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Does storytelling affect story writing in a Lower Elementary classroom?

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact an oral storytelling component had on students' story writing. The study took place over six weeks in an Elementary classroom at a small independent Montessori school. Eight Lower Elementary students (ages 6-9) listened to stories told by the teacher, or orally told ideas for their stories, prior to thirty minutes of story writing. Also, approximately halfway through the study, the students participated in a storytelling workshop conducted by a professional storyteller. Data sources included pre-intervention and weekly writing samples, engagement observations, a writing rubric to code the writing samples and a student writing attitude scale completed before and after the intervention. Over the course of the study, students' time engaged in the writing process and quality and length of their stories increased. Additionally, after the storytelling workshop, improvement in student writing increased at a faster rate than before the workshop. Further research could study if an oral storytelling workshop implemented earlier in the school year could have a greater impact over a greater length of time.

Keywords: storytelling, story writing, Montessori, elementary

Across the years of my Montessori Elementary teaching, the process of writing has always been an amorphous aspect of the language curriculum. Phonetic reading instruction, grammar, word study and sentence analysis, all rooted in thoughtfully developed Montessori manipulatives or “materials,” create a very clear pathway to mastery. Because no concrete materials addressing the process of story writing exist, teachers, myself included, are left searching for tools and ideas to enhance our training.

Bursting forth with their accounts of their day, and the moments that defined it, children are compelling storytellers. Story writing for a child should be second nature, stemming from their personal experiences and the desire to communicate them. However, at times the assignment to craft written stories leaves students feeling ambivalent about writing and doubting that they have something to express.

At our small independent Montessori school, the majority of younger students (6-9 years old) in our 6-12 Elementary classroom showed minimal enthusiasm for writing, evidenced by a lack of engagement and production. Children were permitted to generate illustrations before the text to let them have a visual prompt of their idea. This activity had a varying degree of success. Some students would spend extended periods of time constructing an elaborate drawing but lost interest in the process when attempting the written words. Students have also been allowed to collaborate with other children to tap into, as Dr. Montessori defined the ages of development from six to twelve years old, the Second Plane child’s tendency towards group work. This method produced a more stream-of-consciousness text and very few published stories. The use of student selected picture prompts have also been used but yielded very little in the way of descriptive writing or plot.

Cosmic Education, the part of the Montessori curriculum that includes history, geography, science, and biology, is based on several impressionistic lessons in story form. Our students remained riveted by the recounting of the coming of the universe, life on earth and humans, to name a few. The class showed such a strong interest in oral stories, they would give up socializing with their friends, begging me to tell them stories of my childhood during their lunchtime. They requested stories so often I made a tradition of telling a story every Friday while they silently ate, enamored by the recounting of my childhood. Also, Our Head of School dabbles in storytelling as a past time, and every so often came into the classroom and told a story to the students' great delight. I observed the students enthralled by being told stories, including the familiar ones that they requested time after time, and began to wonder how they could be so drawn in by listening to stories and be so lukewarm about creating their own on paper. I also began to wonder if I was missing some possible link between telling stories orally and story writing. Could it be that the physical act of telling a story could create a bridge between the idea and the ability to map it out on the paper?

My review of the literature of storytelling in the Elementary classroom shaped the focus of my intervention. Academic writings affirmed storytelling is necessary as a fundamental aspect of communicating who we are as individuals, in addition to passing down collective cultural knowledge. Previous research examined storytelling with both the teacher as the storyteller, as well as the student. Prior literature also supported the relationship between storytelling and language and literacy skills. This study was designed to incorporate both the teacher and student in oral storytelling in an effort to impact students' story writing.

Literature Review

Ursula Le Guin (1979) proclaimed, “There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories” (p. 22). Storytelling is the oldest form of communication. Segments of humanity may lack literacy and writing, but the oral transfer of knowledge and stories through storytelling transcends socioeconomic, racial and hierarchical power structures. It is universal and timeless. It is in this context that it seems that storytelling in a classroom could be a significant tool in teaching language and writing skills. Through this review of the literature, it will also become apparent why stories matter, their various uses in the classroom, and the impact they can have on story and journal writing.

Why We Tell Stories

For thousands of years, information, history and cultural context have been passed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition. From the Torah of the Jews to the Gospels of the Christian tradition, to the creation stories of native tribes, storytelling has explained, imparted and shared collective knowledge. Cultures have preserved their history, wisdom, and cultural norms through storytelling (Koki, 1998).

