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# What effect will talk partners have in a primary writer's workshop?

An Action Research Report

By Erin Jacobson

What effect will talk partners have in a primary writer's workshop?

Submitted on May 21, 2014  
In fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree  
St. Catherine University  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Abstract

The intent of the research was to determine the effect of talk partners on student achievement in the content area of writing. The research study took place in a public elementary third grade classroom which consisted of twenty students. The four sources of data collection used in this research included two writing samples, an observation form to document the amount and duration of turn and talks, a survey for students and field notes recorded by both the teacher and coach. The data showed an overall increase in student achievement from the baseline to the summative writing samples. The students reported that using a talk partner was helpful during the writing workshop. The results of this research indicate that offering opportunities for students to turn and talk in a consistent manner can benefit their ability to write proficiently.

Throughout the past few years as a teacher working in the role of an instructional coach, I have noticed a need to increase the frequency of opportunities that students are permitted to talk with each other in an academic format. Since instructional coaching can take on varied roles in the elementary classroom, I began to search for a teacher who was dissatisfied with the current amount of talk in the classroom and was curious how to include more time for structured academic conversations.

During my time as an instructional coach, I have also been provided with professional development on the topic of increasing student achievement in the area of writing instruction for elementary students. The professional development that I have received urges teachers to model writing, give time for students to write regularly and confer with writers as a way to differentiate the instruction. I have the privilege to focus in on specific elements of the art of teaching as an instructional coach and have observed children flourish as writers in classrooms that empower them to continuously improve. I have also observed students who seem stunted by the mere mention of writing and are left with few ideas of a topic and even fewer ideas of how to start. These are the children that are in need of a talk partner to help them create new meaning and engage in the internal process that follows conversations.

In my research project, I hoped to learn the effect of explicitly teaching and modeling the use of a talk partner while working collaboratively with a classroom teacher to increase the student achievement in the content area of writing. The addition of talk in the form of academic conversations, as an essential and possibly missing factor of the writer's workshop model excited me as I hoped to discover the impact of including talk on students' ability to write. Upon finding

a teacher who was dissatisfied with the current student achievement in the area of writing, my research took place in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade elementary classroom in the public school setting.

According to a study on content area conversation, when primary students are taught how to talk appropriately to one another in the school setting and given opportunities to practice this type of talk they are able to build their talk partner skills in small steps. This building of talk partner skills allows students to become more confident learners and build their “academic identity” (Fisher, Rothenberg & Frey, 2008). Steve Barkley agrees with the notion that talk is essential by saying that, “Paired talk in the primary classroom is a way for students to generate ideas, voice their understanding, and develop their thinking, speaking, listening, and collaborative skills” (2013, p. 2). Taberski notes that, “we as teachers must learn to talk less in an effort to provide more time for our students to talk” and continues to urge that when talk is promoted, “students are taught to participate in meaningful conversations with their classmates” (2011, p.11 ).

However, through my research, I found that “to fully learn new concepts, the concept must be processed both externally as well as internally. The external processing is focused on when the teacher is teaching a skill or introducing a topic through the use of a book. The internal processing takes place afterwards through the use of conversations; this is when the student is able to create new meaning” (Jensen, 1998, p. 41). Furthermore, Caulkins & Ehrenworth (2012) agree that structuring the writer’s workshop with multiple opportunities to talk allows students to become clearer in their own thinking as well as stretch the learning of others. Graves said, “Writing might be magical but it’s not magic. It’s a process, a rational series

of decisions and steps that every writer makes and takes, no matter what the length, the deadline, even the genre.” (1983, p. 14)

Past research has found that we lose an important opportunity for the brain to make meaning when we emphasize one sided lecture methods; meaning is created through socialization which promotes the role of student-to-student discussions (Jensen, 1998, p.93). Further research points out that the inclusion of talk helps to promote meaningful feedback as well as a way to generate ideas. (Graham, 2008, p.4) When children are asked to write, they must be offered a model of the thinking that is necessary when deciding what to write, as well as a model of the writing itself. I found that a writing lesson plan which is structured to include modeled writing, time to write and time to confer with writers must also offer opportunities for writers to talk in order to internalize the process and create meaning.

