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# Teacher Feedback, Writing Assignment Quality, and Third- Grade Students' Revision in Lower- and Higher-Achieving Urban Schools

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## Abstract

The relation of the quality of writing assignments and written instructor responses to student writings to the quality of subsequent student work was investigated in 29 urban third-grade classrooms in 8 schools. Writing assignments were generally of a higher quality in the 4 schools that served primarily middle-class, higher-achieving students, most of whom were white or Asian, versus the 4 schools that served primarily low-income and lower-achieving students, the majority of whom were Latino. Across all classrooms, however, teachers focused on standardizing students' written output, which led to marked improvement in the writing mechanics of students' work. Results of regression analyses indicated that the amount and type of feedback students received predicted a significant, although small, proportion of the variance in the quality of the content, organization, and mechanics of students' final drafts. The quality of the writing assignments predicted a small but significant proportion of the variance in the quality of the content of students' final drafts only. These findings raise questions about the implementation of broad educational policies in classrooms, such as using the writing process approach, and indicate a need for professional development for teachers.

Nearly 2 decades ago the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) declared the United States to be a "nation at risk." In response to this and other high-profile reports, a number of programs were launched to improve student achievement, especially for students who were most at risk for academic failure. Many of these reforms focused on creating and implementing content standards at the national, state, and district levels that would guide instruction and ultimately improve student learning (Strickland et al., 2001). With regard to writing instruction, teachers often were en-

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couraged to adopt a process-oriented pedagogy with students ideally drafting, editing, revising, and redrafting their work. This writing process approach eventually became the standard for instruction in many states and school districts (e.g., California State Board of Education, 1999; Los Angeles Unified School District, 1998).

According to most evaluation studies, this recent proliferation of school reform efforts has led to little discernible change in the academic achievement of poor and minority students. One reason posited for why reforms and policies have not always "worked" is that teachers did not have the knowledge or skills needed to significantly change, let alone improve, their practice (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). Even when teachers "buy in" to an instructional practice, classroom implementations often do not reflect a reform program's goals (Cohen & Ball, 1994; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999). If this pattern is true for reforms aimed at implementing the process approach to writing instruction, it has serious implications.

As early as 1984, Applebee and his colleagues found "some surprising disjunctions between teacher intentions and student experience" even in "the classrooms of exemplary teachers" dedicated to process-oriented writing instruction (1999, p. 356; see also Applebee, 1984). Investigating the relation between writing instruction and student learning, they discovered that "writing activities could easily be introduced in a wide variety of classrooms, as long as the activities fulfilled legitimate pedagogical functions—that is, as long as the activities supported the teacher's goals. It was a different problem altogether, however, to introduce writing activities that significantly transformed student learning" (Applebee, 1999, p. 356).

This "different problem altogether" has remained. It behooves researchers to address the critical question of why the promise of so many reforms has not been fulfilled so many times. Indeed, Applebee con-

cluded his 1999 reflections after "30 years" of writing research with the observation that "it remains distressingly true that there has been little improvement in student achievement in any subject area over the past 30 years. . . . We have learned a great deal about how classrooms work, but we have done very little research about how to make them work better" (1999, p. 363).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Despite the proliferation of content standards aimed at improving student writing, little research has investigated the implementation of these policies (Strickland et al., 2001). In this study we sought to address this gap by investigating how instructional standards were translated into classroom practice. Specifically, we investigated the implementation of the process approach to writing instruction in diverse, urban third-grade classrooms in Los Angeles, focusing on the feedback teachers provided to students on drafts of their work, the quality of teachers' writing assignments, and the nature of students' revisions across drafts.

Previous research we conducted in elementary and middle school classrooms serving primarily low-income and minority students indicated that teachers' written feedback on students' early drafts tended to be superficial and did not lead to improvement in the content and organization of students' later drafts (Clare, Valdés, & Patthey-Chavez, 2000). Elementary school students in particular tended to receive feedback pertaining to either the mechanics of their writing (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) or asking for clarification of specific phrases or pronoun usage. The "writing process" at both levels of schooling more accurately resembled a "recopying process" with measurable improvement toward the written standard only. We wondered whether this approach to writing instruction was more prevalent in classrooms serving primarily poor and minority students and whether more privileged stu-

dents with stronger writing skills might receive more substantive feedback.

Past research we conducted also indicated that writing assignments in urban schools tended to be of poor quality (Clare, 2000; Clare & Aschbacher, 2001; Clare, Valdés, Pascal, & Steinberg, 2001). We also found that the quality of teachers' writing assignments was associated with the quality of third-grade students' essays, specifically with regard to the cognitive challenge of teachers' writing assignments, the clarity of teachers' instructional goals, and the alignment of goals and task (Clare et al., 2001). We wondered how the quality of assignments might influence students' opportunity to improve their work across drafts.

With these equity and developmental issues in mind, we investigated a more diverse sample of third-grade writings and classrooms. Specifically, we explored the implementation of the writing process in two types of classrooms, the first serving poor and primarily Latino and African-American students, the second serving primarily middle-class white and Asian students. The two types of classrooms were sharply differentiated by students' performance on the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT 9). (All students in California are required to take the Stanford Achievement Test, a nationally normed test of basic academic skills administered in grades 2 through 11.)

In process instruction, writing development involves a number of skills including generating ideas, organizational schemes, and goals; transforming ideas into language and its orthographic representation; and re-writing text to improve it (Berninger, Fuller, & Whitaker, 1996). In this study we focused on students' ability and opportunity to re-write and improve text. Specifically, we investigated the relation between the writing task and the quality of teachers' feedback to students on drafts of their compositions, and improvements over subsequent drafts of students' written work. Of course, students routinely receive oral feedback on

their work from their teachers, such as during teacher-student conferences, as well as from peers and in parental response journals (see, e.g., Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Yagelski, 1995). For many teachers, however, written comments on student papers remain a significant method of response (Ferris, 1997), and we focused on these instructor responses to student writings and on their uptake.

### Research on Written Feedback

In the process approach to writing instruction, teacher feedback and the opportunity to revise written work based on this feedback are key to students' development as writers (Graves, 1983). Novice writers need guidance to evaluate, modify, or restructure their ideas and to add and delete content to improve their writing (Keppner, 1991; Olson & Raffeld, 1987). Ideally, teacher feedback enables students to expand and shape their ideas over subsequent drafts of their work (Ferris, 1997; Sternglass, 1998). With teacher assistance and feedback, students become better writers by gradually appropriating the skills necessary to critically view and revise their own work (Zellermayer, 1989).

Despite the acknowledged importance of student-teacher interaction in the development of writing skills, relatively few studies have investigated the ability of teachers to support and guide improvement in student work over multiple drafts, or even examined the quality of student work from early to final drafts in K-12 settings. Most research on writing development has examined student texts without attending to teacher input. Dyson's groundbreaking 1989 study examined complex developmental patterns in the writings of very young children but left a distinct impression of an almost autonomous evolution influenced by many voices. Patthey-Chavez and Clare (1996) investigated longitudinal development in the writings of five bilingual fourth graders and found a clear teacher influence on that development but

did not pay attention to written teacher feedback between drafts. Orellana (1995) probed complex relations between teacher attitudes and the development of student writing in two very different inner-city classrooms but again did not focus on written teacher feedback between drafts.

