

# Being a Writer Program Evaluation

Literacy & Research Departments



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## Executive Summary

The *Being a Writer* (BAW) program developed by the Developmental Studies Center was evaluated for its effects on student and teacher outcomes. A standard professional development course is in place for teachers new to this curriculum program. The goal of this project was to examine the effects of extending the professional development support throughout the entire year. Several tools were utilized in this evaluation: surveys, teacher responses, and the Nevada Writing Proficiency Examination scores of fifth grade students. The results were:

- Teachers reported high teacher efficacy for writing instruction.
- Teachers also reported greater dedicated time to writing.
- Teachers reported better writing instruction associated with BAW.
- Teachers reported better voice, word use, and overall writing quality.
- Teachers reported seeing greater growth in student writing achievement.
- Students were reported to have greater ownership of their writing and excitement for writing.
- Other student outcomes included improved communication, respect for fellow students, and listening skills.
- BAW was attributed to building classroom community through the collaborative activities and paired work, such as peer editing.
- BAW schools with more than one year of implementation had significantly higher NWPE fifth grade students than other schools within CCSD.

*Being a Writer* (BAW) was created by the Developmental Studies Center (2007). The Developmental Studies Center utilized research from the National Reading Panel and the National Council of Teachers of English Writing Initiative (Developmental Studies Center, 2012). BAW included elements of collaborative learning, writing in context, and teacher modeling. Specific instructional strategies focused on regular periods of writing, teacher and peer feedback, writing for an audience, and self-assessment.

Professional development is a critical element in improving instruction in the classroom. Several elements of successful professional development are required. First, professional development needs to focus on a specific content area (Borko, 2004; Clewell, et. al., 2004; Kennedy, 1998). In this case, the Developmental Studies Center and RPDP collaborated in supporting writing instruction in elementary schools.

Other factors are important as well. Researchers have determined that teachers need about 80 hours of professional development “face-time” before gains in student achievement occur (Clewell, et. al., 2004). How these hours are set up matter. Clewell found that professional development distributed throughout the school year is more effective than clumping it together as in-services within a few weeks. Finally, communities, or networks, of educators that allow teachers to explore and assess instructional methods act as a support to the professional development (Borko, 2004). Teachers provide support, explore ideas, and assist other teachers to customize instruction to the needs of specific classrooms.

The goal of this evaluation was to assess the effects of extending the initial professional development among teachers new to the *Being a Writer* curriculum. Teachers would engage in online discussions regarding writing instruction. A mediator would post prompts that teachers responded to and to each other. Teachers also attended a monthly meeting where they discussed

challenges and solutions to writing instruction. Professionals from the Developmental Studies Center, RPDP, CCSD and UNLV were available to provide support.

In evaluating this extended professional development, two phases of analysis were included. The first phase related to teacher perceptions. Surveys were administered online at the end of the academic year. Responses to prompts posted online through Google Documents were analyzed using qualitative data techniques. The second phase examined student achievement utilizing the fifth grade student scores from the 2012 administration of the Nevada Writing Proficiency Examination.

### Teacher Perceptions

Twenty-one teachers responded to the survey. The response rate was high with 65.6% of teachers responding. The average (mean) years of teaching reported were 14.8 years. Grades teachers were teaching were predominantly Grade One through Grade Five. Almost one-half of the teachers came from Grades Two and Five. Table 1 shows the breakdown by grade.

Table 1

*Reported teacher grade level of teaching*

Grade	Frequency	Percentage
One	1	4.8%
Two	5	23.8%
Three	3	14.3%
Four	2	9.5%
Five	5	23.8%
Other	5	23.8%
Total	21	100.0%

The reported average number of students in the classroom was 25.2 students. Two responses were not included since the number of responses were unusually high, probably

literacy specialists. On average, 59.8% of students were receiving Free or Reduced Lunch. Only 8.9% of these students were receiving special education services. Classes consisted predominantly of Hispanic students with 44.7% of the student body. White students made up 26.4% of this student population and 10.6% of these students identified as African American/Black. The full breakdown can be seen in Table 2. The ethnic representation closely paralleled the district population.

