

Advancing civics-specific disciplinary writing in the elementary grades

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Abstract: Students need support through intentional writing instruction to develop their discipline-specific writing skills outside of Language Arts. Yet, we argue not all writing instruction provides the same opportunities for student learning. In this study, with the support of professional development, teachers engaged students in civic perspective-taking through writing, focusing on locally relevant public issues. Drawing from disciplinary literacy and genre pedagogy, our research team conducted a descriptive study where thematic analysis was applied to examine second and third graders' civics writing samples. Our findings indicate that students' engagement with key civic concepts became more complex and purposeful as they practiced argumentative writing. Development continued from second to third grade in both the sophistication of their civic perspective-taking as well as their writing. Additionally, we found that student motivation to engage in argumentative writing increased in all classrooms across both grade levels when engaging with locally relevant public issues. This article provides details about the elementary civics writing curriculum and the students' writing outcomes as well as includes the two graphic organizers used in the curriculum.

Keywords: civics instruction, elementary social studies, perspective-taking, student writing, argumentation



Enright, E.A., Toledo, W., & Landau Wright, K. (2023 - accepted for publication). Advancing civics-specific disciplinary writing in the elementary grades. *Journal of Writing Research*, 15(1), 41-71. <https://doi.org/10.17239/jowr-2023.15.01.03>

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1. Introduction

Writing is profoundly important to student learning across subjects and grades in schooling. Students not only benefit from skillful instruction to learn how to write (Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 1986) but also from skillful instruction to process their learning through writing (Bangert-Drowns et. al., 2004; Graham & Herbert, 2011). The benefits of learning to write and learning through writing are not limited to elementary literacy instruction and secondary language arts instruction (known in the United States schooling context as English Language Arts or ELA). When writing is taught across the subject areas, researchers have documented benefits to students for learning discipline-specific knowledge (Monte-Sano, 2010) and reasoning (De la Paz & Felton, 2010).

Mottart and colleagues' (2018) claim that writing skills and knowledge taught in language arts instruction rarely transfer (or are remitted) when students write in other subjects. In short, writing skills are not discipline neutral (Graham et. al., 2020; Mottart et. al., 2009). Students need support through intentional writing instruction to advance from foundational writing skills, taught in early literacy instruction, to the genres of discipline-specific writing found in later grades (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

To provide additional context for this study, during the years we (i.e., the authors of this article) conducted this research (2016-2022), the United States and other countries have been experiencing a surge in political polarization and nationalism (Bieber, 2018; Giroux, 2017; Whitehead et. al., 2018). In response, scholars have called for an increased focus on civic education and research on civic engagement and education, in particular, research focused on marginalized groups (e.g., Fitzgerald et. al., 2021). Our focus on civics education in schools with high rates of poverty and large Latines¹ populations for the past six years is part of those efforts to better understand and counteract these surges in the U.S. (Enright et. al., 2022; Toledo, 2019, 2020; Toledo & Enright, 2022). Thus, we chose to focus on civics instruction specifically for this U.S.-based study, rather than the cluster of social sciences (e.g., history, civics/government, sociology, geography, etc.) taught under the umbrella of social studies.

Additionally, we believe that this focus on civics is critical when studying writing in the disciplines since the differences between the disciplines that make up social studies are meaningful. In elementary instruction, in particular, civics is a subject area that is twice marginalized (Journell et. al., 2015); social studies instruction is not given adequate instructional time and, when taught, elementary teachers tend to focus on historical content. While roles and tasks, such as community helpers, may be used to teach important civics concepts in early elementary grades, they are not sufficient replacements for civics instruction and rarely include civics-specific

writing instruction (Maple, 2005). Civics as a distinct disciplinary tradition requires specialized knowledge and concepts that differ – for example – from history.

This paper presents the findings of a descriptive study where thematic analysis was applied to examine cases of second and third graders' use of writing to engage in civic perspective-taking, a core civic practice (Toledo & Enright, 2022). Next, we describe the larger research context for this specific study of persuasive writing, a key piece of the civic perspective-taking framework (Toledo, 2020). Then, we describe the civic perspective-taking framework at the core of this study and delve more deeply into the literature on writing in the social studies and the role of literacy instruction to promote perspective-taking.

