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IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS THROUGH THE USE OF MORNING WORK IN THE SECOND-GRADE CLASSROOM

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IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS THROUGH THE USE OF MORNING WORK IN

THE SECOND-GRADE CLASSROOM

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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We are the culmination of all of the experiences, people, and places that touch our lives,

and I have been blessed with many. Sincere thanks to my family and friends who didn't

roll their eyes when it took me ten years to complete this process. Thank you Alta Loma

Christian School for impacting students, families, staff, and community through the

Living Word and message of Jesus. Much appreciation goes out to all of the teachers and

colleagues who inspired me to finish what I started. And a final thank you to my

husband, children, and grandchildren without whom this accomplishment would be

hollow.

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Introduction

Overview

Reading, writing, and arithmetic. The academic subjects covered within the typical elementary school day include far more than the three r's. Our districts provide us with academic curriculum allow us to present information necessary for students to learn and grow, and we use research and best practices to drive our teaching praxis. With our best intentions, we augment, enhance, and extend the given curriculum in order to reach each-and-every student. There is so much to do and never enough time to get everything done. Through this capstone project, I intend to answer the following action capstone question: *How can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*

Personal Foundations

I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher. Growing up in a family of teachers instills certain values and opinions regarding education and its role in life. My grandmother taught first and second grade in Washburn, Wisconsin. When she began teaching, teachers were not allowed to be married. Rather than give up one love for the other (my grandfather or teaching), she decided to have both. In order to *have it all*, she married my grandfather and lived in a separate city from where she taught. Later, licensing regulations changed, and teachers were required to have a bachelor's degree. My grandmother's teaching certificate from Superior State Normal School was no longer acceptable. So strong was her dedication to teaching that she went back to school and graduated with her bachelor's degree in the same year that my uncle graduated from high

school. This dedication did not end there. She saved a single piece of work from each of her students, and, when the student graduated from high school, she sent it to them in a card. Not only did I want my grandmother to *be* my teacher, but I wanted to *be* like her.

In addition to my grandmother being a teaching role model for me, my mother was a teacher, as well. My mom happened to be one of the teachers who walked the picket lines in the '70s before teachers had the benefits and representation that they have today. She modelled strength and perseverance. Additionally, she brought creativity to her classroom by integrating hands-on activities for her fourth-grade students. I watched her connect literacy (this is why I must have *all* of the books) and science in order to offer urban students experiences that they may not have had otherwise. I loved being able to help set up the snail ecosystem and clean out the hermit crab habitat! Both of these women modeled passion and creativity that inspired me to pursue a career in teaching.

My teaching journey would take a different path. I started as an Early Childhood Educator for the ECFE (Early Childhood Family Education) program in Saint Cloud, Minnesota. It was there that I was able to dig deep into developmentally appropriate practice, hands-on learning, and the work of Magda Gerber. Applying these principles in early childhood settings allowed me to flex my creativity muscles and expand my skillset. I decided to step out of pre-kindergarten and teach kindergarten. Pivoting from addressing academic skills through open-ended, developmentally appropriate activities to the explicit teaching techniques of kindergarten was very, *very* challenging for me. It took a lot of work for me to reconcile what I knew about developmentally appropriate practice and child development and what was expected of five-year-olds in kindergarten.

Quite honestly, elementary school, in general, does not hold the philosophy of process-over-product in very high esteem, and I had to reconcile this within myself.

Planning age-appropriate learning experiences that addressed more than one academic area was challenging, but through practice and experience, it became second nature. I understood that number recognition, identifying letter sounds, and learning about worms could all be rolled into one effective lesson…for five-year-olds. Then I was hired to teach second grade. I was given separate books for separate curricular areas. In a way, I had to go against everything that I had learned about teaching young children. I decided to combine hands-on, interactive learning with traditional academic curriculum. For example, at the end of our study of worms, I brought in *real* worms. Students used math, reading, spelling, and writing to do a final investigation. Fortunately, the administration embraced my franken-approach and celebrated my personal style of teaching. I felt alive as a teacher and appreciated as an individual. It was amazing. When I had to leave due to relocation for my husband's job, I was heartbroken. I had so much more that I wanted to do! There were so many ideas that I wanted to try!

This brings me to the inspiration for this capstone project. As I moved through the second-grade curriculum, I was frustrated by missed opportunities to connect concepts and reinforce skills. For instance, when students were writing rhymes in English, it would have been helpful to connect spelling words that rhyme with that series of lessons. The handwriting curriculum was wonderful but challenging to incorporate in a meaningful way. As I looked at these challenges, I realized that there already was more than enough material to fill the daily schedule. I did not want to create more work, learn another technique, or spend additional money. I wanted to find a way to use something

that already existed, something that was familiar, and something that would not take up

more time to address these challenges in curriculum continuity. I honed in on *morning*

work. Morning work was already scheduled for the first fifteen minutes of the day.

Students were familiar with the procedure. The morning work being used was not,

specifically, tailored to our needs, but offered a quick warm-up that appeared to cover the

academic content areas.   Could this be the answer?

Literacy as Foundation

One of my first experiences teaching in an elementary school setting was that of

being an English Language Learner program paraprofessional. It was in a tiny rural town

in southwestern Minnesota, and the entire K-12 program was housed in one building. I

was excited that I would be able to work in a new area, taking direction from an ELL

teacher who knew what they were doing. Only that was not the case. It turned out that

the ELL paraprofessional was, actually, the ELL *teacher!* The previous paraprofessional

had students work on a computer program for the time that they were scheduled for ELL

services. I, simply, could not do that. I, instead, asked teachers what each student needed

to work on and developed individualized plans from there. We played games. We read

aloud. It was better, but I still felt as though I was doing a great disservice to my students

by not knowing what I was doing. I enrolled in the Hamline Master of Arts Literacy

Education program in order to elevate my knowledge and skills.

The Master of Arts Literacy Education program offered a plethora of information.

Along the way, there was a course that used the required text "Teaching Reading in

Social Studies, Science, and Math" (Robb, 2003). This book changed the way that I saw

and taught *everything.* Prior to this, I had not considered literacy to be a part of science

or math. I learned that, especially for my ELL students, math had its own signs, symbols, and language. There is also science-specific jargon. What?! It was a personal epiphany.

Literacy skills are essential for student success in all content areas. (Robb, 2003) Teaching literacy skills is not limited to explicit reading and writing blocks in the classroom schedule. In fact, the more practice opportunities offered to students throughout the day, the more they can hone these very important skills and apply them to a variety of scenarios. But how? Most classroom teachers receive teacher's and student's editions for the curriculum that corresponds with content areas that they are expected to teach. My personal experience is that these curricula do not seamlessly coordinate with each other, and the result can be missed opportunities to reinforce literacy skills across content areas.

