**Improvement in Teachers’ Writing following an Intervention Program Meant to Enhance Students’ Writing of Argumentative Texts**

**Abstract**

This study focuses on the improvement in argumentative text writing that occurred among eight fifth-grade teachers after they took an intervention program meant to promote students’ writing achievements. The improvement in teachers’ knowledge of writing instruction was followed by an improvement in their own ability to write argumentative texts and of their self-perception as researchers. The improvement in the teachers’ writing prowess was assessed through several measures of writing, related mainly to the development of the ability to reason in order to substantiate an argument. The findings demonstrate the importance of settings of professional development at the elementary level in the fields of writing, writing instruction, and especially, argumentative writing.

Keywords: argumentative writing, professional development, teachers as writers, teaching knowledge, writing instruction

**Introduction**

In recent decades, argumentative writing has been a key component of curriculum reforms in schools around the world (Newell et al., 2011). As early as the 1990s, researchers have been claiming that teachers who write and experience success, enthusiasm, and confidence in their writing will serve as role models for their students (Emig, 1971; Geekie et al., 1999). Students’ motivation to write is grounded in their teacher’s beliefs and abilities as a writer because these factors shape students’ beliefs about themselves as writers (Daniels, 2018).

An argument is a complex verbal and social demarche that focuses on an interaction between two or more interlocuters that aims to resolve disagreements. Many researchers explain that participants in an argument try to convince each other of the correctness of their claims by applying a personal thought process in which they deliberately communicate with their interlocutor’s mental representation and expand or reduce a controversial point ofview (Berland & NcNeill, 2010; Crasnich & Lumbelli, 2005; Van Eemeren et al., 1996; Berrill, 1992; Crammond, 1998; Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Nussbaum et al., 2005; Allen et al., 2019). The complexity of an argumentative text stems in part from the writer’s need to engage in argumentational activities and textual activities simultaneously (Dellerman et al., 1996; Allen et al., 2019). Teachers are limited in their knowledge of how to create a reasoned argument and are unaware of the contentual and procedural knowledge required to produce argumentative writing (Beyer & Davis, 2008). In previous studies, various strategies are offered that may help teachers as writers to develop the ability to reason in argumentative texts in order to produce a coherent text that meets its goals:

**Setting specific goals for writing—**When teachers provide clear directions about what to include in the essay and encourage writers to persevere, allowing them to track their progress toward the overall goal, their writing performance may improve (Ferretti et al., 2005).

**Focusing on opposing positions and counterarguments—**Many writers tend to focus on advancing their argument and factors in support of it without addressing the opposing arguments (Felton & Kuhn, 2001; Kuhn & Udell, 2003). According to Walton (2007, 2011, 1989), [זה חסר בביבליוגרפיה] writers base their arguments on two goals—using counterarguments to support their arguments and invoking the possibility of challenging the opposing position by identifying weaknesses in it. In both, the writer must pay attention to the opponent’s position and counterarguments. According to Walton, novice arguers fail to attain the dual goals of argumentative discourse—identifying weaknesses in counterarguments and using them to support their own claims. It is also found (Mateos et al., 2018) that writers are able to refer to and even counter the other’s position when asked to do so explicitly. What is more, when writers are given goals for writing an argument that instruct them to provide solid support for their position and formulate counterarguments, they turned out high-quality argumentative texts (Ferretti et al., 2005).

**Linguistic components for use in creating and establishing dialogues between writer and reader—**According to various scholars (Fløttum et al., 2006; Hyland, 2001, 2005; Author b, 2012), dialogue includes the writer’s interaction with him/herself, with the reader, and with other texts. Typical linguistic devices for creating dialogues in an argumentative text include interrogatives, syntactic structures that express contrast and concession, and various rhetorical expressions.