Table 2

*Ethnic breakdown of students by teacher report*

Ethnicity	Percent
White	26.4%
Hispanic/Latino	44.7%
African American/Black	10.6%
Asian	6.1%
Indian American	0.5%
Multi-ethnic/Multi-racial	10.4%

**Self-Efficacy**

The first section of the survey consisting of Likert items was adapted from Steve Graham and colleagues' *Teaching Efficacy for Writing* (Graham, Harris, Fink & MacArthur, 2001). Teachers were asked to assess their confidence in teaching writing. This instrument consists of two scales: Personal Teacher Efficacy and General Teacher Efficacy. The average teacher score of Personal Teacher Efficacy was 39.4 out of a total possible score of 54.0. The lowest score was 29 and the highest 48. The average teacher score for General Teacher Efficacy was 9.1 out of 18.0. The lowest score was five and the highest score was 14. Teacher efficacy for writing was much higher at the personal level than in general efficacy for writing.

Looking at individual questions, the most positive elements of writing instruction with no disagreement related to classroom management and redirecting students. Almost all teachers

were confident in other aspects including: finding multiple approaches to teach, using multiple approaches to teach, reteaching, their pedagogical knowledge (knowing how to teach), and their assessment practices. Teacher comments were more varied than the Likert items. For example, improvement in student writing was attributed to what was learned with BAW, but student maturity and family support were also identified as contributing factors. When asked about reteaching, teachers believed they could, but were not reteaching. One teacher revealed that reteaching occurs during conferencing. Much of the credit in improved writing was assigned to the BAW program by teachers.

Teacher confidence wavered when asked about reaching students with a wide range of abilities. Consistently, 71.0% believed not all students could be reached. Another 24.0% reported having trouble adjusting the instructional level for struggling students. Of responding teachers, 38.0% did not attribute student improvement to their extra effort. Only 24.0% of teachers believed that time in class writing provided little influence on student writing. Those teachers who commented on these questions had more positive remarks.

Correlations were analyzed between the *Teaching Efficacy for Writing* and the other two instruments, teachers' years of experience, class size, grade level, and classroom ethnic make-up. There were no statistically significant correlations between the *Teaching Efficacy for Writing* subscales and the other measures.

### **Teaching Writing Scale**

The Teaching Writing Scale consisted of two sections. The first section related to estimated time spent on writing instruction and aspects of writing in the classroom. Teachers reported that they spent approximately 310 minutes a week in writing instruction. The

breakdown of specific teacher instructional activities can be seen in Table 3. Teachers reported that students spent 221.5 minutes, on average (mean), in writing. Writing activities included planning, drafting, and revising.

Table 3

*Average (mean) teacher estimated time on writing activities*

Teaching Activity	Minutes Dedicated
Spelling	62.9
Grammar	55.0
Revising Strategies	52.9
Planning Strategies	47.1
Assessment	44.3
Word Processing Skills	34.5
Handwriting	13.1

The second section of this instrument was divided into five scales (Graham, Harris, Fink & MacArthur, 2000): Teaching the Writing Process, Students Working Together, Teaching Spelling, Teach Grammar, and Usage (only one of the two items was included), and the remaining miscellaneous items. For Teaching the Writing Process, the average scale score was 10.4 out of 15.0 points. This scale tracked teacher instructional strategy use. Teachers often taught organization and revising strategies. Sometimes teachers would teach planning strategies.

For Students Working Together, the average scale score was 8.1 out of a possible 10.0. This scale identified teacher perceptions of how often students worked with their peers, assisted their peers. Students often were engaged in peer work.

For the Teaching Spelling, the average for this scale was 5.6 out of 10.0. Teachers often taught spelling strategies. Seldom did teachers (First through Fifth Grade) teach how to write the letters of the alphabet. For the last scale, Teaching Grammar and Usage, the average response was 3.6, meaning that teachers often taught grammar and conventions.

