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Preventing Children's Writing Difficulties Through Specific Intervention in the Home

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1. Introduction

In recent times there has been a wealth of studies, both from the empirical (Bodovski & Youn, 2010, Burnett & Farkas, 2008; Mensha & Kiernan, 2010; Powell, Son, file, & John, 2010; Robledo & Garcia, 2009; Xia, 2010; Yun & Kusum, 2008) and from the legal point of view, confirming the need to consider the family, and especially parents, in educational processes, both due to their natural impact on student learning and for their potential to successfully stimulate students (Cayo, 2008; Hegarty, 2008; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2009; Rogers, Wiener, Marton, & Tannock, 2009). Moreover, in the European context, given the constant changes the education systems are facing and the increasing educational requirements (Novoa, 2010), the context that supports the important role of parents in the academic progress of their children is especially relevant.

Nowadays, skills development it an established priority (Muñoz, 2008). Skills development is defined as the sets of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to transfer and apply knowledge from different areas and subjects to reality in order to understand it and solve real problems with expertise and efficiency across different types of contexts (Junta de Castilla y León [Government of the Region of Castile and Leon], 2009). So from this perspective, it is believed that the involvement of people and everyday environments in students' lives could be an excellent supplement to formal educational institutions in their efforts to empower children to develop lifelong learning applicable to real life. When we take into account the fact that the natural context where students spend more time other than school is the family it becomes apparent how ideal it is to involve parents in the improvement of basic skills, including the most important area in compulsory education – linguistic communication competence (Fernández, 2007).

Communicative competence refers to the use of language as a means of oral and written communication, learning, building one's thinking and personal and behavioral regulation. It is therefore highly relevant in the field of education and is very applicable to the social field, which means it can be approached through different contexts (Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000; Hood, et al., 2009; Reyes, Alexandra, & Azuara, 2007; Strasser & Lissi, 2009). Thus, the goal of educators is to train competent communicators to operate naturally in different everyday communicative contexts that involve both the use of oral language and reading and writing (Pérez & Zayas, 2007). However, despite the triple configuration of this competence, empirical experience confirms that its stimulation in schools tends to offer a

limited systematic treatment of writing, especially with regard to text composition (Fabregat, 2009; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Lecuona, Rodríguez, & Sánchez, 2003). Meanwhile, at home, the parents themselves, in their natural process of encouraging their children's communicative development, sometimes also seem to forget writing (Cusumano, 2008). Consequently, the writing aspect of communicative competence is poorly addressed by schools and families, which tend to focus, when they devote their attention to writing, primarily on mechanical elements. They do so to the detriment of the more complex issues, aspects of higher order that would lead to true written competence, and whose complexity, according recent theoretical models, requires greater attention. This model emphasizes that writing is a highly demanding task, dependent on several modulating factors of cognitive and emotional nature, that requires the implementation of a set of specific mental processes related to planning, editing and revising the text, which require a big cognitive effort and mean it is unlikely for students to complete them successfully exclusively through the use of natural abilities (Alamargot & Chanquoy, 2001; Galbraith & Torrance, 1999; Graham, 1999; Kellogg, 2008; MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2006; Wong, 1999; Wray, 1998). Consequently, it is argued that learning to write requires explicit instruction that promotes and facilitates it.

At present, the complexity of the process of composing written texts is widely recognized, as well as its practical nature as a socially applicable communication tool. All of this points to the need to take action to overcome traditional cultural limitations in its teaching. The development of this skill can take place in the context of everyday communication, the family context being one of such settings (Pardo, 2009).

In line with the above, research confirms that the habit of writing is more common in students whose families provide models and positive attitudes towards written composition tasks (Reyes, et al., 2007; Romero, 2007). It also states that the daily writing activities carried out at home, where children and parents interact, exert an important influence on students understanding the usefulness of writing, awakening a love of it in them (Lacasa, Gomez, Queen, & Cosano, 1999). Similarly it has been shown that children acquire the ability to perform better text compositions when these tasks are carried out in context with real communicative purposes (Reyes, et al., 2007).

Aware of this, some practitioners have developed guidelines on how to assist families with children in the stimulation of writing through natural tasks and by offering models that demonstrate its applicability (Elish-Piper, 2010; Rasinki & Padaka, 2009). Meanwhile, other teams of professionals have increased the role of parents in the teaching of writing, implementing specific training programs, in which parents are taught strategies to successfully develop children's literacy, help them with their homework or increase the number of activities that involve writing at home (Axford, 2007; Saint Lauren & Giasson, 2005). Other practices undertaken at the empirical and practical level, focus on the prevention or treatment of learning difficulties in this area through family support. Generally, these give parents advice, through home visits or regular meetings, on how to help their children with writing. They are also taught patterns for enriching the literacy environment of the home, activities for working with children and basic notions about the importance of providing feedback or reinforcement. Usually, these practices are highly effective. They have shown how families' interventions cause students to adjust their pace of learning to the level expected for their age or level of education, and even manage to overcome their specific difficulties to improve their writing further (Feiler, 2003; Jones & Christensen, 1999).

This evidence confirms that parents, with adequate support, can develop students' written competency, thus demonstrating the potential and effectiveness of direct intervention (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Lacasa , et al. 1999; Neuman, Hood, & Neumam, 2009; Persampieri, Gortmaker, Daly, Sheridan, & McCurdy, 2006; Reyes et al. 2007; Romero, 2007). Nevertheless, specialized research is still scarce, especially when compared to the set of empirical research on family collaboration to stimulate oral language and reading (Lozano, Galian, & Cabello, 2009; McElvany & Arlet, 2007; Policastro, Mazeski, & McTague, 2010). It is also limited in relation to the age of the children, the type of skills addressed or the process of training offered to parents (García & Fidalgo, 2003; Montealegre & Forero, 2006).

