



Evaluation of the Outdoor Writers' Workshop Professional Development Program

Executive Summary June 2012

Introduction

In 2010-11, the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Department of Curriculum and Instruction partnered with the Boston Schoolyard Initiative (BSI) to integrate Outdoor Writers Workshop (OWW) into the BPS elementary writing program and provide professional development and materials to teachers as part of an overall effort to introduce and support the district's new district-wide writing curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards. As described below, the district's focus on writing at this time addresses both national and local concerns about the state of writing instruction.

To understand the extent to which the professional development program was meeting its goals, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy conducted a program evaluation. **While the evaluation is based on the experiences of a subset of teachers who participated in the professional development, the findings illustrate the promise that the OWW professional development program shows for improving outcomes for both teachers and students, especially English language learners and students in special education classrooms.** Key findings from the evaluation are presented in this Executive Summary.

National concerns about the state of writing instruction

At a time when educational attainment can dramatically affect life outcomes, writing instruction in the United States is woefully ignored. A decade ago, the National Commission on Writing argued in a series of reports that writing is "the neglected R" and sought to increase national attention on the teaching and learning of writing. Despite these efforts, very few teachers require their students to write more than a few hours per week, and two-thirds of students say their weekly writing assignments add up to less than an hour.¹ Furthermore, national assessments indicate that approximately two-thirds of students in grades 4 through 12 are low-achieving writers.²

College courses in all subject areas require well-developed writing skills and writing is the means by which students are evaluated to some degree in nearly every postsecondary course.³ Yet, college faculty report that students arrive at school unprepared or unable to write well. In a national study of instructors who teach first-year students at two- and four-year colleges, 62% indicated they are dissatisfied with the job public schools are doing in preparing students for college when it comes to writing quality.⁴ Instructors estimate that 50% of high school graduates are unprepared for college-level writing.⁵

In today's workplace, a majority of jobs require written communication skills. More than 90% of midcareer professionals cite the "need to write effectively" as a skill of "great importance" in their day-to-day work.⁶ However, a vast majority of employers describe recent high school graduates as "deficient in written communications" such as memos, letters and technical reports.⁷ The nation's private companies now spend an estimated \$3.1 billion per year—and state governments spend an additional \$200 million—teaching their employees to write.⁸

The general public believes that there is a greater need for a person to be able to write well in order to succeed in today's world than there was twenty years ago.⁹ Findings from public opinion polls suggest that Americans are in favor of starting writing instruction in the early elementary grades and providing teachers with training on how to teach writing.¹⁰ Half (49%) of those surveyed believe that writing instruction should begin before the second grade

and a substantial portion (44%) believe it should start in second, third, or fourth grade. In the case of teaching writing, two thirds (66%) believe that putting additional resources into helping teachers with writing instruction will yield students who are better writers. And three-quarters (75%) believe that providing school-based workshops that help teachers of all subjects learn how to teach writing is a good idea that should be put into practice now.

Boston Public Schools' focus on writing

As is true for many large urban districts, BPS struggles to reach the goal of all students achieving proficiency on state assessments. While the district has made some progress toward this goal, there is still a substantial portion of students who are not proficient in ELA. Last year, more than half of BPS students were not proficient – 54% of students scored in the “warning/failing” and “needs improvement” categories on the ELA MCAS compared to 31% of students statewide. And, over two-thirds of the district’s special education (SPED) and limited English proficient (LEP) students are not proficient in ELA. Last year, 84% of SPED students and 67% of LEP students were in the “warning/failing” and “needs improvement” categories.

At the elementary level, 70% of the district’s 4th graders and 57% of 5th graders were not proficient. Specifically, elementary students did not perform well on the writing portions of the test. In fact, many students did not answer test questions requiring a written response – as many as 20% of students left some open-response items blank. The average score across all open-response items was 1.65 out of 4 possible points in 4th grade and 1.7 out of 4 possible points in 5th grade. Fourth-graders also fared poorly on the composition items, with an average score of 5.91 out of 12 possible points on the Topic/Idea Development item, and 5.76 out of 8 possible points on the Writing Conventions item.

Prior to the 2010-11 school year, BPS had not had a consistent, core reading and writing curriculum for many years. However, the district had provided extensive professional development during the 1990s based on the Readers and Writers Workshop developed at Columbia University’s Teachers College and many schools in the district created their own curriculum maps and units of study. During the 2009-10 school year, the district adopted a core reading curriculum. In 2010-11 it began the work of developing a coherent writing curriculum and professional development plan in ELA, social studies, humanities, and science.