Stories also communicate a sense of self by reaffirming our personal histories, as well as our understanding of the world (King, 2007). Paley (1990) attests children who tell and act out stories are offering a glimpse into their realities even though they tell the story in a fantastical way. Through the process of recording the stories that children tell to their class, the receiver is granted access to the understanding of the individual, regardless of the fantastical nature of the characters and setting (p. 19).

Another aspect of storytelling as an effective teaching tool is its ability to promote collaboration and imagination. Creating stories through storytelling and sharing them with others,

establishes a common bond, and nurtures collaboration (King, 2007, Koki, 1998). Also, the relationship between teacher and student is strengthened and enhanced when dialogue around personal experiences, expressed through storytelling, are shared (Koki, 1998).

The effects of storytelling can also impact the development of language and literacy. Horn (2005) attests to the important role oral language plays in the acquiring of writing skills. Tracing the history of language through human evolution she points out that oral language came first, then the expression of language in drawings, and written language came last. Children that can talk through a story before beginning the written process frequently craft a stronger written product. Horn (2005) also presents that in younger students, through verbally telling their stories, children begin to learn how to construct stories even before having the skills to write it.

Looking at storytelling through a Montessori lens, Dorer (2016) states the Montessori Elementary teacher is called to be a storyteller to deliver the curriculum of the student in the 6-12 year age range. The story-centered lessons are meant to spark the imagination at this age, helping the children to revel in the wonderment of their universe. These impressionistic stories bring the immense world within the confines of the classroom (p. 16). So too these story-filled lessons create a mutual reference as students discuss and order the vastness of the cosmos. Stone (2009) relates that children learn about subjects that are complex and rich, regardless of their decoding and reading comprehension skills.

Storytelling in the Classroom

Through investigating the literature, two major themes emerged regarding storytelling in the classroom: (1) Teacher as the storyteller and (2) student as the storyteller. These two components were also inextricably entwined and considered equally important to a successful classroom storytelling culture.

One aspect of the teacher as storyteller found in the literature was the attention to the training of teachers to cultivate storytelling skills. This was one focus of a Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) study at an elementary school in Melbourne, Australia (Faulkner et al., 2014). During a six-week period, teachers worked with a professional storyteller to inform their storytelling practice, focusing on the role of storyteller and their relationship to the listeners. Also included in their training was the use of gestures, props, and voice. One outcome was a greater confidence gained by teachers in their role as a storyteller as they used the newly honed skills to involve students in oral story creation. Outcomes observed by the teachers in their classrooms included increased engagement of their students in their own oral storytelling and an awareness of story sequencing and other literacy skills.

Another consideration for teachers who include storytelling in their curriculum is the choosing of stories. Personal narratives, folktales, and beloved children's books are all considered valuable genres to share with students (Hamilton & Weiss, p. 20-21). In a Montessori Elementary classroom, the curriculum itself contains stories to be told by the teacher. These five lessons, *The Story of the Universe*, *The Coming of Life*, *The Coming of Humans*, *The Story of Language*, and *The Story of Mathematics* are the backbone of the Elementary curriculum (Dorer 2016, p. 63-64).

The literature also stresses the second theme, student as the storyteller. Children are natural storytellers and partake in it every day through their retelling of a particular event or their imaginative play (Mallan, 1992, p. 9; Paley, 1990, p. 4).

A variety of student storytelling practices were described. Bustamante (2002) told of how young children dictated stories while teachers wrote them down. Then the students would gather

to hear the stories created by a few students that day. The students then had the opportunity to dramatize their story for the class.

Horn (2005) described another student's experience of orally telling a personal story of their choosing. The teacher offered kindergarten students the opportunity to present a spontaneous story. They guided them by asking clarifying questions and helped them to rework and order it orally before the rest of the group. These activities were pre-cursors to recording stories with paper and pencil.

Another way of the student as the storyteller is collaborative storytelling. Houston, Goolrick, & Tate (1991) describe a model of the class creating a communal story about an occurrence all students shared. The teacher helps them to create a "semantic map" to organize the students' recollections, and then they order the events. The students go on to guide the teacher as they serve as scribe to the collective story.