Moving forward in my capstone, I use research regarding literacy integration across content areas to guide the creation of a curriculum supplement for my former school's second grade. I utilize current school curriculum to develop a component that provides customized practice in order to maximize student understanding. This enhancement explores *how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*

Summary

Chapter one depicted my personal life story as it contributed to my experience as a teacher. It explained the journey I have taken in recognizing the importance of maximizing the opportunities for students to practice literacy skills. It described my path toward creating a curriculum supplement that improves these skills without adding to teacher workload or taking time away from other instructional areas.   Through my

capstone, I seek out the most effective practices that offer the most impactful results for both students and teachers in order to incorporate them into a curriculum supplement.

Chapter two reviews research on the theories used in the development of my curriculum supplement. First, it explores literacy and its overall significance as it applies to writing. Next, I examine what literature has to say about reading and its connection, impact, and relationship to writing. Finally, research as it applies to the best practices for the development and acquisition of writing skills is considered. Chapter three will then describe the progression, paradigms, and methods used to create the actual morning work supplement, and chapter four will offer a personal reflection on the capstone process and final product. Key findings and connections will be discussed, along with successes and limitations in answering the capstone question, *how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

A primary goal of writing instruction is to equip students with the tools they need to become proficient, independent, and confident writers. This chapter presents research in the areas of literacy and writing, with a focus on writing. Because writing development is soundly related to literacy success (Juel, 1988), identifying effective instructional techniques and approaches is imperative in answering the question, *how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*

To answer the capstone question and formulate a curriculum supplement, literacy will be examined; what it is, why it is important, and the role it plays in the development of writing skills. Next, reading and its relationship to writing is considered. Then, as it is the focus of the final capstone project, research in the area of writing instruction is presented. The review of the literature informs, directs, and guides not only best practices, but also *most effective* practices so that a morning work curriculum supplement can be developed that offers students the opportunity to develop and improve their writing skills.

Literacy

Literacy can be defined as "the ability to read, write, and think effectively" (Schmoker, 2007, p. 488). It encompasses a variety of skills and abilities that are considered essential to success in school, work, and day-to-day life. Throughout the elementary school years, students focus on learning, practicing, and mastering a variety of literacy skills. In the early primary grades (K-2), instruction is largely skills-based and

focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. (Barone, 2004) So important is primary-grade mastery, that these skills have been found to be an indicator of future literacy success (Burns, 2004). To add further emphasis to the significance of early literacy, Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) found that the most effective tool in the prevention of reading failure was quality instruction in kindergarten and primary grades.

Literacy skills are imperative for academic success. It includes the mastery of at least three domains: language comprehension, word awareness, and print knowledge (Perry, Pressley, Billman, Moorhead Reynolds, & Reffitt, 2015). Students who do not develop reading and writing proficiency are at-risk, not only academically, but in later years, as well (Graham, et al., 2017). The area of literacy is broad and far-reaching. In order to develop a deeper understanding of writing as a component of literacy, it is important to examine reading and its relationship to writing.

Reading

Reading is the interpretation of symbols and sequences of symbols. When those sounds are put together to make whole sounds that symbolize meaning, this meaning can be exchanged with others (TeachThought Staff, 2020). It has been described as involving three dimensions: cognitive, cultural, and effective (Shvidko, 2017). The cognitive dimension refers to what takes place in the brain; specifically, "Reading is a number of interactive processes between the reader and the text, in which readers use their knowledge to build, to create and to construct meaning" (Shvidko, 2017, p. 1). The cultural event of reading describes how it occurs within a given culture, and in what way this culture influences what, how, where, when, and even *if* individuals read. Finally, the

affective dimension of reading emphasizes the emotional connection that the reader experiences as they process text. It is also referred to as *flow experience* (Shvidko, 2017).

While research has mainly focused on reading skills development and instruction, recent studies have identified relationships between reading and writing and how teachers can improve both (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015). Reading and writing share a set of abilities and skills that draw on common sources of knowledge and cognitive processes. These processes intersect and connect to make meaning and accomplish significant learning goals (Graham, et al., 2017).

Kim and Graham (2018) investigated the co-development of reading and writing, In the third-graders studied, they found a strong relationship between word reading and spelling. Further evidence identified a number of highly-similar skills needed for word reading and spelling such as phonological awareness, orthographic awareness (knowledge of letters and their patterns), and morphological awareness (Apel, 2012).

Critical to reading instruction is comprehension. The ability to understand the material that is read is essential for every reader, and equipping students with the tools needed to comprehend complex text involves imparting the skills of phonemic awareness, fluency, decoding, vocabulary, and a variety of comprehension strategies (National Institutes of Children's Health and Development, 2000). Consequently, writing has been identified as a way to improve reading comprehension. Overall text comprehension has been found to improve when students write about the text that has been read using summary, answering questions, note-taking, and other supplemental writing activities. Improvement was seen in all levels of readers (Graham & Hebert, 2011). The recommendation based on these findings suggests that teachers use a variety of writing

activities in order to impact and improve students' writing, as well as reading comprehension.

Writing

Writing is the process by which written symbols are combined into a readable form that conveys meaning to others. It requires standardized application of components and conventions including spelling, grammar, and handwriting (Graham, MacArthur, & Hebert, 2019). As it applies to the gathering and organizing of knowledge, writing is instrumental to student learning, and it is the primary means by which students reveal their understanding of acquired knowledge (Graham,, Gillespie, McKeown, & Hebert, 2013). Previously described, writing is strongly connected to reading. Many of the skillsets required are related and overlapping. A variety of strategies are used to teach students how to write, and this section reviews what research tells us about what is most effective in the acquisition and improvement of writing skills.

Writing mastery has implications that extend beyond the doors of academia. Students who fail to acquire strong writing skills may experience restrictions in both post-secondary education and employment (Graham, 2006). In the workplace, writing can offer opportunities for employment and promotion (National Commission on Writing, 2004, 2005). Businesses and government, for instance, expect employees to generate written communication, documentation, presentations, reports, and electronic messages. In a social context, those who do not write well may have difficulty participating in e-mail and text messaging (Graham & Rogers, 2008). In one's personal life, writing about feelings and experiences can have psychological benefits, and many

people use writing to explore, document, and journal about and for themselves (Smyth, 1998).