Most research on written teacher feedback has focused on college students in general and college students who are second-language learners specifically (Ferris, 1997; Keppner, 1991; Olson & Raffeld, 1987; Zamel, 1985). For these students, researchers generally have found that teacher feedback about content (i.e., comments that encourage students to add and delete content and/or restructure content) as opposed to teacher feedback about surface features (i.e., word choice, spelling, grammar, and punctuation) during the revision process is associated with higher-quality revisions (Keppner, 1991; Olson & Raffeld, 1987). Ferris (1997) similarly found that certain types of written comments appeared to lead to more successful revisions for college students who were English-language learners. For example, teacher requests for information, summary comments on grammar, and text-specific comments on earlier drafts of student work appeared to lead to more successful revisions, whereas statements that provided information to students and less specific comments were less successful.

### **Research on Writing and Writing Development**

Historically, research in writing composition began with a focus on individual cognitive processes (Emig, 1971; Gubern, 1999), particularly as early proponents of process-oriented pedagogy started to disseminate the results of their empirical work on the composing processes of children and adolescents (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Graves, 1983). Responding to the need to broaden this frame of reference, writing studies expanded into the social and classroom worlds of student writers. Heath's

(1983) work demonstrated that literacy practices were rooted in the "ways with words" of particular communities and that within each community, learning to read and write depended on the community's routine activities and repertoires involving print. The focus on the cultural and social processes that influence the relation between routine language use, literacy acquisition, and written text soon expanded to the classroom (Dyson, 1989; Edelsky, 1986; Lensmire, 1994; Wells, 1986). This work uncovered complex relations between children's print environments, their routine literacy activities, and their gradual appropriations of literacy and standard language use. Children were shown to be "meaning makers" (Wells, 1986) who brought a range of print experiences and literacy conventions from home into the classroom (Dyson, 2001; Heath, 1983; Kamberelis, 1999; Patthey-Chavez & Clare, 1996) and used writing creatively to play with each other, to negotiate friendships, and to jockey for social position as well as to learn about and engage in school tasks (Dyson, 1989; Lensmire, 1994; Orellana, 1995; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992).

In the 1980s proponents of process-oriented pedagogy did more than simply research writing processes; they also advocated a turn toward a process-oriented writing curriculum. In both first- and second-language writing instruction, process-oriented curricula now have become the standard (Applebee, Langer, Mussis, Latham, & Gentile, 1994). Process writing pedagogy emphasized the exploratory and expressive functions of writing, with early versions often describing writing as a discovery of meaning that should be guided and encouraged. Teachers were encouraged to assume the role of the facilitator and to view student writing as developmental. Student errors were to be understood as a natural part of writing development, especially in the early years, and teacher corrections and evaluations were to be deferred until later in both the composing

cycle and in writing instruction. Implicit in at least some of the psycholinguistic models of writing development was the notion that errors would take care of themselves as writers completed their acquisition process (see, e.g., Elbow, 1973; Krashen, 1985), which was welcome news indeed for writing teachers often facing weekly stacks of student compositions. Many writing teachers took up their new roles as facilitators of student texts with enthusiasm, adopting writing curricula emphasizing interactions with authentic texts and cooperative writing activities and de-emphasizing exercises and activities meant to sharpen accuracy (Connors, 2000; Scarcella, 1996; Strickland et al., 2001).

That initial enthusiasm soon was tempered, however, by the uneven ways in which student writing developed in diverse classrooms. As more socially grounded perspectives of writing development complemented early psycholinguistic accounts, they brought into focus the shaping influences of parents, peers, and pop culture. It became increasingly clear that learning to write did not follow a single developmental course. Child writers and English-language learners of all ages came from different communities with variable literacy practices and entered U.S. schools with diverse literacy repertoires. Heath (1983) and Scollon and Scollon (1981) in particular demonstrated that although some children entered U.S. schools with congruent language and literacy practices, others were socialized into divergent practices, and schooling seemed to amplify both congruence and divergence (see esp. Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989, for an enlightening discussion of school amplification). This led to a higher incidence of school problems and school failure for children without the literacy head start from home.

Alarmed by less than promising instructional results with some groups of learners, a number of writing researchers began to advocate a more directive and explicit teacher role in writing instruction, espe-

cially for minority students (Delpit, 1988) and English-language learners (Scarcella, 1996). It also became increasingly clear that learning to write included learning about a number of writing genres, defined as conventionalized language strategies, to achieve different social-rhetorical purposes and communicative goals (Kamberelis, 1995; Rothery, 1989). Some of the most valued forms of school literacy, those forms of writing most associated with eventual success in school, followed different genre conventions than the kind of narrative and expressive writing encouraged in writing process pedagogy. Australian genre theorists in particular adopted a critical stance toward laissez-faire writing process approaches, arguing that "genres of power," such as essayist literacy (Gee, 1990; Scollon & Scollon, 1981) or science writing, "must first be learned" (Christie, 1989, p. 163; see also Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Martin, 1993) before they become part of young writers' repertoires. Moreover, few young writers have opportunities to learn these forms outside of school. In other words, schools and teachers play a critical role in the literacy acquisition of their charges, one that may be *supplemented* by but could not be *supplanted* by the parental, peer, and pop influences uncovered in ethnographic research on writing and writing development.

Focusing on the role of teachers in shaping student writing may be inspired as well by the latest reform trends emphasizing teachers' and schools' "accountability" for the academic success of their students (Strickland et al., 2001). This notwithstanding, across contexts of inquiry writing researchers are finding it worthwhile to treat "the emerging text as an improvable object" (Haneda & Wells, 2000, p. 443). Although even very young children appear sensitive to genre characteristics and display emergent genre knowledge in their writing (Kamberelis, 1999), "the early years may be a time ripe for teaching and learning, not simply for self-directed experimentation" (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000, p. 62).

Moreover, the kind of explicit, form-focused instruction Australian genre theorists advocate has been found to benefit cultural minority students (Yeh, 1998). Thus, the role of instruction in children's (and other novices') learning and appropriation of writing has (once again) become a focal concern in writing research. That instruction appears channeled to student writers in two important ways: first, through the writing task as a means of appropriation and practice, and second, by providing feedback and assistance once student writers take on the writing task. In this study we focused on both of these key instructional interventions, assignment design and instructor feedback and assistance.

### Research Questions

To better understand the negotiation of literacy and schooled writing in elementary school classrooms, we explored the interrelation among the writing task, written teacher response, and student writing. It is a truism among writing instructors that good assignments make or break a composition class. A well-designed assignment can become a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) for fledgling writers, a task that meaningfully engages students and scaffolds the kinds of literate choices they need to master to complete the task successfully. A poorly designed assignment, in contrast, does not provide students with an opportunity to engage in authentic literacy practices and may even frustrate and confuse novice writers (Clare & Aschbacher, 2001; Newmann, Lopez, & Bryk, 1998).