The Storytelling/Story Writing Link

The literature shows that the use of storytelling in the classroom can be a key component in language and literacy skills. Peck (1989) points out that when the teacher tells stories, children gain vital listening skills, and, when the children are the storytellers, the opportunity to develop the means of language expression is present. Students are also engaged in story comprehension as they listen and respond to the various elements of the story.

Miller and Pennycuff (2008) state that storytelling is a means for eventually documenting a story. The article goes on to support the practices of vocabulary development and defining audience through the oral practice of story writing. In addition, orally telling a story can impact the ability to organize their stories.

A study done by Agosto (2016) was designed to research presumed benefits of storytelling on literacy skills. The researcher analyzed the thank you cards of a second-grade class after she told two stories to them. Four components of literacy, visualization, cognitive engagement, critical thinking, and story sequencing, were present in their responses. Unfortunately, the research did not indicate any previous baseline data for comparison. The article goes on to suggest that a variety of post-story telling activities, such as making connections to the actual books, reenactments, response writing, etc., enhanced the literacy benefits of storytelling.

Another study conducted by Campbell & Hlusek (2009) observed that many times the students who lack strong writing skills are strong storytellers. They crafted a Writers' Workshop (Calkins, 2003) that included the telling of the story through rehearsing it orally just before students were dismissed to write independently. After three eight-day segments, students were writing longer narratives and began to apply more vocabulary and story elements.

More evidence of storytelling impacting students' writing came from a study by Cody and Wagner (2008). By adding a component of oral storytelling to Writers' Workshop (Calkins, 2003), within two weeks, the students' attitudes towards writing improved. They decided to increase the number of weeks and extend the study. However, their research showed that there could be fatigue of the intervention over an extended period. Recommendations were made to keep rotating possible writing support techniques to maintain interest.

Storytelling is a significant and timeless tool in human communication. It is essential to who we are and how we share that information with others. The Committee on Storytelling, sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English, (1992) states, "students who search

their memories for details about an event as they are telling it orally will later find those details easier to capture in writing.”

This study, taking into consideration prior studies on storytelling in the Elementary classroom, looks to answer the question: Will storytelling be effective in helping Lower Elementary students to be more engaged in story writing and the writing process?”

Methodology

The study, conducted over a six-week period starting early January and continuing into mid-February, used four different tools to gather data. The tools (see attached Appendices), a Student Writing Rubric, a Student Attitude Scale, Student Engagement Observation and Student Writing Assessment, were designed to gauge students’ understanding of written story structure, engagement and attitudes regarding story writing before, during and after the study.

Collected baseline data, in the form of student pre-intervention writing samples, were coded using a rubric (Appendix A) to compile and code the data. These stories from story writing assignments were evaluated for evidence of story structure, vocabulary and sentence structure. The rubric included criteria to assess the level of character development, setting, problem/conflict, plot and conclusion present in each story, as well as the degree of complexity in vocabulary and sentence structure.

The students completed a Student Attitude Scale before the start of the study (Appendix B). The baseline data recorded indicated the students’ attitudes and confidence levels concerning story writing. The form, using a five point Likert scale, addressed questions about the individual’s desire, the length of time and their successes and challenges with writing. Additionally, a Student Engagement Observation form was used to document students’ active engagement in the story writing process. (Appendix C). The form tracked the students’

participation in writing stories over the course of thirty minutes and recorded whether they were “not writing,” “writing collaboratively” or “writing individually.” Two observations of the thirty minute writing time were conducted prior to the intervention.

I initially planned to track fifteen Lower Elementary (6-9) students for the study, but due to a variety of issues, I reduced the group to eight students. It was necessary to omit some participants because of scheduling conflicts that made them unavailable at the time the story writing took place. Another student was excluded from the study as he left regularly for therapeutic services and would not regularly be present. I designed the intervention to include a brief oral storytelling time previous to the assigned time for story writing. Each week the students were to listen as I told a story, approximately 3-5 minutes in length, before they wrote for thirty minutes. I told the students stories in a variety of styles including the history behind Rev. Martin Luther Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, a tale of our class being stranded on a deserted island and several personal narratives. When the students dispersed to write, I recorded their engagement on the observation form.

Additionally, the students were divided into two groups and took turns dramatizing and orally telling a story idea of their own before writing it. Participants extemporaneously told their fledgling stories to those gathered and garnered feedback about their presentation from the other group members. Comments offered included thoughts about the storyteller’s degree of enthusiasm, enunciation, story development and eye contact, as well as encouragement and praise.

