, I noticed that compared to other students, she supported her argument skillfully with relevant facts and details. In her first sentence she stated her argument and then used the facts she had researched, to support her argument. Her argument statement demonstrated an insightful understanding of her topic. Her voice really came through in her writing and she was able to connect with her audience. The audience was focused and laughed at certain points while she

was reading. This showed that the audience was engaged. In the end, she was one of the students whose fruit won an award. Zina used more persuasive strategies than her classmates and wrote stronger conclusions.

At the beginning of every conference I introduced the clear purpose of the day's lesson or work. If it was a writing day, we would recall what we had learned about persuasive writing through the mentor texts which we had already read, and then we would talk about how that could be applied to her new writing assignment.

I also believe that through mentor texts, Zina gained a greater understanding for what excellent persuasive writing sounds like because she had the opportunity to read multiple texts. In analyzing someone else's writing, Zina was able to better understand herself as a persuasive writer. Later, she applied that learning to her own writing which was the ultimate goal.

From the beginning of the study Zina worked hard to make sure she did not have any conventional errors. We had recently learned about proper nouns, and I saw her successfully apply that knowledge in her own writing when she wrote about Mount Everest. Although some of these aspects of writing was not the focus of our writing conferences, Zina improved as a 3rd grade writer. This gave me a comprehensive understanding of her as a writer. In class we had also been working on making our writing more descriptive. I saw evidence of this when Zina wrote "beautiful, beautiful diamond necklace..." in one of her writing pieces. She was using the strategy of repetition along with adding description to her writing.

As an educator, I had always known that when you present students with a text, they must have some kind of background knowledge. If not, you must build background knowledge in order for them to become successful learners. When we read the book *Earrings!* I noticed how

background knowledge and experience really helped Zina write persuasively. In the book, a little girl wants to persuade her mom to get her earrings. We discussed the many ways the little girl tries to do this by looking at the techniques the author used. Later, Zina wrote a persuasive letter to her mom regarding something she had really wanted. Her voice was really evident throughout the whole writing piece. She used phrases such as “I want it. I need it. I have to have it.” I chose this book because it was relevant to Zina, a great example of voice, and really showed what a strong persuasive argument sounded like. Later, when we worked with non-fiction informational texts, I referred back to this book because I wanted to remind her of the importance of voice even in informational texts. As mentioned earlier, voice is a strength in Zina’s writing. Zina was able to smoothly incorporate her voice into her writing when she was writing an argumentative letter to her mom and then when she was writing an argumentative letter responding to a current event. Even though the informational text was not very relevant to her, Zina wrote a successful argument because I built her background knowledge and helped her make connections to what she had read about on the topic. This was a necessary step to make the text relevant to her. I also connected the article *African Lions in Trouble* to a fiction text we read. The article was a debate on whether the lions should be listed as an endangered species. I explained how the pig and wolf in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* talked from completely different perspectives, and how that is what happens with writers whose purpose is to persuade. We discussed the varying viewpoints a person may have on the same topic, and then we looked for evidence of a convincing argument. Zina said, “I see a lot of the same strategies being used in the fiction books which are used in these articles.” We discussed those strategies. The strategies Zina pointed out were repetition, appeal on emotion, and giving good reasons. When I asked her what the author’s purpose was for writing from the wolf’s perspective she said, “it’s a different way to understand

USING MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

the story.” For the article, *African Lions in Trouble* Zina said that the author’s purpose was “to help people understand why African lions need to be protected.” The fiction and non-fiction argumentative texts helped bridge the gap between fictional argumentative writing and non-fiction argumentative writing. It helped her make connections between different genres.

Chapter 4: Findings

From my data collection and analysis two themes emerged. These themes are very relevant to the research in the area of teaching writing. The first theme is discussed below.

Direct instruction impacts a students' ability to write argumentative writing.