Teacher feedback, particularly written teacher feedback, also has a number of characteristics of interest for ongoing research into writing development. It is a key site of knowledge construction between expert and novice, a time when teachers are most likely to provide explicit, form-focused, and individualized instruction to student writers. Teacher feedback brings into focus the language choices writers need to make to convey their ideas and often reinforces in-

structional points discussed in whole-class settings (see, e.g., Orellana, 1995; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). And although composition teachers have complained for decades about how students often ignore their written feedback, that feedback is most likely to help novices develop their metalinguistic awareness, an important step in their appropriation of the written system. In studies that have examined it, feedback also is associated clearly with writing improvement, especially for older students, and those students much appreciate it (see Ferris, 1997, for a recent review and empirical findings grounded in a large sample of college students).

As a result of the research we have described highlighting the critical role of teacher assignment design and feedback in supporting students' writing development, and the need to gain a better understanding of the implementation of standards for writing instruction in diverse classrooms, we investigated the following questions: What is the quality of writing tasks in a diverse range of third-grade classrooms? What is the nature of teachers' written feedback on drafts of student work? How does the quality of students' written work change across drafts? And, what are the effects of teacher feedback and assignment quality on the quality of students' final drafts?

### Method

#### Setting and Participants

Writing assignments and drafts of student writing were collected in eight schools as part of a larger study evaluating the influence of large-scale urban school reform initiatives on the classroom learning environment. Although the larger study focused on grades K–12, we chose third grade for in-depth study because it represented the midpoint in elementary school education and a critical transition time into more substantial writing and writing instruction.

Four of the schools served primarily poor students, the majority of whom were Latino. On average, 28% of the third-grade students

at these schools scored at or above the fiftieth national percentile rank on the 1999–2000 SAT 9 in reading. These schools served a high proportion of English-language learners, though all assignments and student work were in English, as mandated by recent California legislation specifying that all children be instructed in English unless they receive a special exemption.

Four of the sample schools served primarily middle-class students, the majority of whom were white or Asian. On average, 82% of the third-grade students at these schools scored at or above the fiftieth national percentile rank in reading on the 1999–2000 SAT 9. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics for both groups of schools.

Four third-grade teachers at each of the lower-socioeconomic-status (SES) and middle-SES schools were recruited by principals to participate in the study. Of the teachers who were originally recruited, four declined to participate because they were too busy, leaving 13 teachers from the lower-SES schools and 16 teachers from the middle-SES schools ( $N = 29$  teachers). The average number of years teachers had been teaching was similar across the two samples and averaged approximately 12.5 years, with a range from 1 to 34.

### Procedures

Teachers were contacted at the beginning of the school year and asked to submit a typical writing assignment and a typical reading comprehension assignment. Teachers completed a one-page information sheet describing each assignment, including its goals and grading criteria. Teachers were asked to attach to this cover sheet any materials they thought would describe the assignment. Additionally, for each assignment teachers submitted four samples of student work, two that they considered to be of medium quality and two of high quality. These materials (notebook, cover sheets, consent forms, etc.) were collected in winter and spring (see Clare et al., 2001).

In this study we focused on the type and quality of written feedback on student work from the typical writing assignment only (a final writing project with earlier drafts). Assignments that did not include rough drafts of student work were excluded from the analyses. The quality of these assignments was judged analytically using a rubric developed at UCLA's National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). Students' draft compositions were coded for the type and amount of feedback that teachers wrote. The quality of students' draft and final compositions was determined by using an analytic rubric focusing on important dimensions of writing. All of these measures are described in the following section.

### Measures

*Quality of writing assignments.* The measure we used to assess teachers' writing assignments was developed from a larger research effort focused on creating reliable, meaningful, and efficient indicators of classroom practice (described in Aschbacher, 1999; Clare, 2000). The criteria used to assess assignment quality were based primarily on research investigating effective teaching practices (Danielson, 1996; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Slavin & Madden, 1989). The criteria also were limited to dimensions that could be operationalized in a rubric, that could be taught to a large number of novice raters and that could be assessed based solely on written artifacts. A four-point scale (1 = poor to 4 = excellent) was used to rate the following six dimensions of quality for each writing assignment.

- *Cognitive challenge* describes the level of thinking required of students to complete the task, specifically, the degree to which students have the opportunity to apply higher-order reasoning and engage with academic content material.
- *Clarity of learning goals* describes how clearly a teacher articulates the skills,



TABLE 1. Demographics and SAT-9 Scores (Percentages) for Schools in the Sample

	Lower-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 4)		Higher-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 4)	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Enrollment by ethnicity:				
Asian	7.6	.3–27.0	22.5	5.5–40.3
African American	12.1	1.4–20.0	4.4	3.0–5.2
Latino	62.9	34.0–92.1	16.1	9.8–24.6
White	14.6	3.8–37.3	55.0	36.9–79.3
Other	2.9	1.0–7.0	2.0	.8–3.1
English language learner	66.3	50.4–82.2	9.0	4.2–13.1
Free/reduced-price lunch	89.9	86.7–93.8	11.2	7.4–17.0
1999–2000 SAT 9 scores at or about fiftieth NPR in reading for grade 3	28.0	14.0–45.0	81.8	77.0–94.0

concepts, or content knowledge students are to gain from completing the assignment, that is, the degree to which an assignment could be considered a purposeful, goal-driven activity focused on student learning.

- *Clarity of grading criteria* measures the clarity and specificity of the teacher's grading criteria and their potential for helping students improve their performance. How clearly each aspect of the grading criteria is defined is considered in the rating, as well as how much detail is provided for each of the criteria.
- *Alignment of goals and task* focuses on the degree to which a teacher's stated learning goals are reflected in the design of the assignment tasks students are asked to complete. This dimension attempts to capture how well the assignment appears to promote the achievement of the teacher's goals for student learning.
- *Alignment of goals and grading criteria* describes the degree to which a teacher's grading criteria support the learning goals, that is, the degree to which a teacher assesses students on the skills and concepts they are intended to learn through the completion of the assignment. Also considered in this rating is whether or not the grading criteria include extraneous dimensions that do not support the learning goals, as well as the appropriateness of the criteria for supporting the learning goals.

- *Overall quality* provides a holistic rating of the quality of the assignment based on all of the previous dimensions.

Three independent raters scored each assignment on these dimensions. Overall exact scale-point agreement between at least two raters for the classroom assignment scales was 87%.