Also as part of the storytelling component, I arranged for a professional storyteller to visit and conduct an hour-long storytelling workshop. He told the entire Lower Elementary class a variety of stories and discussed with them the process of telling an engaging story, with an

emphasis on story structure. He included in this dialogue story elements such as characters, setting and plot development (beginning, middle and end). During the workshop, students took turns reading portions of picture books to the group, experimenting with a wide variety of accents and voices.

Throughout the six-week period, I continued to observe and record how engaged students were during the thirty-minute writing period following storytelling. Weekly I asked the students to choose a story they had written and fill out a Student Writing Assessment Form evaluating their work (Appendix D). Students reflected on their work and completed the assessment using their understanding of story structure as applied to their writing. The plan for the study was to engage the students in the storytelling/writing process with four, thirty-minute sessions per week. It became apparent within the first couple of weeks that the planned schedule was not viable. Student absences due to illness, lost curriculum time because of inclement weather and a whole-class play impacted the ability to keep to the original timetable. Instead, I was only able to implement the plan two or three times a week, for a total of sixteen sessions.

At the conclusion of the study, students completed another Student Writing Attitude Scale to gather data to see if their attitudes or opinions regarding story writing had changed over the six weeks.

Analysis of Data

Student writing samples were collected pre-intervention and coded using the Student Writing Rubric (Appendix A). The students' samples were evaluated using a three-point scale analyzing their use of character, setting, problem, plot, conclusion, vocabulary and sentence structure. The same rubric was used to code writing samples collected at the end of each week over the course of the six-week intervention. Each aspect of the criteria was given a score from

one to three, with total scores for each sample ranging from seven to twenty-one points. Overall, the total criteria score for each student over the seven assessments increased as presented in Figure 1. One student only submitted six samples because of absences due to prolonged illness, but still showed progress during the study. Although the individual scores do not indicate a consistent upward trend, the average of all the participants showed steady increases as depicted by the black line in. Overall the average criteria sum for the group increased from eleven points to nineteen points across the length of the study.

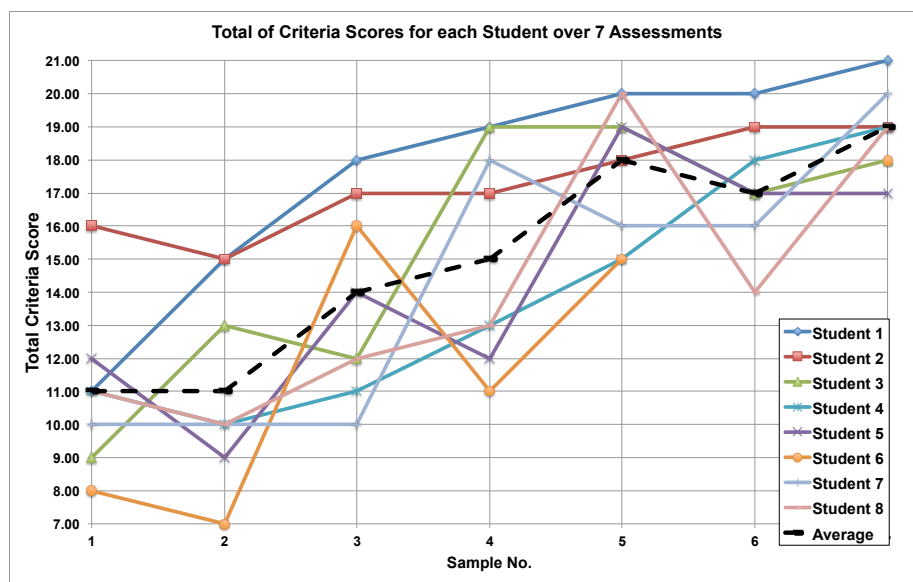


Figure 1. Total Criteria Scores.

In comparing the pre-intervention and final writing samples, each student's sum of criteria scores, as coded by the rubric, rose as presented in Figure 2. The data shows that not only the average of the group, but each student individually as well, improved over the six-week intervention.