For the other items, teachers reported that conferencing with students typically occurred weekly (52.4%) or monthly (47.6%). In general, students often selected their own writing projects and sometimes students worked at their own pace. Sometimes students would use computers for their writing. Teachers often taught grammar and conventions and often modeled writing strategies. Teachers reported that they retaught writing skills sometimes.

When asked about additional students support for weak writers, teachers responded that conferencing was the most common strategy. Peer tutoring and small group work were also common responses. Some teachers added that they would model more for weak writers.

The three scales: Teaching the Writing Process, Students Working Together, and Teaching Spelling were correlated with each other. There was a moderate, positive correlation between Teaching the Writing Process and Students Working Together, meaning frequent use of instructional strategies was associated with high collaboration among students. Teachers who reported high frequency of teaching spelling had fewer student collaborative opportunities. The correlation between Teaching the Writing Process and Teaching Spelling was not statistically significant. All three scales were correlated with the grade level taught meaning intermediate grades spent more time with writing instructional activities, spelling, and student collaborative activities than early childhood and primary grades.

### **Writing Orientation Scale**

The last 18 Likert items were part of Steve Graham and colleagues' Writing Orientation Scale (Graham, Harris, Fink & MacArthur, 2000). There were three subscales: Correct Writing, Explicit Instruction, and Natural Learning. The higher the score represented the higher teachers believed in these approaches.

For Correct Writing, the average scale score was 18.0 (out of 30) with the lowest score being 11 and the highest being 25. These teachers believed that writing instruction should include reminding students of correct spelling and grammar. They also believed students should be able to write good compositions in one draft.

For Explicit Instruction, the average scale score was 19.7 (out of 24) with the lowest score being 16 and the highest score was 23. Teachers believed strongly that writing instruction must be explicit including studying spelling, learning revising strategies and conventions.

For the Natural Learning scale, the average scale score was 16.5 (out of 24) with the lowest score being 9 and the highest 22. Teachers believed in, but to a lesser degree, lessons should occur as the need arises. These beliefs included learning by practicing writing and practice critiquing each other. The Natural Learning Scale had the single statistically significant correlation. There was a strong negative correlation between this scale and the percentage of Hispanic students in the classroom, meaning increases in the percentage of Hispanic students were associated with less practice writing and less writing in context. This finding may suggest that additional support may be necessary for Hispanic students for writing in context.

### **Qualitative Data**

As part of the initiative in the spring, besides monthly professional development meetings, teachers responded to online prompts. Two to three prompts were posted in Google Documents. Teachers would respond to the prompt and to each other. There were 10 prompts over four sessions. Documents were coded for content with 80 codes identified using MaxQDA software.

Often certain codes were direct responses to the prompts. The first question of the second sessions asked teachers what they have learned from recent classroom assessments. Most of the responses were coded as descriptions of classroom assessments. The second and third questions examined peer partnerships among students in the classroom. Most comments focused on partners and related topics such as community, collaboration, sharing work, teamwork and involving parents. For that second question, teachers also discussed student acquired skills, such as listening skills, being respectful, and student self-evaluations. In the third question, teachers elaborated less on student outcomes and focused on the teaching process, such as, student-teacher conferences, peer editing, and modeling writing for students. Student affect was also common in terms of student frustration, timidity, or pride in their work.

Not all coding were directly related to the prompts. The first question of the first session was a self-assessment, but the responses were more related to assessing the BAW program. This program evaluation was also heavily represented in the third session prompts: embedding writing traits in BAW, and integrating Common Core State Standards. Some discussed their pedagogical writing knowledge stemming only from the Southern Nevada Writing Project; others identified BAW workshops as their formal exposure.