In a coaching relationship it is important to allow ourselves to become comfortable with discomfort (Barkley, 2011) while promoting reflection among teachers. The reflections offered by the teachers as to how they could effectively increase the opportunities for students to talk, especially during the writer’s workshop, and the conclusions from the research discussed led me to the question: What effect will talk partners have in a primary writer’s workshop?

In the next section I will be describing my research process. The description of my research process will include the details of the four data collection sources that I used to draw conclusions about the implementation of talk partners. I will also include a detailed report of how the classroom teacher and I structured our coaching as well as the specifics about how talk partners were explicitly taught and modeled.

## Description of the Research Project

I chose to teach in a third grade classroom with the consent of the classroom teacher during a three week period of time beginning on February 3, 2014 and concluding on February 21, 2014. My data collection procedures included: (1) two student writing samples that will be used to compare student achievement before and after the change in instruction, (2) tally sheets documenting observations during the lessons, (3) a survey for students, and (4) field notes taken by both the coach and classroom teacher. Prior to the study students were given a writing prompt and were asked to write a persuasive paragraph in response.

The student writing samples were used as a baseline and summative assessment. The baseline assessment was given prior to the beginning of the study. Both of the writing samples were scored using a standards based writing rubric that was created to align with the Common Core State Standards (see Appendix A). The samples were scored on a scale that ranged from 1.0– 4.0 and were categorized into four areas: focus on topic, support/details, word choice and conclusion. The scoring of the writing samples was done collaboratively by the classroom teacher and me to increase the validity of the scores.

The tally sheets were used as a method to record the number of opportunities students were offered to turn and talk as well as the amount of time spent talking (see Appendix B). The observation data helped to document the change in the instruction and also offered a place for notes to be documented. This captured specific student and teacher language that occurred during these planned and purposeful pauses in teacher instruction where students became their own instructors.

The student surveys were a form of inquiry data that allowed students an occasion to report their feelings about being allowed to talk to a partner during their writing time (see Appendix C). Students were asked four questions: Is it important to talk with a partner when you are learning? How should a teacher assign talk partners? What is helpful about having an assigned talk partner? What subject areas are the most important to be able to talk with a partner? All of the students participated in the anonymous surveys and were assured that they could be honest about their feelings in regards to working with a talk partner during the writer's workshop.

The field notes were used for the teacher and I to document specific student language that occurred during turn and talk as well as the teacher language that occurred to signal and terminate a turn and talk opportunity (see Appendix D). The notes continued as the students went back to write independently but were still allowed to use their talk partner as a support. These notes were helpful to gauge the effect of discussion on student writing.

My research project was conducted in a public third grade general classroom setting. The classroom consisted of twenty eight and nine year old students with eleven boys and nine girls. The classroom is located in a suburban area of the United States. One student currently receives a reading intervention and one student receives a math intervention. One student qualified for learning disability services in the area of writing. The students include eighteen Caucasians, one Hispanic and one Native American.

The teacher and I used the gradual release model of coaching as teachers often will need to see a recommended change demonstrated. This three step model begins with the coach modeling the desired change in instruction while the teacher observes. Next, the teacher and the

coach instruct together while the coach offers support and guidance. During the final step of this model, the coach will observe the teacher implementing the desired change in instruction. The gradual release model of coaching allows teachers to see how strategies may affect their own students and scaffolds the learning as they are observed and given feedback. We worked together for twelve sessions which were forty-five minutes in length. The first four sessions were modeled by me as the coach in the classroom. I planned the lessons with the teacher and also asked the teacher to track the opportunities for talk on the observation form as well as record student language in the field notes journal. During the second week we co-taught the four writing sessions and shared the role of documenting. Co-teaching during the second week allowed the teacher to become more comfortable with the change in instruction style. The final week was spent observing the classroom teacher teach writer's workshop with full implementation of turn and talk partnerships. All of the twelve writing sessions used the workshop model of a mini-lesson, time for writing/conferring and time for sharing student work.

During all of the twelve sessions academic conversations were explicitly modeled and taught by a teacher. The explicit instruction that occurred in regards to the detailed expectations of talk partners included a list of agreed upon norms. The agreed upon talk partner norms included: I can look at my partner when they are talking, I can think about what my partner is saying and respond, and I can stay focused on the question/task. These norms were reviewed at the beginning of each mini lesson.