These findings justify the development of research that analyzes the ability of families to contribute to the teaching of written composition from cognitive-communicative perspectives, as well as the need to develop and empirically validate the effectiveness of parent training programs aimed at enabling them to increase their involvement in the optimization of this competence, which is precisely the purpose of our research study. We intend to broaden the field of research regarding written composition, seeking to overcome some of the constraints identified in the teaching and study of this competence, mainly related to the intervention in central aspects belonging to different communicative contexts.

Thus, the first objective of this study is to explore the effectiveness of an intervention program in written composition, focusing on the written product and the activation of higher cognitive processes involved in word processing, to increase the children's performance in writing, both in terms of its product and of the process, and to optimize other motivational-affective variables. The aim is also to find if any improvements are stable in time and if not, generalize to different textual typologies. The secondary objective of the research project is to find out whether there are differential effects on program effectiveness in relation to the environment (school and home) and the figures (parents and teachers) involved in its implementation. The third objective is to determine whether increasing parental involvement in writing homework is sufficient to improve outcomes for children or whether families require prior training to enable them to do so. This objective seeks to find the effectiveness of parent training specifically aimed at enabling them to teach written composition by helping with homework. Finally, in line with this, we studied the children's awareness of parents' help and their assessment of it.

To achieve this, we used four experimental groups according to the modality of written composition intervention students had received in connection with the degree of implication of agents in charge of implementing it. In the first one, called EFP (parental training school), parents, after training at a school, implemented the intervention program in written composition with their children at home through the use of homework. Teachers, meanwhile, continued the regular process of teaching writing, except they increased the amount of homework related to the composition of written texts to meet the demands of the research project. In the second group, called PAD (parents help in homework), teachers operated similarly, while the parents increased their assistance with text writing homework, without receiving any specific prior training. In the third group, called PRO, it was teachers themselves who carried out the intervention program in the classroom, while families acted as usual, not having been asked for any specific collaboration. In the last group (CO, ordinary curriculum), teachers maintained the traditional teaching of writing and families offered children the usual academic support.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

For the purpose of this research we needed the collaboration of students and their parents. The sample was made up of 112 primary school children, with ages ranging from 10 to 13 (mean = 10.46 years), distributed according to study groups, grade and sex as shown in Table 1.

	PRO			EFP			PAD			CO		
	Boys	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*
5th grade	11	11	22	8	8	16	5	8	13	7	6	13
6th grade	7	6	13	6	4	10	6	6	12	7	6	13
Total Sx/Gr	18	17	35	14	12	26	11	14	25	14	12	26

Table 1. Sample of students according to their experimental group, course and sex

All participants attended school regularly and none of them had any specific educational support needs. The children of the different groups did not initially differ, according to our pretest in any of the assessed variables.

As for families, the following table describes the main characteristics of the parents that were actively involved.

	Sex		Age			Child's grade		Parent's highest level of education achieved			Labor market participation	
	Men	*Women*	*Mi*	*Ma*	*M*	*5th*	*6th*	*Primary*	*Secondary*	*University*	*Active*	*Non active*
EFP	0%	100%	36	52	42	62%	38%	12%	41%	47%	56%	44%
PAD	8%	92%	33	51	41	52%	48%	36%	48%	16%	72%	28%

Table 2. Characteristics of EFP and PAD family groups

In the other two study groups family collaboration was not explicitly required although their main features may be of interest. Their ages ranged from 32 to 52 years, with a mean age of 42.9. In terms of levels of education, 21% had reached primary, 50% secondary and 29% higher education. Finally, 77% were working, while 23% were stay at home parents.

2.1.1 Sample selection

The process of selection and distribution of the sample across different groups followed a procedure which aimed to achieve a correct and comparable distribution of participants to experimental conditions.

First, to select the schools, we took several criteria into account with the aim of achieving the maximum possible similarity between them, both with regard to their structure and organization, and with regard to the characteristics of students and families. Specifically, we selected state schools in which the teachers' profile, teacher-student ratios and the availability of human and material resources or infrastructures were similar. In addition, these centers hosted middle-class families with traditional structures and were mostly Spanish. Finally, based on the objectives of our the research and considering the interests and availability of schools and families we established the need to involve four schools. As noted, we tried to control their differences, thereby trying to overcome the possible handicaps resulting from the impossibility of making a completely random distribution of participants to experimental groups, as the involvement of parents and teachers was voluntary.

Of the institutions addressed, two of them declined the option of increasing family collaboration, and were thus assigned to the PAD and EFP experimental groups. In these cases, only the parents who showed interested in family training were enrolled in it, which determined the group of students in EFP. Other parents of those schools, unable to attend the training sessions, chose the option of assisting their children more actively with writing assignments and were assigned to the PAD group. Therefore, children in groups FP and PAD were enrolled in the same schools, were classmates and had the same teachers, so that one group served as control for the other. PRO was carried out at a third school. The faculty of the third cycle of primary was responsible for the direct implementation of the intervention program in written composition in 5th and 6th year of primary. The last school took part in the CO group. It therefore only carried out the relevant assessments of students in grades 5 and 6, maintaining the ordinary curriculum regarding teaching of writing and regular family help with homework, thus also acting as a control for the PRO group.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Performance assessment in written composition: product and process measures

To evaluate the written performance of students we sought to cover their written products as cognitive processes activated in word processing, using different tools previously validated by the research team.

Product Measures

The written products were evaluated using two types of measures, some based on objective evidence collected in the text or text-based measures (MBT). Others used subjective criteria, based on the overall interpretation of the text by the reader (MBL). Table 3 lists the parameters included in the MBT, as well as the criteria to be observed by the reader to estimate their subjective ratings.

We would like to emphasize that since all these measurements, imply an opinion, assessment or interpretation on the part of the evaluator, corrections were made by two experts who worked independently. We then calculated their rates of agreement, which ranged overall between quite high (between kappa 0.6 and 0.8) and very high (kappa greater than 0.8 points).

