

FOSTERING STUDENT AND TEACHER COMMUNICATION
THROUGH DIALOGUE JOURNALS

by

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ABSTRACT

This action research study examined the effects of dialogue journals on writing development and student-teacher relationships. The study was conducted by a teacher-researcher during her student teaching experience. Analysis of dialogue journals, student surveys, and parent surveys found that student interest expressed through dialogue journals could inform teaching practices and increase student engagement with future lessons. The study also found that the teacher and students' use of questioning enhanced relationship building and encouraged students to provide more detailed descriptions in their writing. In addition, data analysis revealed that students used the dialogue journals to state their needs both implicitly and explicitly. Finally, the study found that providing students and teachers with the opportunity to draw in their journals enhanced communicational efforts. Implications for future practice include a the multiple roles dialogue journals play in developing student centered curriculum, building relationships with students, and improving student writing though modeling.

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Grandma, "I love you more than all the stars in the sky!"

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CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act revision of 2001, also known as No Child Left Behind, required all students to meet a national standard in reading, writing, and mathematics by the 2013-2014 academic years. The aim of this reform was to create greater accountability for states and schools. Thus, it sends the message to teachers and administrators that meeting the yearly progress requirements is no longer optional. The reform movement granted several states waivers. These waivers eased the accountability requirements of a 100% passing rate by 2014. However, several states lost their waivers by not meeting other requirements identified by other criteria.

The pressure for progress has trickled down from the federal level to the State, counties, and school districts. Each district faced the harsh reality of school closures, displaced students, and other punitive actions if the schools failed to meet standards. This has created a significant amount of pressure for teachers to implement instruction that will support the aims of the national standards. To assist teachers in their pursuit of meeting the needs of the national standards, some school districts have adopted packaged curriculums. These packaged curriculums are designed with a play-by-play script which tells teachers exactly what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach it. For the schools in danger of facing punitive action, a scripted curriculum can seem quite appealing, especially one that claims to be aligned with the Common Core State

Standards. However, this type of curriculum can limit teacher autonomy.

Research has shown that teachers whom are provided with greater autonomy in their curriculum have shown decreased stress levels, increased levels of professionalism, and increased feelings of empowerment (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). This research shows that teacher autonomy matters. A prescribed curriculum is not able to attend to the needs of the diverse learners teachers face daily. These curricula also lack flexibility to address student's lived experiences.

There are teachers who believe in the sanctity of teaching the whole child, and that prescribed curriculums are not advantageous, despite their current appeal. I have observed several teachers as they struggled to deviate from the prescribed curricula. In an attempt to meet standards and avoid punitive action these teachers are conforming to scripted curricula that has a stronger focus on reading, writing, and mathematics.

The standardized test scores for Washington State schools indicate that a stronger focus in the above three academic areas may be necessary. According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Washington state report card, 72.5 percent of 4th grade students are meeting the standard in reading, 62.2 percent in writing, and 62.5 percent in math (OSPI report card, 2012-2013). These low scores support an argument for creating a stronger focus in these academic areas. However, this has minimized the focus on disciplines such as Social Studies, Science, and Art that are not tested. As an educator this makes one wonder about the possible scores of these disciplines if they were tested. Would they be about the same or lower?

Although curriculum plays an integral role in students' learning experiences, instructional practice is arguably more significant. Researchers and educational authors have shown that instructional practice, designed to meet the needs of individual students, can produce significant learning gains for students (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003; Van de Walle, 2014). This implies that teaching from a flexible curriculum that allows for a variety of instructional strategies rather than scripted strategies could assist students in achieving greater academic success. This stems from the arguments by Pearson and Moomaw (2005) that teachers whom are provided autonomy in their practice demonstrated a greater level of professionalism while becoming more invested in their teaching. There argument parallels the ideal that when students have choice in the curriculum they are more invested in learning (Milner 2010) and have greater levels of self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2000), which leads to increased test scores. The aim of this Action Research project was to look closer at how teachers can attend to students' needs in the classroom as the result of relationship building through writing in dialogue journals and the effects on the development of writing.

Effective Writing Instruction using Dialogue Journals

There are several ways teachers can provide students with a plethora of strategies for writing in various contexts. Teachers know their students needs and strengths, enabling them to differentiate instruction, increasing students' oral and written communication skills (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). Recent research into writing practices has indicated that dialogue journals offer an effective, individualized approach to helping students develop writing mastery. Barrs

(2000) found that writing partners could help students think about how their writing impacts the reader. In another study, Phelps (1992) found that students' writing became more meaningful and contained complex descriptions through journaling. These students' journaling increased their ability to compare and contrast information, in addition to writing with a purpose for a specific audience.

Dialogue journals can serve as a conduit for students to explore different topics through writing in order to increase their writing capabilities. Journals can also support students in their ability to communicate their understanding or interests to their teacher or peer. After reading the writer's journal entry, the respondent engages the writer in a back-and-forth dialogue by posing open-ended and clarifying questions to the writer. For the purposes of this study, I read my students' dialogue journals and engaged them in a conversation about their writing. I reviewed the current research on writing practices and dialogue journals that employed writing strategies used by teachers and students, the effects of journaling on students' self-efficacy, technology used during the writing process, journaling in education, and journaling as a means for communication, assessment, and support for the development of writing.

Background

Dialogue journals can serve several different purposes in the classroom. For this study, I was interested in how dialogue journals could enable teachers to attend to student needs in the classroom and foster student-teacher relationships through writing.

Writing Strategies

There are several writing strategies in which students can engage. A few popular modes are journaling, creating drawings, working collaboratively, and exploring other perspectives (Boaler, 1998; Graham & Harris, 1993; Reinersten & Wells, 1993; Rueda, 1992; Stillman, Anderson & Struthers, 2014). All of these strategies elicit critical thinking. Two important aspects of the writing process related to the above strategies are dialogue in the classroom (Borasi & Rose, 1989; Kamps, Abbott, Greenwood, Arreaga-Mayer, Wills, Longstaff, Culpepper, & Walton, 2007) and student choice (Campbell, 2012). The issue at hand is how to attend to both strategies in order to increase student achievement and writing ability.

Oral communication predated writing. It is important to remember that some students process their ideas more effectively through verbal conversation than through writing. Cremin & Myhill (2012) discuss how students traverse the editing process while listening to their ideas being read loud. Approaching the writing process in this way leads to a more internalized and individual editing practice, expanding the student's conception of writing beyond the scope of standardized spelling conventions, grammar, and punctuation. Students may be able to employ a critical lens to their use of syntax and discourse if they are given agency over their writing processes (MacArthur, 1998). A critical aspect of students' agency in writing is having the ability to choose their audience and discuss a variety of topics without fear of judgment. If these conditions are

honored, then students are better able to integrate their oral and written capabilities cohesively.

There are however, other modes used to engage students in the writing process. Cremin & Myhill (2012) suggested that students benefit from hearing their writing aloud to help them engage in the writing process. However, according to Caldwell & Moore (1991) drawing has been a very useful strategy for writing, because it draws upon a writer's ability to visualize where their writing is going, serving as a planning tool for the writing process. Drawing increases the quality of writing that students produce because it integrates new ideas into their writing and elaborates on details that otherwise could be left out in an oral editing process. Both reading aloud and drawing enabled students to revise their thinking while they engaged in the writing process.

One particularly effective method shown to increase the quality of student writing is to allow students to write about topics of their choice (Cremin et al., 2012; Kasten, 1987; Granger, Gooch, & Lambirth, 2003). Granger, Gooch, & Lambirth (2003) found that students were more motivated and more easily formed ideas when they were given autonomy over their writing. Kasten (1987) acknowledged students' natural language influence on their writing strategies and, when given autonomy over their writing, students were able to transfer knowledge from their native oral language into proper written Standard English.