The ability to write effectively is important and essential. Hawkins and Razal (2012) break writing into three areas: writing as penmanship, writing as product, and writing as process. These over-arching themes give context to historic, as well as modern-day, approaches to writing that are useful in reviewing the literature.

Writing as Product and Process

Writing as Product. Writing as product refers to the actual product created by the writer (Hawkins, 2012). At the turn of the twentieth century, penmanship and product were inseparable, and any instruction outside of penmanship was considered language instruction. This language instruction was mainly oral and consisted of recitations of both oral and written communication. The roaring 20s ushered in an era that emphasized individualism and self-expression, and, as a result, writing was considered a form of art. The Scientific Age of the 1950s/60s brought forth the behaviorist theories of Watson, Pavlov, Thorndike, and Skinner. The focus on observable and measurable changes in behavior gave birth to what is now known as *behavioral objectives*. Teachers were encouraged to use the context of authentic writing to teach handwriting, spelling, and grammar. The whole language and emergent literacy models of the 1970s/80s manifest writing as product in the form of process writing. Teachers were to address writing mechanics on an individual basis and focus on the message being communicated. The 2000s brought the rapid expansion of technology and its use to create and produce written products. Technology continues to innovate

instructional practice and influence student writing products into the future (Graham & Harris, 2016).

Writing as Process. This view indicates writing in the verb form; the *activity* of writing. It is about the *how,* rather than the *what* (Elbow, 1998). The historical shift of recognizing and incorporating the process of writing can be seen in the 1930s when writing as penmanship gave way to teaching students how to create original products. During the 1960s/70s/80s, books such as Why Johnny Can't Read (Flesch, Why Johnny Can't Read, 1986) and Why Johnny Still Can't Read (Flesch, 1983) paved the way for new writing instruction methods. Further transforming the process of writing, A Nation at Risk (Gardner, 1983) emphasized the need for students to spend time on individual writing assignments. It stressed the importance of students being able to "write in a variety of forms and for a variety of purposes and audiences" (Gardner, 1983). No Child Left Behind sought to bring greater accountability to education, and, as a result, led to greater standardization of curriculum and reliance on standardized testing. Finally, Common Core State Standards defined writing standards to include text types and purposes, production and distribution of writing, research to build and present knowledge, and range of writing. While the outcomes are clearly defined, the process by which to achieve them is left to the discretion of the states, districts, schools, and teachers.

Writing as Best Practice

Graham and Harris (2016) found that best practices fell into three main categories: Cognitive/motivational, Explicit Instruction, and Scaffolded Student Writing. Cognitive/motivational practices focus on the individual's mental processes in

combination with long-term memory. This study found that creating a positive, supportive writing environment allowed students to be more receptive to the skills, knowledge, and strategies required to become skilled writers (Graham & Harris, Research-Based Writing Practices and the Common Core, 2015).

Explicit instruction provides students with specific instruction on specific skills needed for writing proficiency. Examples of explicit instruction strategies include:

- Specific approaches to planning, drafting, and revising assorted types of text.
- Procedures for adapting known writing strategies. For example:
    1. Goal-setting
    2. Self-assessment
- Structure and creation of different types of text
- Spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013).

It should be noted that the quality of research in the area of explicit instruction is high, which supports its use in teaching writing. The third classification, Scaffolded Students' Writing, encourages students to collaborate in planning, drafting, revising, and editing their writing. Collaboration can take place with peers (partner or small group) and/or teacher. In all cases, clear and specific goals should be set along with rubrics for assessing writing progress. It was also found effective to involve students in activities that support gathering and organizing ideas *before* writing their first draft (Graham, Kiuhara, McKeown, & Harris, 2012).

To create a morning work supplement that meets the schedule constraints of the classroom, it is important to consider what gives the most bang for the buck? With a limited amount of time, which writing practices have the most impact? In a review of

writing intervention research, Graham, et al (2012) discovered several levels of effectiveness. This information is helpful in determining best practices and implementing them in the classroom. Writing practices found to be most effective are:

1. Strategy instructions

2. Peer collaboration for planning, drafting, and revision

3. Setting product goals

4. Prewriting activities, such as research and graphic organizers

5. Utilizing the process approach to writing instruction

Effective writing practices were found to include:

1. Self-regulating strategies

2. Teaching text structure

3. Creativity and imagery exercises

4. Text transcription activities to improve skill and speed (spelling, handwriting, keyboarding)

5. Detailed rubrics for assessing student writing

6. Increasing the amount of time students have for writing (Graham, Kiuhara, McKeown, & Harris, 2012)

Also, to be considered when choosing and utilizing instructional methods for writing is the frequency students use and implement these strategies, as this has a direct impact on the quality of writing (Graham, MacArthur, & Hebert, 2019). The more students use writing strategies, the more independent and self-sufficient they become. The most powerful practices were found to be direct strategy instruction, summarization instruction, collaborative writing, and goal setting for product outcome. Practices that

were found to yield moderate results were word processing and sentence combining. Small gains were found for the practices of pre-writing activities, inquiry activities, employing process writing approach, the study of models, and writing for content area learning (Graham, MacArthur, & Hebert, 2019). It is important to note that several of these findings contrast with Graham, et al (2012) which, as previously stated, indicated that both prewriting activities and using the process approach to writing instruction were high-impact practices. Individual differences in students, classrooms, and teachers may account for these variances and should be considered when making decisions regarding writing instruction.

Sentence Construction and Combining

The foundation of writing begins with the smallest components of letters and sounds and builds toward complicated, higher-order expression. Effective writers plan, generate, and revise text on multiple levels, including handwriting, grammar, and spelling (Berninger V. N., 2011). Of primary importance to writer efficacy is the ability to compose and construct sentences. A *sentence* is defined as "written language in which idea units are marked by capitalization and punctuation" (Fayol, 1997, p. 158). Formulating a sentence requires the writer to consider a vast array of choices that will assure that the reader accurately "sees" what the writer is trying to convey. As the length of composition increases, the complexity of the writing task increases (Graham, MacArthur, & Hebert, 2019). It is, therefore, important to consider what research indicates about instructional best practices in sentence construction.

Writers need to develop sentence construction proficiency in order to communicate their thoughts effectively using a variety of linguistic structures

(Drijbooms, 2017). An important, though difficult, skill for many writers to master is syntactical control, Sadler & Graham (2005) found that direct, explicit techniques, such as cognitive nudging (using deliberate, engaging language experiences) or increased usage of particular syntactic models, improved both writing and sentence complexity.