ASPECT	ASSESSMENT
	Text-based measures
Title	Presence or absence of a title, yes or no.
Productivity	Total no. of words: content, functional and determinants.
Coherence	Referential coherence: referential and lexical indicators Relational coherence: structural and meta-discursive (structuring, connectors, reformulated and argumentative).
Other coherence measures	Relevant ideas. Correct link between the ideas. Coherent and well defined paragraphs. Coherent storyline.
Structure	Introduction, body and conclusion.
	Reader-based measures
Structure	On a scale of 1 to 4, we assessed the presence in the text of: introduction, purpose and theme, signs of structure, organized and structured development, paragraph coherence and unity and conclusion.
Coherence	On a scale of 1 to 4, we assessed compliance of the text with parameters such as identification and presentation of the topic without digressing, presence of a context to guide the reader, organization of details in a plan, distinguishable presence of links connecting sentences/paragraphs, flow at the conclusion of speech and sense of purpose.
Quality	On a scale of 1 to 6, we evaluated: clear sequence of ideas, good idea organization, vocabulary, variety of details, correct sentence structure, punctuation and spelling.

Table 3. Textual measures based on the text and on the reader

Process Measures

To measure the activation and deployment of cognitive processes involved in writing tasks we used a variation on Kellogg's triple task (Olive, Kellogg, & Piolat, 2002) that had been used previously by the research team in several research projects (García & Fidalgo, 2006; Torrance, Fidalgo, & García, 2007). This technique works as follows: as students are writing their texts, they hear an audible signal (beep) distributed randomly over time (with a mean onset interval of forty-five seconds), when they must make a direct and immediate retrospection on their thoughts and actions and choose between seven response categories that assess the major cognitive processes involved in writing. For planning, the categories used were: read about the subject, think about the content and develop an outline. As for the editing process, the category included was writing a text. Finally, to assess the review process we considered categories of reading and changing text. Finally, we added a seventh category called "not related to the task".

Prior to the self-reports, students were trained through example to identify and memorize the seven categories. After this, in order to verify the reliability of the process, we presented them with a case study with a total of 25 possible items that Luis, our example of a student,

carried out when writing (e.g. Luis thinks "What things can I tell about my city?"). Students had to identify to which of the 7 categories each of the 25 items belonged. When we compared the children's result with that of an independent expert we obtained an average agreement of .957 (kappa index). Students were then asked to write their own text and record their progress on a writing log.

2.2.2 Instruments for the evaluation of motivational-affective elements

A second group of scales were intended to meet different motivational-affective aspects of how students relate to writing, specifically to examine their attitudes, attributional patterns and perceptions of self-efficacy.

Attitudes

The survey of attitudes toward writing, included in the test evaluation of planning and writing psychological factors (EPP and FPE, Garcia, Marbán, & de Caso, 2001), allows us to evaluate students' attitudes toward writing tasks. It consists of ten items - statements to which children have to respond "yes", "no" or "neither agree nor disagree" depending on how well each claim applies their own real attitudes.

Attributions

The questionnaire Motivation to Write II (MOES II, Garcia, Marbán, & de Caso, 2001), examines the actions performed by students in essay writing tasks. It allows us to see whether students attribute their success/failure to their own work, effort, ability or luck. It consists of thirty-two claims in eight scales based on the attribution component considered. Children must respond according to their degree of agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Self-Efficacy

The Self-Efficacy in Written Composition Questionnaire (developed by the research team) considered all the high and low cognitive level factors that are involved and influence the writing of texts and over which a person can exert voluntary control. It consists of twenty items evenly distributed among low and high cognitive level processes. Ten items measured mechanical processes such as calligraphy, layout, spelling and grammar and the remaining ten covered substantive processes categorized into information generation, prior knowledge, organization, monitoring, and draft review. The scale asks the student to what extent s/he thinks s/he can achieve/include each item in a text (e.g.: To what extent can I write my text with correct spelling? To what extent can I include many ideas in the text?). Each response is graded on a scale of 0-100, where 0 means "very sure not to" and 100 means "very sure to". The questionnaire was explained and applied immediately before the start of the writing assignment.

2.2.3 Instruments to assess family involvement: Family Opinions (FAOP)

For the perception of children about parental involvement in education and in written composition of specific academic subjects we used the scales *Family opinions: parental implication in education* (FAOP-HI-IM) and *Family opinions: writing practice* (FAOP-HI-PRAES), which are widely described elsewhere (see chapter in this book).

2.3 Training programs

Here we describe, first of all, the instructional program for students in the EFP and PRO groups, and secondly, the training program developed with the parents group in the EFP group.

2.3.1 Instructional program in written composition

The instructional program in written composition, applied by the mothers in the EFP group and teachers in the PRO group, consists of eight intervention sessions. The order of the sessions was based on the objectives of the study and on the cognitive processes involved in written composition.

As for the teaching-learning procedure followed, each session consisted, in general, of an initial activation of prior student knowledge and then to proceeded to the presentation of new content and strategies, offering in most cases modeling and implementation of different strategies to this end, including the initial observation of the model and the subsequent practice of repeating in pairs or individually (depending on the session). We provided external expert feedback and finished by reviewing the content covered in the session. Table 4 presents a summary of the program by collecting the main elements of each session, its objectives and the teaching-learning process followed in both the EFP and PRO groups.