Kasten's (1987) study focused on whether students from the Papago Indian Tribe incorporated into their writing both their Native heritage and

American culture while using Standard English conventions. The study included six students (but focused on three of them) and was conducted over a two-year period when the students were in third and fourth grade. At the school they attended, all the teachers and administrators were Caucasian while the para-educators, janitorial staff, and secretaries were Native. Prior to beginning the study, samples of each of the participants' writing were collected. Through the duration of the study, 200 writing samples were collected, and staff and students were interviewed. The incorporation of multiple data sources strengthens the study through the use of triangulation. The transferability of Kasten's (1987) study is strong because of the level of description that was provided, some of which was previously mentioned. This study was conducted on a culturally distinct Native People's reservation, with six students over a two-year period, where the researcher conducted interviews with the students, and collected their writing. The study's credibility improved because the researchers were involved in the community for two years and they debriefed with the data (teachers and administration) as well as their peers in the similar fields of study. Dependability was strong because the researchers explained how the progress and assignments were given to the participants. The contribution this research provided was the importance of writing autonomy for all students, including non-native English speakers.

Reinersten & Wells (1993) used dialogue journals in their study with college students, but provided constraints on how their students could discuss topics in their journals. There were two parts to this process. First students

engaged in a dialogue with just the professor. Later, the students engaged in group dialogue journals that were kept in the library on closed reserve. For both processes the students were given articles to read and were required to analyze the information by looking for perspectives different from their own. The guidelines for each week included multiple weekly written journal entries that critically evaluated the reading, analyzed the reading for factual information rather than opinion stating, questioned the validity of the reading source, reflected on or expressed concerns with the article from several different perspectives, and maintained an awareness of one's personal bias. The requirements were the same whether the exchange was between the researcher and students individually or if the dialogue happened between students in their open reserve journals. When the students wrote in the group journals, they went to the library and then responded to a peer's commentary about a reading. The students pushed on each other's thinking and asked questions, which engaged them in deeper conversations.

The researchers found that group journals supported students in their ability to provide a critical analysis of the articles that they had read and allowed them to further explore conversations that took place in class. Their overall findings suggested that, through dialogue journaling, students were able to think more critically, take responsibility for their own learning, embody an awareness of multiple perspectives, and become more confident in their ability to create meaning through their writing. While Reinersten & Wells (1993) limited student

choice, the aspects that are consistent within the writing community are attention to audience and writing with a purpose.

Teachers have employed several strategies for teaching writing through journals. Three of these strategies are guided journaling, student chosen writing topics, and teacher chosen topics with some student autonomy. Guided journals have included sentence starters like “Today I really want to...” Student chosen journal topics have provided students with an opportunity to write about a topic of interest. Teacher chosen topics with student autonomy are when a teacher has chosen a writing topic, like “the flag” and students are enabled to incorporate the flag into their writing how they chose. Though some strategies require teachers to respond directly on student work, others require responses on a separate sheet of paper. This directly affects students’ engagement with the journaling process. Borasi & Rose (1989) found that when teachers write responses directly on students work, students disengage from the writing process because it has become evaluative, rather than reflective.

A common feature present in the different methods for teaching writing through journaling is engaging students in an investigation of the world around them through conversation. This feature enabled students to engage in a metacognitive practice, where they analyzed and developed awareness about their thinking, through writing practices. Where there is natural and innate curiosity, there is a self-empowered learner.

Self-Efficacy Achieved through Journaling

As students traverse the waters of the writing curriculum and teachers try to make connections to student's lived experiences, students can develop self-efficacy in writing. Carey & Forsyth (2015) of the American Psychological Association defined self-efficacy as a process that "reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment." The relationship that exists between self-efficacy and writing is that writers have control or autonomy over how their ideas are expressed. When given autonomy over the writing process, individuals are empowered through the exploration of their written thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. Cremin & Myhill (2012) emphasized that students who worked on small group writing tasks were highly encouraged which increased student participation, language cultivation, and self-efficacy. Group tasks and journaling have led students to develop a greater ability to self assess writing, which can enable their metacognitive abilities during the editing process (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Stillman, Anderson, & Struthers 2014). In one such study conducted by Reinersten and Wells (1993), students who attended to the writing of peers prior to writing themselves were more likely to engage in reflection about their own thinking and writing. For this particular circumstance students' sense of self was enhanced through a metacognitive state while writing responses, which forced them to analyze their perspective in relation to their peers.

When students are self-assessing their writing, they tend to think more critically about their writing process and learn about themselves. Cremin & Myhill

(2012) argued that providing students with agency over their writing choices is vital for increasing student engagement with the writing process. Giving students agency places them in a position to engage in deeper conversations, both in the classroom and through their writing.

The authors of one case study argued that having autonomy over their writing allowed students to have more authentic communication with their teachers through the journaling process, which built upon their self-efficacy. Stillman et al. (2014) studied a classroom with fourth and fifth grade English language learners. The researchers discovered an authentic exchange of ideas between students and teachers as the result of student centered writing topics derived from their lived experiences. The action that made this authentic exchange possible was students interacting with their teachers through the journaling process. The study revealed that when students wrote about happenings in their life and were seen as the authority on the subject, their ability to self-assess writing, revise their thinking, and communicate more specific details increased their self-efficacy. As a result of students' freedom to write on topics of their choice, which included writing about their home lives, movies they had seen, peer or adult conflicts, learning struggles, students felt empowered and had a sense of social and emotional security through an inclusive classroom and curriculum, that also contributed to students ability to write for different purposes and audiences that lead to an increase in self-efficacy. This was attainable due to the teachers' recognition of the power they held in student-

teacher discourse. The teachers' willingness to relinquish that power allowed their students to be autonomous in their writing choices.

Research has shown that the use of journals in the classroom can be one of the most influential ways to give students autonomy over their writing in the classroom. Yet, in my experience, I have rarely see teachers employ this technique. One problem with excluding the journaling process is that students lose out on the opportunity to have safe spaces to express themselves in the classroom.

The feedback teachers provide students in their journals can support or hinder students' motivations to write. When teacher feedback is focused on criticism, students may disengage from the writing process and their self-efficacy may be adversely impacted (Bourne, 2000; Burniske, 1994; Grainger, Gooch, & Lambirth's 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers find alternative ways to assess students writing that does not negatively impact students' perceptions of themselves as writers. There are teachers who have chosen to solely provide dialogue with students in journals without attending to grammatical and structural errors in students writing: this has proven to be supportive of the development of students' self-efficacy (Stillman et al. 2014).

Technology Used for Narrative Writing

Technology can increase communication in the classroom, improve student-teacher relations, and improve students' writing skills. Research has shown that teachers' learning to utilize computer technology alongside their students is a key to an increased communication environment (Campbell, 2012;

Rueda, 1992). Campbell (2012) argued that this process increased student completion of work up to 100%. While there was a limited amount of time available to participate in student-teacher dialogue through technology, doing so offered the teachers great insight into student interests and personal stories.

Rueda (1992) found that, when using dialogue journals that were computer based, teachers were much more conversational in their dialogues. Despite their use of technology, the length of conversations between students and teachers remained at four exchanges (which were either student-teacher-student-teacher or teacher-student-teacher-student). The teachers in the study found that the computer programs were easy to use, helpful in completing journals, and assisted students in improving their writing skills.

Campbell (2012) used digital storytelling rather than the traditional method of writing that required a hand-written rough draft prior to typing a story on a computer. At the close of the study, most of the students were more confident in their writing abilities, they felt their families, teachers, and peers thought they were good writers, and they enjoyed the writing process. In addition, most of the students who participated in the study displayed improvements in the quality of their writing.

Several studies were conducted that involved the use of word processing and different word prediction programs in order to help struggling students communicate more effectively with teachers using electronic dialogue journals. MacArthur (1998) completed a study involving students who were diagnosed with learning disabilities. A majority of the students involved in the Evmenova et al

(2010) study were also diagnosed with learning disabilities. Both studies concluded that the students communicated more fully in writing through the use of word prediction programs versus scribing the journal entry themselves. Dialogue journals serve as a formative means of communication for both teachers and students and assist in the development of writing skills through the process.

Use of Journals in Education

Communication is an essential part of our daily interactions. We communicate with our teachers, friends, students, colleagues, families, and community members. We may even communicate with our selves through private journaling. As mentioned earlier, communication between students and teacher is enhanced through technology. However, a written form of dialogue between student and teacher is also important. In the following section I explore how journal use in the classroom has impacted some aspects of communication, provided a form of assessment, and assisted teachers' understanding of students' development.