A method called *sentence combining* was developed in the 1960s as an alternative to formal grammar instruction. Since that time, much research has been done supporting its use as an effective method for helping students generate syntactically sophisticated sentences. Sentence combining provides direct and specific practice in maneuvering and rewriting phrases, clauses, and short sentences into more syntactically mature forms (Daiker, 1979). *Syntactic maturity* is defined as "the ability to write a variety of complex and compound sentences within a story" (Graham, MacArthur, & Hebert, 2019, p. 243). Take, for example, the following sentences: My dog is big. My dog is friendly. These sentences can be combined to form a more mature-sounding product: My dog is big and friendly. Several benefits have been found for teaching sentence combining. As students become more skilled at combining and creating more complex sentences, they can shift their attention to other writing elements such as audience awareness and purpose (Sadler, 2019). Sentence combining represents a type of controlled composition exercise that is valuable for writers of all abilities. Explicit exercises support students in becoming more adept at arranging syntactical elements, by prompting them to practice the manipulation and control of syntax. This manipulation becomes more complex over time (Sadler, 2019)

Sentence combining is advantageous to the classroom teacher in that it does not require special materials, curriculum, or extensive training in order to implement. It takes

up a relatively small amount of time and can be easily integrated into existing curriculum (Graham, MacArthur, & Hebert, 2019). When used as a component of or supplement to existing instruction, sentence combining has been found to improve complexity of student writing for a variety of skill levels (Sadler, 2019).

Content-Area Writing

Student understanding has been found to improve when they write about what they have read (Robb, 2003). When students write about what they have read, they are provided with the opportunity to analyze, record, connect, control, and personalize key ideas from the text in visible and permanent ways. Two meta-analyses found that students' learning was greatly enhanced by writing about content materials in social studies, mathematics, and science (Bangert-Drowns & Langer, 2004; Graham & Perin, 2007). Another meta-analysis performed by Graham, et al found that content-area instruction that also included balanced reading and writing instruction greatly improved comprehension in these content areas (2017).

Writing as Technique and Form

Handwriting. "The famed playwright Harold Pinter, having just been introduced as a very good writing, was once asked by a six-year-old boy if he could do a *w*" (Graham S. , 2010, p. 49).

The young man assumed that being a good writer meant having good handwriting. While simple on its surface, the research, at least in part, supports this line of reason: that handwriting instruction improves students' writing. Not simply in terms of legibility, but in its quantity and quality, as well (Graham, 2010). Handwriting is the physical creation of written symbols using an implement such as a pencil or pen.

Proficiency progresses through developmental stages and includes both fine motor and visual-perceptual skills. Each person's handwriting is so unique that it can be used as a means to identify an individual. This section provides an overview of what research tells us about the best practices for teaching students the physical act of writing.

The historical progression of writing is interesting to note. During the 1920s, penmanship was taught through imitation and practice (Enstrom, 1966). Elementary-grade instruction focused strictly on handwriting and, when a level of proficiency had been achieved, secondary students moved on to creating original compositions. In the 1930s, penmanship was renamed "handwriting" and considered a subset of writing. Manuscript (printing) was introduced as it was thought to require less practice and could be mastered quickly. The 1950s/60s/70s brought new instructional practices which included offering a variety of writing experiences. Whole-group drills were discouraged, and teachers used authentic composition to teach handwriting and grammar. In the 1970s and 80s, the concept of whole language is introduced, and emergent literacy. The whole language approach emphasizes the interactional and functional relationship when language learning occurs (Secondary, 2005). Emergent literacy has been defined as "those behaviors shown by very young children as they begin to respond to and approximate reading and writing acts" (Braunger, 1998, p. 12) .

Legibility indicates that what has been written can be read or deciphered with ease. The reader can see and understand what the writer has put on the paper. Young readers must learn to both decode, so that they can focus on comprehension, and develop fluid, legible handwriting, so that they can focus on creating and organizing their ideas. For these emergent readers, much thought and intent must be put into the formation of

letters, and this affects other writing processes (Elbow, 1998). It is important to address legibility early in the learning process because changing handwriting habits become more difficult as time passes. When young writers have to focus on letter formation, they have difficulty developing other features of writing. These multiple demands can serve to decrease composition because the writer has to highly focus on the formation of letters (Eidiger, Assessing Handwriting Achievement, 2001).

Fortunately, handwriting instruction does not require large amounts of educational time. Graham (2010) found that to be most effective, instruction should be taught in short bursts several times per week (or daily) with fifty-to-one hundred minutes per week dedicated to its proficiency.

Several techniques or types of handwriting can be used. Generally, manuscript, cursive, D'Nealian, and italics are the forms of handwriting that are taught to young writers. Research does not offer a definitive answer regarding which script is most effective. Graham (2010) determined that traditional manuscript was most effective for the following reasons:

- Most kindergarten children already know how to write some of these letters
- Traditional manuscript is easier to learn
- Traditional manuscript allows the writer to write with more speed and legibility
- Traditional manuscript may accelerate reading development because most reading materials are written using manuscript

Emergent readers, specifically, need to be able to quickly and easily identify letters by name. match name to letter and write letters as named. Marlow Eidiger (2001) found that the most effective procedures for having students learn letter names was to name

each letter as it is practiced, writing the letter that comes before and after a given set of consecutive letters, and using a variety of alphabet practice games to make learning enjoyable. As teachers embrace the instruction of letters as it relates to handwriting, they should keep in mind the most difficult letters for students to form. The letters *q, j, z, u, n,* and *k* account for the most omissions, miscues, and illegible efforts, while *q, z, u, a,* and *j* make up those letters that are most often illegibly written. The goal is for students to be able to create legible writing quickly without needing extensive, deliberate attention to the process (Graham, 2010).

What is the best way for students to hold their pencil and position their paper for writing? The answer is somewhat individual, but there are guidelines to support students in producing their best work. First, students should practice having a comfortable, but not necessarily perfect, grip. A tense grip can lead the writer to be uncomfortable, stressed, and more easily drained. The tripod grip is most common and encouraged, as it supports comfort and stability while writing (Graham S. , 2010). Optimal positioning of the paper differs for right- and left-handed writers. Right-handed students should start with their paper squarely in front of them with the left side at, approximately, the center of the body. For left-handed writers, the paper should be rotated slightly clockwise and they may find the need to hold their pencil somewhat farther back (in order to avoid an inverted grip). It is critical to remember that all of these recommendations are likely to be adapted by the individual for comfort and ease (Graham & Harris, 2015).