Focus	Objectives	Teaching-learning procedure
Motivation for writing. Overview of the process of written composition.	Increasing students' interest in writing, showing its relevance. Activate students' prior knowledge about the process of written composition. Provide students with the main processes involved in writing.	Explain the importance of explicit writing. Interactive stimulation of prior knowledge about the writing process, brainstorming. Transmission mnemonic rule "Perdidos" (Lost in Spanish) Writing a text (Family Adventures) and stimulating the use of writing in everyday tasks. - PRO: individual text written and read in class. Everyday classroom tasks (mail suggestions, friends little notes, etc.) - EFP: Family material. Daily chores (shopping list, notes, e-mail).
Text planning process	To develop students' ability to address the planning of texts effectively, according to their different threads. Promote the development of students' "PLAN-L" planning strategy, corresponding to	Session 2: Activation questions guided by prior knowledge about the writing process (remember "Perdidos"). Instruction on/explicit explanation of mnemonic strategy and Plan-L. Teacher models the use of strategy by thinking aloud based on the text

Focus	Objectives	Teaching-learning procedure
	the "P" in "Perdidos"	(Comparison-contrast- CC). - PRO: Children. - EFP: My school today and my parents' school. Joint teacher-students/mother-child development of first draft. Session 3: Text from previous session, strategy work in pairs. - PRO: pairs of students, a think-aloud, another feedback. Teacher supervision. - EFP: mother-student work together. The child thinks out loud, and the mother gives feedback. Public Reading (family/class) made text and displayed strategy used to encourage memorization.
Text editing process	Ensure that students acquire the skills necessary to properly edit text, spinning planning and editing. Encourage use of graphic organizer, "Child".	Session 4: Memory stimulation through guiding questions on the sequence of "Perdidos" and strategy PLAN-L. Explicit explanation and interactive editing using "Child" graphic organizer The instructor gives an example of its implementation based on the first text, highlighting the improvements resulting from its use. Session 5: Different applications according to their method of application. PRO: Work in pairs of students on a new text (CC: mammals and birds) to implement the PLAN-L strategy and the graphic organizer. Feedback from the instructor. EFP: mother-child work together on new text-duties (CC: fun today and our parents) using PLAN-L strategy and graphic organizer. Family feedback. Parent and child review the whole process.
Review process	To develop students' skills to deal with the review process, so that the text is of the highest possible quality.	Session 6: Understanding interactive strategy review process and REC. - PRO: Partners exchange the final text and review using the REC

Focus	Objectives	Teaching-learning procedure
	Facilitate learning strategy review "REC".	strategy, offering suggestions for improvement. Feedback from the teacher. - EFP: Mother and child apply the strategy to their joint review of the final text. They read the text to a relative before and after the review to be aware of their improvement. Review all processes and strategies to develop a text. Session 7: Development of an individual text CC (PRO: basketball, handball; EFP: Spanish families vs. families from other countries) with all materials. - PRO: Reading the text to large group and evaluation. - EFP: reading text in class (with the teacher's permission).
General essay writing process	Working in a joint process to compose texts encouraging use of any learned processes.	Session 8: The instructor goes over thinking aloud, and the text writing process (Perdidos: P: Plan-L, E: Editing, R: BER), using incomplete models that students have to detect and correct. Individual composition of a text, without teacher or material assistance. Checking with the help of the review of materials that they have followed all the steps, positive reinforcement, instructor corrects texts produced.

Table 4. Summary of the written composition instructional program implemented

According to the instructional pattern followed in the intervention program, the teaching procedure for written composition was based on the mnemonic and motivational aspect of the acronym Perdidos, on which we based the teaching of the various planning and text revision comparison-contrast strategies and introduces the use of a graphic organizer to guide the editing stage.

2.3.2 Parent training program

The parent training program consisted of six main foci, one per session which are detailed in Table 5, together with the methodology implemented.

The sessions maintained a structure that can divided into four interconnected stages. In the first stage, we started by remembering what was learned in previous sessions and

SESSION No.	MEETING	METHODOLOGY
Session 0	Participants and program presentation The importance of family performance Written composition: performance, everyday tasks.	PowerPoint presentation explaining instructor and program. Presentation of participants. Briefing and reasons to enroll in the training program. Reflections on the importance of the family in performance, in a large group. Explanation on the importance of writing. Set homework.
Session 1	Self-knowledge of writing skills Processes involved in written composition	Activating prior knowledge of the writing process working in a large group. Brainstorming. Instructor models writing process. Explanation of mnemonics of Perdidos. Presentation homework, simulation application. Role-playing instructor. Homework presentation and models of speech in your application (Perdidos and planning strategy PLAN-L).
Session 2	The school-family relationship. The text planning process	Discussion of advantages/disadvantages of cooperating with teachers. Discussed proposals of ways of effective and workable school involvement. Explicit explanation of the mnemonic strategy and Plan-L. Instructor models use of strategy, thinking aloud, in relation to the text the group is working on.
Session 3	The editing process	Activation of what was learnt regarding the writing using Perdidos and Plan -L strategies. Disaggregated presentation of graphic organizer to help in editing (Child). Instructor modeled thinking aloud, teaching children the complementary use of PLAN-L and Child organizer based on the acronym Perdidos. Sets of parents, role-playing, where mothers represent a parent and a child carrying out the teaching strategies. Instructor feedback. Setting homework, questions
Session 4	The importance of reinforcement. The review process	Exposure to different types of reinforcement, virtues and functions; personal use of large group analysis; every mother presents and focuses on the proper use of writing tasks. Activating prior knowledge and review of knowledge of writing strategy.

SESSION No.	MEETING	METHODOLOGY
		Practice in pairs of parents, role-playing, complete processing of a text with all the strategies. Instructor feedback. Homework presentation, questions.
Session 5	The potential of parental expectations General essay writing process.	Analysis of evidence of the potential for adult expectations to inform children's performance. Sharing of thoughts and opinions. Presentation of incomplete modeling and instructor implementation. Finding parents' mistakes, general review of the writing process. Presentation of homework, questions.
Session 6	Final evaluation	Program evaluation, suggestions for improvement, effects on children and writing. Exemplification of application of what was learnt to other types of texts.