Six main categories were generated from the codes: Program Evaluation, Student Outcomes, Teaching Process, Classroom Community, Student Affect, and Teacher Affect. Program Evaluation referred to comments directly evaluating BAW or a writing program such as *Step Up to Writing*, or comparisons to Lucy Calkins. Comments were very positive including categories that were separated from Program Evaluation, such as Student Outcomes, Student Affect, and Classroom Community. Teachers felt that BAW was well aligned with the Common Core Standards. Writing traits were embedded in BAW instead of being taught explicitly;

however, the primary grade teachers were more positive about how BAW address traits than the intermediate/middle grade teachers. The opinion about teaching organization was generally positive with some teachers believing more was needed and some teachers commenting that they supplement with other materials or approaches (*Thinking Maps*). BAW Teachers voiced that more focus should be given to conventions and grammar. Frustration was expressed particularly with conventions as part of the Nevada Writing Proficiency Exam.

Student Outcomes were all positive. There were 11 outcomes identified with the most prominent being growth seen in student writing ability. Teachers were very positive about the progress they had seen in voice, word use, and quality. A love for writing was also a common theme as was students saw themselves as writers. Several teachers commented that they “have never seen students so excited about writing.” Related were gains in student ownership. The other outcomes included better communication, asking questions, greater focus, respect for others, listening skills, self-evaluation skills and increased critical thinking.

Teaching Process referred to specific tasks, content or instructional strategies discussed online. This category had the highest number of codes. Those with the most traction were: assessment, writing across content areas, teaching revising, teaching conventions, conferencing with students, generating ideas, and modeling writing. Allocating instructional minutes was the biggest concern to teachers. Several teachers reported struggling with daily writing because of multiple scheduling demands. Some struggled with daily writing per se; others struggled with specific aspects such as conference, peer editing, and revising. Kindergarten teachers reported setting aside time for instruction was particularly difficult, except for those teachers who taught full-day kindergarten.

Assessment was one of the most common themes. Teachers reported using a variety of formative and summative techniques. Teachers reported feeling they were comfortable with what their students' abilities were as well as their weaknesses. Two teachers were concerned that the NWPE was different from the writing students had been doing during the year.

Writing preparation, according to teachers, was perceived by students as not writing. Student engagement decreased in regards to prewriting activities. Student resistance to these activities increased.

Writing across the curriculum was an emotional topic with teachers resistant in terms of embedding writing instruction into other content areas. Teachers asserted that writing needs to be taught within a specific block of time. However, exposure to writing and different types of writing should occur throughout the day. Teachers were dismissive of "integrating writing." The integrated writing work was described as short, written responses.

Conferencing with students was seen as a beneficial and popular. Teachers reported conferencing often with students. Conferencing was included as formative assessment and a means of providing feedback to students. There were also concerns about time allocated to conferencing as a whole and how much time to dedicate to individual students. One teacher reported conferencing with small groups instead of individuals.

As conferencing was seen as positive, the comments about conventions were not positive. Teachers were adamant that conventions, grammar, and spelling were essential aspects of writing and writing instruction. Two teachers identified that conventions have a significant role in the Nevada Writing Proficiency Exam. One teacher described the BAW approach to conventions as "students explore capitalization, punctuation, and spelling." Most of the frustration expressed was related to students not using conventions, punctuation, and spelling.

Conventions instruction is provided by the *Being a Writer* (personal communication, August 1, 2012). Teachers may have lacked the knowledge to access this material or may have chosen not to utilize it. Because of the structure of this evaluation, follow-up interviews were not an option. It was slightly different for fifth-grade teachers who did not see conventions in BAW and having to reteach. The need to reteach conventions conflicted with following the BAW structure. Two teachers did express that BAW does not adequately cover conventions instruction.

Teachers reported modeling writing frequently. Modeling writing was seen as a critical element of good writing instruction. One teacher reported modeling writing daily. Modeling was seen as having a positive effect upon student writing.