**Type and amount of teacher feedback.** Guided by Olson and Raffeld (1987) and our previous research (Clare et al., 2000), we categorized the type of feedback students received on each draft as surface level, clarification level, or content level. Surface-level feedback included all edits and comments students received that pertained to mechanics, usage, grammar, spelling, sentence structure, or format. Examples of this type of feedback included underlining the title of a student's paper, circling misspelled words, and calling for an indentation at the beginning of a paragraph. Clarification-level feedback was defined as teachers' directions to students to clarify or elaborate on specific words. This type of feedback included asking a student to supply the name of a person instead of simply using a pronoun and asking a student to define specific words. Content feedback was defined as teachers' comments pertaining to the concepts in and

structure of students' writing. This type of feedback included comments to delete, reorganize, or add information, as well as questions intended to challenge students' thinking. This category of feedback also could include genre-specific comments or edits. The following are examples of this type of feedback: deleting a student's personal comment that "sharks are cool" in an informative essay, or asking students to elaborate or provide supporting evidence for their statements. Student papers that received no written comments were noted as well.

Two researchers categorized each teacher comment. Agreement for the designations was achieved by consensus. The amount of feedback students obtained was standardized by dividing the number of edits and comments students received for each of the feedback categories by the number of words in the composition.

**Quality of student writing.** Drafts of student writings were rated using three standards-based scales measuring content, organization, and writing mechanics. These scales were from the Language Arts Project rubric developed by United Teachers–Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Unified School District in partnership with CRESST at UCLA (Higuchi, 1996). Each dimension was scored using a four-point scale (1 = poor to 4 = excellent). Student papers were randomly ordered, and one rater first assessed the quality of students' early drafts and then rated the quality of the final drafts. Reliability of the student work ratings was assessed by having another researcher independently score 20% of the assignments chosen at random. Overall exact scale-point agreement for the student work scales was 81%.

The Language Arts Project rubric represents features of writing believed to be most important according to a survey of hundreds of teachers, researchers, and other experts in language arts instruction. The generic version of the rubric consists of three (originally four) scales: content, organization, and writing conventions. The

content scale measures the extent to which a student addresses the topic using supporting details from the text and clearly articulates a goal. The organization scale measures how well a student organizes the paper at the sentence level and at the paragraph level, providing a clear sense of beginning, middle, and end. The writing conventions scale measures a student's command of mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling (referred to as MUGS).

After the development of the generic rubric, one of the goals of the Language Arts Project was to tailor the rubric for specific assignments that teachers could use in their classrooms, with attention to aligning rubrics and assignments to the local district's language arts standards. These "on-demand" rubrics were modified versions of the generic rubric that contained key points about the text to which the assignment referred. Specifically, the content scale was customized by including within it scoring criteria referring to a particular text. For example, one third-grade on-demand rubric was adapted for the text *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein (1964). This content-adapted rubric included the extent to which a student "describes what the tree did to show he was the boy's friend . . . states what he learned about being a friend, explains why the tree's friendship is important to him," and so on. Teachers and researchers in grade-level teams developed the adapted rubrics. The Language Arts Project teams believed that the same features of writing, however, applied across the grade levels in which the Language Arts Project worked—third, seventh, and ninth.

In a similar fashion in which the Language Arts Project teams adapted the generic rubric for use with specific texts and assignments, we tailored the content scale to analyze narrative and informative writing. The content criteria that we applied to the scoring of narrative writing, for example, involved the extent to which a piece engaged the reader with the setting, plot, and characters. We focused on the extent to

which the student addressed the purpose of the assignment; the clarity of the student's presentation of setting, plot, and characters; and the detail and elaboration the student gave to describe these narrative elements. The content criteria that we applied to the informative writing, in contrast, focused on the extent to which a student clearly communicated information, stated a thesis or general point, and provided evidence from texts or other sources.

### Analyses

We used descriptive statistics to examine quality of writing assignments, quality of student writing, and amount and type of feedback teachers gave to students on their written work. Mean comparisons were made on assignment quality and the nature of teachers' written feedback across the different types of schools. Repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to investigate change over time in quality of students' work from first to final drafts, for students who attended either a lower- or higher-achieving school. Regression analyses measured the effects of teacher feedback and assignment quality on the quality of final drafts of student compositions, after first controlling for the quality of students' first drafts and the type of school they attended. Finally, a qualitative approach case study was adapted from earlier studies tracking longitudinal changes in student writings across multiple drafts (Ferris, 1997; Patthey-Chavez & Clare, 1996; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). We classified and traced teachers' comments and edits from draft to draft to see whether and how students took them up and incorporated them into their revisions. We also investigated the nature of the writing tasks for our case study examples to better understand their influence on students' opportunities to revise their written work.

## Results and Discussion

### Writing Assignments

Results of mean comparisons indicated that the classroom assignments from the

higher-achieving schools were rated significantly higher compared to the assignments from lower-achieving schools with respect to cognitive challenge ( $p < .001$ ), clarity of learning goals ( $p < .01$ ), alignment of learning goals with the assignment task ( $p < .05$ ), and the overall quality of the assignment ( $p < .001$ ) (see Table 2). The quality of the criteria teachers used to assess student work was rated higher in the lower-achieving schools, though this difference was not statistically significant. These schools were rated slightly higher with respect to the alignment of the teachers' learning goals for students with their assessment criteria, though again this difference was not statistically significant. As described earlier, our sample of schools serving lower-achieving students had been part of a reform effort that emphasized (in part) the development and dissemination of rubrics for scoring student work. These rubrics were new in many of our sample classrooms, which likely explains why this dimension was rated higher than other dimensions of quality in these schools (e.g., cognitive challenge) (Clare et al., 2001).

### Quality of Teachers' Written Feedback

Results of mean comparisons of teacher feedback indicated that most of the comments on student papers across both types of schools were surface level in that they pertained to the technical features of student writing and not to organization or content (see Table 3). On the whole, students from the lower-achieving schools received significantly more feedback with regard to the content of their ideas ( $p < .05$ ), though the amount of content feedback students in both types of schools received was small (an average of one or two edits per 100 words of student writing). Students in both types of schools received an equivalent amount of feedback pertaining to the clarity with which they had expressed their ideas in writing and the surface-level features of their writing.

Another way to look at teacher feedback

TABLE 2. Quality of Assignments in Schools Serving Traditionally Lower- and Higher-Achieving Students (*N* = 29 Teachers)

Measures of Quality	Lower-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 13 teachers)		Higher-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 16 teachers)		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Cognitive challenge of the task	1.64	.44	2.23	.61	-4.10***
Clarity of learning goals	1.92	.50	2.32	.56	-2.78**
Clarity of grading criteria	2.37	1.01	1.94	.66	1.84
Alignment of goals and task	1.83	.49	2.17	.48	-2.57*
Alignment of goals and grading criteria	1.81	.59	1.71	.55	.65
Overall quality	1.71	.43	2.21	.48	-4.15***

NOTE.—Items were scored on a four-point scale (1 = poor to 4 = excellent).

\**p* < .05.