Table 5. Synthesis program for parents

commenting on aspects of interest regarding its implementation at home. Immediately afterwards we activated parents' knowledge of the content that we were going to work on during that session and then proceeded to address it through various training activities. We generally used active learning methodologies, such as analysis and reflection on real life situations, practical assumptions or empirical information. We used group techniques such as guided discussions, collaborative work among peers, practicing together and reading and analyzing documents. Also, since we sought to build behavioral skills in parents who were offered conceptual and procedural knowledge in relation to higher order cognitive processes involved in writing, providing them with useful resources and strategies was important to enable them to transmit this knowledge to their children at home. We used techniques such as role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, cognitive modeling, thinking aloud, cognitive strategies to guide the writing process, and resources and tools such as graphic organizers and mnemonic pictures.

Finally, given the need to set the practical applications of what was learnt in the home, the different ways of application in the home were discussed and analyzed (which were related to writing assignments that teachers proposed as homework).

2.4 Procedure

We initially carried out the design of the approach and of the instructional program. Following this, we planned and developed the parent training program. This program was adapted from the Families Training School format. Once designed, we selected the potential schools to participate in the research project following the process described in the participants section.

Then, in the case of the schools that declined the inclusion of families (schools 1 and 2), we proceeded to send newsletters and open registration for the training school to all parents of students in grades 5 and 6. Only thirty four mothers enrolled, of which we only considered to be participants in the EFP group those whose attendance was over 95%, resulting in a total of 26. In these same schools, twenty-five additional families showed interest in the training initiative but had difficulty attending parent training. These were included in the PAD experimental group. As for the schools that had opted for the PRO group, we held a first meeting with the faculty on the program and all materials necessary for its implementation. Finally, we went to the fourth school to confirm their collaboration as a control group.

Immediately after this, we carried out a pre-assessment of all students, in their class groups, and proceeded to the implementation of the interventions. To this end, proper instructional groups, PRO and EFP were created. An expert not pertaining to the schools conducted the training for teachers and families respectively. In the case of the PRO group, the expert met with teachers on a weekly basis where the following meeting was prepared, and was also present in the classroom during most of their implementation to verify their correct application. As for the EFP group, we began with the development of parent training in which, in addition to training mothers to implement sessions with their children at home, they discussed their experiences in working cooperatively with their children. They raised the difficulties and doubts they were facing, allowing for the continuous evaluation of the appropriate application of the skills they were learning. The parent training sessions were held on school facilities during the second school term, fortnightly and lasting between 90 and 120 minutes, depending on the demands and availability of mothers.

This continuous monitoring of the process of training parents and teachers allowed us to evaluate the adequacy of the implementation of the intervention program.

We also held fortnightly meetings with all faculty in the PAD group, who were asked to set homework assignments based on the comparison-contrast text fixed by the researchers. They were also asked to organize them in a portfolio for each student for their timely collection. Thus, we ensured that the children in the PAD group also performed the proposed writing practices, but also, through periodic monitoring and verification of the portfolios (for all students), it was found that all participants had completed the tasks properly.

After the interventions we carried out an assessment of students. Then, within the following three months, we carried out a follow-up assessment to verify the stability of the improvements.

On completion of the fieldwork the expert staff carried out the correction of the assessment tests. Finally, we computerized the data for statistical analysis and obtained the results presented in the next section.

3. Results

The results presented were obtained by statistical treatment of data with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18.0.

First, we conducted an analysis of variance with repeat measures of 4 x 2 taking the repeated measure time (pre/post-test) as inter-subjects factor and the experimental group students belonged to (EFP, PRO, PAD, CO) as inter-factor.

Second, we conducted an analysis of the measures repeated 3 X 3. We considered the group as intersubject factor (PRO, EFP and PAD, as the CO group was not evaluated after three months due to lack of availability) and as intra-subject factor the repeated pretest, posttest and follow-up measures.

3.1 Effects of interventions on written composition performance

We first present the results relating to products written on the cognitive processes activated in the drafting of the texts.

Product Measures

Multivariate contrasts of variance showed statistically significant results and a large size effect for all measures based on the text and the reader, as shown in Table 6.

Between-effects tests show statistically significant differences in text-based indicators of productivity [$F_{(3, 108)} = 7.169$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .166$], referential coherence [$F_{(3, 108)} = 11.241$, p<.001, $\eta^2 = .238$], relational coherence [$F_{(3, 108)} = 24.245$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .402$], overall consistency [$F_{(3, 108)} = 18\ 506$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .340$], other measures of consistency [$F_{(3, 108)} = 11.927$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .249$] and overall structure [$F_{(3, 108)} = 38\ 367$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .516$], as well as structure [$F_{(3, 108)} = 40.055$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .527$], consistency [$F_{(3, 108)} = 14701$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .290$], quality reader-based indicators [$F_{(3, 108)} = 11.606$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .244$] and the resulting total [$F_{(3, 108)} = 22.842$, p <.001, $\eta^2 = .388$] in all cases, with a large size effect.

Post-hoc analyses have shown statistically significant changes across groups following the implementation of different instructional methods. The data is shown in the Table 7.

This analysis shows a significant improvement in all text-based measures and in the reader of the groups who developed the specific interventions for the EFP and PRO groups, compared to CO and PAD groups.

Three months after the implementation of the various forms of intervention, we detected that in groups where actual instruction had taken place there was a partial maintenance of the gains resulting from the interventions. In these cases, as in the case of text-based measures, although there were significant decreases between the post-test and follow-up in overall coherence and other consistency items, there was significant improvement vis-à-vis the initial situation (pretest). Regarding structure, the gains following the implementation of the different interventions were almost entirely maintained within the three months following the intervention. As for reader-based measures, we detected maintenance and even further development compared to the post-test.