2. Context of Our Descriptive Study

The study presented within this article emerged from a larger design-based research (DBR) study (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Our larger design-based study is a multi-year partnership between a university and a large, urban school district to collaboratively study the design and implementation of civics curricula in different public school classrooms across grade levels in the United States (U.S.). The name and specific location of the school district will not be disclosed per our Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved agreement. Our research team utilizes DBR because the framework allows us flexibly to evolve our understanding of both our civic perspective-taking (CPT) framework and student and teacher thinking related to CPT simultaneously. As a methodology, DBR provides our team space to re-conceptualize and develop frameworks while we study the application of those frameworks to real-world, educational environments.

This study focuses on two iterations of our work: the first iteration focused on second grade teachers and students, and the second iteration focused on third grade teachers and students. The results from our second grade study and our third grade study have been published independently (Enright et. al., 2022; Toledo & Enright, 2021, 2022; Toledo et. al., 2021). This manuscript, however, is the first opportunity our research team had to examine data across iterations specifically to examine students' written argumentation and the development of this argumentation from second to third grade. We are currently developing our third iteration, focusing on the fourth grade data.

3. Conceptual Framework

In the present study, students engaged in civic perspective-taking through writing, requiring that they understand the disciplinary demands of civics as well as the genre-based norms related to presenting and understanding multiple viewpoints. Thus, our work is supported by three conceptual frameworks: disciplinary literacy, genre pedagogy, and civic perspective-taking.

3.1 Disciplinary Literacy

Disciplinary literacy describes the specialized literacy skills needed to be successful in a specific disciplinary context (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Proponents of disciplinary literacy argue that reading and writing instruction cannot be confined to English/Language Arts classes because the person best prepared to teach these skills is the content-area expert (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Furthermore, concern over the transfer of foundational skill sets from English/Language Arts to other subject areas, such as needed for writing, is not new. After reviewing 12 programs in elementary instruction meant to help develop foundational skills, Rosaen (1988) suggested that the transfer of specific skills is more likely when programs aim to develop metacognitive awareness and strategies in students as well. Students need to be taught to see the structures of particular genres of writing (Martin, 2009; Rose, 2009). These findings advance our understanding of why research on writing in the disciplines in general, and as we discuss in this article, in social studies disciplines specifically, is so important.

3.2 Genre Pedagogy

Genre pedagogy specializes instruction further by drawing focus to the forms and patterns of language explicitly used within a genre for a specific audience and purpose (Hyland, 2003). Genre pedagogy has been widely used as a framework for building engagement with learners reading and writing in their non-dominant language (e.g., Gill & Janjua, 2020; Paltridge, 2014; Schall-Leckrone, 2017), as genre pedagogy offers an “organizational framework for language teaching and learning” that supports the development of disciplinary literacy skills. (Schall-Leckrone, 2017, p. 361).

3.3 Civic Perspective-Taking

In the larger design-based research study, as well as this article’s focused analysis of the genre-specific writing process and outcomes, the use of civic perspective-taking as a conceptual framework is central in this work for three reasons. First, civic perspective-taking represents one approach to the development of civic reasoning as knowledge, which we argue needs more attention in elementary instruction and research (Enright et. al., 2022; Toledo, 2020; Toledo & Enright, 2022). Second, civic perspective-taking supports teachers in explicitly teaching the structure of persuasive writing in civics to students. More genre-specific writing preparation is needed in elementary grades (Purcell-Gates et. al., 2011). Third, civic perspective-taking is one way to operationalize culturally sustaining practices in elementary civics instruction, given the framework’s emphasis on locally relevant issues and student agency (Enright et. al., 2022). For these reasons, this article uses civic perspective-taking as a conceptual lens and means to support teachers in utilizing culturally sustaining practices in their writing instruction.

Elements of CPT as we have conceptualized it are similar to social perspective-taking (Sandahl, 2020) and historical perspective-taking (Seixas, 2017). However, our framework requires students specifically to consider civic and public issues in their perspective-taking, which sets it apart from social perspective-taking which tends not to have a civic-specific oriented lens. Additionally, our framework requires that students consider current cultural and societal norms, which sets it apart from historical perspective-taking, which asks that students intentionally suspend their understanding of present-day norms. Figure 1 displays our most current CPT framework, which has evolved as we have continued to engage in DBR cycles.

We used the conceptual framework in Figure 1 to design and implement the civics unit we describe in this paper, in which we predominately focus on the “argumentation” piece of the framework. During the professional development workshop in the larger design-based research study, the elementary teachers participating in the professional development, with support from the professional development team, collaboratively designed a unit that the teachers then taught in their respective classrooms.