Communication

Teachers can utilize journals to learn about students' thoughts on school and learning that teachers otherwise may not have time to discover (Borasi, & Rose, 1989). Journaling becomes a low risk form of communication allowing room for the expression of someone's true feelings without the fear of having a face-to-face conversation (Phelps, 1992). With the level of risk low, the value of the journaling conversation increases, allowing participants an opportunity to learn about each other from the experience.

Journals have been used to document classroom interactions in which students are able to communicate what they have learned in class with their teachers. According to Phelps (1992), these dialogue journals have helped students solidify their thoughts and provided accessibly to more in-depth classroom instruction. Dialogue journals provided students with a means for processing their views on topics prior to the beginning of class and positively impacted classroom discussions. At the same time, dialogue journals and the classroom discourse provide teachers with vital information which allows them to differentiate instruction in order to assist and support students in the learning process (Borasi, & Rose, 1989). While working with dialogue journals is highly beneficial for all parties, it does take a serious commitment from the teacher. "One of the drawbacks of using dialogue journals in any class is that they require a large commitment of time by the instructor" (Reinertsen and Wells, 1993, p. 184). The teachers in the Lambirth and Gouch (2006) study also found that dialogue journals required a great deal of instructional time. Unfortunately, the teachers involved in the aforementioned study abandoned the use of dialogue journals in order to employ standard writing and grammar lessons. In abandoning the dialogue journals, these teachers sent a message about what type of communication and learning is valued in the classroom.

Dialogue Journals as Assessment

While dialogue journals are an avenue for communication, they also provide a valuable means for assessing writing. A dialogue journal can be used to self monitor ideas, teachers can use the journals to monitor students'

progress, and inform their teaching practices. Both students and teachers can use the journals as a means to see how their perspectives vary and change over time and as a sort of personal assessment. Students are able to use their journal ideas as starting points in conversations (as previously mentioned in this paper). The journal entries can act as a form self-assessment. As students test out their written ideas in class discussions, they receive instant feedback on how well their analysis of a topic aligned with the course materials (Reinersten, & Wells, 1993). Students also see the progression of their comprehension of topics (Borasi & Rose 1989).

When students and teachers engage in a journal-based dialogue, teachers may become more proficient at pacing instruction. Teachers can see where students are struggling and provide more individualized instruction for the students (Borasi & Rose, 1989). The teacher can shift curricula in response to student journal entries and individualized needs. As a result, both teachers and students can continue to make sense of each other's needs in the classroom (Dixon, Egendoerfer, Clements, 2009) and teachers can create a student centered curricula based on student needs.

Supporting the Development of Writing

John Dewey (2004) described learning development as an ongoing process. Students need teachers to believe their ability to learn is malleable and not fixed. Teachers who disregard students' ability to cope with varied situations limit the challenge and rigor provided to students. Kamps et al. (2007) discussed the importance of direct instruction based off of student assessments in order to

support students' reading and writing skills, while adapting instructional processes to meet student needs. Attending to instructional practices that support the development of the student writer is more conducive to student growth. Graves (1985) suggested the implementation of classroom norms that supported the creation of a structured classroom where all learners become empowered as they learn to write. He felt this was essential to the "establishment of a community of learners" in his third grade classroom.

Dialogue journals are an effective process to aid in the natural development of students' writing. However, with everyone perusing writing topics of interest that support their writing development some might not perceive this as fair.

Wiebe-Berry (2006) suggested that creating accommodations within the classroom to ensure fairness could actually inhibit learning. With the development of student writing abilities at the forefront of teacher concern, it would be advantageous for the teacher and students to utilize their dialogue journals as a means to discuss these concepts, furthering students' development of voice (Urzua, 1987). While Dewey (2004) spoke of students' ability to learn from academic drilling for the purpose of recollection, Barrs (2000) discussed the importance of a repetitive process of reading one's writing aloud in order to hear the ideas that were crafted. The process of reading one's dialogue journals aloud leads students to engage in the learning cycle. Zull (2002) described the learning cycle as a "sequence of experience, reflection, abstraction, and active testing". To better describe the process of the learning cycle in relation to writing, I have looked at Darhower's study. Darhower (2004) discussed how students in

a secondary Spanish class were able to utilize dialogue journals in order to develop their understanding of the language. Students were given prompts to write about, which they related to their lived experiences. This is an example of Zull's first step in the learning cycle, an experience. Then the students wrote about their understanding, which engaged them in steps two and three of the learning cycle, where students reflected on their understanding and experience while formulating how to communicate what they were thinking in another language. Finally they wrote their ideas on paper, which employed the active testing stage of the learning cycle. This was a process that the students repeated continuously. Darhower's students displayed how engaging with dialogue journals supported the development of their written and oral language.

The overall conclusion of study after study is that dialogue journals are a tool that can empower students' development of voice, purpose, writing, self-efficacy, self-assessment, and communication. This leads to the purpose of my action research project, to examine relationship development with students and teachers through the use of dialogue journals.

Research Question

Journals can be an effective way for teachers, students, and other community members to log and track thinking, understanding, and development. It can also be an important method to support students in their ability to write. Therefore the question of this action research study is: How do dialogue journals support student and teacher relationship building and writing development?

CHAPTER 2: METHODS AND ANALYSIS

In order to investigate the relationship between dialogue journals and the writing development of students, I introduced dialogue journals as a writing strategy in my 4th grade classroom.

Participants and Setting

This action research project was conducted in a suburban public school. At the time of the study, Ansel Adams Elementary¹ served approximately 500 students in the 4th and 5th grades. The student population was quite evenly divided between genders. More than half of the student body was of European decent. The next largest ethnic groups tied between Hispanic/Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander at approximately 13% in each. The percentage of students who received free and reduced lunch constituted of about 22% of the student body. This district served four distinct communities with over 3,100 students and the demographics of the district mirrors that of the school.

Ansel Adams Elementary has a slightly higher transient population than other school communities. Part of the high mobility rate of this school is due to the military population in the area. Only 74% of the students from fourth grade returned for fifth grade. During the previous year there were a total of three students who left and the classroom gained one new student.

¹ All names within this paper are pseudonyms including the name of the school and students.

The group of pupils with whom I had previously worked had state test scores that were nearly identical to those reported in Chapter 1. The cohort had scored a 78% for the reading standard, which was slightly higher than the state average of 72%. The cohort math and writing percentages were both at 64% compared to the statewide data, that reflected math and writing at 63% each. This school had scores that generally mirrored that of the state average. There was an extensive focus on test preparation prior to the implementation of the statewide test.

The average size of each classroom in this school was about 25 students. At the time of this action research project, I had 26 students in my classroom. The year began with a total of 25 students which included: two students with IEP's for reading/writing and math, five students who received Response to Intervention Services (RTI) for reading, two of the five students also received services for math, one student was provided a 504 plan for reading and math during the research process, one student was an English Language Learner (ELL), and English was a second language (ESL) for two of the students. Throughout the research process one student transferred to another classroom and two students moved. Therefore, my research began with dialogue journals for 25 students and ended with only 22 student journals.

With regard to fourth grade classrooms, this study took place in a hallway amongst similar grade band students and teachers, with the exception of the two teachers, whom were in an independent module outside. The classroom had an adjoining door to another 4th grade classroom, which was kept locked. At times

during class, the students could hear the other classroom talking; this was occasionally a distraction. There were two student computers in the classroom situated along the back wall in addition to a book shelf, cupboards, three file cabinets, and a white board. To the left of the entry hallway of the classroom was a sink area with cupboards, the students' cubbies, and a large kidney-shaped table where students received small group and Response to Intervention Services (RTI).

The classroom was set up so that the students' desks were positioned in table groups of four. There was also one student whose desk was positioned at the front of the room against a table that was used to organize corrected work, teaching supplies, and the worksheets for the day, and one student who was seated at the back of the room by the white board. Next to the front table, where the supplies were kept, was a wheeled cart that held a document camera. The document camera was connected to a ceiling-mounted projector that I used during whole class instruction. The teachers' L-shaped desk was situated in the front right side of the room. There was also a cupboard behind the teacher's desk that held instructional materials and was connected to a book shelf that ran below the windows along the length of the wall. The bookshelf held reading books, games, and the students' dictionaries.