The application of learning to other types of text was also corroborated. In this case, we saw a considerable improvement in the follow-up compared to the pretest (p = <.001) in the EFP and PRO groups, compared to the PAD group in the *other coherence* text-based measures (pretest comparison-contrast: $M_{PRO} = 1.2$, $M_{EFP} = 0.9$ and $M_{PAD} = 1.2$; coherent storyline: $M_{PRO} = 2.2$, $M_{EFP} = 2.8$ and $M_{PAD} = 1.1$) and *structure* (pretest: $M_{PRO} = 1.1$, $M_{EFP} = 1.1$ and $M_{PAD} = 1.3$;

Table 6. Results of repeated factorial measures designed 4 x 2, measures of written product

Variables	EFP (n = 26)				PRO (n = 35)				PAD (n = 25)				CO (n =26)			
	M pre	SD Pre	M post	SD Post	M pre	SD pre	M post	SD post	M pre	SD pre	M post	SD post	M pre	SD pre	M post	SD post
Text-based measures																
Productivity	74.85	44.31	91.96	21.04	72.86	23.63	90.68	31.42	63.68	28.36	66.88	27.13	76.19	21.37	49.46	22.53
C. referential	6.42	4.95	13.04	4.10	8.11	5.32	12.11	6.18	5.04	3.42	7.48	5.41	6.73	4.73	4.04	3.96
C. relational	5.85	4.04	12.31	2.90	5.43	2.31	12.03	5.22	4.92	2.73	5.64	3.30	4.92	2.56	3.77	2.55
C. total	12.27	8.31	25.35	6.34	13.54	6.69	24.14	10.88	9.96	5.21	13.12	7.84	11.65	6.74	7.81	6.13
Others C.	0.96	0.77	3.08	0.84	1.20	0.83	2.71	0.89	1.20	1.04	1.52	1.08	1.38	0.85	0.69	0.88
Structure	1.15	0.46	2.81	0.40	1.14	0.43	2.69	0.53	1.28	0.54	1.24	0.52	1.19	0.40	1.23	0.51
Reader-based measures																
Structure	.69	.61	3.08	0.89	0.85	0.49	2.63	1.06	0.68	0.62	0.92	0.75	0.73	0.45	0.46	0.58
Coherence	1.23	0.71	2.96	0.87	1.20	0.67	2.63	0.87	1.2	0.95	1.36	0.95	1.30	0.61	1	0.74
Quality	1.57	0.85	3.38	0.94	2.08	0.61	3.34	1.02	1.76	0.92	2	0.76	2.11	0.58	1.69	0.83
Total	3.53	2	9.81	2.26	4.22	1.68	8.97	2.66	3.84	2.56	4.44	2.25	4.15	1.43	3.27	1.97

flow of argument: M_{PRO} = 2.3, M_{EFP} = 2.8 and M_{PAD} = 1.5) and in all the reader-based measures including the total (pretest comparison-contrast: M_{PRO} = 4.2, M_{EFP}=.4 and M_{PAD} = 3.8; flow of argument: M_{PRO} = 6.7, M_{EFP} = 8.7 and M_{PAD} = 3.2).

Variables	EFP vs. PRO	EFP vs. CO	EFP vs. PAD	PRO vs. CO	PRO vs. PAD	PAD vs. CO
Text-based measures						
Productivity	n.s.	.008	.028	.009	.035	n.s.
C. Referential	n.s.	.001	.017	<.001	.003	n.s.
C. Relational	n.s.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	n.s.
C. total	n.s.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	n.s.
Others C.	n.s.	<.001	.017	<.001	.022	n.s.
Structure	n.s.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	n.s.
Reader-based measures						
Structure	n.s.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	n.s.
Coherence	n.s.	<.001	<.001	<.001	.003	n.s.
Quality	n.s.	.024	.018	<.001	<.001	n.s.
Total	n.s.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	n.s.

Table 7. Post-hoc contrasts in the textual product measures

Process measures

Following the process measures, multivariate contrasts and inter-subject effects tests show statistically significant differences in overall task frequency [$F_{(3, 108)}$ = 3.409, p = .020, η^2=.087], frequency of making an outline or draft [$F_{(3, 108)}$ = 4.250, p = .007, η^2 = .106] and percentage of time thinking about ideas [$F_{(3, 108)}$ = 4141, p = .008, η^2 = .103].

The post-hoc analysis showed a significant improvement in the groups that received explicit instruction in writing processes (EFP y PRO) compared to the CO and PAD. Thus, the EFP group increased the total task frequency compared to CO (p = .022; pretest: M_{EFP} = 15.7 and M_{CO} = 19.7; post-test: M_{EFP} = 25.8 and M_{CO} = 14.2) and in time preparing a draft (pretest: M_{EFP} = 0.07 and M_{CO} = 2.1; post-test: M_{EFP} = 5.5 and M_{CO} = 0.3). This general increase in the time spent drafting was also significant among the PRO and CO groups (p=.032; pretest: M_{PRO} = 0 and M_{CO} = 2.1; post-test: M_{PRO} = 6.3 and M_{CO} = 0.3).

3.2 Effects of interventions on the motivational and contextual elements

Regarding attitudes, multivariate contrasts do not show statistically significant results.

When looking at attributions, on the other hand, the results were statistically significant regarding time-intervention interaction in the failure-effort attributional pattern [F (3, 108)=3.545, p = .017; η^2 = .090]. The inter-subject effects test was also statistically significant [F (3, 108) = 2.800, p =.044, η^2 = .073] and post-hoc contrasts showed differences very close to statistical significance between EFP and PAD groups (p = .059), both showing a decrease from pretest to post-test (pretest, M_{EFP}= 11.40 vs. M_{PAD}= 9.04; post-test, M_{EFP} = 9.96 vs. M_{PAD}=. 80).