Because increased speed in writing enables the writer to focus on higher-order creating and organizing, it is important to examine what is most effective in reaching this goal (Coleman McIver, 1998). To improve handwriting speed, students need to write

frequently. Timed copying of text leveled slightly above the writer's reading ability significantly increased student speed proficiency.

Student writing success depends on reducing the amount of time dedicated to the handwriting process. Correctly forming letters in order to create legible words takes a great deal of attention and concentration. This, in turn, can detract from the process of writing; generating ideas, organizing thoughts, and refining what is written. Providing time for students to practice letter/word formation and increasing the frequency of this practice is helpful in propelling students forward toward the goal of honing their writing craft. Next, the importance of putting letters in the correct order so as to accurately inform the reader is examined.

Spelling. Spelling lists, spelling tests, spelling bees. Learning to spell words correctly is an important aspect of good writing. At its core, the definition of spelling is the representation of speech sounds (phonemes) in a written form (graphemes). How do students learn to spell, and what does research tell us about teaching spelling? There are many theories and approaches, and this section will examine what the literature has found to be most effective in teaching spelling to students.

As with handwriting, spelling impacts the students' ability to accurately communicate with the reader. Automaticity in spelling frees the student to attend to high-order processes required for writing (Anderson, 2017). Misspelled words can be a source of distraction and irritation, and cause the reader to become confused or unable to understand the writer's prose altogether. Therefore, for the fluidity and flow of the writing process, accurate spelling is essential for both writer and reader.

For emergent writers, it is important to remember that spelling is a developmental skill (Sipe, 1994). Strategies introduced at this stage must be developmentally appropriate in order to be most effective, and, for the youngest writers, include hand-on practice, phonics, word families, and mnemonic devices (Gentry, 1981). Students in this stage should also be allowed to use creative spelling. Bloodgood found that overemphasis on spelling adversely affected student writing, and when there was no pressure to spell correctly, students were free to practice these skills (1991). Additionally, when students used creative or trial-and-error spelling approaches, they felt safe to take risks, therefore accessing higher-level thinking and writing skills.

Writing frequently for authentic purposes promotes student value of correct spelling (Gentry, 1981). Teaching spelling should revolve around teaching reading and writing, and addressing spelling is done, most effectively, once the writing process has begun (Bean & Bouffler, 1987).

Arndt and Foorman (2010) found specific patterns in the errors of the second-graders that they studied. The most common errors were morphological, and the least common was transposition. The poorest spellers made the same mistakes as the best spellers but made these mistakes more often. The results indicated that performing detailed analysis of student errors was more helpful than simply considering whether spelling is right or wrong (Arndt & Foorman, 2010).

Research confirmed that spelling is a developmental process requiring developmentally appropriate practices in order to support mastery. The most prevalent method of spelling instruction consists of practicing/memorizing weekly lists of related words and testing on those words, usually at the end of the week. What, in fact, is more

effective is to embed spelling instruction into writing. In this way, students can understand the role spelling plays in effective writing while, at the same time, sharpening their skills in this area. While involving students in more authentic spelling opportunities,

Grammar. Merriam-Webster defines grammar as "the study of the classes of words, their inflections, and their functions and relations in the sentence," and "a system of rules that defines the grammatical structure of a language" (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Grammar can appear to be complicated and without logic, but its mastery is essential to effective writing and communication. For example, placement of punctuation (in this case, a comma) can significantly change the meaning of the sentence: *It's time to eat Grandpa. It's time to eat, Grandpa.* The literature review for this section explores how grammar is taught in the classroom and which strategies render the most successful student results.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD). In their study of fifth-graders, Feng and Powers (2005) found that grammar instruction was most effective in the form of mini-lessons that are specific to errors in student writing. A student-centered, strategy-specific approach also enhanced the quality of student writing. The student-centered approach used was Self-Regulation Strategy Development (SRSD). SRSD implements explicit instruction for specific writing tasks:

1. The teacher models the use of a target strategy.

2. The teacher provides ample support for students, moving them toward independent use of the strategy.

3. Students are taught how to generate ideas, organize these ideas, and,

then, expand on them.

SRSD was shown to be effective in teaching students a variety of planning and revising

strategies. Not only did grammar improve, but it led to improvement in the quality of,

knowledge of, approach to, and attitude toward writing (Graham, Kiuhara, McKeown, &

Harris, 2012).

Adding self-regulation to strategies instruction has been found to improve the

effectiveness of such strategies. In a study of teachers who provided direct and explicit

instruction in writing strategies positive results were reported, but, when integrating self-

regulation strategies, these results increased further. SRSD, consistently, had the highest

ES (effect size) of all interventions included in this study: (elementary ES = 1.17, Middle

and high school ES = 1.14 (Graham & Perin, 2007). Another meta-analysis supports

these findings, reporting effectiveness increases in elementary, middle school, and high

school students (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015).

Another effective instructional approach to teaching grammar is the Guided

Writing or Quick-Write Program. Guided writing is instruction that is presented to a

small, flexible group of students who have comparable instructional needs (Gibson,

2008). Using this method, teachers can meet the needs of a specific groups of students

and provide direction instruction, assessment, and feedback. It differs from SRSD in that

instruction is time-restricted, typically about ten minutes. Its major strength is that

students can move through the process of writing a rough draft at a more rapid pace;

sometimes as often as each teaching session. This frequent and repeated practice

supports students in both understanding and utilizing writing skills that have been learned (Gibson, 2008).

Allowing students to manipulate sentence structures in context allows them to become aware of patterns, as well as create and combine complex sentences (Goodman, J., & Burke, 1996). Cloze procedure, (a technique in which words are omitted from a passage and students insert words as they read) can facilitate syntactic awareness, as well. Goodman (1996) found "cooperative group cloze" to be effective in encouraging students to talk about language structures while, at the same time, using authentic texts (p. 24).

In 2017, Collins and Norris (2017) looked at Discrete Grammar Instruction (DGI) versus Embedded Grammar Instruction (EGI). DGI was defined as traditional grammar instruction in which grammar is taught separately from other reading and writing activities. EGI taught grammar within the context of reading and writing instruction using authentic texts. Students taught using EGI were found to rapidly improve syntactic awareness, which is "conscious awareness of the syntactic structure of sentences and the ability to manipulate them" (Collins & Norris, 2017, p. 24). Syntactic awareness has a high correlation with word recognition and comprehension and also allows readers to make meaning of text that is unexpected or ambiguous (Collins & Norris, 2017). After six weeks of fifteen- to twenty-minute lessons, statistically significant improvements were seen in the generation of complex sentences and overall writing. In contrast, DGI instruction appeared to condition students to focus on form at the expense of meaning and function. Prolonged practice that ignored meaning appeared to weaken students' ability to coordinate and organize ideas.