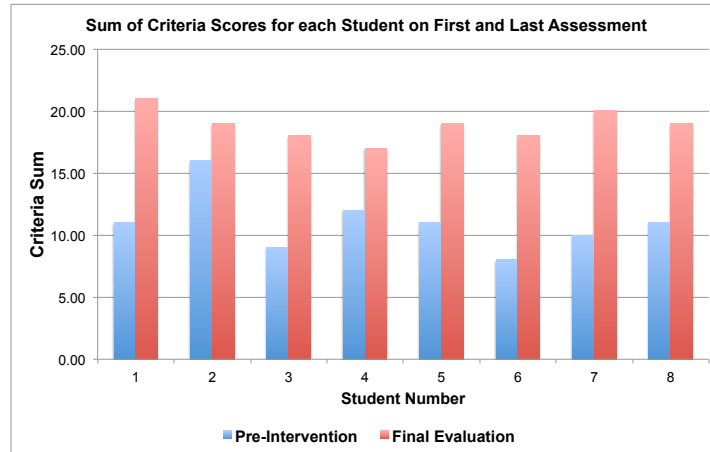


Figure 2. Criteria Sum for each Student.

The data also indicated that the average of all the student scores for each of the seven criteria rose as shown in Figure 3. The story element of including a problem (conflict) had the greatest increase, jumping from 1.25 points to 2.875 points.

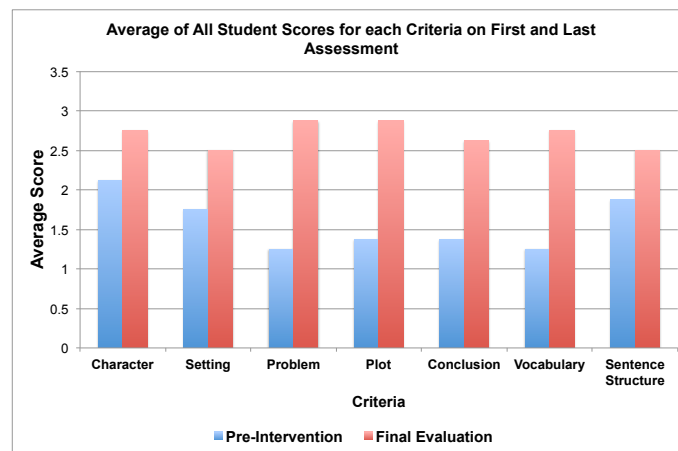


Figure 3: Scores by Criteria, Pre-Intervention and Final.

Additionally, I noted on the rubric the length of each written sample (e.g. half a page, one page, one-and-a-half pages, two pages, more than two pages). For each sample, I calculated the average page length of the eight students. Over the course of the seven samples, the length of the students' written work increased. The average page length grew from just over a half page to

more than two pages in length as shown in Figure 4. This increase represents a 300% improvement in the length of the students' stories.

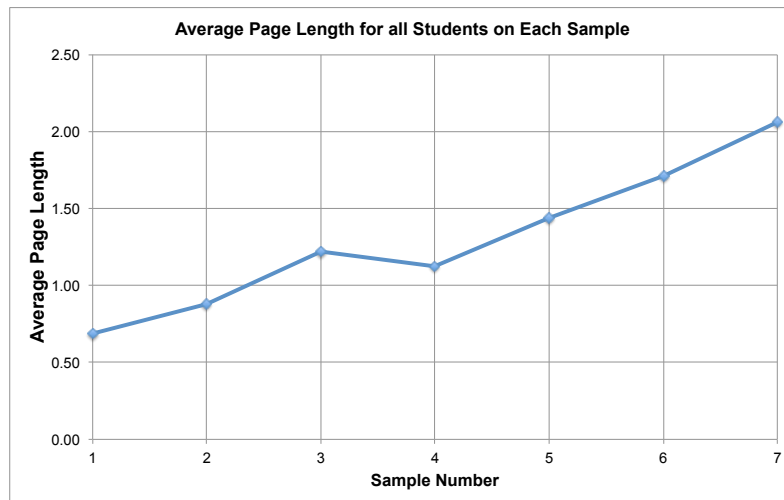


Figure 4. Average Page Length.

While the students wrote I observed the thirty-minute writing period and noted every five minutes on my Student Engagement Observation form (Appendix C) whether each student was “writing,” “not writing” or “writing collaboratively.” I completed two observations before the beginning of the study.

