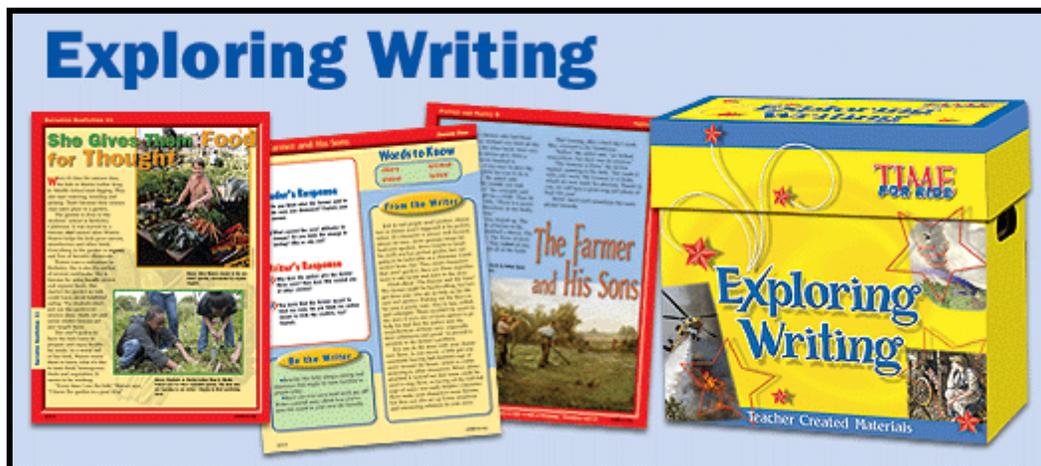

Teacher Created Materials

PUBLISHING

Research-based Curriculum *Exploring Writing:*

*Complete Supplemental Fiction and Nonfiction Writing
Program based on Respected Research & Literature*



Research-Based Curriculum

Exploring Writing

Comprehensive Nonfiction and Fiction Writing Instruction Based on McREL Standards and Years of Respected Educational Research

Exploring Writing is a writing program based on valid and reliable research on the most effective instruction for improving writing and reading skills. Traditionally, reading and writing were thought of and taught as “flip sides of the coin—as opposites; readers decoded or deciphered language and writers encoded or produced written language” (Tompkins, 1997). However, since the 1980s researchers have found a direct correlation between reading and writing. Tierney and Pearson (1983) proposed that reading and writing were similar processes of meaning construction. They found that readers create “drafts” of readings, refinements of meaning that evolve as the person continues reading or rereads, in much the same way as writers produce drafts of texts. Such research has been widely validated through instructional practice in the classroom. This program teaches the essential skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension that were studied and reported in the National Reading Panel Report. This comprehensive fiction and nonfiction reading and writing program

is based on *Content Standards: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education, 4th Ed.* published by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). As such, each kit is designed to provide easy-to-use lessons to teach and enhance independent fiction and nonfiction writing skills, resulting ultimately in improved essential reading and writing skills.

Authentic Nonfiction Material Presented in Instructional Sequence

According to Dr. Douglas Reeves in *Reason To Write* (2002), “Of all the possible reasons for writing, perhaps the most important...is that encouraging our children to write will help them to become better readers and writers.” *Exploring Writing* encourages students to read and write about concepts and ideas that matter, events that occur in the world around them, and things that they see, hear, feel and do. Stephanie Harvey in *Nonfiction Matters* (1998) claims, “Nonfiction inquiry must be authentic whenever possible. . . . Writing is modeled through authentic nonfiction text from magazines, trade books, billboards.” A comprehensive program such as *Exploring Writing* provides the structure for authentic inquiry as it is

“...encouraging our children to write well will help them to become better readers and writers.”

based on the biweekly publication TIME for Kids (Szymusiak and Sibberson, 2001). Rather than requiring educators to pore over daily nonfiction newspapers and magazines for just the right piece for teaching a particular skill, *Exploring Writing* has matched, by grade level, previously published nonfiction articles with the skills required by the McREL standards. It is also organized according to scope and sequence, so that students' skills are built upon a solid foundation and teachers, students and their family is able to see the progressive growth of a students' reading and writing abilities.

Pairing Nonfiction and Fiction—Connecting Students to a Variety of Text



Stephanie Harvey (1998) points out that “We read fiction primarily for enjoyment, to connect the text with our lives, to let imagination carry us away, to hear the sound of narrative language, and to explore age-old themes. We read nonfiction to learn. If we lose ourselves too far in the language or mood of a nonfiction piece, meaning may be disrupted, comprehension can suffer, and learning may go up in smoke.” *Exploring Writing* offers teachers a specific structure for instructing in both fiction and nonfiction. Students are exposed to the process, strategies and

purposes of fiction and nonfiction, learning to distinguish the different reasons and varied approaches of these two types of text. Some people read efferently, to carry away information after the reading, and some people read aesthetically, to be carried away by the experience that is lived through during the reading. Education is obligated to enable students to become competent efferent and aesthetic readers, (Louise Rosenblatt, 1978) and reading fiction and nonfiction allows students the opportunity to do both.

