

Write Time for Kids:
**Report of a Field Study
in Philadelphia Public Schools**

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Introduction

Write Time for Kids (WTFK), a program developed by Teacher Created Materials (TCM) with *TIME For Kids* magazine, is a K-8 curriculum that teaches nonfiction writing skills in four different genres: narrative, expository, persuasive, and visual presentation. Lessons and activities are based on current best practices research in the teaching of writing skills. There are few such structured writing programs, especially those that focus on nonfiction writing.

This preliminary report presents results of a field test of WTFK conducted between late January 2003 and June 2003 in Philadelphia Public Schools, a large urban school district heavily populated by African-American and Hispanic students. The purpose of the field test was to demonstrate the effectiveness of WTFK to improve writing skills among ethnically diverse students and to assess teacher and student satisfaction with the program.

WTFK was designed to be implemented in three to five, half-hour to 45-minute lessons per week over a school year. It was decided, however, to begin the program mid-year rather than wait for a new school year. Consequently, instruction occurred over a four-month period rather than the ideal nine months.

Methods

WTFK was field tested in three elementary schools and one middle school. Approximately 500 children in 14 classrooms from grades one to eight received WTFK instruction over a period of four months. (Eight of these classrooms were elementary and the other six were at the middle school.) Another 500 children, serving as control groups within the same schools, did not receive WTFK instruction. Children in both WTFK and control group classrooms were pre-tested in late January 2003 and post-tested in early June 2003 with a 20-25 minute writing exercise appropriate to each grade level. Writing samples were evaluated systematically by professional readers. A six-point holistic scoring rubric, developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, was used. Each sample was read twice and the resulting scores were combined so that the maximum score possible was 12.

In June 2003, WTFK teachers completed a brief questionnaire designed to assess their usage and satisfaction with the program. At this time, focus groups were conducted with randomly selected children from WTFK classrooms to assess their reactions to the program.

The field test commenced in late January 2003 with a one-half day training workshop provided by TCM for WTFK teachers. TCM also provided several days of onsite product support, including modeled lessons, to WTFK teachers.