Students were encouraged to utilize the classroom resources while working and were permitted to obtain those resources as long as the teacher was not providing instruction. The classroom typically operated on a low to no volume conversation level. Students were permitted to talk to each other in table

groups in order to brainstorm ideas for a brief amount of time, followed by a group share to the class as a whole. The mentor teacher selected exceptional writing samples to be read aloud by the author to the class. Occasionally, the entire class was presented with the opportunity to share their work with the class. While the students worked on writing assignments, the mentor teacher and I circulated about the room assisting students as needed.

Writing Curricula

The classroom that I worked in relied heavily on the reading and writing curriculum from Houghton Mifflin, *Traditions: Back to School* series. The year that I began student teaching was the first year that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were implemented. After examination of the Common Core requirements, my mentor teacher continued to use the previous writing curriculum. I originally believed that, upon reviewing the new standards, we would have implemented changes in order to meet the new requirements. However, that was not the case. The only change to writing instruction from the previous year was the use of dialogue journals. Some of the supplemental instructional materials used to teach writing in the classroom were dialogue-bubble conversations between characters in a picture, poetry, graphic organizers, and the writing prompts from the previous year's state testing exams.

Writing instruction typically took place in the afternoon, following a 30-minute reading session. Over the 10 weeks that I was in the classroom, students received instruction on types of nouns (common, proper, singular, and plural)

regular verbs, and suffixes. Students also received instruction in the creation and use of different types of concept maps, the five paragraph essay structure, and narrative writing. This coursework was typical for students at the beginning of the school year. During this time I implemented the use of dialogue journals, which was a new practice for this classroom environment.

Although there were 25 students initially enrolled in my class, three students left for a variety of reasons. All three of these students began the journaling process; however when they left the classroom the journals left with their other belongings. This does bias the study to the extent that I am unable to account for the writing progress of those three students for the duration of time they were in the classroom. Examining the work of the 22 students who remained in the class offered an accurate picture of the effects of journaling throughout the study and the affects that dialogue journals have on the writing process. This includes an IEP student who was academically at a K-1 writing level, whose work mainly consisted of pictures. Excluding this student from the study findings could have biased the results because I was looking at how dialogue journals foster the relationship between students and teachers. This third grade groups standardized test scores in writing are slightly lower than the statewide scores. The 4th grade statewide test scores for this class and cohort will not be available until after this study is completed, so I will not draw conclusions between dialogue journals and test scores.

Description of Data Sources

In order to investigate the relationship between dialogue journals and students writing development, I collected data from several sources including pre-and post- writing assessments, student work in their dialogue journals, parent surveys, and student surveys.

Pre-and Post Writing Assessments

Prior to the implementation of the dialogue journals, I wanted to get an accurate measure of students writing ability. My mentor teacher and I decided to have the students write a personal narrative about their summer. The essays were assessed using the rubric checklist that the mentor teacher employed. The students did not see the assessment, as it was for teaching purposes only. At the end of my 10-week student teaching experience, I collected samples of the students' edited personal narratives about an event in their lives. These essays were the students' first experience at writing this type of essay and they were scored using the same rubric checklist. This allowed me to compare writing samples and look for qualitative changes in writing ability.

Dialogue Journals

After the initial assessment students were provided with a journal. The students wrote in their journals three to five times a week. Each Friday the students handed in their journals. I took the journals home, read, and responded to the students' entries by hand in the next available page in their journal books. I personalized each response attending to the information each student shared. I

set out a personal goal of writing one full page back to each of the 22 students. On Monday, I returned the journals to the students. They were required to read my responses and write back. In order to keep the students engaged in the journaling process, I created journal topics that the students used to guide their writing each day. Students could continue writing on the previous topic, or they could write about the new one. The journal topics started out as extensions of class readings. After I came to know the students and their interests, I introduced topics that I knew the students would be able to relate to. I provided these topics to better engage the students in the writing process and to get them to express their perspectives on different topics. An example of one of the topics was “What does ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag’ mean to you?” These journal entries provided an opportunity for both teacher and student to engage in meaningful conversation that related to students’ lived experiences.

Parent Surveys

At the beginning of the school year, I collected parent surveys. The parent surveys included questions that illuminated parents thinking about writing. The content of the questions included what they think counts as writing, the use of technology in writing, what types of writing are utilized in the workplace, what they think good writing looks like, who they considered to be good writers, what writing they enjoy, and how important a factor writing is in becoming successful in today’s world. The data collected from the surveys helped me understand the communities that the students came from and how writing is employed by their families.

I was only able to collect 11 parent surveys. The surveys were sent home with the students welcome packets the week before school started. Students wrote reminder notes in their planners for their parents to return all of the paperwork that was sent home. The survey was accompanied by a letter that I wrote to the parents expressing my excitement to work with their students, the purpose of the survey, and research project I was conducting. This is one of the limitations of my study, as I am only able to see the potential familial influence or bias of less than half of my students. Despite the limitations this placed on my research, I was able to make connections between the parents' perspectives on writing and student ability.

Student Surveys

I collected 21 student surveys at the beginning of the year; the only student I did not collect a survey from was my one IEP student who did not understand the questions. In the student surveys I asked a series of questions about writing. This survey was adapted from the Burke reading inventory. I inquired about what students do when they get stuck writing, who they considered to be a good writer, what makes that person a good writer, whether that (identified) person ever struggled with writing, and what they think that person does when they struggled with writing. The survey also asked the students how they would help a person who struggled with writing, what they think the teacher would do to help the person who struggled, how they learned to write and what they remember about learning to write, how they want to improve as a writer, and if they considered themselves a good writer. The student

surveys helped me understand the attitudes and beliefs that students had about writing before the implementation of dialogue journals. In fact, this caliber of data helped me identify shifts in student writing practices, by identifying what works, what doesn't work, and how they have used writing previously.

The students at Ansel Adams Elementary struggle with writing in various contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate instruction, in order to better support student progress towards the national standard for writing.

Analysis Procedures

To accurately assess the influences parents have on the writing process, I analyzed the surveys they submitted. For each individual question, I made a chart with the parents' responses. As I recorded the responses I found patterns in beliefs about the writing process. After identifying the patterns in the parent survey, I analyzed the students' responses to their writing survey and compared the results to see whether a correlation existed between parents' beliefs about writing and students perspectives about writing. To compare the two sets of data I needed to analyze the student surveys.

First I created a chart, like I had with the parent survey. Second, I identified themes that presented in the students responses to questions. Third I compared the responses from the student survey that corresponded to responses on the parent survey. I identified similarities and differences in the parents and the students' responses. Analyzing the data in this way is appropriate because, as educators, we know that students don't enter our

classrooms alone, they bring with them a whole community that influences their beliefs and practices. The effectiveness of the journaling process is somewhat dependent on the external influences the child brings into the classroom. There has to be a buy in on this model in order for the process to be effective.

I coded the dialogue journals after I created a more manageable data set to analyze. I took the 22 student journals and divided them into three piles, one pile of *above grade level* writers, one of *at grade level* writers, and one *below grade level* writers. I would like to note that when I categorized the students' journals into ability levels it was based on their overall writing throughout the ten weeks through their test scores, journals, and writing samples. Then I chose five journals randomly from each pile. After I narrowed the journals down to five journals for each writing level, I randomly chose two journals from each pile as a representation for that writing group. The groups are as follows: *above grade level* writing was Cassie and Polly; *at grade level* writing were Stan and Easton; and *below grade level* writing were Nigel and Dion.

First, I started by analyzing the *above grade level* students journals. I looked for topics that I had incorporated into the curriculum or classroom discussions. I had chosen to open code the data, letting the data drive the coding process, so the above data was coded in orange. As I coded for one type of data, I took notes on other topics that appeared. Second, I coded in pink that represented changes in the instruction that students requested directly or indirectly. While I coded the above two types of data, I noticed a relationship between teacher initiated and student initiated questions. Based on relationship,

my third step was highlighting questions that the students or I posed in blue. Then I repeated the process with the students' journals that were *at grade level* and *below grade level*. This coding process was adapted from Mertens (2010). Finally, I compiled the data from the different ability groups into charts, which are displayed within the findings section below.