About 80 percent of reading done outside of school is nonfiction, however, educators must keep in mind the four characteristics used in determining an appropriate text for students to read, including: purpose, audience, genre and writing quality. Educators must be thoughtful consumers of fiction and nonfiction (Harvey, 2000) in order to enable students to connect to all types of text, use a variety of strategies and write both fiction and nonfiction.

Critical Elements Review Evaluates Essential Reading Skills in *Exploring Writing*

Strong evidence supporting *Exploring Writing* as an exemplary supplemental reading program is demonstrated with criteria developed by Simmons and Kame'enui. Using their *Critical Elements Review Summary*, *Exploring Writing* was reviewed. The review confirmed the program's strength in the areas of Phonemic Awareness, Listening Comprehension, and Reading Comprehension. These skills represent three of the five essential elements of a

reading program developed by the National Reading Panel. Comprehension is included in all levels of the program.

It should also be noted that *Exploring Writing* provides high interest, short reading passages that are an ideal bridge from word instruction to passage reading that can also be used for developing fluency. The National Reading Panel concluded that guided, repeated oral readings of a text leads to improved word recognition, fluency, and comprehension across a range of grade levels. The program is designed in such a way that the nonfiction articles are often re-read for different purposes. Rereading for different purposes is a strategy widely supported by the research of Tim Rasinski as well (Rasinski, 2004).

Fostering Lifelong Writers and Readers

Stephanie Harvey (1998) points out that “Although most of the reading people do in life is non-fiction, most classroom reading programs focus heavily on fiction.” *Exploring Writing* has a secondary goal of creating lifelong writers and readers. At the same time, the program builds a bridge for students to make the connection between reading and writing. It does this by providing students passages in four main areas: narrative, expository, and persuasive writing, and visual presentations such as charts, maps, tables, graphs and photo captions. Richardson (1983) postulated that knowledge is stored in two forms—a linguistic and an imagery form and the more we use both systems of

representation, the better we are able to think about and recall knowledge. The inclusion of visual presentations in *Exploring Writing* explicitly engages students in the creation of both linguistic and nonlinguistic representations, which increases activity in the brain (Gerlic & Jausovec, 1999).

With more than 100 lessons included in each grade level kit, the writing skills needed for each nonfiction area are covered in depth. For each lesson there is also detailed instruction on how to read and recognize each type of writing, strengthening the students’ connection between the two activities. In addition, the *Teacher Resource Notebook* provides the educator valuable tools to assist in the direct instruction and small group facilitation of specific knowledge and skills. The explanation of each genre offers instructors background knowledge to support their content knowledge and instructional practice.

Building Vocabulary, Inspiring Discussion and Application of Knowledge

Student achievement increases by 33 percentile points when vocabulary instruction focuses on specific words that are important to what students are learning (Stahl and Fairbanks (1986). There is overwhelming evidence that supports the strong relationship between vocabulary and knowledge. Direct instruction on words that are critical to new content produces the most powerful learning (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Based on the extensive research on vocabulary instruction, *Exploring Writing* has identified

specific vocabulary words and definitions to aid students' comprehension of each article. Prior to reading each article, educators are able to provide instruction on words, which will greatly enhance the probability that students learn the words from context when they are reading. Students who have prior instruction on words are about 33 percent more likely to understand new words when reading than students who had no prior instruction (Jenkins, 1984). The vocabulary component allows students to learn and apply new vocabulary in both reading and writing.

Reading and writing provides an opportunity for small group instruction and classroom discussion. Teachers have the structure to engage students and differentiate instruction in order to meet students' needs. The passages in *Exploring Writing* were chosen with this in mind. There is explicit instruction to encourage discussion. The discussion questions enable students to think critically. Answers to these questions require higher level thinking; analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). Feature stories and editorials can be used to demonstrate and talk about leads, headlines, verbs, research, sources, explanations, photographs, captions, writing style." *Exploring Writing* supplies this type of everyday reading encounter, but does so in such a way that it engenders the type of enthusiasm that has even inspired students to create their own newsmagazines and autobiographies, thus applying their knowledge of fiction and nonfiction.