I plotted the average criteria sum (red) and average story length (green) in comparison to the writing sample collection dates (Fridays) while the average minutes worked (blue) are actual observation dates (note that the green line is plotted on the secondary axis (scale to the right)). Included is the date of the Storytelling Workshop as implemented by the professional storyteller (purple line) as shown in Figure 5.

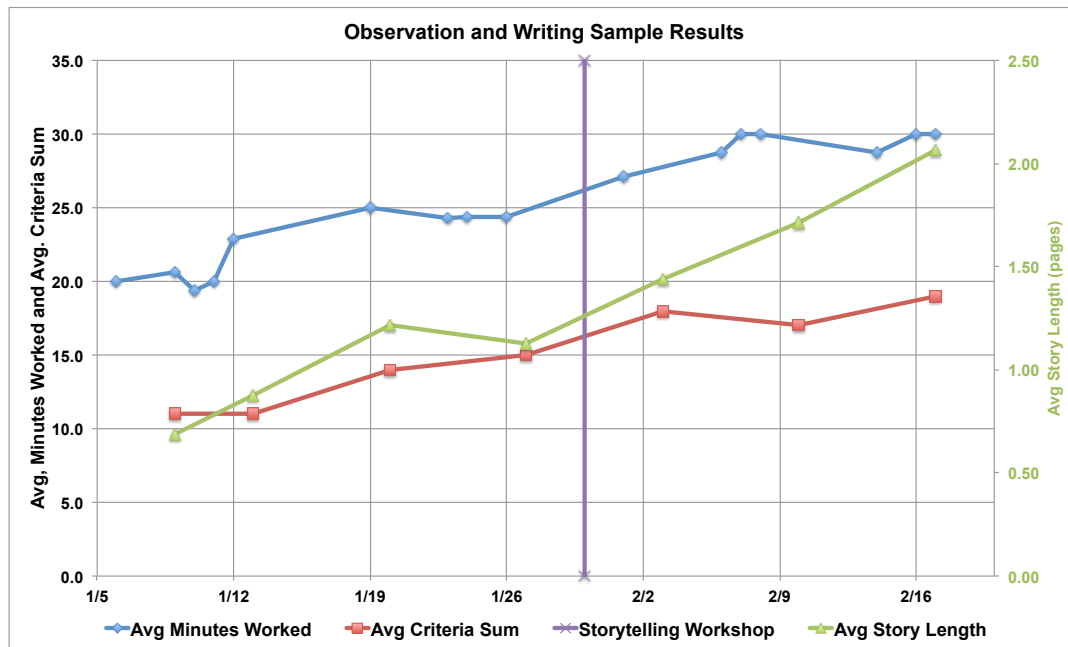


Figure 5. Observation and Writing Sample Results over the 6 weeks.

Comparing the data in relation to the storytelling workshop shows the greatest increase in story length and average minutes worked occurred after students participated in the workshop. Although the students' average minutes engaged in writing, as well as the length of their stories, were on an upward trend, the gains had begun to level off. While the data suggests that the storytelling event had an impact, it is not clear exactly what about the experience created the impact. It is possible that the emphasis on story elements and the dialogue about the arc of telling a good story led to the students being more aware while writing their stories. Another point to consider is whether or not the lack of writing engagement could have been due to the act of thinking about writing or what to write and not due to a lack of interest in writing itself.

An additional data collection tool used was a Student Writing Assessment (Appendix D). Students evaluated their writing samples by answering a series of nine questions. This data proved to be not very useful because the students' lack of awareness regarding their writing and the questions' open-ended nature made compiling the data difficult. However, two main themes

as shown in Figure 6, making their stories longer and adding more description and details, emerged when responding to the question, “What could you do to make your story better?” It is possible that they associated longer stories with more developed plots or more descriptive writing.