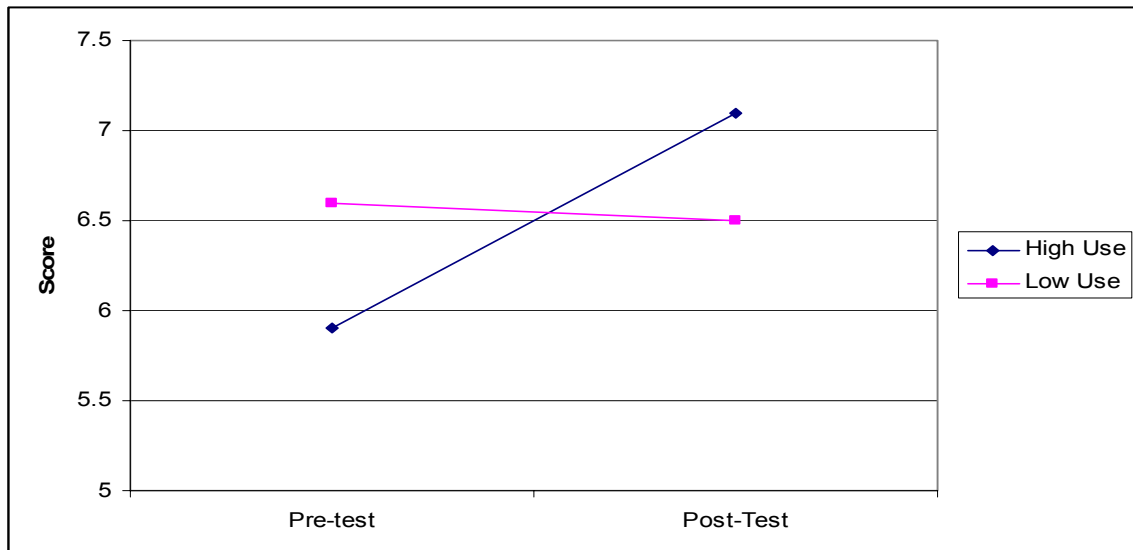
Results

Improvement in Nonfiction Writing

Statistically significant gains in writing were found in WTFK classrooms in grades one, two, four, and five. When compared with control group classrooms, WTFK classrooms showed significantly greater gains in grades two and five. Though not statistically significant, children in a seventh grade classroom showed improvement in writing, while writing among children in the control group classroom declined.

In a further analysis, WTFK classrooms were divided into two groups, those that met or were close to meeting the delivery expectations of the program (High Use) and those that did not (Low Use). Classrooms that fell into the first group provided at least two hours of instruction per week and covered at least three lessons in each of the four main program genres. Four elementary classrooms met these criteria (High Use). The remaining four elementary school classrooms did not meet these criteria and comprise the second group (Low Use). Figure 1 below shows how these two groups compare on pre-test and post-test writing measures:

Figure 1. Comparison of High Program Usage vs. Low Program Usage on Pre-test And Post-test Writing Measures



High Use classrooms whose writing scores were lower than those of Low Use classrooms at the start moved upward and surpassed Low Use classrooms whose scores declined slightly. This result is a powerful demonstration of the potential impact of the WTFK program and suggests that the more teachers use the program, the more likely it is to have the desired impact.

Teacher Satisfaction

Teachers are overwhelmingly positive about the program. Over 90 percent of the teachers rated ease of use, presentation format, and organization of the program support materials and lesson plans as either “Excellent” or “Very Good.” More than half the teachers (56%) felt that WTFK was “Extremely Effective” or “Very Effective” in teaching students to develop writing skills and learning nonfiction material. Over 70 percent of the teachers reported that WTFK helped students to “think like a writer.” In response to the question “Overall, how useful was the program in helping you teach writing?” nearly 85 percent of the teachers indicated the program was either “Extremely Useful” or “Very Useful.” In focus groups teachers praised the quality of the instructional materials. They felt the program activity cards and resource materials are beautifully made and user-friendly. They also indicated that the lesson plans are well organized and the nonfiction material presented in the activity cards is very interesting and motivating for the children.

Student Reactions to the Program

Teachers reported high interest and enjoyment among students for the WTFK materials. Children loved the stories contained in the activity cards, which stimulated lots of meaningful class discussion. The materials touched on personal experiences to which the children could easily relate. Teachers noted that this helped students to write more personalized stories. Student focus groups revealed that even first graders could remember the content of many of the program cards. Virtually without exception children enjoyed the program’s learning activities. Children could also articulate things they had learned about writing. They mentioned making words and sentences more interesting; using compound words; using correct grammar and punctuation; writing leading sentences; writing stories that have a beginning, middle and end; editing one’s own writing; and learning different styles of writing (e.g., narrative, expository, persuasive, etc.). In short, children had a very positive learning experience using WTFK.

Conclusions

The field test clearly showed that teachers who use the program as the developers intended obtain significantly better outcomes. Teachers liked teaching WTFK and believe it is an effective writing curriculum. Children reacted very positively to the program.

Despite best efforts, the desired and expected level of program implementation was not achieved in the field test. The duration of the field test was too short to enable WTFK to be fully implemented. Program coverage and the amount of instructional time given to the program were limited. Most teachers covered only about 25 percent of lessons and spent less than two hours per week teaching the program. Fewer than half the teachers reported they were able to implement the program effectively. Time constraints and competing instructional priorities were limiting factors. Teachers reported they wished they had more time to teach the program. At two schools teachers

noted that the program would have been more effective had it started at the beginning of the year rather than at mid-year. Despite these weaknesses, the field test demonstrated that WTFK has the potential of teaching children to become more effective writers even under limited conditions.