Direct instruction truly had an impact on my student's argumentative writing work because after looking at her work before and after I modeled, I was able to clearly see the difference in her writing. The techniques I modeled became a part of Zina's writing. The need for modeling a teacher's thinking in order for a student to conceptualize the learning and apply it in her own work was seen from the beginning of the study. I learned that Zina benefited from consistent modeling because I saw that Zina began to use the academic language I had been using. Through direct instruction, I knew what kind of modeling I needed to do in order for it to meet Zina's needs. As a result, in our conversations she discussed an author's various techniques clearly explaining how the author's use of that technique contributed to the overall argument of the text. At one point in our study, Zina told me that she never thought about author's having strategies when they were writing books. This is when I realized Zina was learning to read through a critical lens, specifically focusing on an author's purpose. Zina gained a better understanding of persuasive writing and how to read a text for the specific purpose of looking for strategies an author uses. Then she transferred them to her own writing which helped her become a better writer. Since I modeled this consistently, it became evident that the more I modeled what the student needed, the better the writing became.

As stated in the data analysis section, the fiction and non-fiction argumentative texts helped bridge the gap between fictional argumentative writing and non-fiction argumentative writing.

My learner made connections between two distinct texts. Therefore, teachers need to help students make relevant connections by analyzing several texts if the purpose is to help them write argumentatively. This is helpful because students come to look at text through a critical lens as they compare and contrast different types of text. As a result, they become better writers because of the takeaways they receive as they compare texts. With direct instruction Zina was prompted to compare the two texts and discuss them in a way that would benefit her as a writer of argumentative texts. Therefore, students need to have direct instruction because the teacher is better able to understand what the students' thinking is and help build on that knowledge. In a whole, group you may not necessarily be able to do that because you are instructing a larger group.

Through one on one writing conferences we were able to have conversations about the mentor texts and her writing. By the end of the study, our discussions alone were a great indicator of Zina's growth in her comprehension of persuasive texts. This assignment confirmed to me that when students have a purpose for writing about something that is relevant to them, the quality of their work will increase. This supports Strachan's (2015) research because students need to work with text that allows them to make relevant connections to their own lives which helps better understand a text and I will add that in turn the student becomes a better writer on the topic.

The use of mentor texts showing an author's use of argumentative writing positively impacts a student's ability to write argumentative writing.

Over the course of reading several books, Zina began to independently pick up on the techniques an author used to persuade and recorded them and her reasoning, on the t-chart. This supports the work of Dorfman & Cappelli who stated that using mentor texts to analyze the author's purpose helps students develop strong writing skills because it serves as a model for

student writers. (2007). Zina was able to apply the strategies she recorded in the t-chart to her work. Therefore, students can be provided with scaffolds to help them achieve these strong writing skills.

Students need to be taught to think critically about an author's work because every writer has a bias. Naturally, students often believe what they hear when they read it in an article. Zina was taught to question and form her own argument on the topic. The use of mentor texts supported Zina's understanding of point of view in argumentative writing. I saw how important it was to have the student think about the author's point of view as we read and discussed the mentor text. This helped to guide our discussions of the text and focus in on the author's purpose for writing the text and using specific techniques. This was a priority in the study, and with every text we read.

I saw a big difference in our discussion of the texts, and in her writing after reading several books and discussing the author's purpose for each strategy used, and for writing the book. Furthermore, when we read the non-fiction articles, Zina went back to highlight evidence in the text to support her opinion. This scaffolding tool helped Zina to support her argument using evidence from the text. The mentor texts allowed Zina to understand an author's perspective and the point that every writer has a bias because there is a specific goal he/she is aiming to achieve. After writing and/or responding to several pieces of text, I saw how Zina's writing became more developed as she used evidence from the text to support her reasoning.