In the context of beginning to develop this plan, the BPS ELA Department partnered with BSI through a Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Partnership Grant. The focus of the partnership was on introducing and supporting the new district-wide writing curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) at the elementary level and creating an aligned, common platform for writing curriculum and instruction across the district. Through the partnership grant, BSI collaborated with BPS to create map out units of study in writing on each of the three types of writing highlighted in the CCSS: narrative, informational/explanatory and argument/persuasive. Designed to be a model for the conceptualization and implementation of the CCSS for writing across the district, the OWW professional development program was pilot tested in two schools.

Boston Schoolyard Initiative Outdoor Writer’s Workshop (OWW)

Since 1995, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative has been transforming Boston’s schoolyards from asphalt lots into vibrant spaces with plants and green space for recreation and learning. The goal of BSI is to design and build multi-use open spaces that complement the primary mission of the school: to preserve and foster children’s innate sense of curiosity and give them the tools and skills needed to become lifelong learners. To date, BSI has completed 89 projects on 81 schoolyards. Every schoolyard renovation conducted since 2007 has included an outdoor classroom specifically designed for teaching and learning. Many outdoor classrooms include a sample woodland, urban meadow and planting beds. BSI also offers professional development for BPS teachers in two areas, writing and science.

Over the last four years, BSI has developed and pilot tested the Outdoor Writers’ Workshop professional development program in collaboration with the BPS English Language Arts Department. Through the professional development program, BSI works with teachers to develop the skill and knowledge to use the outdoor classroom as a

venue for the writer’s workshop method of instruction (described below) in order to help students find topics to write about, develop vocabulary and voice, add description to their writing and otherwise improve their writing skills.

What is Writer’s Workshop?

The OWW professional development program provides teachers with training on a method of teaching writing using a workshop method.¹¹ A Writer’s Workshop allows teachers to meet the needs of their students by differentiating their instruction and altering their writing instruction based on information gathered throughout the workshop. There are three key components:

- *Mini-lesson (5 to 10 minutes)*: A mini-lesson is explicit instruction in a specific writing technique at the start of the workshop. Mini-lessons sometimes include reading aloud from “mentor texts” that illustrate a particular genre of writing (such as personal narrative or persuasive writing). By reading excerpts of mentor texts, students can see how writers use different styles and literary elements to create pieces of writing.
- *Independent Writing (20 to 30 minutes)*: During this time, students are prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing their pieces. Students determine what topics they will write about and use a writer’s notebook and/or folder to organize their writing. The teacher serves as a facilitator, circulating the classroom, monitoring, encouraging, conferencing and providing help as needed.
- *Sharing (5 to 10 minutes)*: Students share their writing pieces. This gives students the opportunity to learn from each other’s writing.

Program Evaluation

During the spring of 2011, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy conducted an evaluation of the professional development program in the two pilot schools. The evaluation concentrated on 22 teachers in two East Boston elementary schools, Adams Elementary and Bradley Elementary, who received 12 hours of on-site professional development and some additional grade-level support through the partnership grant. Data collection instruments used to evaluate the program included teacher practice logs, interviews, a professional development evaluation form, an outcomes survey and a student writing prompt.

Two factors presented challenges for both implementation of the program and program evaluation. First, the program occurred during the same year that the ELA Department was beginning work on the new comprehensive district-wide writing curriculum, and the writing curriculum maps were not available in advance of BSI’s scheduled professional development sessions that focused on the content of the maps. This affected BSI’s ability to provide OWW lessons in conjunction with the maps in a timely way. Second, approval from the BPS Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment needed to proceed with the evaluation was delayed, reducing the time available for data collection and therefore the number of responses to data collection instruments. Of the 22 teachers invited to participate, 3 were on maternity leave, reducing the pool to 19, of whom 15 participated in some aspect of the final evaluation. Despite these challenges, we found that the OWW professional development program, a key component of which is taking students outdoors for writing, shows promise for improving outcomes for both teachers and students.

Key Findings

Key findings from the evaluation are presented below.

The professional development increased teachers' understanding of how to effectively use the outdoor classroom to improve writing instruction. Although teachers wanted to use the OC prior to participating in the OWW professional development program, they were intimidated by the prospect of designing lessons for outdoor activities. One of the main goals of the professional development (PD) was to increase teachers' understanding of how to effectively use the outdoor classroom (OC) for writing instruction. Most teachers expected the PD to accomplish this goal and indicated that their expectations were met, either fully or somewhat.