Limitations of the Study

Before the academic year of this study began, I attempted to set up a schedule with my mentor teacher in order to implement dialogue journals. We created a daily schedule that allotted the first 15 minutes of each day to the journals. However, as the first few weeks passed it became evident that the journals needed to be completed at a more convenient time of day. Therefore, I moved the journaling time to right after lunch taking 15 minutes from the hour-long reading block.

The ten weeks that I was in the classroom limited the amount of time my action research could take place, which is a limit to the credibility of my research. I tried to increase the credibility of my research by checking in with the students about what I was noticing in their journals and through participating in peer-review of my data analysis. I was able to triangulate my findings through multiple data sources, including the dialogue journals, parent and student surveys. Additionally, I shared my findings with my mentor teacher and other school staff as the research project progressed.

I tried to increase the transferability of my action research project by providing detailed descriptions of the study setting, participants, journaling procedures, and analysis processes. This included my ability to identify trends in student writing early on in the journaling process and how I made adaptations to journaling topics to relate to student interest. Although there are several ways to engage in the journaling process with students I did not evaluate their grammar or punctuation but rather engaged them in a dialogue about their writing. I chose this as my practice because the research showed that non-evaluative writing in response to students was a more effective way to engage them in the writing process. I also did not want to dissuade the students from writing to me.

The process for engaging students in the journaling process may have affected the dependability of my study, because I began my action research with the intention of looking at how dialogue journals could support students' writing development. However, as a result of my approach to writing responses, I changed my research question to look at how dialogue journals impacted relationship-building between students and teachers and how that supported writing development.

I attempted to strengthen the confirmability of my study by documenting my process for analyzing the data and asking my peers to review my findings. Both peers and my mentor teacher were able to see the evidence of my findings within the dialogue journals and surveys.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Below I have described the findings of this action research project as they pertain to the data that I collected. These findings are based on data from the students' dialogue journals, student surveys, and parent surveys.

Findings

After reviewing the data in the student journals I was surprised by the findings that emerged from the data and the implications that journaling had on the teacher-student relationship and writing development. First, the journals served as a portal into the students' thinking, which enhanced my teaching practices. One of the ways that the dialogue journals impacted my teaching practice was that it enabled me to incorporate student interest and ideas into my lesson plans or conversations with the students. Second, the journaling process facilitated opportunities for students to ask questions about topics that interested them. In addition, I was able to pose questions to students that supported their writing development. Third, I noticed that students were expressing their needs either through direct questioning or statements about what they wanted. A fourth finding was that many students used images as a form of communication. All of the above findings supported the students' writing development.

Teaching Practices Influenced by Student Interest

The students expressed numerous interests throughout their dialogue journals. I seized the opportunity to incorporate student interest into my lessons

that engaged students in the learning process. I did this through several different methods like writing, reading, social studies and math.

Stan, a student in my classroom with *below grade level* writing, was hesitant to begin writing tasks. He would stare off into space and when I would check in with him, he would say that he didn't know what to write. The dialogue journals provided opportunities for me to support Stan with writing projects. For example, when the class was required to write an essay about a trip they had taken, Stan was stumped. I helped Stan identify a writing topic, which eased his anxiety about writing; using one of the ideas he had started writing about in his journal. His journal served as a great resource, which encouraged him to expand on his ideas and provide more details about his stories.

My reading and social studies lessons were also enhanced as a result of students' dialogue journals. Several of the students discussed a need for movement, which will be discussed in another section of the findings that influenced my choice of reading materials for the class. We read two stories, one called *Grandfather's Journey* and another *Boss of the Plains*. Both stories involved the mobility of people and a need to travel and explore. I wanted students to see that their need for movement could lead them on great adventures, like that of Lewis and Clark, which I taught in social studies.

I was also able to learn more about my students' interests related to their home lives. Cassie, Easton, and Nigel discussed experiences with different languages. Easton said, "My favorite Greek food is pemell you might not know it

because that how you call it in Greek.”² Nigel’s comment was about his dog. He said, “Zara it means prencess in cerin.” Translated, Nigel’s comment reads “Zara means princess in Korean.” I used the information about students’ knowledge of different languages and my knowledge of other languages spoken by the students in my classroom to teach students how to count in different languages. I also invited students to teach me other ways of counting that I was not familiar with. I noticed that counting in different languages helped me gain their attention so we could launch into other tasks.

There were several students in the class who wrote about Pokémon. With the exception of football, this was the most popular topic in the dialogue journals. I utilized this information for several of my math lessons. I started out one day using a place value chart giving students numbers like 2,465 and I asked them to identify the place value for the number four. Then the students would write their response on their white boards. I realized that recognizing numbers on the place value chart was challenging for some of the students, so I decided to try and use words. I chose the word Pokémon and wrote it on the board with the letters aligned under the different place values. I helped students use the word to identify place values. I would say a letter in the word and they would identify what place value that letter would have, “What is the place value of the letter ‘k’?” The students responded with “10 thousands” or “ten thousand” on their white boards. This activity helped students who struggled with place value gain a solid

² All student quotes from the dialogue journals are written exactly as the students wrote them in their journals.

understanding of what each place represented. Pokémon were also useful in other math lessons.

The dialogue journals also allowed me to learn more about what my students understood. From reading Easton's dialogue journal entry about creating an invention, I discovered that he understood the concepts of supply and demand. Easton often struggled in math, and I found this was a great opportunity to enhance my lessons in order to construct opportunities to assign him competence for his mathematical thinking. I used the information from his journal to create story problems that involved buying different products and then required him to explain his thinking. Incorporating problems like this into the curriculum helped several other students as well. The dialogue journals provided opportunities for me to engage the students in the curriculum more effectively, because the materials and topics related to their interests.

Student and Teacher Questions

As I analyzed my data, I found that the journaling process facilitated opportunities for students to ask questions about topics that interested them. Likewise, I was able to pose questions to students in my response to their journal entry. I found that this student-teacher questioning process supported their writing development. When I reviewed the students' journals, I noticed that several of the students asked questions in order to get to know more about me. The students posed questions inquiring about my interests and family after they had answered a question that I asked them. I found that not all groups of students

asked me questions. I considered this evidence significant in relation to the development of the student-teacher relationship and writing development. Table 1 displays the difference between teacher and student initiated questions for the three groups of students.

Table 1

Number of questions asked through dialogue

Questions	Writing <i>above grade level</i>		Writing <i>at grade level</i>		Writing <i>below grade level</i>	
	Cassie	Polly	Stan	Easton	Nigel	Dion
Teacher initiated	10	13	23	11	16	18
Student Initiated	23	5	0	0	0	15

I found there was a difference between student and teacher initiated questions. Overall, I initiated more questions with the writing groups *at grade level* and *below grade level*, with fewer questions asked of the *above grade level* group. I found that I asked the *above grade level* group fewer questions because they engaged in conversation with me through the dialogue journals more readily. Their responses included several details and descriptions that helped paint a clear picture of what they were discussing. I also found that the *above grade level* group posed more questions to me than the other two groups combined. Cassie, a student who excelled at writing, asked questions like “Can we do a musical on the Civil War for a writing project?” or “Who is your favorite character from Frozen?” Both sets of questions were continuations of previous

conversations. I asked her questions like, “Who would you want your first concert to be?” or “Other than games, is there another way to support you in learning more in school?” I found that through this type of questioning, I showed Cassie that I valued her opinion and that I wanted to engage and challenge her in the classroom. Many other students also posed questions and requests for assignments that would extend their learning and align with their interests. This was an effective tool for differentiating my instruction and building relationships with students.