\*\**p* < .01.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

TABLE 3. Type and Amount of Written Feedback Provided to Student Essays per 100 Words

	Lower-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 43 students)		Higher-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 44 students)		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Surface edits	.07	.07	.06	.06	.61
Clarification edits	.00	.01	.00	.01	.05
Content edits	.02	.02	.01	.01	3.41**

\*\**p* < .01.

is to focus on the distribution of each type of feedback and on how many student compositions received no written feedback of any kind. Table 4 provides an overview of written feedback distributions and the number of papers receiving no feedback. Of interest is the fact that teachers provided their student writers with almost four times as much feedback on errors and language use than on their ideas and the skill with which they conveyed those ideas. For example, students in the lower-achieving schools received an average of 11.2 surface edits compared to an average of 3.1 content edits. Students in the higher-achieving schools received an average of 8.1 surface edits, and an average of only 1.5 content edits. Also interesting is that nine student writers in the lower-achieving schools (21%) received no comment or question from their writing in-

structor; 24 (55%) of the student writers in the higher-achieving school clusters received no substantive written feedback.

### Corpus of Student Writings

Repeated-measures ANOVAs were used to investigate change over time in the quality of students' writings from early to final drafts for students who attended either a lower- or higher-achieving school (see Tables 5 and 6). Results indicated a significant interaction between the type of school students attended and the degree to which their compositions improved from first to final drafts for organization (*p* < .05) and writing mechanics (*p* < .01) (see Table 6). Results also indicated that students in both types of schools showed significant improvement in the organization (*p* < .001)

TABLE 4. Frequencies and Means for Types of Feedback Provided to Students on Draft Compositions per 100 Words

Feedback	Lower-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 43 students)	Higher-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 44 students)
Surface edits:		
0	6	2
1-20	27	38
21-40	9	3
41+	1	1
Mean	11.2	8.1
Clarification edits:		
0	27	29
1-2	10	13
3-8	6	2
Mean	.7	.5
Content edits:		
0	9	24
1-4	22	14
5+	12	6
Mean	3.1	1.5

TABLE 5. Descriptive Statistics for the Quality of Early and Final Drafts of Student Compositions

	Lower-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 43 students)				Higher-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 44 students)			
	Draft		Final		Draft		Final	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Content	1.98	.63	2.04	.61	2.23	.64	2.30	.74
Organization	1.91	.72	2.14	.74	2.34	.68	2.41	.66
Writing conventions <sup>a</sup>	2.12	.54	2.58	.54	2.95	.57	3.11	.44

NOTE.—Items were scored on a four-point scale (1 = poor to 4 = excellent).  
<sup>a</sup>Includes mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling.

TABLE 6. Results of Repeated-Measures Analysis of Variance on Quality of Assignments in Schools Serving Lower- and Higher-Achieving Students (*N* = 87 Students)

Effects	Quality of Writing Assignment ( <i>F</i> -values)		
	Content	Organization	Writing Conventions <sup>a</sup>
School type (higher or lower achieving)	3.25	5.93*	49.70***
Improvement (from early to final drafts)	6.30*	13.41***	29.30***
School type × improvement interaction	.01	4.01*	7.04**

<sup>a</sup>Includes mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling.  
 \**p* < .05.  
 \*\**p* < .01.  
 \*\*\**p* < .001.

and mechanics of their written work (*p* < .001) and statistically significant (though small) improvement in the content of their writing (*p* < .05).

To test for significant interaction effects

we conducted additional ANOVAs within type of school to further investigate change over time in students' papers (see Table 7). Results indicated that student compositions from the lower-achieving schools showed

TABLE 7. Results of Analysis of Variance on Quality of Assignments within Classrooms Serving Lower- or Higher-Achieving Students

Quality of Writing Assignment	Lower-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 43 students)					Higher-Achieving Schools ( <i>n</i> = 44 students)				
	Initial Draft		Final Draft		<i>F</i>	Initial Draft		Final Draft		<i>F</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Organization	1.91	.72	2.14	.74	10.10**	2.34	.68	2.41	.66	3.15
Writing conventions <sup>a</sup>	2.12	.54	2.58	.54	20.90***	2.95	.57	3.11	.44	8.14**

<sup>a</sup>Includes mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling.

\*\**p* < .01.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

significant improvement in organization ( $p < .01$ ) and writing mechanics ( $p < .001$ ) but not in content. Student compositions within the higher-achieving schools showed significant improvement in writing mechanics ( $p < .01$ ) only.

#### Quality of Writing Task, Teachers' Feedback, and Students' Final Drafts

To address our final research question, we conducted a series of stepwise regression analyses to investigate the predictive effects of the quality of teachers' assignments and teachers' feedback on the quality of students' final drafts of their compositions, beyond the effects of school type and the quality of students' initial drafts. The first analysis, predicting the quality of the content of students' final drafts, was conducted by entering three sets of predictors: (a) school type (higher or lower achieving), (b) quality of the content of students' first drafts, and (c) quality of the writing assignment and the type and amount of feedback teachers gave to students on their early drafts. School type was important to consider because preliminary analyses indicated that it was associated with the quality of students' writing. The quality of students' earlier drafts was entered in the second step of the regression to control for students' writing ability on their first drafts before estimating the amount of variance explained by the quality of the writing assignment and the amount and type of feed-

back teachers provided to students on their early drafts. Both sets of teacher feedback variables and the quality of writing assignment variables were entered together in the third step without controlling the order of entry of these two sets of variables. These analyses were repeated twice using the quality of the organization of students' writing or the quality of the writing mechanics as the dependent variables and controlling for the quality of the organization or mechanics of students' earlier drafts, respectively.

To reduce the total number of variables used in the regression analyses, we excluded the assignment-quality dimensions that were highly correlated with each other. Specifically, we excluded the variables measuring the alignment of the teachers' goals and task, and the alignment of the goals and grading criteria (these were correlated with clarity of teachers' goals and grading criteria), and the overall quality of the assignment (a holistic measure of quality that considered all of the other dimensions). The assignment-quality variables included in the analyses were cognitive challenge of the writing assignment, clarity of teachers' goals, and clarity of teachers' grading criteria.

As illustrated in Table 8, results indicated that the amount and type of feedback students received predicted a significant, although small, proportion of the variance in quality of content ( $p < .05$ ), organization ( $p$

TABLE 8. Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Quality of Students' Final Drafts ( $N = 87$  Students)

School/Teacher Variables	Quality of Students' Final Drafts								
	Content			Organization			Writing Mechanics (MUGS)		
	Coeff.	Beta	$R^2$	Coeff.	Beta	$R^2$	Coeff.	Beta	$R^2$
School type	.05	.04	.04	-.07	-.05	.03	.16	.15	.21**
Initial draft	.93	.88***	.83***	.84	.85***	.69***	.46	.57***	.15***
Teacher feedback:			.01*			.03*			.14***
Content	4.73	.12***		6.86	.17**		-3.45	-.11	
Clarification	-.03	.00		2.93	.03		10.51	.15	
Surface	.14	.01		.38	.04		2.16	.27**	
Quality of assignment:			.01*			.02			.04
Cognitive	.17	.15**		.14	.12		.21	.23*	
Goals	-.10	-.05		.06	.03		-.32	-.23*	
Grading	-.03	-.04		.01	.01		-.01	-.02	
$R^2$			.89			.77			.54
$F$			73.03***			31.20***			10.63***

<sup>a</sup>Includes mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

$< .05$ ), and mechanics of students' final drafts ( $p < .001$ ). Quality of writing assignments predicted a significant, though equally small, proportion of the variance in quality of content of students' final drafts ( $p < .05$ ) but not in the quality of the organization or mechanics of students' writing once school type and quality of students' first drafts were taken into account.