Teachers who regularly used the OC indicated that the ideas shared and generated in PD sessions were crucial to their ability to incorporate outdoor activities into their writing instruction. Many used the lessons created by BSI or modified them to suit their needs. Others indicated that the PD provided them with useful information on how to structure outdoor writing lessons. One teacher stated "This was a key piece for me, because I was able to feel more confident and not be so afraid of this wonderful thing that was out there." Guidance on the practical aspects of bringing a whole classroom of students outdoors, including goals and rules of an outdoor writing lesson, also contributed to teachers understanding of how to effectively use the OC for writing instruction. Novice teachers noted that the PD helped them gain a deeper knowledge of good writing instruction and helped them change their classroom practice in ways that help them provide better writing instruction.

Teacher Profile: Ms. G

Ms. G teaches a special education class that includes autistic students in grades 2 through 5. As a new teacher, participating in the OWW professional development was beneficial because it gave her ideas for lessons and gave her the confidence to increase the amount of writing in her classroom.

At the beginning of the school year, Ms. G did writing lessons twice a week. During writing time, her students were primarily working on letter formation. After attending several PD training sessions, she built writing into the schedule almost every day. The OWW professional development program showed Ms. G how to construct a writing unit. She explained that the PD showed her to focus "on the little pieces" and plan each part of the unit around a certain skill. She learned to structure each week around outdoor writing activities and related indoor lessons. During the second half of the year, she developed a routine for outdoor writing. On Mondays she did a mini-lesson and independent writing outdoors then brought her students back inside to share what they wrote. On Tuesdays, the students turned the ideas they generated on Monday into sentences.

Although the materials provided in PD sessions were not specifically designed for use in a SPED classroom, Ms. G was able to modify the materials for her students. She benefited from learning different strategies and methods for breaking down the curriculum material so it is easier for her students to grasp. Consequently, Ms. G was able to better understand her students' abilities. Since Ms. G's students are autistic and very sensory, going outdoors for writing lessons allows them to be hands-on and interact with what they are writing about. "When they can actually see or experience something for themselves, it's easier for them to write about it and understand what they're writing. It makes the lesson more concrete for them." As Ms. G's students began understanding and engaging in the lessons, she noticed their motivation to write increased.

Outdoor Writers' Workshop professional development deepened and expanded teachers' knowledge of good writing instruction. The majority of teachers who participated agreed that the PD trainings helped them gain a deeper knowledge of good writing instruction. Participating teachers said writing was challenging for them or "their least favorite" subject to teach. However, these teachers emphasized that they gained confidence and motivation to teach writing as a result of participation in the PD. The experience showed them how to break writing instruction into manageable steps, and these teachers were more enthusiastic about incorporating outdoor writing activities when they saw how motivated their students were when using it. One teacher believed the strong lessons provided in the PD were helpful guides for her instruction and practice. Another teacher summarized: "I found that I challenged myself having to use the outdoor classroom...I took some ideas from [the PD training], talked to people, went home

and started thinking about it, and it calmed me down. I learned to do two mini-lessons outside, then came back and did a bigger lesson inside. I created a different pace for myself, but it worked and made it fun.”

Outdoor Writers’ Workshop professional development deepened and expanded teachers’ knowledge of the new BPS writing curriculum standards. Participants in OWW professional development were some of the first teachers in BPS to see the new writing curriculum standards, and most teachers who responded to the Outcomes Survey (6 out of 7) agreed or strongly agreed that the PD trainings helped them gain an understanding of the new standards. Some teachers indicated that following the trainings they used the curriculum maps during lesson planning and others indicated that they did not, perhaps because they were not able to keep the draft maps or maps had not yet been created for their grade level. Some teachers, particularly those we interviewed, said they referenced the maps frequently during lesson planning, and the PD trainings helped them understand them better. One teacher said she referred to the maps much more when planning a unit to make sure her lessons were aligned with the standards, and “reflected and realized [whether] I had hit one standard and not another.”

Outdoor writing activities provide valuable experiences for urban students. Based on information collected from a subset of teachers who regularly used the OC, outdoor writing activities show promise as a strategy for improving writing outcomes for elementary students in urban schools who otherwise may have limited opportunities to spend time outdoors. After incorporating outdoor writing activities in their instructional routines, teachers realized how little time their students spend outdoors. One teacher explained that using the OC showed her “how little some of them [students] go outside, and how little knowledge they have of the outdoors and what’s around them.” Teachers now view outdoor writing activities as valuable experiences for students that lead to important changes in their work.