Polly, like Cassie, asked questions that expressed her interest in getting to know me better and building a teacher-student relationship. Polly asked questions like, “How many professors do you have?” and “Did you have Ms. Deecee [her student teacher from last year] in your class?” This shows that she was interested in my educational process as a student teacher in addition to my role as her teacher. We had a common connection; Polly had a student teacher from my program in her 3rd grade year. With Polly being one of the *above grade level*/writers, I posed questions to her that also elicited her input on classroom proceedings. For example, I asked, “Who would you like to sit next to? Who could you be the most successful by?” My line of questioning for Polly was implemented as a way to support her social growth in the classroom. Both Polly and Cassie were somewhat shy students who needed support in making new friends in the school environment. I found the dialogue journals to be a helpful way to check in on their needs and progress towards their goals for social interaction. I found that most of the students whose journals fell into the *above*

grade level category asked more questions of me than I asked of them. Because I maintained a balance between student-initiated questions and teacher-initiated questions with this group of students, the length of their writing usually ranged from writing three quarters of a page to a page and a half.

I found that I asked the *at grade level* and *below grade level* groups more questions in order to provoke conversations and more detailed responses. As you can see from the chart above, the *at grade level* group did not ask me any questions. While this was somewhat representative of the other students in the *at grade level* group, there were students who did pose questions to me. However, the number of questions was fewer than the *above grade level* group. When I examined the types of questions that I was asking this group of students I noticed that I was probing them to see if they could share more about their experiences, such as traveling. All of the students in the *at grade level* group had traveled to several places both within and outside of the U.S. I attempted to draw out some of their experiences in order to build stronger relationships with the students and incorporate their experiences into the classroom. I also asked them questions to support their writing development by pressing for details. I asked Stan questions like “What was the best part of going to school there?” and “Do you like school?” When he was asked to write about his school experience, he titled the page “Every New School”, and wrote “After a few days, I get used to the school, make some friends.” In class Stan was a very quiet individual and appeared distracted or preoccupied most of the time. By asking him questions like the ones above, I gained insight into Stan’s needs in the classroom and I

broke through his silence with writing. I discovered that Stan talked about friends on a regular basis, which led to several of his social needs being expressed. He expressed a need to have friends in the class. Had I not known that he was new to the school and that making friends was challenging for him, I might not have been as attentive to his need. Knowing this about Stan allowed me to bring this topic up in a class discussion.

When I reviewed Easton's journal, I noticed that the types of questions that I asked him were very specific to the locations he had visited. For example, I asked him "Do you ever go back to New York to visit?" This question was in my first response letter back to him. I asked this particular question because I was trying to establish a connection between Easton's travels and the purpose for the travels. I had hoped he would explain his connection to New York and he did. I asked other questions like, "Did you live in Greece and Mexico, or did you just visit there?" This question prompted an ongoing dialogue about his travel experiences. Through the dialogue I learned that the student was verbally trilingual. I was able to use this information in order to differentiate instruction for him by explaining directions in different ways, drawing pictures or making comparisons to other things he was more familiar with.

While neither of the boys from the *at grade level* group asked me questions, they both attended to my questions with intentionality. I was concerned that perhaps these two students were exceptions to my findings, so I investigated further. I browsed through the other three journals from this

achievement group and discovered that none of the students asked me questions; however, they all attended to answering mine.

Nigel was one of the *below grade level* students and he didn't ask any questions. While journaling Nigel had a hard time focusing. He was a student who was diagnosed with ADHD. He was generally distracted during writing time and wrote very little. When I wrote letters to him, I started by asking various questions trying to see what he was interested in. My initial questions were ones like "Why do you like pandas?" or "What's your favorite movie line?" After a while I noticed that his interests were very broad and that most of his time was spent outdoors. When my questions changed to topics like, "Did you really climb the whole way barefoot?" or "What were you and your friend doing with the rope?" He became more interested in writing back. The length of his writing increased and it helped him focus on what he had experienced. Like the other students in the class, getting to know Nigel through journaling helped me recognize what he was interested in and what needs he had that I needed to attend to in the curriculum. Nigel's writing grew from two sentences to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page. I believe that this was the direct result of the specific questions that I started asking him.

The other student in the *below grade level* category was Dion. While she asked me questions, she was the only student in the *below grade level* group who did. Dion asked a lot of questions. She was very concerned with building relationships and maintaining friendships. Dion asked me the type of questions that I would expect from much younger children when they are getting to know someone new. She asked "What is your favorite book?" and "What's your

favorite candy?” These questions are significant, because they show that Dion is approaching writing in the same way that she engaged in verbal conversations. She would ask a question, wait for a response, and then tell the other person that she liked the same thing. This is exactly what happened through the initial dialogue that we had. Later, however, Dion started sharing interests that differed from mine. Her questions changed to include things that showed interest in knowing more about me. She asked, “Why did you have long black hair? Where did it come from? What did you do after that?” These questions were significant, because it showed that Dion had begun transitioning away from simpler questions to more advanced thinking. This showed her ability to track and engage with a story. Dion began using this type of questioning during lessons outside of reading and it helped her gain understanding about several academic subjects. In other words the dialogue journal process helped her identify ways to pose questions to me, which transferred into class discussion and learning.

The questions that I asked Dion started out as responses to her questions, like “What is your favorite type of candy?” I quickly realized that this type of questioning was not going to elicit an in-depth response from Dion. I wanted to engage her in a dialogue that would help me build a strong relationship with her in the classroom and help her learn how to write in a linear way. Her writing was all over the place, rarely stuck to one topic, and was missing several grammatical structures. My questions to her changed in my next several responses. I intentionally chose one or two topics from her previous letters to address and asked her specific questions to get her to write a story from the beginning to the

end. I asked her a few questions about a drawing she made at the bottom of one of her letters. They were, "Who are they? Is one of them you?" In her response letter, she didn't attend to even one of my questions. I noticed that throughout the entire journal Dion posed questions in order to get information out of me, but only shared materials about her when she felt safe. Her writing did shift from a few sentences to an average of $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page. This was significant for her writing development.

Overall, I found that the students in the *above grade level* group asked more questions of me than the students in the other two groups. These questions provided a way to dialogue with the students through their journals. Across all groups, I was able to pose questions to students that required them to provide detail in their writing. This strategy of asking questions allowed me to differentiate my instruction for students who had different writing needs.

Needs

As I mentioned earlier, the students in the class expressed several needs. There was one overarching need that presented through the students journals and that was the need for friendship. I knew that several of the students were new to the school and they were concerned about making friends. I was able to identify this need early on in the journals, which allowed me to help students find partners for recess activities. There were several other needs that the students expressed in their dialogue journals. Some of their needs were expressed explicitly and other needs were more implicit. An example of an explicit need

from a student was, “can we have lunch together” and an example of an implicit need from a different student was “giving a helping hand to anyone”. Table 2 below shows the students’ needs as expressed in their journals.

Table 2

Needs expressed through dialogue journals

Needs	Writing above grade level		Writing at grade level		Writing below grade level	
	Cassie	Polly	Stan	Easton	Nigel	Dion
Implicit	3	0	3	3	2	5
Explicit	3	3	0	0	1	2

Several of the students had overlapping needs that presented within the journals. Three over arching needs were for movement, drawing, and communication. These same themes were also evident in their writing surveys.

Movement was the only need that was solely expressed explicitly. Cassie discussed how she needed to get up and move throughout the day. She recalled instances when her former teacher would play music and the students would dance. This was also implicitly stated through her story about how learning can be more fun. In her writing survey she also discussed the need to get up and move around in order to work through writers block. This was just one of her strategies for working through writing struggles.

Cassie was not the only student who implicitly stated a need for movement within her journal. Both Easton and Nigel commented about movement. Easton wrote about all the different sports that he participated in and how he was happiest when he was active. Nigel had a slightly different need for movement. Several of Nigel's journal entries discussed a need to be creative and build things; this was his preferred mode of movement. His need for movement, when included in classroom instruction, allowed him to be focused. Nigel was a student with ADHD and movement was essential for his daily learning. Through his journal I was able to determine different structures to help him move, while he participated in lessons. Nigel's need to create things also linked to the needs of several of his classmates.