After the twelve writing sessions were completed the students were given one writing prompt. The protocol of this writing assessment was identical to the protocol used in the

baseline writing assessment. Students were given two sessions to complete their writing independently; each session was thirty minutes in length. The writing samples were again scored collaboratively by the classroom teacher and myself and entered into the teacher's grading database. The writing scores of each student were analyzed in terms of growth from the baseline data to the summative data. These scores were then analyzed to the baseline and summative writing scores that were given in the narrative writing genre.

In the next section, I will analyze the data sources that have been outlined. I will look closely at the baseline and summative writing scores to determine the amount of student growth achieved as a result of the implementation of talk partners during the writing workshop.

#### Analysis of Data

The baseline writing score was the first data collected. The individual writing samples were analyzed in collaboration with the classroom teacher. The students were provided with a prompt of "What is your favorite school lunch?" Students were provided time to write during two sessions. The data includes four categories as defined by the standards based rubric; these categories include: introduction, supporting details, word choice and conclusion. A score ranging from 1.0 to 4.0 was given to each student in each of the four categories. The data shows that over half of the students are able to write an introduction and include supporting details at a level two proficiency. Less than 25 % of the students are able to write a proficient conclusion, while only two students are able to use temporal words, as was scored in the word choice section of the rubric. Overall, every student in the classroom has room for improvement in all four of the scored areas of writing. The results of the baseline assessment as measured by the standard based rubric are in Figure 1.

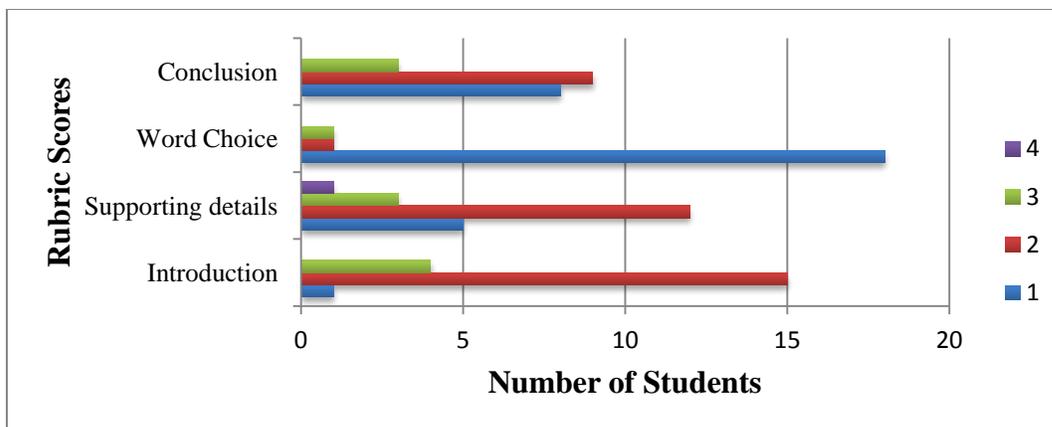


Figure1. Formative baseline assessment scores for opinion writing prompt.

The next data source, turn and talk observation form, recorded the number of times students were allowed to turn and talk in each of the twelve sessions. The data collected from the observation form showed that during eight of the twelve sessions, turn and talk was used three times. Students were asked to turn and talk a minimum of two times and a maximum of five times per writing session. The number of times students were prompted to turn and talk was recorded only during the mini lesson portion of the session. Data was not collected in regards to how often students chose to talk with their writing partner after the mini lesson. The data indicates that using turns and talks a minimum of two times and a maximum of five times in a mini lesson session is an adequate amount of time to provide for academic conversation. The results of number of times students were directed to turn and talk during the mini lesson are depicted in Figure 2.