Outdoor writing activities show promise for improving student outcomes. Teachers who used the OC noticed that their students were more engaged and willing to write, enjoyed the collective experience, talked enthusiastically while outside, and those who typically did not participate in class were excited to do outdoor writing activities and share their work. One teacher described the shift in her students’ attitude toward writing “it allowed them to view writing in a different way, rather than a tedious task.”

For example, a science teacher showed examples from students in a K2 class who were able to write several descriptive sentences, far exceeding the district expectations of that level: “I see a flower booming. I hear a bee flying. I touch a bud that was green. I smell a flower. It’s like perfume.” Another teacher stressed how important outdoor activities are for her students’ language development. She was very excited as she described the change from “feeding language to kids and just getting back language you’ve given them” to asking students a question and receiving original responses that include new vocabulary words learned from their own experiences.

Teachers used the strategies they learned to support writing instruction and oral language development. While teachers varied in the extent to which they used the outdoor classroom, those who did so regularly used many of the OWW strategies covered in the PD to support writing instruction and oral language development. Specific strategies include using the outdoors to: inspire students to write, inspire students to generate their own ideas for writing, develop new vocabulary words, observe details using their senses and use those details in their writing, observe and record observations using drawings and/or words, create shared learning experiences for the class and generate class discussion.

Outdoor Writer’s Workshop shows promise for improving outcomes among English language learners. The OWW professional development shows promise as a strategy for improving writing outcomes for English language learners. In particular, teachers who implemented the OWW model in their classrooms observed increased motivation, interest and confidence to write among ELL students. Teachers who regularly use the OC indicated that ELL students in their classrooms experienced an increase in overall writing quality. In particular, these students exhibited a wider range of oral and written vocabulary. Teachers explained that students were able to learn vocabulary words easier in the OC “because it’s something tangible they can see and touch in terms of developing vocabulary.” Teachers

believed the “experiences and vocabulary of being outside were huge, more than other students.” And, as shown below, samples of student writing illustrate improvement in the quality of some students’ writing.

Student Profile: Ms. D’s Student

Ms. D has an English language learner in her 2nd grade class whose family speaks only Portuguese. When the student arrived in Ms. D’s class she had difficulty writing in English and thus wrote very short pieces. Her writing was characterized by poor sentence structure and repetition of the same ideas. As the year progressed and Ms. D incorporated more outdoor writing activities into her lessons, this student was able to produce more drafts and write longer pieces. Ms. D began to see improvement in this student’s sentence structure, word choice, vocabulary, grammar and use of supporting evidence, and the student’s writing was less repetitive. In addition, the student showed greater motivation to write. Ms. D believes these changes are due, in part, to the “hands-on aspect of outdoor writing lessons” that provided the student with the opportunity to write about what she could see, touch, hear and smell.

- Writing sample from the beginning of the year: “Rabbits can be different colors. Rabbits can be all colorful. Rabbits can be this color on their ears and feet, tail and nose. Can be blue, black, brown, white. Rabbit hair can have a spot. Rabbits have we noses.”
- Writing sample from the end of the year: “Me and Ms. D and everyone in the classroom were going to the outdoor classroom. It was so fun. I had so much fun I got trash. It was funny because trash can look funny for me. I saw bugs but I did not make it die so it can be alive so when I was it was would still be happy and alive. It is bad when you throw away garbage in the garden. It is good when you put it in the recycle or in the garbage place.”

Outdoor Writer’s Workshop shows promise for improving outcomes among students in special education classrooms. The OWW professional development shows promise as a strategy for improving writing outcomes for students in special education classrooms. Special education teachers who implemented the OWW model in their classrooms observed increased motivation, interest and confidence to write among their students. For example, one SPED teacher said one of the biggest changes in one of her students was “how much she enjoys writing...creating sentences and using her own words to express herself. It made her feel special, built her confidence, and gave her a fun, wonderful opportunity to be a successful writer.” And, as shown below, samples of student writing show improvement in the quality of some students’ writing. However, it is important to note that these outcomes were not observed by general education teachers who have special education students in their classrooms.