Robinson and Feng (2016) examined the effects of explicit grammar instruction on overall quality of student writing skills. Their findings indicated that when instruction was integrated into the revising and editing process, students were able to make immediate changes and see how grammar applied to their own writing in context (Robinson & Feng, 2016).

Summary

Reading and writing are inextricably linked. So, too, are the subtopics of handwriting, spelling, and grammar. Innate knowledge of these skills allows the writer to focus on developing creative and organizational writing techniques, which are often more engaging for writers. Generally, the specific components of writing are most effectively learned through integration into writing instruction. In this way, students can experience the importance, usefulness, and impact that their writing choices make on the end product.

Handwriting refers to the sensorimotor action of putting a writing implement to the paper so as to create meaningful combinations of letters and words. These letters and words used to communicate thoughts, feelings, and ideas to a specific audience: the reader. While the importance of handwriting has, historically, changed over time, it still remains a necessity in the development of writing literacy.

Spelling is a linguistic skill that involves "encoding linguistic forms into written forms. The linguistic units – phonological strings, morphemes and words – are provided by the spoken language" (Perfetti, 1997, p. 22). The literature tells us that, while the tried-and-true practice of test/study/test may be prevalent, it is far more effective for

students to address spelling in tandem with writing. In this way, students can witness the value and use of correct spelling and interact with it organically.

Sentence structure skills (grammar) are best learned in context and, therefore, integrated into literacy instruction. Writing consists of the individual juggling several balls at the same time. Student mastery of these abilities allows for the progression of skills to the point that the writer can focus on creative ideas and organization, rather than mechanical processes (Graham & Harris, 2015).

Engaging all learners to become active participants in learning is a key objective of quality writing instruction. The literature from this chapter will be used to create a curriculum supplement that can add more meaning and authenticity to the already-implemented morning work currently being implemented in the classroom. In answering the capstone question, "*how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*" chapter three provides an overview of how the best practices described in chapter two can be strategically and effectively implemented in the format of morning work.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Writing is recognized as a foundational skill that has the potential to impact, not only academic success, but professional and personal achievement, as well (Graham. Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013). Students who struggle to master writing skills in the primary grades are more likely to be at risk in later grades in both the areas of writing *and* reading (Elbow, 1998). Chapter two provided an overview of the research on best practices in the area of writing skills development and acquisition. It offered literature that examined the relationship between writing and reading and also how instruction in one of these areas has been shown to have an impact on both (Graham, et al., 2017). This review was used to inform the development of a writing supplement that reinforced and built on the academic curriculum and also addressed the goal of improved writing proficiency. Chapter three seeks to describe the project rationale, methods, and format used to answer the capstone question, *how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*

Research Paradigm

Research has identified a number of effective practices that support student writing proficiency. However, not all of these approaches met the needs of the project being developed. My school uses morning work as a student warm-up activity upon arrival into the classroom, and the designated amount of time is fifteen-to-twenty minutes. Therefore, strategies requiring more than that amount of time needed to be eliminated (at least for the purposes of this project). Additionally, students are expected

to work independently during this period, so any supplement created had to incorporate student self-sufficiency.

The Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) is an evidence-based approach that met many of the criteria for developing a morning work supplement (Feng & Powers, 2005). SRSD is an effective method of teaching writing strategies to students who demonstrate a wide variety of writing abilities. It has also been found to improve the efficacy of both reading and writing strategies used by students (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013). Due to its emphasis on student self-sufficiency and independence of use, it was determined that use of the SRSD model would be a good fit for this project.

At the beginning of the year, the teachers within my school review and compare student achievement based on MAPS test scores from the previous year. Using this information, each grade determines where there were gaps, declines, and/or challenges in student achievement, and goals are set to facilitate improvement. For second grade, these scores revealed that our students were most significantly challenged by writing skills, and we decided that our goal would be to focus on improving proficiency in this area. Among the evidence-based writing practices that lead to overall improvement, is, simply, providing students with more time to write (Graham & Harris, 2016). Even a modest increase of forty-five minutes per week of additional writing time has been shown to enhance *both* reading and writing performance (Graham & Harris, 2016). Offering more time to write appeared to be the beginning of a good solution for improving student writing, but finding time to squeeze in additional instruction was the challenge. Short of adding more time to the day or eliminating portions of other valuable lessons, it was tricky to find time to address and meet this goal. How were we going to do this, and

where would we find the time? When various schedule permutations failed, a moment of clarity led to a solution: the time that was being used for morning work could be utilized as a means to meet writing goals for our students!

The school requires that primary grades include morning work as a part of the daily schedule. However, the supplement used was not directly related to or coordinated with the curriculum presented to students, but rather, it was purchased from a separate curriculum development company. By creating morning work that aligned with the curriculum, students were provided with an opportunity to improve their writing skills without taking time from other academic areas. Additionally, students were already familiar with the concept and practice of morning work and, therefore, would not have to adapt to a new routine or schedule.

Setting and Participants

The school setting is in a community in southern California with a highly diverse population of 177,751. The school itself is a private, PK-8 Christian school accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges with an enrollment of approximately three hundred students. Current enrollment data reflects a diverse composition of 21% White, 23% two or more races, 16% Hispanic, 16% Asian, 13% other, 5% African American, and 4% non-specified. Class size ranges from sixteen to twenty-four. This project was designed to meet the needs of the second-grade classroom has between sixteen and twenty-four students. As previously noted, the area of writing was identified as the target subject based on MAP testing results from the previous year.

Current Curriculum

The curriculum used for reading, language arts/English, and spelling has been developed by Bob Jones University (BJU) Press. It incorporates a biblical worldview into rigorous academic standards that meet or exceed Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and supports the mission of the school which is to "educate, equip, and empower our students and school community through excellence in Christ-centered education, to the glory of God." (Alta Loma Christian School, n.d.) The BJU Language Arts curriculum is further reinforced by the use of the Step Up to Writing (Auman, 2008) program. Additionally, Handwriting Without Tears (Olsen, 2018) has been selected to support penmanship instruction. The BJU Press spelling curriculum incorporates phonics, dictionary skills, writing skills, and Biblical integration. A weekly list of eighteen-to-twenty words is presented and practiced within the context of these skill areas.