As for self-efficacy, multivariate contrasts show statistically significant results in the time-treatment interaction in both areas – mechanical [F (3, 108) = 3.453, p = .019, η^2 = .088] and fundamental [F (3, 108) = 6.560, p = <.001, η^2 = .154] - with medium and large size effects,

respectively. However, the pre/post differences in interaction with the intervention in the trial of inter-subject effects was not statistically significant for mechanical [F (3, 108) = 1.479, p = .224, η^2 = .039] nor fundamental indicators [F (3, 108) = 2.330, p = .078, η^2 = .061] so we chose to individually analyze some items of interest. In this case, significant differences were found in item number 11 - organization of ideas into paragraphs [F (3, 108) = 6.277, p = .001, η^2=.148]. The inter-subject effects test confirmed this [F (3, 108) = 4.329, p = .006, η^2 = .107] and the post-hoc indicated that the only differences were between the CO and the EFP (p=.032), PAD (p = .043) and PRO (p = .035) groups. These groups somewhat improved their writing practices in all measures (pretest, Mco = 60.1, M_{EFP} = 62.4, M_{PAD} = 70.7 y M_{PRO} = 67.4; post-test, Mco = 47.7, M_{EFP} = 84.1, M_{PAD} = 74.7 y M_{PRO} = 76.03).

Three months after completion of the intervention, in general there have not been statistically significant changes in any of the motivational-emotional elements.

3.2.1 Family opinions: Implication and writing practice

This time we designed 2x2 repeated measures because only PAD and EFP students completed this scale. Thus, the intra-subject factor considered as the repeated measure was the pre/post-test and the inter-subject factor was the experimental group students belonged to.

Multivariate contrasts showed no statistically significant results for any of the FAOP-PRAES variables. They did, however, for three IM FAOP - Total: home involvement [F (1.47)=4.529, p = .039, η^2 = .088], school involvement [F (1.47) = 4.529, p = .039, η^2 = .088] and total involvement [F (1,47) = 8.720, p = .005, η^2 = .156].

The intersubject effects tests show statistically significant differences in indicators of home involvement [F (1.47) = 3.985, p = .052, η^2 = .078], in school [F (1.47) = 8.427, p = .006, η^2=.152] and [F (1.47) = 6.405, p = .015, η^2 = .120], with medium/large size effects. Such group differences favor the EFP group, as evidenced in Figure 1.
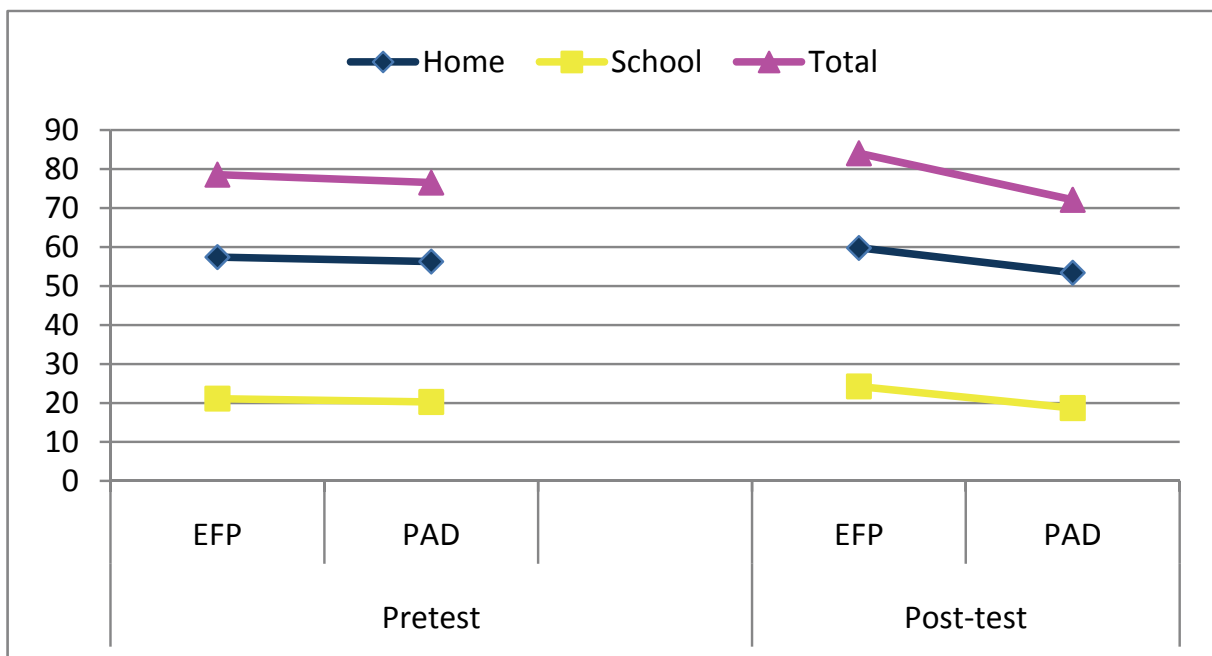

Fig. 1. Differences in FAOP-IM measures between groups at the time of evaluation

4. Discussion and conclusions

The new European education guidelines establish the need to stimulate the development of students' skills (Llach & Alsina, 2009; Fernández, 2007; Muñoz, 2008) and stress the importance of compulsory education specifically in the promotion of communicative competence in its oral reading and writing forms (Pérez & Zayas, 2007; LOE, 2006). Nevertheless, it is common for formal education to address the written aspect of this competence in a less profound manner than the other dimensions. The prevailing psycholinguistic teaching trends focus on aspects with lower cognitive load, at the expense of communicative approaches (Clemente, Ramínez, & Sanchez, 2010; Fabregat, 2009; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Lecuona, et al., 2003). The other main context of children's learning - the family – which could also help optimize the student's written communication skills (Axford, 2007; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Feiler, 2003; Jones & Christensen, 1999; Rasinki & Padaka, 2009; Reyes, et al., 2007; Saint Laurent & Giasson, 2005), also shows little interest in developing them. Thus, the consideration that composing written texts is a complex process that requires instruction and practice set in context and motivation to promote and facilitate its assimilation (de Caso & García, 2006a; de Caso & García, 2006b) led to our interest in finding whether the teaching of written composition through psycho-communicative methods in different educational contexts could redress the imbalance and fill the gaps resulting from the incomplete traditional educational approach. Based on this perspective, we developed this research, which sought to test the differential effectiveness of a writing intervention program, implemented in two different contexts (school and home) and by two different educational figures (parents-teachers), to optimize students' writing competence. We also sought to determine families' ability to carry out this type of instruction and indirectly validate the effectiveness of a training program designed and implemented to prepare them for this. The results obtained in the course of this research project lead us to several relevant conclusions.