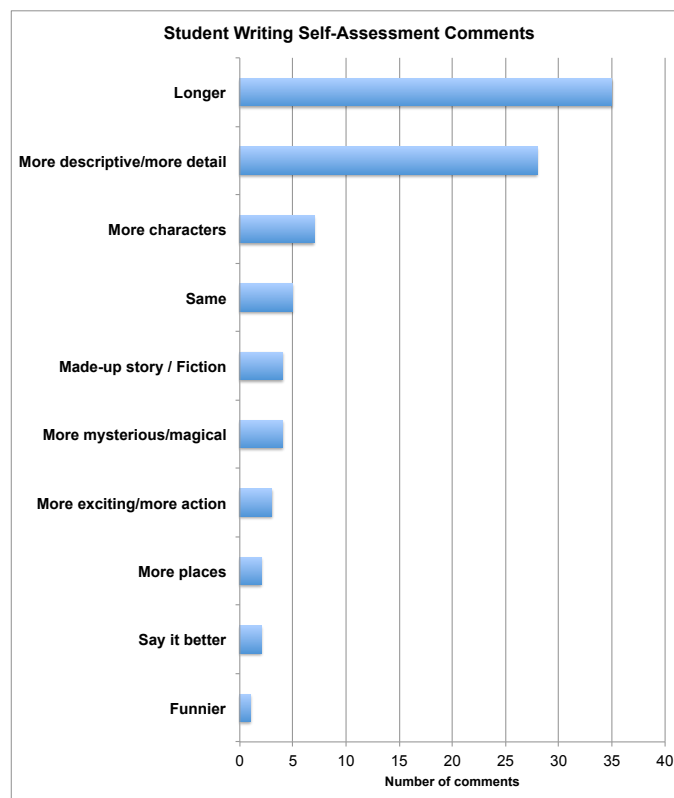


Figure 6: Student Writing Self-Assessment Comments.

Other data collected involved the students’ attitudes regarding writing. Students completed a Student Attitude Scale (Appendix B) indicating their feelings concerning writing before the study as well as post-intervention. The students responded to nine statements about whether or not they liked writing and story writing, whether or not they had trouble generating ideas to write about and what types of writing they enjoyed. This tool also proved to be awkward and confusing and not a reliable source of data overall. Statements #2 and #5 were of a negative nature (e.g. “Writing is boring.”) and had to be inverted for analysis so the 5 on the scale could

represent the maximum positive outcome. Also, during the completion of the post-intervention scale, I became aware that they had not necessarily understood the questions from the beginning. The results were not very conclusive (see Figure 7), but one data point that emerged in correlation to other findings was the responses to the straightforward statement #5, “I have trouble thinking about what to write.” The students’ responses went from an average of 2.9 points, out of a possible 5, to an average of 3.9 indicating a 35% increase. This change could be due to students knowing that they would tell stories to their peers before the writing period, thus helping to generate a story idea prior to their story writing activity.

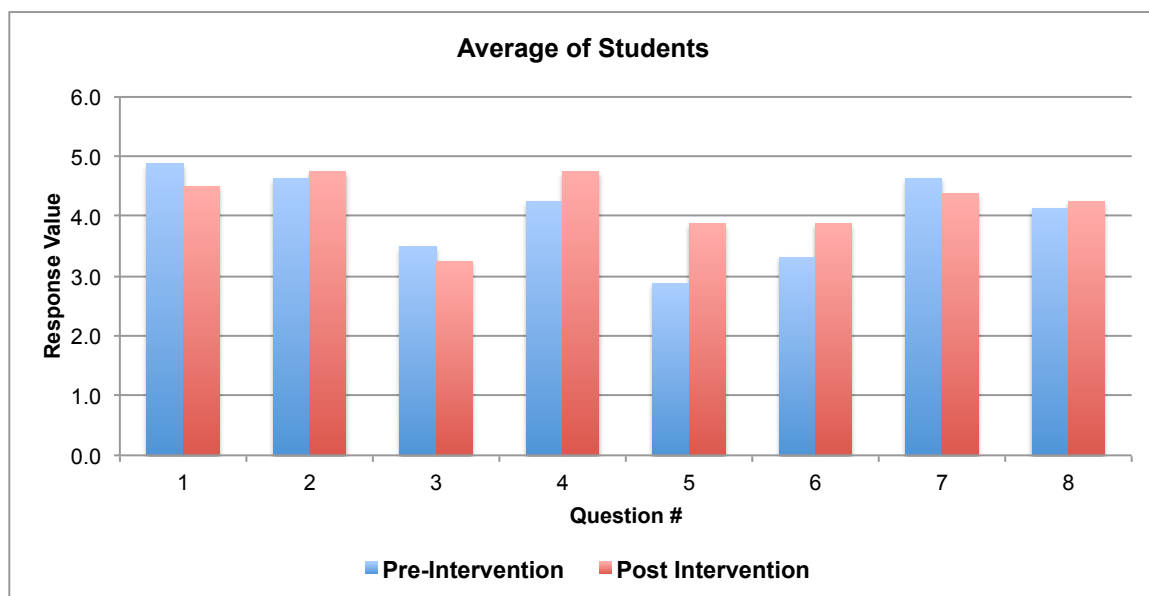


Figure 7: Pre and Post Intervention Attitude Scale, Average of All Student Responses Broken Down by Statement.