In order to develop morning work that built on and reinforced student background knowledge, it was imperative to embed and relate content-area curriculum. Research indicates that handwriting, spelling, and grammar are best learned within the greater context of writing (Berninger, et al., 2000) . Students are able to see, use, and understand the importance, function, and application of each feature with authentic text as the backdrop. For this reason, I took the scope-and-sequence, along with the pacing guides, for each subject area and outlined when specific skills were introduced, practiced, and reviewed.

Handwriting

Because students must put a great deal of thought into the motor function of letter formation, it can interfere with the other writing processes. Fortunately, effective handwriting instruction does not require large amounts of time and improvement can be achieved without sacrificing significant classroom programming. The guideline of ten-to-twenty minutes per day was taken into consideration (Graham S. , Want to Improve Children's Writing? Don't Neglect Their Handwriting, 2010), with fifteen minutes being the most desirable in light of morning work time constraints in the daily schedule.

The handwriting curriculum, Handwriting Without Tears (Olsen, 2018), was used as a basis in determining which skills to review and reinforce. The morning work required students to practice and evaluate their handwriting within the context of an authentic writing exercise.

Spelling

Reading, writing, and spelling are linguistic skills that require understanding of the components of phonology (organization of sounds), orthography (standardized system of written structures), and morphology (word structure and interaction). Time spent improving spelling, has been shown to improve both reading and writing. Helping students to recognize spelling as a writing skill, and practice it within the context of writing, has been found to increase both spelling and writing proficiency (Al Otaiba & Hosp, 2010). Students should be allowed to *see* and *use* spelling words in literacy activities. (Arndt & Foorman, 2010) To support and reinforce spelling concepts being taught in daily lessons, I chose to embed these into authentic writing exercises. Students were, then, be able to feel safe in taking writing risks, as well as foster the value of correct spelling (Bloodgood, 1991).

Grammar

Grammar is most often taught using explicit instruction of mechanics isolated from the context of writing. While this approach can be useful, findings suggest that embedding grammar lessons into the process of writing yields better results (Feng & Powers, 2005). In fact, Graham and Perin (2007) found that teaching grammar in isolation had no positive effect on writing. Giving students time to practice and interact with text allows them to actively engage in thinking about language which has been found to significantly improve the writing of complex sentences (Collins & Norris, 2017).

For this project, students receive writing and grammar instruction through BJU Press English curriculum, as well as through the Step Up to Writing program (Auman, 2008). These curricula offer step-by-step formulaic approaches to writing and grammar in which students learn and practice the mechanics (grammar) and process in an explicit instructional format. To incorporate content that was relevant to the curriculum, organic opportunities for students to practice these skills were embedded into the morning work product. Close-ended questions, such as multiple-choice or true-false, were used minimally in order to promote the use of self-regulating writing strategies (Graham & Harris, 2015).

Timeline

The development of this project began with participation in and completion of GED 8400 Research Design during Hamline University spring 2020 term. At the

conclusion of the course, a literature review revealed best practices and supporting documentation that were carried through to the final phase of the capstone project. During the summer 2020 term, GED 8490 Capstone Project allowed for further expansion and development. Consultation with the Content Reviewer and Peer Reviewer provided the feedback and focus necessary to steer the project in a direction that met the needs of the students, teacher, and school. The final product provides eight weeks of morning work for second-grade students that allows for increased writing practice across content areas.

Assessment

The goal of this project was to answer the question, "*how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*" When determining the direction and scope, careful consideration was given to the needs of the target audience. The second-grade teacher identified writing improvement as an ongoing goal for the upcoming school year, and a literature review offered a variety of opportunities that could be implemented without placing significant new burdens on the teacher or students.

Among the recognized practices were:

- Providing additional time for students to engage in authentic writing experiences (Graham, MacArthur, & Hebert, 2019)

- Engaging students in writing about learning across all content areas (Graham, Kiuhara, McKeown, & Harris, 2012)

- Promoting self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) that embeds grammar, spelling, and handwriting instruction and practice (Feng & Powers, 2005)

After implementation in the fall of 2020, teacher feedback will be used to make any changes to the final product. Going forward, the flexible format will allow the teacher to make updates to accommodate variations in curriculum or student need. Additionally, year-end MAPS scores can be used to further focus the writing exercises in order to adjust for student mastery.

Project Design

Eight weeks of morning work lessons were developed to provide writing opportunities that related to and expanded on the content-area curriculum. Designed to allow for fifteen-to-twenty minutes of writing, an emphasis was placed on utilizing Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) (Harris, Graham, Friedlander, & Laud, 2013).

It was important to not, simply, generate closed-ended quiz-type activities for students, but rather offer authentic writing experiences that supported skill development *in context*. For this reason, Backward Design (Wiggins, 2011) was instrumental in determining what was included in the morning work supplement. Backward Design requires the "targeting of important long-term, higher-order goals and what is required to help students achieve them" (Wiggins, 2011, p. 53). Essentially, what do we want students to be able to *do* with what we want them to *know?* Stephen Covey refers to a similar concept in "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" as Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind. (1989) It is easy to rattle off a list of skills that students need to know, but, for this project, backward design, it was necessary in order to create exercises that encouraged students to *use in practice* what they were learning in content-area curriculum. The additional value in this approach is that all skills can be used, applied, and practiced in all subjects.

The curriculum scope and sequence, as well as pacing guides, were used to create writing opportunities that reinforced and coordinated with the lessons that students were completing in academic areas. For example, Table 1 depicts the lesson objectives for English, Spelling, Writing, and Reading.

Table 1

Curriculum lessons and objectives

Subject	Chapter/Lesson	Objective
English/Grammar	1/1	• Locate title, contents page, and handbook • Identify and give examples of the four language skills
Spelling	1-6	• Short vowel sounds • Initial blends • Word families
Reading	Seth and the Angry Bug	• Predict events based on a story title and pictures • Choose the best title for a story • Draw a picture for a story

Table 2 offers a sample overview of morning work that supports the goals and objectives of academic curriculum lessons contained within content-areas:

Table 2

Sample Morning Work Lessons Overview

Day	Morning Work (15-20 minutes)
Monday	Write three sentences that tell a story. Circle two words that show your best handwriting.
Tuesday	Draw a picture to go with your story. Use at least three different colors.
Wednesday	Choose a title for your story Proofread. Do your sentences start with a capital letter? Do your sentences end with a period?
Thursday	Trade stories with a friend. Circle the word written in their best handwriting. Tell them your favorite part of their story. Give one idea that might be added or changed. Add one more sentence to your own story.
Friday	In your best handwriting, write your story on a new piece of paper. Draw at least one picture to illustrate your story. This is your *final draft.*