**Producing a coherent and cohesive text—**Cohesion and connectivity are essential features in producing a logical and comprehensible unit of discourse (Kostopoulou, 2007). In argumentative texts, writers are expected to develop and explain arguments that support their position and to work efficiently in the writing process in order to produce a text that conveys a meaningful message, reflects their ideas, and is easy to understand for their readers, while complying with the rules of cohesion and connectivity. Therefore, it is important and even necessary to integrate these two elements into the curriculum such that teachers will teach the process and the rules explicitly (Crowhurst, 1981; Gao, 2012; Liu & Braine, 2005; Mutwarasibo, 2013; Yang & Sun, 2012).

***Professional Development for Writing Instruction***

Since the 1990s, a close relation between teacher quality and students’ academic achievements has been found repeatedly (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 1997; Nye et al., 2004; Rice, 2003; Rivkin et al., 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright et al., 1997). The effectiveness of writing instruction in elementary schools has been found to be mediocre. In a review of empirical works between 1990 and 2015 on teachers as writers. Cremin and Oliver (2017) showed that teachers have narrow perceptions about what is considered good writing and that multiple tensions are involved, related to teachers’ low self-confidence as writers and insufficient experience in writing and writing instruction. In Goldenberg et al. (2011), teachers admitted that they did not feel comfortable with the craft of teaching writing because they had not practiced it extensively during their professional development. Teachers who feel insecure in their knowledge of writing instruction feel incompetent or unwilling to teach writing and avoid doing so (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Cantrell & Hughes, 2008; Harward et al., 2014; Klehm, 2014; Mosenthal, 1995; Marculitis, 2017). In a random sample of fourth- to sixth-grade elementary-school teachers across the United States, nearly two-thirds of participants reported that their teacher-training courses in college had given them scant preparation for writing instruction (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Other studies propose professional development for teachers to guide them toward building knowledge of content and of effective instruction (Marculitis, 2017; Cantrell & Hughes, 2008; Parr & Jesson, 2016; Howell, et al., 2018; Joyce & Showers, 2002).

Initial training and professional-development programs provide teachers with opportunities to reformulate their attitudes and self-esteem as writers (Cermin & Oliver, 2017). Teachers of writing may develop new understandings that can enrich their pedagogy and influence their students’ achievements (Gennrich & Janks, 2013; St. John et al., 2004). By inference, the most effective way to improve student achievement in writing is to provide teachers with professional development that expands their knowledge of writing and writing instruction and changes their pedagogical beliefs about both (Wood & Lieberman, 2000; Bifuh-Ambe, 2013).

According to Swan (2003), professional-development workshops enable teachers to explore their writing skills and later guide them to translate the skills they acquire into effective classroom teaching. Research evidence supports the hypothesis that the effectiveness of teachers’ reading and writing instruction is contingent upon their becoming confident and enthusiastic readers and writers themselves (Atwell, 1987, 1991; Calkins, 1993; Commeyras et al., 2003; Gambrell, 1996; Gilespie, 1991; Graves, 1978, 1983, 1994; Mueller, 1973; Murray, 1985; Routman, 1991). Monte-Sano and Allen (2018) found that the level of sophistication of students’ written arguments depends on the teaching and guidance they receive from their teachers.

Teachers have difficulty with specific components of argument-writing instruction, such as finding evidence and arguments in support of a claim, and their understanding of the concept of reasoning is limited (Hillocks, 2010; Newell et al., 2011). Teachers are often unaware of concepts such as evidence or causal evidence and are therefore unable to effectively incorporate explicit teaching of reasoning and argumentation into their classroom teaching. Thus, expanding teachers’ knowledge of writing text for argumentative purposes is essential to promote the development of reasoning and argumentation among students (McNeill, 2009; McNeill & Pimentel 2010). Finally, teachers’ professional development that focuses on argumentation instruction helps its participants to acquire a better understanding of the essence of an argumentative text (McNeill & Knight, 2013).

**The Current Study**

Given the global need to improve the quality of students’ writing and to test the impact of different types of writing interventions tailored to students’ needs (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Rosário et al., 2019), we base this article on a broad study that examined the improvement of students’ achievement in writing after their teachers participated in a professional-development program. Only some of the findings are reported below: those that focus on the connection between the elaboration of teachers’ knowledge of writing instruction and the improvement of their own writing abilities and their self-perception as writers, following an intervention program that proposed to improve students’ ability to write text for argumentative purposes. Thus, the research question is whether and how a process of professional development meant to promote student achievements in writing enhanced the teachers’ own achievements in writing argumentative texts.