Conclusions from this study suggest that an oral storytelling component can positively affect students’ story writing. Greater awareness of the elements of a story, the engagement that comes from being involved in oral storytelling and the ability to generate story ideas prior to the writing process are all possible outcomes.

Action Plan

The goal of my action research was to investigate whether an oral storytelling component would affect students' story writing. I tried to discover if there could be some link between the quality and length of the participants' stories, their engagement in the process of writing, as well as their attitudes regarding their writing, and the act of storytelling. The analysis of the data shows it is possible for storytelling to have a positive effect on students' written stories and caused me to review a variety of my practices.

First, this study has caused me to consider the efficacy of particular data collecting tools that are too open-ended for students in a 6-9 classroom. For instance, asking students questions about their writing seems less viable as a data source than asking them to use a rubric to assess their writing pieces. This change in data tool would probably provide a more consistent data source. Likewise, creating an attitude scale with more consistently arranged statements, not requiring inverting the results for analysis, would provide a clearer source of data. Another adjustment to data collection tools would be to consider the Student Engagement Observation form. After studying the data, it became apparent that although it was a useful tool for tracking active writing engagement it did not offer any insight as to why they disengaged at times. For instance, could their lack of actively writing be because they were thinking about their writing?

Next, I believe I will include a storytelling workshop early in the school year as an annual event. The awareness of story structure and the more active engagement in writing better and more complex stories shown by the participants inspires me to provide the opportunity sooner in the year and on a regular basis. Additionally, by participating in a storytelling event, the benefits of the event informing their writing practice over a longer period is possible.

Finally, I believe that maintaining the act of children telling their story ideas before writing them is a practice that I will continue going forward. Not only did the students enjoy the experience, but it also gave them the opportunity to experiment with how to shape their story and the vocabulary they may use to convey their ideas.

This study indicates possibilities for future action research investigating the link between storytelling and story writing. A larger study that included more students, using some of them as a control group, could yield more comparative data. Another option for further research would be to conduct a longer study to examine how sustained the benefits of storytelling in conjunction with story writing are over time. Although this study consisted of a small number of participants, the data indicated that storytelling could have a positive effect on students' story writing. These effects include the quality and length of the students' stories and their engagement in the process of writing.

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Appendix A
Student Writing Rubric

Criteria	3 points	2 points	1 point
Character	Clearly describes what the character is thinking and feeling.	Describes what the character does but not what he/she is feeling.	Names the character but needs to describe what he/she is doing and feeling.
Setting	Clearly describes where the story takes place.	Names the place where the story is set but doesn't describe it.	Does not say where the story takes place.
Problem	Clearly describes the problem that the character has to overcome.	Mentions the problem but needs more details about why it's a problem.	Does not mention the problem.
Plot	Clearly organizes what happens as the character tries to deal with problem.	One or more details are missing from the plot.	Many details are missing from the plot.
Conclusion	Clearly describes how the problem is solved and it makes sense.	Says how the problem is solved but it doesn't make sense.	Doesn't say how the problem is solved.
Vocabulary	Vocabulary is complex and includes many descriptive words and phrases.	Vocabulary is sometimes complex and includes some descriptive words and phrases.	Vocabulary is not complex and includes very few descriptive words.
Sentence Structure	No sentence errors; variety in length and type.	Few sentence errors; some variety in length and type.	Several sentence errors; little variety in length and type.

Adapted from: http://halekulaweb20.weebly.com/uploads/3/8/2/3/3823096/screen_shot_2012-10-23_at_3.17.31_am.png

Appendix B
Student Writing Attitude Scale

Student Writing Attitude Scale

Respond to all of the statements on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (a whole lot).

1. I like writing stories.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Writing is boring.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I like to write in my spare time.

1 2 3 4 5

4. I like writing at school.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I have trouble thinking about what to write.

1 2 3 4 5

6. I like to share my writing with others.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I wish I had more time to write at school.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I think I am a good writer.

1 2 3 4 5

9. What kind of things do you write? (types, topics, or titles)