Summary

This chapter gave an overview of the rationale, methods, and format of this capstone project. It considered the setting, participants, and the needs of the classroom teacher, as well as the . Then the curriculum currently in use was described in order to understand the context and process used to incorporate and develop content-area instruction into the final product. Next the most impactful practices used in the design process, Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) and Backward Design, were explained, and, finally, curriculum objectives were paired with sample tasks in order to illustrate how these connections could be made. Chapter four will present a reflective narrative reviewing the results in the capstone question, *how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

The chosen capstone project sought to answer the question, "*how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?"* My goal was to create a morning work supplement that offered students a chance to improve their writing by incorporating research-based best practices into this familiar, daily activity. Chapter one described my personal and professional journey as a backdrop for the selection of my capstone project and why it is important to me. The literature review in chapter two examined research in the areas of literacy, reading, and writing. This process of discovery provided the direction and focus required for me to create a curriculum supplement informed by researched-based best practices. A reflection on the capstone process and final product is examined in chapter four. I highlight key findings, connections, and understandings that impacted the resulting project. Project successes and limitations are addressed, as well as application elements that support effective usage in the classroom.

Literature Review in Application

The literature review was essential to answering the research question and creating a morning work supplement that both met the needs of the target audience *and* was based on data and analysis. Research was gathered from a wide variety of pertinent sources in the areas of literacy, reading, and writing, with a primary focus on writing, and played a critical role in the development of the project. This being said, there are themes I found to be significant and deserving of emphasis.

Most significant to me, was the discovery regarding the ineffectiveness of rote learning as a function of writing (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013). All of the elementary schools where I have been both a student and a teacher utilized curriculum that featured individual skills being presented and practiced in isolation. For example, sentence components, such as nouns and verbs, are taught separately. Students are asked to identify and/or generate the feature: *Circle the nouns. Write five nouns.* In fact, while explicit instruction is necessary, students make more progress when they can see and practice concepts in context (Graham, Kiuhara, McKeown, & Harris, 2012). These authentic writing opportunities allow students to practice a variety of skills that apply across content areas (Graham & Perin, 2007).

In the areas of handwriting, spelling, and grammar, embedding instruction into mini-lessons that focus, specifically, on student errors proved to be most effective (Bean & Bouffler, 1987). These findings appear to contradict many current practices as evidenced by English, grammar, spelling, and writing curriculum used in most schools today. This will forever change my personal approach to teaching writing as I move forward in the classroom.

Successes

In answering my research question, "*how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?*" it was important to me that I create a supplement that met the needs of the target audience. The classroom teacher was consulted, as well as the vice principal in charge of curriculum development. I began by asking for pros and cons of the morning work currently in use, followed by a wish list of the vision and direction for future curriculum. My goal was to create morning work that took into

consideration current curriculum, time restraints, best practices revealed through the literature review, and student engagement.

Using the current curriculum as a foundation, I was able to design morning work that offered relevant practice of skills and concepts recently covered in content areas. It was important, not only to allow additional time for writing, but to also embed opportunities for students to practice and demonstrate skill proficiency (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeowra, 2013). I intentionally employed open-ended prompts as a means to encourage students to explore the writing process rather than simply choosing from multiple choice or true-false answers. In this way, students would be engaged and invested in their work, therefore employing higher-order thinking skills.

As a teacher, I want anything new to be practical, meaningful, and flexible. I kept these characteristics in mind throughout the capstone process. We have all experienced the new initiatives, programs, and mandates that come out year after year. Some are useful, and some are, simply, more work with little return-on-investment. For this reason, it was important that the morning work that I created be easily implemented. I wanted the teacher to be able to offer morning work to students without having to do anything extra. In addition to practicality, the supplement had to be meaningful to both students and the teacher. Throughout the literature, findings reinforced the significance of *authentic* writing experiences. No busywork. No check-the-box, circle-the-answer worksheets. Students will be actively engaged in writing that is student-centered and related to curriculum content. Finally, as classrooms encompass a wide range of abilities and competencies, it was important that I design morning work that was flexible; easily individualized for students who are struggling, as well as those who need challenge. By

avoiding single-answer, right-wrong exercises, students can work at their skill level with ease.

Instrumental to the success of this project was the process of "backward design." Being new to creating learning units for the classroom, it was daunting to determine where to begin. The book, "The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units," (Wiggins, 2011) offered a roadmap to developing meaningful curriculum that actually does what you want it to do! This resonated with me, particularly, because I drew a connection with Stephen Covey's Habit 2: Begin with the end in mind. (Covey, 1989) Applying this to curriculum design made a great deal of sense and helped me to dig deeper into the *why* of what I included in morning work before determining the *what.*

Limitations

As with most noble endeavors, there are challenges. I identified a few limitations as I worked through my project. First, morning work is meant to be a warm-up that engages students as they first arrive for the day. Participation and completion are meant to be carried out in a short amount of time, and this can restrict a student's ability to immerse themselves into the writing. Next, a significant change in schedule, pacing, or curriculum could cause the misalignment of morning work to content-area curriculum. I believe that this disruption is minimized, however, by the open-ended design employed.

Toward the Future

While the literature review concentrated on literacy, reading, and, of primary focus, writing, it was not exhaustive. As research proceeded, it became apparent that there were other topics that touched, overlapped, and intersected with the main areas of study. Going forward, it might be advantageous to expand and include other skills for

student practice. An additional consideration would be to incorporate content to address needs of specific populations. Students who participate in English Language Learner, gifted and talented, and other specialized programs may require adaptations or alterations in order to make the morning work more user-friendly for these demographics.

Conclusion

When I began thinking about doing this project, I asked the question, *how can morning work be used to improve second-grade student writing skills?* I thought that I would uncover studies extolling the virtues and advantages of rote learning and tried to think about how I would incorporate individual skills from existing curriculum into a morning work supplement for second grade. It seemed as though I was going to be trying to untangle a giant ball of yarn. I was, however, surprised to find that research indicates something quite different. Students can benefit from simply having additional time dedicated to writing, not more fill-in-the-blank, circle-the-noun, true-false exercises. Improvements can be seen in classrooms that set aside as little as ten-to-twenty minutes per day exclusively for writing. Strategy-specific instruction is essential, but offering students a way to practice these individual skills through authentic writing experiences gives them the opportunity to see their strategies in action; how they interact and relate to one another. It is my hope that this project supports second-grade students and teachers in offering additional writing practice in the form of morning work and that it is successful in making the connections between acquisition of specific skills and their use in authentic writing contexts.

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