All of the students in this data analysis, with the exception of Stan, expressed a need for art, either implicitly or explicitly in their dialogue journal. They also expressed these needs in their surveys on writing. Cassie wrote in her survey that when she gets stuck while writing, a helpful tool was to draw. Polly also stated that doodling allowed her to think about her writing and that she needed that freedom. Both Easton and Dion expressed a need for art and drawing as a way to make connections to the text and help them learn. Easton was the student who is trilingual and images helped him create links between vocabulary and language. Dion began the year academically low and images helped her make abstract thoughts visible. This was apparent through her journal drawings and classroom activity, despite the fact that she expressed this need in her writing survey, before the journals began.

Table 2 shows several students expressed needs related to communication. The definition of communication that I am using for the purpose of these findings are the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings in a way that allows others to understand them. The expressed needs for communication relate to student-student, teacher-student, and student-community conversations.

Cassie was one of the students who articulated both implicit and explicit needs for communication. She discussed the importance of being able to move around and talk to her peers as part of the learning process. Additionally, she asked for help in order to get over her shyness. Because Cassie desired to get over her shyness, and wrote about it, I was able to implement opportunities for her to talk to her classmates during lessons.

Early in the journaling process, Polly took the time to express her needs to me. She said, "I would like Marigold to sit at my table group." I very quickly discovered that both Polly and Marigold had been in the same class the previous year and they only felt comfortable talking to each other. I was able to incorporate Polly's need to sit next to a friend in my seating chart for a short time, so that she could have that comfort in the classroom. Later, Marigold moved. Marigold took the time to write the class a good-bye letter and gave it to Polly. Polly handed it to me and I put it away for the first part of a day. I noticed that when I walked around during journal time that Polly wrote the question, "When are you going to read Marigold's letter to the class?" This need was attended to immediately after our daily journaling. I understood how Polly had felt alone since her one friend left the class and this was her way of sharing with others.

Her question also helped me realize that Polly had an implicit need that was being expressed through this message, which was that she felt lonely and needed a friend. As previously mentioned, everyone wanted to secure a solid friendship in this class.

Stan was a very introverted student. He desired friendship and the opportunity to help others. All three of Stans' needs involved communication needs. He strove to be a good community member. He also expressed a need for community in his journal. There were several times that I tried supporting his need within the classroom through conflict resolution, praise for his ability to support other students who struggled, or by helping him verbally communicate his needs to others.

Easton's need for communication was different than the other students. I knew that he was trilingual. I also knew that he struggled sometimes during reading or writing, because he was trying to transfer his understanding of a subject or topic from one language to another. I was not aware of how important his need for communication was until I read a specific entry in his journal. I had previously asked him a question about his favorite Greek food. When he replied, he spelled the food name in Greek. Then he said, "You might not know it because that how you call it in Greek." This statement and the writing that followed showed me how hard he worked at translating information and that he had a need to not only share his knowledge with others, but he also wanted to understand language. This was an implicit need that he expressed, however, I

heard him loud and clear. I tried to find ways to support his learning and incorporated this information into my lesson plans.

Communication was Dion's most important need. She expressed both implicit and explicit needs in her journal. I found that her greatest challenge was communicating with other students and adults in effective ways, not just through her writing, but also through her classroom interactions. Both through the questions that were discussed earlier ["What is your favorite book?" or "What's your favorite candy?"] and Dion's expressed needs ["time to talk to each other", "tell me more about you", and "When can we have lunch together?"] it was easy to see that she needed time to socialize. Dion also mentioned the value of working in partners. This was a significant discovery that I made early on in the journaling process and it allowed me the opportunity to support Dion's social development in class, which she had struggled with in the past.

The need for communication was also evident in students' writing surveys. In addition to the needs mentioned previously, two communication needs appeared in the writing surveys. These were asking others for help and receiving praise. Both of these communication needs appeared in Dion's survey. This is significant because the students had taken this survey before the journaling process began. It appeared as though Dion wanted to know that it was ok to ask for help when she struggled, in addition to wanting praise for a job well done. I found that while Dion was one of the students who struggled the most in writing, she was also the most effective at expressing her needs.

The students expressed a few needs in their writing surveys that differed from the dialogue journals. Students articulated a need for their writing to display certain characteristics, which would help them communicate through writing effectively. I found that several students identified a need for neatness, which would allow the reader to understand what they wrote, rereading what they had previously written in order to maintain a linear trajectory for their stories, and remaining focused while in the writing process. All of these characteristics were important to students in order to ensure that the message from their writing was received correctly.

The parent surveys communicated that parents felt urgency for their children to obtain “clear, concise, and coherent” writing that could be used to communicate with diverse populations. Three of the four surveys that identified needs spoke to the importance of students learning how to write without the use of technology. Two of those parents noted that proper writing skills would be needed to compete in future job markets. One parent stated that they thought students should know how to write for different contexts: “bullet points, shorthand, and texting.” Another parent stated that in order for students to succeed they had to learn how to communicate “with multicultural, multi-generational awareness.” The aforementioned need is very significant, because this parent recognized that types of written communication have changed over the years and there is a greater need for students to be able to communicate with people from diverse cultures and generations.

Parental and Student Perspectives on Good Writing

Both students and parents had similar perspectives on what good writing looks like. When I analyzed the parent and student surveys I found three main ideas that both groups saw as good writing: clear concise writing, proper punctuation, and rich description. Of the eleven parent surveys, only one parent did not provide a description of what they thought good writing looked like. Of the other ten parents, six of them thought that writing should have correct grammar, varied sentence structure, and proper formatting. One of the six students specifically stated that sentences should have varied structures.

The topic that most parents and students were in agreement about was the level of description in writing. Students and parents alike thought that good writing should hook a reader and keep them engaged in the story using vivid words and a linear story structure that showed they had thought out their writing process. There were three people, two parents and one student, who stated that proper punctuation, was essential to good writing.

There were two students who had slightly different ideas of what good writing should look like. Polly's interpretation of what good writing looks like was very literal, in that she saw it as a question of what a writer is physically capable of. She spoke to a writer's ability to avoid distractions while writing and being focused. Dion was the other student who had a slightly different perspective on what good writing was. She felt that good writing came from enjoying the process of writing and creating illustrations. While these two students

perspectives on what good writing looks like are different, their responses align with findings from the dialogue journals and the literature review.

Images as a Form of Communication

While writing in the dialogue journals, I noticed that several of the students would finish their letters early, while other students needed more time to write. I asked students to draw pictures in their journals to support the ideas in their writing. The students' use of imagery varied from one picture to eight pictures within their reviewed journaling topics. I noticed that the only group of students who received drawings from me in their response were the students in the *below grade level* group. The imagery was important to our communication because, for some students, it helped them express parts of their writing that they struggled to find words for but were able to draw effectively enough to communicate. I did not intentionally only draw pictures in the *below grade level* students' journals, however, I realized that this was an effective form of expression that helped them navigate topics and allowed me to participate in my own way.

Implications

Dialogue journals are an exceptional tool for teachers to use in order to build relationships with students and to support their writing development. The dialogue journals helped me get to know my students better than if I had tried to engage them in conversation during class. Teacher-student interactions on a personal level are often limited in the classroom and teachers really do have to

go the extra mile in order to learn about their students. I learned about my students' families, interests, and needs. In addition, the dialogue journals served as a way for students to communicate with me. This was the result of engaging my students in meaningful dialogue. If a teacher wanted to implement dialogue journals into their curriculum, I suggest using it as a conversation tool rather than an assessment of the students' writing. Burniske (1994) implemented dialogue journals, but did not correct students' grammar or punctuation. Rather, he wrote his responses on a separate sheet of paper and placed it in the journal for the students to read. While I did not write on a separate sheet of paper, I did not correct students' grammatical or punctuation errors. I would recommend that if another teacher wanted to implement journals they take this into consideration. I found that students writing naturally evolved through dialogue and they began to correct their own errors. They did this by learning writing conventions as I modeled them in the journals.

Burniske (1994) noted that when a teacher evaluates students' written work, the focus becomes the need to write to the requirements outlined in the teachers' assignment rather than writing for the purpose of communication. This stood true in my classroom. When students saw that their work was being evaluated, they were not engaged in the writing process as freely. Their ability to write was stifled because they were worried about attending to the requirements set forth in the assignments. When my students were allowed to write on the journal topics free of judgment, they engaged in more meaningful dialogue and wrote with ease.