Results indicated that the quality of the content of students' final drafts was significantly predicted by the amount of content-level feedback they received on earlier drafts ( $p < .001$ ) and the cognitive challenge of the writing assignment ( $p < .01$ ). The quality of organization of students' final drafts also was significantly predicted by the amount of content-level feedback they received on earlier drafts ( $p < .01$ ). Finally, quality of mechanics of students' final drafts was predicted by the amount of surface-level feedback they received ( $p < .001$ ) and the cognitive challenge of the assignment ( $p < .05$ ). Clarity of teachers' goals for the assignment also negatively predicted quality of mechanics of students' final drafts ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, it appears that students

whose teachers focused less on the concepts students were to learn as a result of completing the writing assignment improved more on the surface features of their writing. These teachers may have focused more on standardizing students' output in the absence of other content-related issues to address in students' compositions.

#### Case Study Analyses

We returned to our corpus of essays to investigate more closely relations between assignment quality, type of written feedback students received, and observed changes in the quality of their essays over successive drafts. As described earlier, teachers in the schools that served middle-SES and higher-achieving students tended to provide these students with higher-quality writing assignments (see Table 2). Although this was true overall, it is important to note that some teachers in schools that served lower-SES students created and assigned high-quality writing tasks, and vice versa.

As illustrated in Table 4, there also was a marked difference in the amount of surface versus content feedback most of the

students in our sample received, with several teachers providing only surface feedback to their students, and most teachers focusing their instruction on that dimension. Although teachers from the lower-achieving schools tended to give more content-level feedback to their students, the overall amount still was small. Students as a group showed improvement in the content of their work, though change on this dimension was less than for organization and writing mechanics. Interestingly, an interaction effect did not exist between the type of school students attended and improvement in the content of their work. Instead it appeared to us that more teacher-specific patterns were emerging from the data; that is, some teachers in both types of schools provided no content or clarification feedback whatsoever, whereas others provided a great deal.

To investigate these links more closely, we chose one set of papers from each type of school where students had received content-level feedback and had shown improvement in the content of their writing, or had only received surface feedback and had shown no improvement (for a total of four sets of student papers). The purpose of this was to examine students' uptake of the type of feedback they received and how teachers' feedback and change in the quality of students' work across drafts might be related to assignment quality (with specific attention to cognitive challenge and clarity of teachers' goals).

#### Lower-Achieving Schools

*A composition that improved in content.* The assignment we examined was based on a fifth-grade-level chapter book, *Morning Girl* (1992), by Michael Dorris, read out loud by the teacher as part of an instructional unit focused on Native Americans. The book describes the lives of an American Indian girl, Morning Girl, and her brother, Star Boy. The teacher asked the students to write a diary entry from the perspective of either Morning Girl or Star Boy, aiming to

have students "demonstrate comprehension by writing from the character's point of view, referring to events in the text, but expanding on character's thoughts and emotions." The students went through the steps of the writing process and worked on the assignment for about 45 minutes every day for a week.

We considered this to be a high-quality writing assignment overall and one of the best from the cluster of schools serving lower-achieving students. First, the students were required to engage with substantive content and to exercise higher-order thinking skills by writing from the perspective of a book character. In other words, the task encouraged students to infer a character's thoughts and emotions based on events in the text as opposed to simply reiterating facts from the story. Additionally, the teacher's goals for the assignment were clear and focused on student learning.

In addition to providing students with a high-quality writing task, the teacher also provided them with content feedback on early drafts of their journal entries. The student essay reproduced below, considered by the teacher to be of medium quality for the class, showed marked improvement in content. Throughout the essay the teacher invited the student to expand and add to her work at key points. Specifically, after the student wrote, "I do not like my sister. I think night is better than day," the teacher wrote, "why else?" The student then revised her work to read, "I do not like my sister because she just cares about the morning. I think night is better than day because at night you could see the stars. She likes the sun better than the stars." Additionally, after the student wrote, "I am very sad too because mother is not going to have a baby," the teacher wrote, "expand?" The student's final draft reads, "I am sad because mother did not have a baby. That is okay because I could see the baby in the special tree right next to grandfather. She looks very pretty on the tree. Sometimes we



come here to talk to the people that died. We don't get sad."

The teacher also drew a line indicating that two sentences, "Last night I put a lizard in the mat" and "I will put a snake in her mat when she looks at the lizard," should be grouped together. These sentences had been separated by a sentence that seemed to be about a different idea, "I was smaller then her but now I am taller then her." The teacher then wrote "why?" after the following statement, "The next day I hid next to a rock." The student responded to this feedback by deleting the reference to the lizard incident in her final draft and expanding on the event in the story where the main character accidentally lost his father's canoe. The student then provided an explanation for why the character hid next to a rock (or pretended to be a rock), "The next day I played with my father's canoe when I wasn't supposed to. I was afraid I would get in trouble. So I pretended to be a rock." The end result of the teacher's comments was a more focused final draft of the student's composition that included more supporting details from the story.

#### Draft 1

Dear Diary,

I do not like my sister. I think night is better. She always makes me copy her.

I am very sad too because mother is not going to have a baby Last night I put a lizard in the mat. Last year I was smaller then her but now I am taller then her. I will put a snake in her mat when she looks at the lizard. The next day I hid next to a rock. Then dad came and he was worried about me. Sharp tooth found the boat. When I came out mom was very happy to see me. Then I knew that my sister was worried too. Now I know that my sister likes me.

Love, Star Boy

#### Draft 2 (Final)

Dear Diary,

I do not like my sister because she just cares about the morning. I think night is better then day because at night

you could see the stars. She likes the sun better then the stars.

I am sad because mother did not have a baby. That is okay because I could see the baby in the special tree right next to grandfather. She looks very pretty on the tree. Sometimes we come here to talk to the people that died. We don't get sad.

The next day I played with my father's canoe when I wasn't supposed to. I was afraid I would get in trouble. So I pretended to be a rock. I was okay until my father came. His said that Sharp tooth found the canoe. That is good because maybe if he did not find it I would have gotten in trouble. When he called my name, I said, "Here I am." My family was so happy! Even morning girl cares about me. She cares about me a lot. Now I like morning girl a lot as my big sister.  
Love, Star Boy

*A composition that did not improve in content.* In another classroom, students wrote a paragraph completing the prompt, "My pot at the end of the rainbow has . . ." The theme of the prompt came from class discussions surrounding the celebration of St. Patrick's Day. According to the teacher, students talked about the month of March, leprechauns, pots of gold, and rainbows. The teacher's goal for the assignment was to have students write a paragraph in complete sentences, using correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The teacher also hoped the assignment would encourage students to express their feelings in writing.