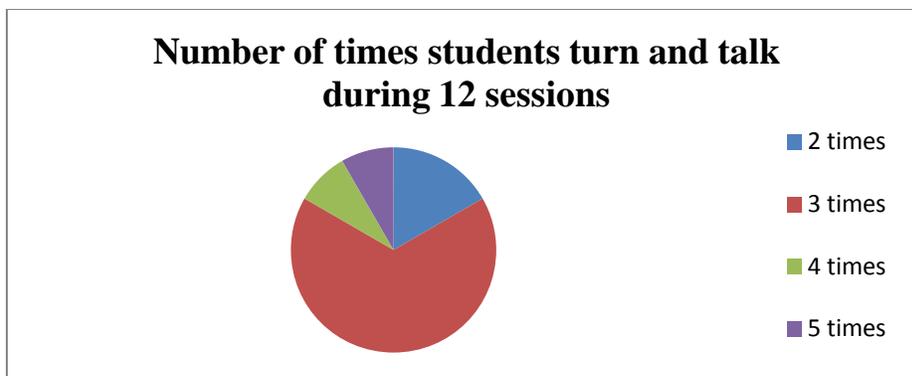


Figure 2. Number of times students turn and talk.

The duration of each turn and talk was measured to determine the total amount of time students engaged in academic conversation during the course of a mini-lesson. The teacher recorded the data on the turn and talk observation form. The data indicated that most often the time spent in a turn and talk between talk partners, was less than thirty seconds. However, turn and talk sessions also stretched up to a minute long, depending on the teacher's directions. It is important to notice that students were not asked to talk for over a minute and more than half of the turn and talks were over thirty seconds. The results are shown in Figure 3.

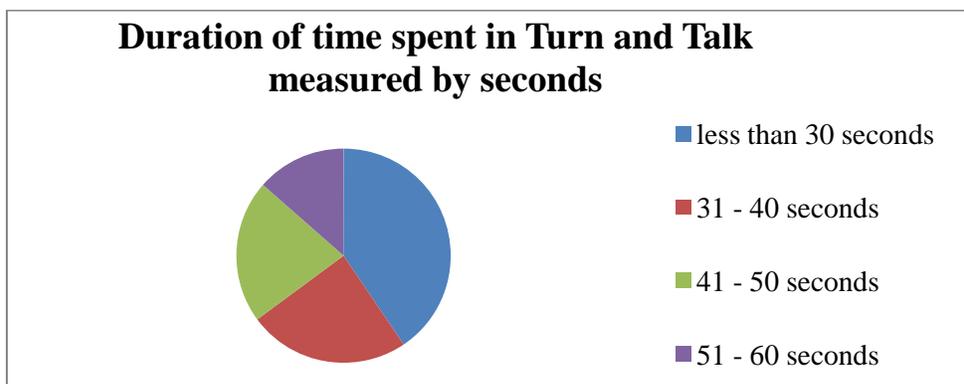


Figure 3. Duration of time spent in turn and talks.

The number of students engaged in conversation with their partner during the turn and talk portions of the mini lesson was also measured through the use of the turn and talk observation form. Recording data in regards to the number of students participating during turn and talk is important to document, in order to understand if the explicit instruction in regards to turn and talk was successful. The data collected shows that students were offered a total of thirty-eight opportunities to turn and talk over the course of the twelve sessions. Twenty four of the turn and talk occasions engaged 100% of the students. Six of the occasions engaged 90-99% of the students, five occasions engaged 80-89% and three occasions engaged 70-79% of the students. This data shows that there was never less than 70% of the students engaging in conversations with their partner during turn and talk. The results are shown in Figure 4.

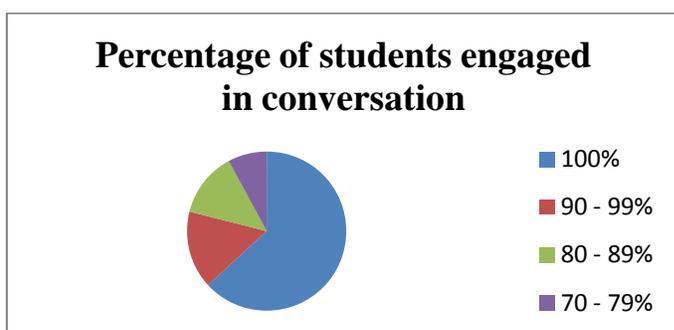


Figure 4. Percentage of students engaged in conversation with their talk partner during turn and talk.

A student survey was given on the third week of the research project. During this survey students responded to four questions through a written response. In response to the first question, Is it important to talk with a partner when you are learning? – I found that 74% of the students believe that it is important to talk with a partner when learning. The remaining 26% of the responses were unsure and believe that they “are able to learn just fine without talking to

someone in class” or they may want to “focus on thinking about my own ideas.” When asked to explain their response students commented that, “I like to think aloud” and “get good ideas from my partner.” One student responded that, “a thinking partner slows her down” and alluded to the necessity of taking great care when deciding who would be partners as she stated “we have different ideas and I don’t want my partner to write what I am writing.”

