

Growing Support for Elementary School Writing Instruction

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Curriculum policies, testing programs, and language arts textbooks have *hampered* the teaching of writing—but circumstances are changing.

Qualitative differences between writing and other school subjects make teaching writing particularly difficult in elementary schools. Because of the unique nature of writing instruction, the teaching skills used by teachers in other subjects cannot be transferred intact to writing instruction with great success. Nor can the materials used in other subjects be converted easily to materials for teaching writing (Pettigrew and others, 1981; Gregg and Steinberg, 1980). An effective writing program requires an educational environment that provides teachers with skills and materials specifically designed for writing instruction.

For many years, this support has been lacking. Until recently, writing instruction in elementary schools has taken place in an environment best described as hostile. In a year-long study conducted by the Center for Research in Writing, we observed the writing instruction of eight teachers in grades three through six. One of the outcomes of that project was a catalog of the forces affecting writing instruction; we found that most of these forces impeded, rather than aided, the efforts of teachers to teach writing (Van Nostrand and others, 1980).

There are three sets of forces that make up the educational support system for writing instruction: state and local curriculum guidelines, tests and textbooks distributed by commercial publishers, and information made available to teachers by the academic

community in the form of courses and published articles.

State and Local Guidelines

In the Center for Research in Writing study, legislative and judicial records of 18 states were surveyed for references to writing instruction.¹ While laws in these states required schools to teach a variety of subjects (such as hygiene, narcotics education, fire prevention, and state history and government), none of them had a specific writing requirement. In four of the states, the department of education specified objectives for writing instruction. In the other 14 it was left to individual school districts.

We found that the curricular guidelines in the seven districts in our study hampered writing instruction in two ways. First, they gave a clear message that writing instruction had a low priority in the curriculum. The guidelines in many districts specified the amount of time to be spent each week in

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reading, mathematics, physical education, and other subjects, but none specifically allocated any time to writing instruction; it was to be done in time left over from other subjects. Second, the guidelines failed to live up to their name as a *guide to instruction*. They referred to writing instruction in vague generalities that were of little help to teachers planning a writing program.

Tests and Textbooks

Without specific curricular guidelines, other forces become particularly powerful in shaping writing instruction. Two of these are uniform across the nation and powerful in their effect: standardized achievement tests and language arts textbooks.

An analysis of four of the more commonly-used national tests reveals a highly constricted sampling of language skills that excludes composing. They are the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the California Achievement Test, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, and the Stanford Achievement Test. Each includes a language scale that entails recognizing or choosing a correction for certain errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar; none of them measures anything remotely similar to composing.

Teachers in our study asserted that their evaluation by administrators was based in part on student test scores and that the pressure to produce high scores was detrimental to writing. In many states these scores are published annually in local newspapers. "Natu-

rally we teach to the tests," said one teacher. "Our superintendent is happy to publish scores that show we are above the state norm." He is, of course, unhappy to publish scores that show the district below the state norm, and the teaching of writing does not directly contribute to high test scores. Some tests, such as the Test of Standard Written English (ETS) and those used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, directly measure composition skills, but these are not nearly as prevalent or potent in shaping educational policy as the tests used by most school districts.

Equating writing to grammar is also found in language arts textbooks. Graves (1977) criticizes these books for virtually ignoring the fact that writing is a *process*.

The entire process is left untouched by these texts. Neither prewriting, composing, or postcomposing activities are suggested with strength or substance in either teacher or student texts (p. 823).

This omission is scarcely an oversight. Stewart (1978) points out that process-oriented instructional materials have not appealed to a wide market, but that books which focus on writing as a product continue to sell

well. Indeed, some authors question whether it is possible to produce an effective process-oriented composition textbook, asserting that textbooks are too static a medium to do justice to a process approach to writing (Rose, 1983).