Revising and editing was the last topic that had significant amount of discussion. Teachers were frustrated with students' perceptions that once the writing was done, the assignment was done. Even if students understood that they need to revise their work, many students struggled with editing their own work. One teacher stated revising as "her students not interested in proofreading and revising." The BAW program is not mentioned in terms of how revising is supported. The focus is solely on engaging students in revising and editing.

Another outcome that was addressed separately was how the BAW supported the sense of classroom community. A number of elements were identified that contribute to the sense of community: students sharing work, collaboration within the classroom and working in pairs. Working in pairs was often described in peer editing activities. There was some discussion related to utilizing small teams or groups instead of pairings. Working with partners helped students who were struggling with revising. There was also a sense of accountability mentioned when students worked together. The increase in listening skills, asking questions, and being respectful were directly related to working in pairs.

Originally, affect was listed as one category. The focus was on reported student affect. Teacher affect began creeping up in the coding and was determined to be sufficiently significant to address on its own. Student affect was more positive than negative. There were terms such as timid, concerned, and frustrated related to students feelings about writing. Most were positive. Students were eager to write and share. They enjoyed writing and were excited for the writing block. Students were proud of their writing accomplishments.

There was a bridge between teacher affect and student affect. For example, students felt encouraged because of teacher excitement for writing. Besides excitement teachers reported feeling relaxed about writing instruction, confident, passionate, encouraged, and proud of their students. There were a couple of comments about feeling apprehensive about teaching writing in the first discussion. There was also some frustration reported in the first discussion in terms of the need to reteach and how best to provide feedback to students.

In summary, the BAW program was described positively and seen as being an effective means of supporting teachers in writing instruction. There were concerns about conventions instruction and making allowances for reteaching in the time table. Teachers saw multiple benefits in using the BAW program.

### **Student Achievement**

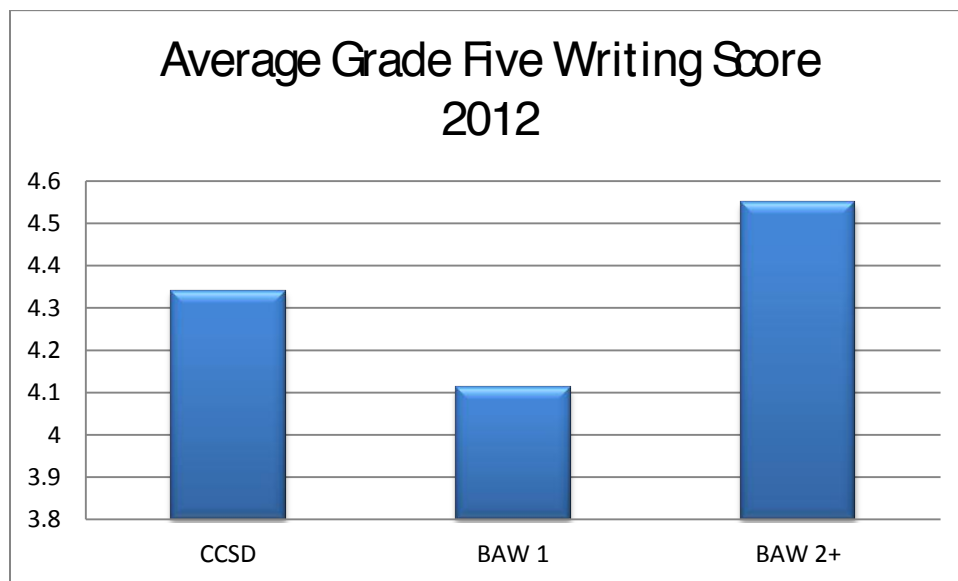
Differences in the fifth grade writing proficiency scores were examined through two different analyses using the Grade Five 2012 Nevada Writing Proficiency Exam. Schools with partial implementation of BAW were excluded from the analysis. The first analysis compared BAW schools to other schools in the district. Of the 23,900 available students, 9,517 fifth grade student scores were randomly selected. BAW was utilized by 33 schools. There were 184

elementary schools representing non-BAW CCSD schools. In comparing BAW schools to non-BAW schools, there was no difference in the mean writing score<sup>1</sup>. There was no difference in the achievement levels either<sup>2</sup>.