Student Profile: Ms. G’s SPED student

Ms. G has a high-functioning autistic student in her 2nd-5th grade SPED classroom. She described him as the highest performing student in her class and a “perfectionist.” At the beginning of the year, he was able to write and form letters quite well, but his writing was “mechanical” and coming up with original ideas was very hard for him. Ms. G noticed that after she began bringing her class to the outdoor classroom for writing activities, this student had much more confidence and interest in his writing and was able to produce his own original ideas. After a few weeks of outdoor writing lessons she was “shocked” at his vocabulary use, and realized outdoor writing helps him write because “it’s more personal, and he chooses what to write about. Concrete idea generators are helpful for him – we’re not just feeding him ideas.” By the end of the year, this student was able to transfer what he learned in outdoor writing activities to indoor writing and produced longer, more fluid pieces featuring original ideas and improved vocabulary.

- Writing sample from the beginning of the year: “I want Arthur movies for Christmas.”
- Writing sample from the end of the year: “It is spring in May. I see a snail moving slowly. I hear kids play. And I smell parsley. I feel bumpy parsley and rough oregano.”

Teachers used the outdoor classroom as a way to create shared learning experiences for students. Many teachers stressed the importance of using the outdoors to create shared learning experiences for their students. Teachers explained that by creating shared learning experiences outdoors they were able to engage their students in productive group discussion indoors. In these discussions—part of the writers’ workshop model—students shared their perceptions of the activity and built word lists. Teachers noted the lists generated a greater variety of words than those created during indoor activities. Kindergarteners and ELL students benefited from this in particular; since teachers indicated these students need more resources to actually write—such as a desk and word lists—teachers use the outdoor classroom to generate new experiences shared by the class and then have their students write indoors.

Word choice lessons were particularly successful in the outdoor classroom, and several teachers expressed their excitement that students were able to communicate the similarities and differences in their experiences. One teacher explains a lesson using descriptive words: “Many of them [described] the same shared thing: the hillside, the outdoor classroom or the playground. When we came inside and shared the superlatives, they were like ‘Oh! I didn’t think of that one!’ I did a lot of word choice lessons...which I didn’t think to do before.”

Students’ responses to the writing prompt

The post-unit writing prompt given to students was: “Our school has an outdoor classroom but most schools don’t. [Your principal] said other principals sometimes ask her whether they should have an outdoor classroom at their school. She liked your letter so much that she asked if you could write a letter telling another principal whether *you* think it is a good or bad idea to have an outdoor classroom. Other principals want know what students in this school think about it. We aren’t going to spend a long time on this, just a couple of days. The important thing is that you let her know as clearly as you can what *you* think about it.”

We analyzed a total of 108 students’ responses to the post-unit writing prompt. The vast majority (94%) of students supported the idea of an outdoor classroom at another school, and only a few students (6%) did not support it. Of those who supported an outdoor classroom, over half (59%) mentioned the learning environment in the outdoor classroom, using words such as “learn,” “discover” and “explore.”

Conclusion and Considerations

Overall, most teachers agreed that the OWW professional development program increased their understanding of how to effectively use the outdoor classroom for writing instruction. Among teachers who regularly used the outdoor classroom, the strategies they learned from the professional development were crucial to their ability to use the outdoors to support writing instruction and oral language development. These teachers were able to clearly describe the impact the professional development had on their teaching practice. They were also able to describe the impact these strategies had on their students' motivation to write, interest in writing and confidence as writers. They also described and showed examples of the ways in which students' writing has improved. While the evaluation is based on the experiences of a subset of teachers who participated in the professional development, they illustrate the promise that the OWW professional development program shows for improving outcomes for both teachers and students, *especially English language learners and students in special education classrooms*.

In addition to the promising findings described above, the evaluation revealed areas for improvement upon which we based the following considerations:

Provide teachers with more time for collaborative planning. The evaluation revealed that collaborative planning time for teachers is an important component in the process of fully integrating outdoor writing activities into instruction. Teachers would benefit from additional time for collaborative lesson planning, brainstorming, sharing and reflecting on their experiences, and troubleshooting about outdoor writing lessons and strategies for using the outdoor classroom.

Provide targeted training and materials for teachers at particular grades. Teachers would benefit from additional grade-specific materials including lessons, lists of mentor texts for each genre of writing, worksheets and writing prompts.

Create an online repository of OWW materials. Collect and store both grade-specific and general OWW materials created by BSI and teachers.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁰ Achieve, Inc. (2005). *Rising to the challenge: Are high school graduates prepared for college and work?* Washington, DC: Peter D. Hart Research Associates.
- ¹¹ Adapted from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's description of a Writing Workshop. For more information, visit: <http://tc.readingandwritingproject.com/professional-development>.