We considered this to be a relatively poor-quality writing task overall. Although the teacher had submitted this assignment as a writing task where the students engaged in the steps of the writing process, the task simply required students to write a list of things they would like to own, for example, candy and compact discs. Students were not required to engage with any content material or even to explain their choices. In contrast to the previous example, the structure of the writing task itself did not provide much of an opportunity for feedback and student revision, in part be-

cause the content was not as rich. Indeed, the teacher's goals were focused almost completely on written language conventions versus developing and expanding students' comprehension or knowledge of writing strategies or genres (e.g., how to write a rich narrative description, etc.).

In addition to assigning a limited writing task, this teacher also did not provide content or clarification feedback to students, and virtually no change from first to final drafts was evident in any of the student papers we read. The final draft of the paragraph shown below, considered by the teacher to be of medium quality for the class, contained only one modification. The teacher crossed out the word "And" beginning a sentence and capitalized the following word ("it"). The student appeared simply to copy the first draft onto a student-decorated construction-paper drawing of a pot.

#### Draft 1

My pot at the end of the rainbow has a lot of hot cheetos. And it also had candy in the pot. And it also had a lot of gold. Then I would buy stuff with the gold. And if I don't have no more stuff and I just had gold I would buy more stuff that I had in my pot. Then I would buy backstreet boys cd's.

#### Draft 2 (Final)

My pot at the end of the rainbow has a lot of hot cheetos. It also had candy in the pot. And it also had a lot of gold. Then I would buy stuff with the gold. And if I don't have no more stuff and I just had gold I would buy more stuff that I had in my pot. Then I would buy backstreet boys cd's.

#### Higher-Achieving Schools

*A composition that improved in content.* For this assignment students were asked to describe a place that was well known to them. The class had read *Little House on the Prairie* (1975) by Laura Ingalls Wilder and used the rich descriptions of scenes in the novel as models for their own

compositions. Students used a prewriting chart to plan their description where they made notes about what they saw, heard, and smelled as they imagined their setting, along with other details they would need to include in their compositions. The teacher also modeled a careful, detailed description of physical aspects of the classroom, guiding students through the steps they would need to follow and providing examples of details to include in their own descriptions. The directions to students emphasized that their descriptions should provide sufficient detail to allow readers to feel as if they had visited places the students described.

We considered this to be a high-quality assignment, first because students were required to engage with substantive content material by studying the writing of an excellent author (Laura Ingalls Wilder). Analyzing and attempting to emulate a writer's style is a challenging task, especially at the third grade. Additionally, the teacher's goal for the assignment, to have students develop their skills in writing descriptions of a setting with sensory details, was clear and focused on student learning.

The writing sample below shows one student response to this assignment that received content feedback and improved in our rating of its content quality. The teacher rated this paper as medium quality with respect to the others in the class. The teacher made several comments on the student's initial draft that prompted the student to include more description and detail. Specifically, the teacher wrote the following questions at the end of the student's first draft: "What's your Aunt's name? What's your Uncle's name? What do you eat there?" The student subsequently added her aunt's name to the final draft (but not her uncle's) and the information that she smells "macaroni and cheese." In response to this addition the teacher wrote, "What does [macaroni and cheese] smell like?" The student then added, "It smells like cheesie cheese." In response to the student's statement, "I hate the smell of [the heater]," the teacher

wrote, "Why do you hate it? What does it smell like? Describe it. Does it smell like burnt toast or what?" The student subsequently added, "I hate the smell because it smells like smoke or something burning."

In addition to asking for more sensory details, the teacher also asked the student to clarify parts of her narrative. After the student wrote, "... when I spend the night his car wakes me up," the teacher responded, "The car comes in your room and tells you to get up?! How does the car wake you up?" The student subsequently added, "... the car wakes me up because the car sounds like this, 'Room room.'" Additionally, in response to the student's statement, "I still love them and I don't think their dumb," the teacher wrote, "Why would you think they're dumb?" The student subsequently deleted this from her essay and wrote as her closing sentence, "I still love them because I don't care what they do."

#### Draft 1

My Grandma's house is cool. Once I go in I see the T.V. and my Grandma holding S. (baby cousin). I also see my aunt and the couch. I go in and I smell the wonderful smell of food. The other thing is when it is cold my Grandma turns on the heater. So (I don't like the smell. The most disgusting thing I hear my Uncle's snore. He snores like this, "Khaaaaaa" My Uncle goes to his work at 7:00 so when I spend the night his car wakes me up but I still love them and I don't think their dumb because I don't care what wrong things they do.

#### Draft 3 (Final)

My Grandmas house is cool. I see The T.V. and my grandma holding S. (my baby cousin). I also see my Aunt S. and the couch. I go in the kitchen and I smell the wonderful smell of Macaroni and Cheese. It smells like cheesie cheese. The other thing is when it is cold my grandma turns on the heater so I hate the smell because it smells like smoke or something burning. The most disgusting thing I hear is my Uncle snoring. He snores like this, "Khaaaaaaaachooooo." My Uncle goes to his work at 7:00 so

when I spend the night, his car wakes me up because it sounds like this, "Room room." I still love them because I don't care what they do.

*A composition that did not improve in content.* The assignment that generated the final pair of papers in our study had the students write a story that exaggerated an ordinary event as a follow-up to the book *Gila Monsters Meet You at the Airport* (1980) by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat. The teacher's goals for the assignment were that students engage in the steps of the writing process and write "clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea" and demonstrate an awareness of "the audience and purpose" for the writing. We considered this assignment to be of moderate quality. In contrast to the previous assignment, students were given relatively little direction with regard to learning how to use exaggeration for a humorous effect in their story. Indeed, the teacher's goals primarily focused on writing clear and correct sentences and paragraphs. This teacher also did not give any content feedback on any of the student essays, and there was little change in the quality of the content or organization of student work. This is illustrated in the essays below, which show the early and later drafts of a student's story the teacher considered to be of medium quality for the class. The teacher made only surface edits on the student's first draft. Specifically, she added an end parenthesis and quotation marks and changed the student's capitalization of "And."

#### Draft 1

Today is th first day of school. I was so nervous you could see my hart beating. I finly got to school. I went into my classroom My teacher's name was Mrs. Homework (school had already started. I got right to work. Mrs. Homework I'm having problems with my desert animal report. Haven't you read your book. No. Then read! At the end of the day she gave 10 pages of homework! And the next day

she gave 25 pages of homework! Then I said "Stop!" Mrs. Homework froze. Just then we got into a fight and her mask flew off everyone froze. Without her mask she was nice. So I snuck out at night and went in the class room and I snatched the mask and braing it to my house. Everybody was waiting we started a fire and threw it in the fire. From then on she gave no homework. From then on she was and her name was Mrs. Nice. From then on she was very, very, nice. The end.