***Method***

This experimental mixed-method study relies on paradigms from qualitative research and invokes a quantitative method to measure the impact of the intervention program on the achievements of eight teachers in writing texts for argumentative purposes. The investigators were involved in the intervention program and its guidance. The current study relies on the findings of a broader study that examined the students’ and teachers’ performance before and at the end of the intervention program (Author a, 2019). The students’ outcomes are not reported in this article.

***Participants***

The participants were eight Hebrew-language teachers who took an advanced professional-development training program (henceforth ‘the training program’) in which they learned about the writing process in general, and how to perfect the instruction of writing argumentative text in particular, by applying diverse instructional practices. They then applied this knowledge in their classes. The intervention was performed among eighty Hebrew-speaking fifth graders, mostly native Hebrew speakers, who were students of the teachers who participated in the training program.

***The Intervention Program***

Based on previous studies that aimed to enhance students’ writing by means of their teachers’ professional development (e.g., Graham & Harris, 2018; Graham et al., 2013) and in accordance with the language-development curriculum at the elementary level, the intervention program provided teacher-training in ten three-hour sessions across a full year, accompanied by the application of what was learned in the participants’ classrooms. The process took place under the guidance of one of the investigators, who serves as a national instructor for teachers in the field of language education in elementary schools. Although approximately twenty teachers took part in the training, only eight gave their consent to participate in the study; therefore, the information and findings that follow refer to them only. The goals of the program were to expand the teachers’ knowledge of writing, foster their positive self-efficacy and self-confidence in writing, and broaden their teaching knowledge so that they could teach writing in the classroom and improve their students’ writing by so doing. The program included improving the teachers’ understanding of the process of writing texts in general and argumentative texts in particular, experience in writing argumentative texts, and evaluating them on the basis of theoretical models. The learning process included activities such as identifying linguistic-rhetorical components in argumentative texts, classroom exercises in contemplating a problem or issue from various points of view, and learning new strategies for improvement of reasoning, such as linguistic components for the creation and maintenance of a dialogue between writer and reader, tools for producing a coherent and connected text, using appropriate syntactic and discursive structures for presenting counter-arguments, carrying out authentic [= real-life?] tasks in which the goal and the readership are well defined, and participating in a collaborative argument writing exercise. The teachers were exposed to new ways of developing the ability to reason and expand their argumentative content in order to produce high-quality and well-reasoned argumentative texts that include different points of view. In the advanced training sessions, discussions were held and written products of the teachers and their students were analyzed. The joint discussions focused on ideas for encouraging dialogic writing, such as examining contrary positions—for example, by asking questions that addressed the other’s views or by creating diagrams of arguments for and against a certain position. The teachers also experienced writing in accordance with the genre and purpose of the text. As mentioned, to examine the impact of this learning on the teachers’ personal progress in writing, they had to write two argumentative texts: one at the beginning of the program and another at its end.

Another experience that the teachers had during the training program was keeping a personal blog. Teachers were asked to express every week thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and feelings about their personal learning experience, describe their classroom experience following what they had learned in the program, and present insights about it. At the end of the training program, the participants shared their data-rich personal blogs with the investigators for use in the qualitative analysis.

While participating in the training program, the teachers applied the knowledge they acquired in their classrooms. This knowledge included explicit instructional practices for writing an argumentative text, with emphasis on content development and expansion of reasoning. In the course of these classroom experiences, their students were instructed to pay keen attention to the purpose of their writing, identify the readership and the context, and give these elements a place in their writing in order to create a text tailored to the readers. They also learned to set aside time for joint thinking and discussion in order to plan the text and to emphasize writing arguments, counter-arguments, and refutation by means of contrastive structures (antithesis and concession).

***Research Tools***

*Writing Assignments*