Much fiction and nonfiction reading and writing readily lends itself to the

application of knowledge. It is something we do quite naturally in many situations (Koedinger & Tabachneck, 1994). For example, students read about sharks, such as the passage, "Sharks: Under Attack" and after reading students conclude that, without sharks, oceans may be filled with more sea life that is over-populated and imbalanced. The student then thinks about and designs a food chain without sharks to determine the specific implications of sharks being hunted. This natural process of generating and testing hypotheses is one of the nine effective strategies that increase student achievement (Marazano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). Each lesson provides students an opportunity to generate and test their hypotheses through *Reader's Response*, *Writer's Response* and *Write Time*. In these three sections, students are asked specific questions to stimulate the development of hypotheses and to write about what they learn as a result of this thinking.

The Well-Substantiated Research behind the Program

An extensive survey of current research was utilized in guiding the creation of *Exploring Writing*, beginning with *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Center for the Study of Reading, 1985). This well-regarded document provides an extensive overview regarding the keys to literacy and reading success. Research in the areas of "The Uses of Writing," "The Processes of Writing," and "The Nature of Writing Development," which was included in

the National Center for the Study of Writing text *On Teaching Writing: A Review of the Literature* (1990) was also referenced. In addition, the Report of the National Reading Panel on Teaching Children to Read was influential in the development of this program.

Scholarly research and theory were also found in *The Art of Teaching Writing*, (Calkins, 1994). The Mid Continent Research Education Lab (McRel) also proved to be a highly useful source for research support.

Tools and strategies for teaching writing were gleaned and modified from research-based literature as well. Graves' *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983), considered by many to be the preeminent work on writing, provides numerous ideas for approaching the teaching of nonfiction. Graves' recommendation for integrating reading and writing in content area instruction is an integral to the design of *Exploring Writing*. Nonfiction Matters: Reading, Writing, and Research in Grades 3-8 (Harvey, 1998), *Strategies That Work* (Harvey, Goudvis, 2000), and *The Comprehension Toolkit* (Harvey, Goudvis, 2005), offer comprehensive techniques for developing nonfiction reading and writing skills. In these texts, instructional strategies are provided. These strategies are also found in *Exploring Writing*. For example, strategies for vocabulary development are included for each card in *Exploring Writing*. Insights and strategies from teachers, illustrative student writing samples, engaging lesson ideas, and scholarly lesson supports came from *Seeing with New Eyes: A Guidebook*

on Teaching and Assessing New Writers (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999). Strategies from this publication were incorporated in the comprehensive Assessment section of the Teacher Resource Notebook. This section includes rubrics and checklists for scoring student writing, which has been studied and reported extensively by Thomas Guskey and Douglas Reeves. .

Information and research on helping students to make the connection between writing and reading and the benefits of doing so were found in *Read to Write: A Writing Process Reader* (Murray, 1994). In addition, *The Reading/Writing Connection* by Carol Booth Olson of the University of California at Irvine Writing Project provided additional strategies and support in the development and enhancement of this program.

The research of Lucy Calkins on children's writing has revolutionized the teaching of writing in the last two decades. Now, Calkins has created a series of units designed to help schools create a comprehensive writing curriculum. In her *Units of Study* (2005)M Calkins creates seven units, or essential components, to any primary writing curriculum. The complete series includes:

- Launching a Writing Workshop
- Small Moments: Personal Narrative Writing
- Writing for Readers: Teaching Skills and Strategies
- The Craft of Revision
- Authors as Mentors
- Nonfiction Writing: Procedures and Reports

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- Poetry: Powerful Thoughts in Tiny Packages

A quick review of *Exploring Writing* shows it includes these essential units. The management section of the program shows teachers how to set up a writing workshop in their classrooms. One of the four sections of cards in the program is Narrative Nonfiction, which provides young students with the opportunity to do personal narrative writing. Skills and Strategies for Writing for Readers are included throughout the program. Several lessons focus explicitly on the skill of understanding the audience prior to writing. The craft of revision is focused on specifically in lessons and included in the writing workshop when students respond to writing prompts. Two nonfiction sections in *Exploring Writing* focus on nonfiction writing. These are the expository and persuasive sections of the program. Students are taught how to write reports as well as lab procedures. Poetry, the seventh component of Calkins' units of study, is also found in *Exploring Writing*. Poetry is included in its own section of the *Exploring Writing* program. The essential elements of a successful primary writing program are clearly included in *Exploring Writing*.

Conclusions

In summary, *Exploring Writing* is a supplemental program of fiction and nonfiction writing and instruction that is based on the research literature on the theories and strategies of teaching writing. A Critical Elements Review supports the assertion that *Exploring Writing* creates a rich opportunity for developing writing within a context of reading, oral discussion, and vocabulary development. By using short nonfiction passages from a well-respected children's newsmagazine, students are exposed to everyday, real life text. While at the same time, students are provided with rich fiction in order to stimulate their creativity, their love of reading and writing and to utilize the strategies and skills needed for reading fictional text. They are then using that text not only as a springboard for writing, but also as a structure to enhance their critical thinking ability.

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