Overtime I saw how my direct teaching resulted in successful application of the strategies I taught. Not only was she able to discuss it, but she applied it as well. In the beginning of my study, when Zina wrote persuasively, her writing was not very well developed. She wrote about her argument but her support was weak. After we compiled a list of techniques that an author can

USING MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

use to persuade his/her audience, I saw how she began to apply these strategies to her writing. In particular, in one of the texts the author used explanation points as a way to bring out his argument. In our conference that day, we did not talk about the author's use of capital letters. When I got her writing back, I saw Zina had included capital letters in her writing and used them appropriately. Zina had noticed more than what I had planned on teaching her from that mentor text. This supports the notion that students can glean more than we anticipate from using a mentor text.

I saw transference of my teaching, by using mentor texts, reflect in other areas of writing. For example, in science, we worked on studying the nutritious benefits of a fruit or vegetable. Then present it to the class in hopes that it would win the "fruit or vegetable of the year" award. Their speech and then presentation had to sound persuasive and informative, so that other students would want to vote for them. Strengths of her writing skills emerged as I worked on this study. These strengths were not necessarily targeted during direct instruction, however when you work on one aspect of writing it is inevitable that other areas of writing will improve simultaneously. In the beginning of the study, I saw that although her argument was stated, she did not have a strong topic sentence. Later, I saw how she referred back to her topic sentence to make sure her ideas were organized and written in complete sentences. We analyzed mentor texts to see how the writer stated his argument. She learned that in well-developed paragraphs all of the ideas in the paragraph support the topic sentence. After analyzing and discussing, Zina was able to apply these skills to her own writing because on other writing assignments at school her topic sentences were clear and focused.

By the end of the study, Zina was applying multiple persuasive strategies to her writing. Looking at our work together, I think this is due to repetition being a major part of this study.

USING MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

This was very possible with direct instruction because you are tailoring to the specific needs of one learner. I continuously reviewed the different techniques an author can use, or the techniques which we did not see that could have been used. This allowed Zina to retain the learning and effectively apply it to her work. With some mentor texts, we discussed only one technique the author used to persuade his/her audience. However, when Zina had a writing assignment specifically meant for her to focus on one technique, I saw her apply other techniques which we had not talked about while we were reading the book. To me, this was evidence of transference of my teaching to her writing because she was building on what she had already learned.

As stated in the data analysis section, it was helpful that I explained the purpose of the day's conference with her because it helped her to retain the new learning and in addition it gave her a confidence boost because she was able to discuss her learning and successfully apply it as she worked collaboratively with a teacher and received feedback immediately. This strongly supports the research done by Dr. Gillian Wigglesworth and Dr. Neomy Storch, (2012) whose findings show that student-teacher collaboration is a key element for learning.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

A Summary of the Major Results

This study confirmed that the evidence-based practices most commonly used today in classrooms are just as effective for direct one to one writing instruction. The emerging theme that direct instruction does impact a child's ability to write argumentative writing was shown in Zina's work throughout the study. Furthermore, this study showed that the use of mentor texts showing an author's use of argumentative writing positively impacts a student's ability to write argumentative writing. Modeling and scaffolding was necessary in order for Zina to better understand and gradually apply all that she had learned from mentor texts to her own writing. Building background knowledge was especially necessary because it helped the writer better understand what she was going to read. In this way, it helped her become a better writer because she was able to integrate newly learned material from the text, along with her prior knowledge to develop a stronger argument. At each conference, I saw evidence of my teaching in her writing. Choosing relevant mentor texts was critical in this study because my writer was more engaged. As a result, the writer exhibited better-developed arguments and an increased effort on argumentative writing. The emerging themes displayed that Zina benefited immensely from direct instruction. It also strongly indicates that direct instruction positively impacts a student's ability to write persuasively with the use of mentor texts.