One of my findings related to students identifying needs in their journals. This was unexpected. Students started writing about their needs both implicitly and explicitly in their first week of journaling. Their ability to express their needs grew as the project progressed. I feel it is important for teachers engaging their students in the journaling process to read student entries several times before writing a response. Through rereading entries I was able to identify different ways that I could implement students' needs and interests into other curricula areas. This corresponded to the findings of Stillman et. al (2014), where they found that teachers could incorporate opportunities' into their curriculum that related to students lived experiences. Like Stillman et al. (2014) I was able to create a more inclusive classroom because students were the center of curriculum design. Dialogue journals are a very effective way for teachers to inform their practice, while giving students opportunities to engage in meaningful writing and developing their sense of voice for different contexts.

When I decided to implement dialogue journals I hadn't considered drawing pictures in students' journals, nor had I envisioned students drawing pictures. As the journaling process began, I noticed that without the use of pictures and basic sentence structures, I could not communicate effectively with one of my students. Because I had drawn pictures in her journal as a way of communicating with her, I began drawing in other students' journals as well. I had students draw pictures to enhance or further express something from their writing. Caldwell & Moore (1991) used drawing for a pre-writing tool, as discussed in the literature review. My findings confirmed their claim that drawing

could enhance writing in the upper grades. When I review this data in relation to my own, I would suggest that if teachers implement dialogue journals and students are struggling to write, that teachers allow them to draw a picture and then explain what they drew. This was a very useful tool for some of my students writing processes.

My finding around questions showed that students not only answered my questions in the dialogue journals, but they also asked me questions about myself. This suggests that I had built a relationship with my students where they felt safe asking questions. Phelps (1992) discussed how dialogue journals provided a “means to communicate one’s hopes, fears, challenges, and questions without the “threat” of face-to-face interaction”.

Choosing to implement dialogue journals was a very serious endeavor. For example, students in my class knew that I would respond to whatever they wrote in the dialogue journals. I made sure that they knew that I was a mandatory reporter and that if they wrote about something that I needed to report, I would be required to report it. I think this was an important aspect that was missing from the literature that I reviewed. While several researchers discussed the importance of building relationships with students, none of them discussed how they informed their students about the parameters of the journals. Perhaps, this was one of the reasons that my students were able and willing to engage in this process with me.

Parents and students overall felt that good writing should follow traditional expectations with proper grammar and punctuation. This was an important finding, because it shows that families value the traditional conventions of writing, while embracing new technological conventions. I felt supported by the families in this school community and their willingness to participate with the surveys. I had intended on involving families more with the journaling process. I would recommend teachers use the journals during parent-teacher conferences and allow students to share their thinking with their parents. I feel like showing the parents their child's writing achievement could be more informative than the standardized test results that I discussed at the introduction of this paper. Graves (1985) found that when teachers conference with students about their writing the students flourished. Graves did not implement dialogue journals. The dialogue between student and teacher served as a type of conference.

Teacher student interactions are the backbone of education. Teachers need to know their students in order to facilitate a meaningful learning experience for the diverse learners in the classroom. Dialogue journals are a very demanding process to engage in. Others interested in implementing dialogue journals in their classroom should consider the amount of time required to respond to students. I spent about ten hour's hand writing responses to each student in my classroom. I feel like this time was well spent, because I was able to create authentic relationships with my students that supported their learning. Others have used computers to engage in dialogue with their students. This might be more beneficial for teachers if they are interested in implementing the

practice, but have limited time. Reuda (1992) reported that teachers felt dialogue journals on the computer were more accessible both to the teacher and students allowing immediate access for commentary.

Overall, dialogue journals enabled me to build relationships with my students which, in turn, supported their learning processes. Additionally, the journals helped students develop their writing skills through engaging in responsive dialogue with another person. As I previously mentioned, a teacher does not have to critique students writing by identifying all of the errors that students make, because students writing skills will evolve as they engage in the journaling process. Teacher modeling is a valuable tool.

Suggestions for Future Research

I enjoyed the journaling process with my students and I believe that my choice to correspond with them in a non-evaluative way was beneficial for building a relationship that supported their learning and growth in the classroom. I wonder how their writing would have changed if I had edited their writing each week and written a response. While I pondered this idea, I don't think I would implement this approach in my classroom because I feel that there are other opportunities to provide students feedback on their writing. The journals can serve as a story of the students' journey as the year has progressed. Even within the ten weeks that I was in the classroom, I could see changes within the students' journal writing.

As part of the journal writing practice, I initiated each of the journal response topics. As I attended to the findings related to student interest that I incorporated into the classroom I wonder what other topics might have come up if the students had created the journal topics. At one point I did create a brainstorm with the students about topics they wanted to write about and I was only able to incorporate two of their ideas into their journal prompts. In future classes, I believe it would be beneficial to have the students generate and write to topics of their choice. This would have given the students more autonomy over their writing, which Cremin & Myhill (2012) suggested is paramount to writing success.

I was able to incorporate several of the students' interests into the curriculum, mostly through math activities and problems. As I reviewed my findings, I realized how impactful this was to the students' math engagement. It made me think back to one of the research articles by Borasi & Rose (1989), where they discussed journals as a tool in mathematics instruction. I believe that based on the students ability to express their needs and how impactful imagery is to communication that using the journaling process for math instruction would be beneficial. I would like to see what it would look like for students to have an ongoing dialogue about their thinking and understanding in math. Journals would be a very interactive way for teachers to engage students in discussions about their understanding while lowering their affective filter.

I think that teachers can consider journals as a tool for classroom use. Given that a new implementation in the teaching profession is the TPEP process,

journals could help teachers provide evidence of their students' growth over time.

I began this action research process with the intention of seeing how dialogue journals improved students writing development. After the first week of implementation I quickly revised my strategy and used the journals not only as a means for analyzing their writing development, but also as a method to learn about my students' interests, perspectives, and needs. With this being said, there are still many ways that dialogue journals can be used in order to analyze student writing capabilities. I would like to do further research on the effects of teachers as evaluators on students' work.

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Appendix A

List of Journal Topics

Weeks	Journal Topics
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dialogue Journal Introduction ▪ Favorite T.V. show.
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Response letter ▪ Case of the stripes ▪ Something you've named ▪ Favorite Book
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Response ▪ Students will write about a time when they moved to a new school and how it made them feel. ▪ Favorite meal ▪ An adventure you went on
Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Response ▪ Talent ▪ Best Friend ▪ What does the pledge of allegiance means to you? ▪ Best and worst picture
Week 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Response ▪ What does education means to you? ▪ What does it mean to be a part of a community? ▪ You can see the glass either half full or half empty. What does this mean and how do you see the glass? ▪ Where would you go, if you could go anywhere in the world?
Week 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If you were an inventor, what would you invent, how would your invention improve people's lives, and what would you do with the profit?

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ What would the perfect school day include? Provide several details.▪ If you could travel through time and tell yourself something that you know now, what would it be? OR- Describe someone who is a hero to you and explain why.▪ What was the best part about doing the dialogue journals? Worst? Would you want to do this again? |
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Appendix B

Writing Inventory³

First name: _____

Age/Grade: _____

1. When you are writing and get stuck what do you do?
2. Who is a good writer that you know?
3. What makes _____ a good writer?
4. Do you think _____ ever struggles when writing?
5. If the answer is yes, what do you think s/he does when that happens? If the answer is no, what do you think _____ would do if that did happen?
6. If you knew a person that was having trouble with writing, how would you help that person?
7. What would your teacher do to help that person?
8. How did you learn to write? What do you remember about learning to write?
9. What would you like to do better as a writer?
10. Do you think that you are a good writer? Why or why not?

³ This writing inventory was adapted from the Burke Reading Inventory.

Appendix C

Parent Survey

What do you think counts as writing?

Do you use technology while writing?

In your workplace, what types of writing do you use?

What does good writing look like?

Who do you consider a good writer?

What type of writing do you enjoy?