Students gave a variety of responses to the question – “How should a teacher assign talk partners?” The factors that students believe a teacher should take into account when assigning a talk partner include willingness to talk, listen and get along. However, the majority of the students agreed that having the teacher draw names randomly to create partners would be a fair way to assign talk partners. Many of the students stated that is helpful when you “like the same things” as your thinking partner. However, another student stated that she thinks it works best, “when you are opposite, because then you think differently.”

When asked to respond to a time when having a talk partner was helpful in a descriptive format, students offered brief comments. Six students wrote about a time when their partner gave them an idea and felt that it was helpful when they were stuck or trying to figure something out. Four students said that a talk partner was helpful when it was time to edit and revise their writing. One comment suggested that it was helpful by saying, “when I just don’t want to read it again, my partner reads it for me and helps me find my mistakes.” Thirteen of the students mentioned that it was, “more fun” to work with someone and “be able to talk with someone instead of just listening to the teacher.”

The final question on the student survey asked, “What subject areas are the most important to be able to talk with a partner?” Out of the twenty students who participated in the survey, sixteen

of the students agree that it is most important to have a talk partner during the writing workshop. Four of the students stated that a talk partner is important to have in all subject areas. One student does not agree stating, "Having a talk partner is not important." When asked to explain why it was important, a student commented that "we can think together and then we come up with better ideas."

The field notes were used by me as well as the classroom teacher. Two interesting trends emerged while looking over the comments on this observation form. In the area of teacher language, the talk that was used to signal turn and talk remained consistent. A question was asked by the teacher and the teacher asked the students to "turn and talk with your partner." When the teacher felt it was time to bring the students back together another phrase was used consistently, "1, 2, 3 eyes on me" and the students quickly responded by saying, "1, 2 eyes on you." These two patterns in the language of the teacher helped to provide a consistent and predictable format to both signal and terminate the turn and talk sessions.

After the twelve sessions were complete the teacher and I collaboratively scored the student writing. We used the same standards based rubric as was used for the baseline writing assessment. The student writing scores improved overall in the students' ability to write an introduction include supporting facts and a conclusion. The area where students did not show growth was their ability to use temporal words which is measured within the word choice of the rubric. The use of temporal words was not explicitly taught during the twelve writing sessions. The baseline assessment resulted in eleven scores of a three on one of the four components that were measured. The summative data showed that thirty three scores of three were awarded to students. The results are shown in Figure 5 and 6.

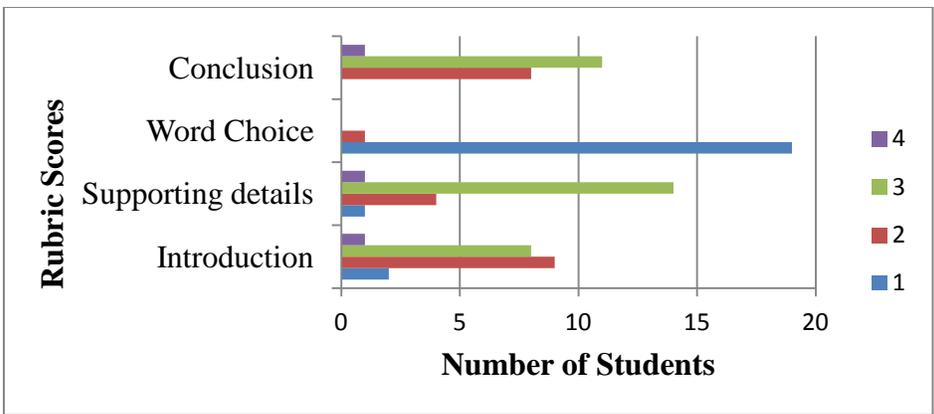


Figure 5. Summative assessment scores for opinion writing prompt.