Related Research

Results obtained from this study confirm findings of Sluys (2011) that conversations with students, connecting what we read and write about are beneficial to the writer. Direct instruction allowed me to have those conversations and so I was able to address areas of weakness and

modify my instruction to fit Zina's needs. When you work one on one with a student you are able to glean a lot more information on the learner and her writing, than when you are working with a group of students or the class as a whole. Through my research, I learned about Zina's strengths as a writer as well as her areas of needs in a greater way. Furthermore, Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) pointed out that mentor texts help students become better writers because the students learn to do what they were previously unable to do. My research strongly confirms this practice because I analyzed samples of my student's writing before and after I used mentor texts. I saw positive differences in her writing because she transferred newly learned material through reading mentor texts, to her own writing. Additionally, she was able to explain to me verbally, how her writing changed due to reading the mentor text.

Personal Reflection

This study did not reveal anything completely new about teaching writing through direct instruction using mentor texts. However, I was able to add to my knowledge and experience and become a better teacher of writing. I reflected on every single conference Zina and I had together because I wanted to learn what was most effective about direct instruction and how it emerged in Zina's writing and in our conversations. Therefore, this study has influenced my own practice of how powerful mentor texts can be when implemented correctly. I have always used mentor texts often in whole group settings, but very infrequently for one to one conferences. At the conclusion of this study, the evidence strongly suggested that incorporating mentor texts is beneficial in conferences. As I was gathering data, I modified the texts I planned to use, conversations, and writing assignments. However, modifying plans to meet the needs of learners is the nature of teaching. The results of this study have sparked my interest for a possible future question as to how student(s) can use mentor texts to their fullest potential for inquiry learning. It

would be interesting to discover what conclusions a student can arrive at about an author's writing, in a four week learning period. This study has prompted me to think about future studies involving mentor texts for the purpose of teaching writing.

Implications for Practice

Teachers should try to introduce styles of writing, or a writing assignment with mentor texts as much as possible. My findings indicated that mentor texts help a student brainstorm ideas for her writing more effectively. Additionally, her writing was more detailed and focused after reading and talking about the mentor text before having a similar writing assignment. For teachers, using mentor texts to teach writing is also very practical. You can implement the use of mentor texts during writing conferences with individual students, in small group, or whole class instruction. Every classroom is different and this study shows that you can take what works best for you, in your classroom. Furthermore, every student is different and so your teaching will be structured differently than mine. However, the fundamentals stay the same. Another implication of this study is to link literature with writing as often as possible because mentor texts positively impact a student's argumentative writing. My findings indicated that mentor texts serve as a model for student writers. Zina successfully applied what she learned from a text, to her own writing. I also realized that her level of engagement was higher than when I had her complete a writing assignment without first reading a mentor text.

Limitations of the Study

Many of the students did not bring back their permission forms for participation in the study therefore my pool for randomly selecting a student was smaller than the anticipated 24 students. Furthermore, I worked with my student in my classroom. Although there were no

interruptions when I worked with her, there were interruptions when she was working independently at her seat. On some days she was absent so I had to change my plans. Lastly, since this was a short-term study I could not take any of her writing to the final draft stage. She had to complete a lot of writing in a short period of time which could get tiring for a 3rd grader. Fortunately, she was a hard worker and always did her best.

Future Research Needs

In the future, research that uses mentor texts to teach writing and compares the impact of individualized direct instruction for two or more students would be helpful. It can give a better understanding of the differences that can be found among students being taught argumentative writing through mentor texts. Even more specifically, research that looks for differences between teaching a student with special needs versus a student in general education would be very beneficial. Today integrated classrooms are growing and research in this area would help teachers recognize what works best for teaching argumentative writing in an integrated classroom. As mentioned earlier in this study, the research in writing is limited. Therefore, research on teaching any other style of writing using mentor texts would be beneficial to the existing body of research.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study highlight the experiences of a student who learned through direct instruction to write argumentatively using mentor texts. This study suggests that teachers need to continue to use best practices to help their students become better writers. More specifically, incorporating mentor texts as much as possible will immensely help students

USING MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

become better at argumentative writing. Although research in teaching argumentative writing is limited, it is truly necessary and beneficial for all teachers of writing.

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USING MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

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