#### Draft 2 (Final)

Today is the first day of school. I was so nervous you could see my hart beating. I finly got to school. I went into my classroom (school had already started). I got right to work. "Mrs. Homework I'm having problems with my desert animal report." "Haven't you read your book." "No." "Then read it!" At the end of the day she gave 10 pages of homework! And the next night she gave us 25 pages of homework! Then I said "Stop!" Mrs. Homework froz. Just then we got into a fight and her mask flew off off everyone froze. Without her mask she was nice. So I snuck out at night and went in the class room and I snached the mask and ran down the street and all the class mates met at my house we started a fire and threw the mask in. From then on she gave no homework and her name was Mrs. Nice. From then on she was very, very, nice. The end.

### Summary and Conclusions

Results indicated that the quality of the writing tasks teachers in higher-achieving schools gave students was higher than that in lower-achieving schools, with notable exceptions. In general, however, many of the writing assignments did not require students to engage with substantive content material, and many teachers had fairly unclear goals for what they wanted students to learn as a result of completing the writing assignment.

With regard to quality of teachers' feedback, most teachers focused on standardized language use, with most of their comments aiming to standardize some aspect of

punctuation, spelling, or grammar. Although teachers in the lower-achieving schools tended to give statistically significantly more content feedback than did teachers in the higher-achieving schools, the total number of content-level edits on student papers in both types of schools was small. Across instructional contexts, teachers paid much more attention to improving the surface features of students' writing than to challenging or improving their communication of ideas.

According to writing process pedagogy, an important purpose of the drafting process is for writers to develop and rethink their ideas as they progress from first to final draft. The first draft is called a draft in part to signal its status as "an improvable object" (Haneda & Wells, 2000, p. 443). The elementary school corpus in our study by and large appeared to have been treated as "improvable" mostly with regard to writing mechanics, grammar, and spelling. In other words, teachers treated student papers as objects of standardization rather than improvement. Perhaps this reflects the priorities of third-grade writing instruction. Generally speaking, third-grade goals for writing instruction include learning to write narrative, expository, and personal text, focusing on characteristics such as sentence type, paragraph structure, and descriptive vocabulary. Writing assignments often require one paragraph, and instruction aims to help students produce the best paragraphs possible, with clear topic sentences and supporting statements. Often it is not until later that elementary school writers are asked to write longer, multiparagraph texts in a variety of rhetorical modes. The third and fourth grades are, however, an important time when most writers start to be held more accountable to the written standard. Invented spellings and idiosyncratic organizational forms often are accepted in the early grades as children first begin to appropriate the writing system; as their acquisition of the writing system progresses, however, teachers increasingly de-

mand that student writers conform to the written standard.

This emphasis on surface-level corrections was reflected in a decreasing number of errors in students' writings. Within both types of schools students showed marked improvement in writing mechanics from first to final drafts. Students in the lower-achieving schools also showed improvement in the organization of their writing. Within school types, however, students did not show significant improvement in the content of their writing across drafts. When content feedback was given to students in either type of school, they appeared able to incorporate teachers' suggestions in their drafts and improve the content of their compositions. Unfortunately, this type of feedback was rare in both types of schools.

Finally, to better understand the influence of teacher feedback and assignment quality on the quality of students' final drafts, we conducted regression analyses controlling for the type of school students attended and the quality of their first drafts. Results indicated that quality of writing assignment and feedback appeared to have similar effects on improvement in the content of student writing. Assignment quality, on the whole, did not predict a significant proportion of the variance in quality of organization and mechanics of students' final drafts. However, writing tasks that were more cognitively challenging appeared to present students with greater opportunities to improve the content of their work. This is likely because these assignments were more content-rich themselves and engaged students with more meaningful ideas and more substantive content material. Interestingly, the quality of teachers' goals was negatively associated with quality of writing mechanics of students' final drafts. As illustrated in our case study examples, it appears that teachers who had vague or activity-focused learning objectives for their assignments tended to emphasize surface features of students' work.

In conclusion, students on the whole did

not show a great deal of improvement in the content and organization of their compositions across drafts, and most teachers did not provide students with content feedback or high-quality writing assignments. What emerges is another example of an instructional practice or standard advocated by reformers without much consideration for how to implement it in the classroom. Teachers do not necessarily have the knowledge and skills to implement the writing process as it was originally conceived. Researchers in other disciplines besides writing have noted the problems in implementing new instructional practices. In mathematics instruction, Cohen and Ball (1994) and Spillane and Zeuli (1999) concluded that teachers need more support for implementing reform practices than is generally offered to them in traditional professional development activities. Tharp and Gallimore (1988), McNiff and Leader (1995), and a number of other action researchers have made the same point. Traditional professional development settings, however, do not appear to be effective for transforming teachers' instructional practices (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; McNiff & Leader, 1995).

As Strickland et al. (2001) noted, the current wave of standards-based reform has drawn attention to the importance of writing instruction. At the same time, however, professional development activities for teachers may be focusing more on strategies for meeting the requirements of mandated assessments rather than more generally on how teachers can help students develop as writers. Reform programs seeking to improve students' literacy skills should include a focus on helping teachers improve both their assignments and their feedback on student writing. Students do not grow as writers, and teachers do not grow as instructors, in the absence of high-quality feedback. As with students, teachers need opportunities for collaborative assisted professional development in order to improve their practice. Our data indicate that teach-

ers are sensitive to the importance of standardizing their students' written language, a primary emphasis of many standardized assessments used to evaluate students and schools. Teachers may not be paying as much attention to students' use of writing as a means to develop and communicate ideas because, in the end, that is not something for which they are held accountable (Dyson, 2000). Teachers also are not promoting the use of a variety of writing genres and written communicative tasks and most likely default to the forms with which they are most familiar.

Clearly, if instruction and student learning are to improve, the educational research community must, in Applebee's words, take on the applied work that will help researchers and educators learn how to make classrooms "work better" for all students (1999, p. 363). To support this work, future research could look more deeply at the qualities of writing tasks and types of written feedback that help students improve as writers. Such future research also could generate grade-appropriate models for student revision and help identify ways to support the communicative dimensions of writing as young writers make the transition from assimilating to appropriating the alphabet.

Future research likewise could look more deeply at the nature of effective written feedback for younger students and attempt to categorize and describe it. Clearly, more genre-focused feedback to younger children cannot take the same form as it does for older, more experienced writers. Younger children have neither the experience nor the technical vocabulary to understand some kinds of instruction, and yet, a number of researchers have reported successful instructional practices in their elementary school studies (Orellana, 1995; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Future research could identify ways for both teachers and students to explore different genres and their uses. It would be important as well to investigate

the type of written feedback that helps English-language learners achieve communicative fluency while mastering written language conventions.

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