The second analysis of BAW schools were split by years of experience. This allowed for comparisons between those schools trying to implement BAW from those who were familiar with the program. This provided three groups: first year BAW, BAW with two or more years, and non-BAW schools. BAW schools with one or greater years of implementation also had higher writing scores than those schools who did not use BAW and those schools who were implementing BAW that year.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1

*Average CCSD fifth grade student writing scores 2012*



<sup>1</sup>  $t(9515) = 1.09$ , n.s.

<sup>2</sup>  $X^2 = 2.83$ , n.s.

<sup>3</sup>  $F(2, 99516) = 10.04$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .003$

In examining specific populations, a slightly different result occurs. Students in which English is a second language (ESL), those in which BAW was implemented in the first year, had higher achievement scores than the other two groups. There was no statistical significance between the non-BAW schools and those that had implemented BAW longer than one year. The caveat here was that there were only 18 ESL students at schools that had used BAW longer than one year. A larger sample is needed before any concrete conclusions can be made.

As for students who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), they responded well to the BAW program. Those in schools who were familiar with the program had the highest writing achievement scores, followed by non-BAW schools. Those students who had schools learning the new BAW program had the lowest scores. The IEP student results reflected the overall results, only with lower scores.

To summarize, those student initiating the first year of the BAW program have lower achievement scores across the board. This may stem from the specific characteristics of these schools. A second explanation may stem from initiating a new program with teachers who are learning the new program. The latter explanation coincides with teacher comments about not really understanding how to teach writing until they were involved in this professional development activity. Teachers experienced with BAW have the most success with non-ELL students.

## **Conclusion**

Data was collected from three measurement sources, NWPE scores, surveys and open-ended responses from teachers as part of professional development activities. There is consensus across these sources that the BAW program is beneficial to students. Gains in student writing were confirmed in both teacher perception and standardized test scores. NWPE scores for schools experienced with the program exceed the scores of students that do not utilize BAW.

Teachers attribute other outcomes to BAW including improved voice, word use, and overall quality. Teachers believed BAW superior qualities lie in the focus on revising, student conferences, and peer editing. Other individual student outcomes attributed to BAW include student ownership of writing, student excitement for writing, respect for other classmates, and improved listening skills. The focus on collaboration was considered a contribution to the classroom's sense of community.

After completing BAW workshops, teachers reported high teacher efficacy for teaching writing in elementary schools. These teachers perceived high competence in writing instruction. Teachers reported daily or weekly writing practice and a focus on students working together. Teachers also reported strong beliefs in explicit instruction for writing, students frequently engaged in writing, and in engaging students in critiquing each other's writing.

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## **APPENDIX**

### Teaching Efficacy for Writing

The internal reliability was good with a total scale Cronbach alpha of 0.74. The subscale reliability for the Personal Efficacy scale was 0.80 while the General Efficacy had a negative average covariance but an alpha of .47. A principal component analysis had four factors which accounted for 72.55% of the variability. Forcing the analysis to two factors accounted for 52.82%.

### Teaching Writing Scale

The full scale internal reliability was 0.76. The factor analysis generated five scales as in the original; however, they did not correspond to the same scales and items.

Table 4

*Correlations between Teaching Writing Scale subscales and grade taught*

	TWP	SWT	TS
TWP		0.45*	-0.26*
SWT			-0.62*
TS			
Grade	0.58*	0.62*	0.72*

### Writing Orientation Scale

The full scale reliability was .56 and ranged from .47 to .60 for the three subscales. The factor analysis produced seven factors accounting for 84.72% of the variance. When forced to three factors 54.40% of the variance was accounted. The items did not contribute to the same subscales. There was a strong negative correlation between this scale and the percentage of Hispanic students in the classroom,  $r = -0.55, p < 0.05$ .