First, the instructional program designed to address the teaching of written composition focused on the product and process, was highly effective in promoting the improvement of the quality of pupils' written texts. This was as expected, considering that the effectiveness of these interventions had been tested by this research team in previous studies (Arias & García, 2007; García, Fidalgo, & Robledo, 2010; Fidalgo, García, Torrance, & Robledo, 2009; Fidalgo, Torrance, & García, 2008). However, this study's main contribution is the finding that the context and the figures of implementation produce no differential effect on program effectiveness. Both family members at home (EFP group) and faculty in the classroom (PRO group) successfully carried out instructional sessions with children, passing on knowledge and methods useful to significantly enhance their writing proficiency when compared to control groups (CO and PAD). Thus, in addition to ratifying the internal efficiency of the program, we can confirm the potential of both environments to optimize the learning of writing, as well as similarities in the teaching capacities of teachers and parents. In both cases, the teaching carried out resulted in students producing better structured, more consistent and higher quality texts. Moreover, in both cases these improvements were maintained over time and, most noticeably, were applied across different text typologies.

Families, despite not being teaching professionals with relevant training have specific advantages (interest in their children's education, availability, direct contact with the child, bonding, etc.). They can therefore contribute very effectively to the optimization of writing,

as the few previous localized empirical studies in this area had shown, although these mostly focused on initial stimulation or in recovering less complex elements from long-term memory (Axford, 2007; Feiler, 2003; Saint Lauren & Giasson, 2005) and did not systematically address higher-order processes in older children, which was the focus of our work.

This intervention program, which addressed the cognitive aspect specifically, we can confirm encouraged in both groups of students subjected to systematic instruction (EFP and PRO) the efficient activation of the psychological processes involved in written composition and was conducive to greater efficiency in this task, although it had a greater impact on the planning process specifically. This again confirms the potential for parents, not only to promote ways of helping their children improve their textual production, but also for advising them on the use of cognitive strategies that enable them to effectively activate the higher cognitive processes involved in writing.

In terms of motivational elements, we have to acknowledge that the program did not produce statistically significant changes in attitudes toward writing in any context, nor has it stimulated more adaptive attributional patterns. However, in the latter case, both peer groups (EFP and PRO) show a positive trend apparent in the increase of attributions to internal factors (effort) and the decrease in external factors (luck). This is possibly due to the stability of these personality constructs and the resulting difficulty in modifying them in a few sessions. The difficulty of optimizing them has been found in specific interventions aimed at motivation for writing (Garcia & de Caso, 2006). Moreover, with respect to efficacy, although there was an increase in the EFP and PRO groups compared with the PAD and CO groups, neither reached statistical significance. Perhaps this result is a consequence of the evolutionary trend that the development of self-efficacy follows, which is exemplified by the overestimation of students' writing ability in the initial stages of education, such as Primary (Pajares, Valiente, & Cheong, 2006).

Thirdly, as to whether increasing parental involvement in homework is sufficient to improve children's outcomes or whether prior training is required to enable them to do so, the results conclude that training contributes to a significantly higher level of success than just natural collaboration, as evidenced by the comparison of the EFP and PAD groups.

As for the parent training program, it has proven very effective and has managed to prepare parents to enhance the development of their children's written composition, not only by participating as role models or providing materials and resources, but also specifically instructing them in the higher-order cognitive processes that make up that skill through the use of homework.

Despite the limitations of this study we can confirm its positive results. The limitations are mainly related to low family involvement and high parents and teacher motivation to engage in instruction, which might account for the degree of positive effect of the program in encouraging the review process or stimulating motivational elements. Thus, the effectiveness of the intervention program to enhance improvements in students' written products in the third cycle of Primary education, its stability and application to other forms of writing, as well as to encourage the activation of the mental processes responsible for efficient text processing, especially in regard to planning, are all confirmed. Similarly, we conclude that the family context, and parents in particular, perfectly complement the teaching of writing. Their potential to stimulate their children's writing competence through

help with homework was confirmed, while we found that for this to be truly effective it is necessary to provide prior systematic training. In this case we chose to create a parent training program, which has proven effective. Therefore, based on our research findings and considering that writing is a complex learning process requiring high doses of motivation and that all environmental stimulation appropriate to the characteristics of child favors its assimilation, we confirm the need for two elements. Firstly, to continue developing teaching schemes focused on this competence based on psychological and communicative approaches. Secondly, to increase the cooperation between school and family, uniting their efforts to improve educational conditions and to enable the students' optimal development, which will enable them to successfully adapt to the growing social demands placed on them (Torío, 2004).

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Learning Disabilities

Edited by Dr. Wichian Sittiprapaporn

Learning disability is a classification that includes several disorders in which a person has difficulty learning in a typical manner. Depending on the type and severity of the disability, interventions may be used to help the individual learn strategies that will foster future success. Some interventions can be quite simplistic, while others are intricate and complex. This book deserves a wide audience; it will be beneficial not only for teachers and parents struggling with attachment or behavior issues, but it will also benefit health care professionals and therapists working directly with special needs such as sensory integration dysfunction.

How to reference

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