The textbooks available to the teachers in our study provided vivid documentation for the observations of Graves and Stewart. Issued by ten different publishers, these textbooks present some 4,500 pages of rules, explanations, and exercises that predominantly address skills in grammar and mechanics. This emphasis was found in texts for all four grade levels (grades three through six), and did not change over a span of 15 years, from 1966 to 1980. The books shared another similar feature: the final chapter in all ten was the chapter on writing. In addition to symbolic implications, this position has a real logistical effect as well. Few teachers ever complete an entire textbook in a school year, and those who follow the sequence of chapters rarely reach the last one.

The Academic Community

Faced with unclear guidelines from state and local education agencies and

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with the misleading conception of writing represented in standardized tests and textbooks, concerned teachers of writing must develop their own writing programs. Until recently resources available to teachers were scant. One survey of 36 universities found 169 graduate courses offered to teachers, of which only two were in writing instruction (Graves, 1978). Education journals have been of equally little help. A search of the ERIC database from 1968 to mid-1980 found only 29 published articles dealing specifically with methods of teaching composition in elementary school. There were far more articles on teaching poetry and the mechanics of handwriting and spelling. Many composition articles were anecdotal; few were of use to another teacher trying to plan a writing program (Van Nostrand and others, 1980).

Recent Developments

Media attention to writing instruction over the past few years has either caused or reflected increased attention to writing instruction by government education agencies. At the federal level, writing programs were specifically included in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for the first time in 1978 and first funded in 1980. Federal appropriations are uncertain at the moment, but including writing programs in the ESEA gives them a legitimacy and a chance at funding that they did not have before. At the state level, departments of education are beginning to revise curriculum guidelines to give more emphasis to writing instruction.²

The academic community has taken a more useful posture toward research

on writing instruction in recent years than in the past. The 29 composition articles published before 1980 have since been joined by an additional 31 articles, which are generally more relevant to classroom practice.³ Collaborative efforts between teachers and researchers have resulted in a number of publications that directly address the needs of classroom teachers (Calkins, 1980; Graves, 1980; Shaw and others, 1983). Two organizations, the National Writing Project and the Regional Exchange Network, facilitate this collaboration. The 129 local projects that constitute the National Writing Project exemplify the benefits obtained when teachers and university researchers collaborate.⁴ The Regional Exchange Network, coordinated by the National Institute of Education, provides a context within which state education agencies and university researchers share resources and develop strategies to improve writing instruction.⁵ Professional associations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English, have also played a major role in disseminating useful information to teachers.

Commercial publishers, too, are beginning to fill the demand for new writing materials. While some of these materials reflect current research about teaching writing, others are simply quick reworkings of the materials that have actively interfered with writing instruction in the past. It is the responsibility of school districts and the academic community to demand appropriate materials and to refuse to purchase materials that do not facilitate the effective teaching of writing.

This last point reminds us that we have it in our power to develop effective writing programs. To do so will require cooperation among teachers, researchers, publishers, and the government agencies which set educational policy. It will also require that we assign writing a high priority in the school curriculum.□

²The states, chosen for their geographic and economic diversity, were Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Florida, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Utah. The survey of legislative and judicial records was conducted in 1981.

³See, for instance, "The Improved Writing Skills Project." *A Profile of Basic Skills Writing Programs in the Northeast States* (Chelmsford, Mass.: NEREX, 1980).

⁴The search of the ERIC database first located all published articles with the descriptors "writing/expository writing/creative writing/writing skills/composition (literary)" and "elementary education/elementary school students" and "instruction/teaching methods/teaching techniques/teaching procedures." The final list was then obtained by excluding all articles dealing primarily with the teaching of poetry or the teaching of spelling, handwriting, or punctuation.

⁵For a description of some of the inservice resources developed by these projects, see Lange (1979), pp. 121-129.

⁶The regional exchanges have produced a number of publications on writing instruction. A list of these is available from the Northeast Regional Exchange (NEREX), 34 Littleton Road, Chelmsford, MA 01824.

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