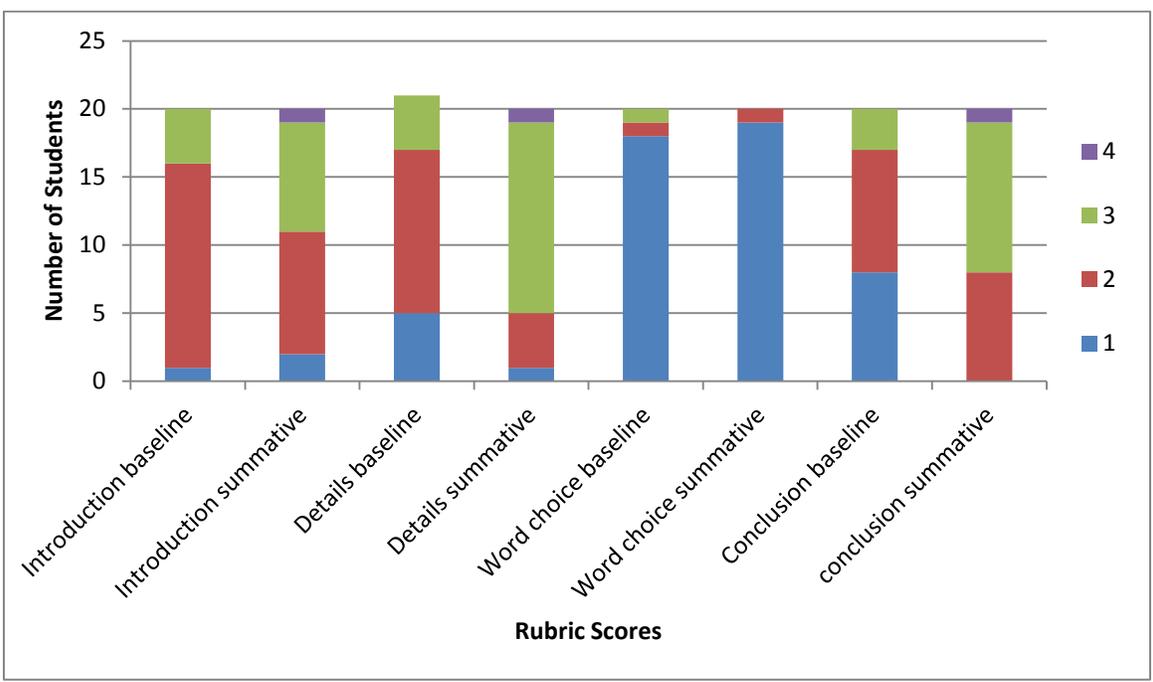


Figure 6. Comparison of the baseline and summative assessment scores for opinion writing.

In conclusion, the data that I have presented combined with the observations that I have made as a coach who has observed writing instruction in many classrooms, leads me to believe that the students benefitted from being explicitly taught how to talk with a partner, assigned a talk partner and offered opportunities to turn and talk during the mini lesson portion of the writing workshop.

The students' willingness to work collaboratively and support each other throughout the entire writing process was exciting to witness. The results from this research support the quote that "Reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (Britton, 1983, p.11).

In the next section, I will outline my response to the results of the action research. I will clearly define the necessary action that will result, including the possibilities for future professional development. I will also address questions that arose while gathering and analyzing the data, these questions will be a source of future action research projects.

### Action Plan

As a coach, working collaboratively with teachers I noticed that teachers were bothered by the lack of achievement in some areas of writing, especially the students' ability to create a topic for their writing. I also noticed that students were given little time to talk during writing workshop and wondered if talking was a necessary learning behavior for student achievement. My research demonstrated an improvement in student achievement as measured by the standards based writing rubric when talk partners were used during the writing workshop. The impact that this research could have on teaching practice in the schools for which I am the Instructional Coach has an exciting amount of potential. The student learning that could result in response to a change in teaching practice also has an exciting amount of potential for growth.

The power of instructional coaching lies in my ability to address the questions that teacher's present, research a possible answer, implement action research by trying the possible answer out in the classroom setting and sharing the results. This ongoing process of defining a question, researching, implementing a change and revising current teaching practice in response to the findings is the definition of a professional. As a professional, I am now responsible for

sharing the results, offering a framework for implementing talk partners, modeling a structure for utilizing talk partners and continuing to research how talk partners could affect learning in other content areas. I have discussed the results of the research as well as the professional literature that supports an increase of talk in classrooms with my school principals. Both principals are instructional leaders and agree that it is worth our time to increase an awareness of the benefits of talk partners amongst teachers through the use of professional development opportunities. The principals and I have also agreed to place an emphasis on talk as a desired student learning behavior during classroom observations and modeled lessons.

Overall, the children enjoyed talking with a partner. The positive feedback offered by students has already created a learning environment that is rich with academic conversation and benefitting from an increase in collaborative learning due to a focus on the need for talk partners. Students have gained a sense of what it takes to engage in an academic conversation in order to become a more successful student. This student learning will benefit these students for years to come as they continue to increase their ability to both receive and give feedback to their peers.

The increase in student achievement in the area of writing combined with the positive results from the student survey create both a sense of urgency to continue offering students opportunities to talk as well as a desire to know what other content areas can benefit from talk partners. I would like to conduct further action research to learn about the effect of talk in other content areas. The questions that I would like to explore include:

1. What effect does talk have on student learning during the math workshop? Can students benefit from talking about mathematical concepts prior to engaging in individual practice?

2. What is the most effective method for assigning talk partners? Should students be allowed to provide their input? Should the teacher take into account the students current level of achievement when pairing talk partners?
3. Can the use of turn and talk with talk partners replace the teaching practice of asking students to raise their hands?

I am prepared to continue learning about the power of talk in the classroom. I am hopeful that a decrease of teacher talk and an increase of students' time spent talking continues to equate to an increased level of student achievement. In conclusion, I will continue to remind myself that it is my job to prepare and empower my students for their future challenges and that through talk, "young children learn that language is power and that they can use words to express their needs, wants and desires." (Fisher, Rothenberg & Frey, 2008, p. 8).

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Appendix A  
Standards Based Opinion Writing Rubric

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Opinion Date \_\_\_\_\_

**3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Opinion Writing Rubric**

Focus on Topic 3.W.1.a				
	4	3	2	1
<b>O</b> pinion	<input type="checkbox"/> Focuses the reader with a strong introduction. <input type="checkbox"/> States a clear opinion on the topic using an interesting hook. <input type="checkbox"/> Organizational structure groups related ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/> Focuses the reader by introducing a topic. <input type="checkbox"/> States an opinion on the topic. <input type="checkbox"/> Organizational structure that lists reasons. (e.g. bullets, numbers)	<input type="checkbox"/> Minimal introduction to a topic. <input type="checkbox"/> Opinion of the topic is partially unclear. <input type="checkbox"/> Organizational structure is partially unclear.	<input type="checkbox"/> No introduction of a topic. <input type="checkbox"/> Opinion of the topic is unclear. <input type="checkbox"/> No organizations structure to list reasons.

Support/Details 3.W.1.b				
	4	3	2	1
<b>O</b> pinion	<input type="checkbox"/> Provide reasons that are supported by facts and details.	<input type="checkbox"/> Provides reasons that support the opinion	<input type="checkbox"/> Uses some reasons to support opinion.	<input type="checkbox"/> Uses no reason to support opinion

Word Choice 3.W.1.c				
	4	3	2	1
<b>O</b> pinion	<input type="checkbox"/> Link opinion and reasons using a variety of words and phrases (e.g., for instance, in order to, in addition).	<input type="checkbox"/> Link opinion and reasons using words and phrases. (e.g., because, therefore, since, for example)	<input type="checkbox"/> Link opinion and reasons using some words and phrases.	<input type="checkbox"/> No link of opinion or reasons using words and phrases.

Conclusion 3.W.1.d				
	4	3	2	1
<b>O</b> pinion	<input type="checkbox"/> Provides a strong concluding statement or section.	<input type="checkbox"/> Provides a concluding statement or section	<input type="checkbox"/> Weak concluding statement or section.	<input type="checkbox"/> No concluding statement or section.



Appendix C  
Student Survey

1. Is it important to talk with a partner when you are learning? Explain

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2. How should a teacher assign talk partners?

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3. Describe a time when having a talk partner was helpful.

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4. What subject areas are the most important to be able to talk with a partner? Explain

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Appendix D  
Field Notes – observation form

Student language	Number of pairs engaged in talk
Teacher language	
Talk used to signal turn and talk	Talk used to terminate turn and talk