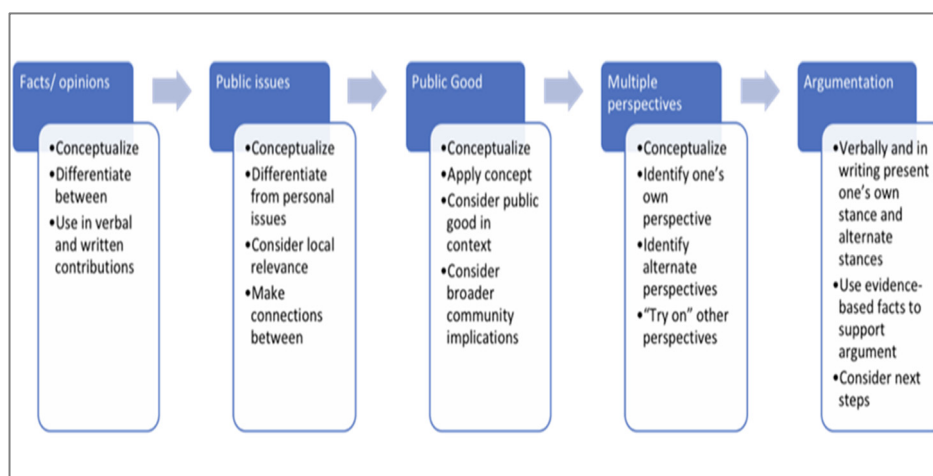


Figure 1: Civic Perspective-Taking Framework: Key Curricular Concepts for Student Learning (Note. Figure adopted from Enright et. al., 2022).

The teachers designed the unit to teach the five key concepts of civic perspective-taking through students' verbal and written engagement with locally relevant issues. First, the unit introduced the concepts of *fact and opinion*. Students learned to define these concepts, differentiate between them, and utilize them in verbal and written arguments. Second, students learned about what makes a matter of concern a *public issue*, rather than a private issue. Students were asked to consider

the local relevance of specific public issues presented throughout the unit. Third, the unit introduced the idea of the *public good*. Students practiced considering the concept in context across the public issues presented in the unit. Fourth, students learned to consider *multiple perspectives*. They practiced identifying their own perspective as well as alternate perspectives without judgment. Then, they tried to view the public issue through those other perspectives. Fifth, the students worked on developing their verbal and written *argumentation*. Students practiced presenting their own stance and differentiating it from alternate stances using claims and evidence. The teachers created opportunities for students to practice drafting their arguments verbally in discussions and then translating those verbal contributions into written texts.

In this study, we study second and third grade students' engagement in civic writing and argumentation. Specifically, we examine the following research questions:

1. How do second and third grade students engage with civic ideas and concepts in their argumentative writing?
2. What differences exist between second and third grade students civic writing and argumentation?
3. How does students' verbal and written argumentation in civics change between second and third grade students' work samples?

4. Literature Review

4.1 Role of Writing in Elementary Civics Learning

There is less research on writing instruction in civics (and the other social studies fields) than in history (van Drie et. al., 2017). We seek to advance our understanding of persuasive writing (also known as argumentative writing) in civics through the study presented in this article. We examine how teachers embedded civics writing instruction in the curriculum through our civic perspective-taking framework and examine the student outcomes of that discipline-specific writing instruction. As we described previously, the civic perspective-taking framework is a cluster of reasoning competencies important to developing civically engaged students. We are advancing the use of this framework to develop students' civic persuasive writing, one of the important genres of writing in social studies (De la Paz & Felton, 2010; Nussbaum & Schraw, 2007).

Providing students with an opportunity to engage in oral discussions of topics has shown to support argument development. For instance, researchers have found that simply anticipating an argumentative discussion encourages elementary students to read more slowly, and such discussion participation is related to conceptual growth (Miller et. al., 2014). Additionally, Reznitkaya and colleagues' (2007) work examined fourth and fifth grade students' ability to construct

arguments, orally and in writing, after engaging in group discussion about a controversial topic. Their findings demonstrated that students who took part in the group discussions were able to make supported argumentative claims, yet direct, explicit instruction in argumentation did not have a statistically significant effect. Considered in concert, these and similar findings (e.g., Morris et. al., 2018; Reznitskaya et. al., 2001) demonstrate the value of supporting the development of both students' written and oral argumentation skills using discussion.

4.2 Role of Literacy Instruction to Promote Perspective-Taking

Perspective-taking can be connected to the psychological concept of *mentalizing*, or children's understanding that people are individual beings with their own thoughts, beliefs, and emotions (Carruthers & Smith, 2011). This process is part of the development of critical thinking. Understanding that the mental models of others might differ from their own is a key piece of perspective-taking, and young children tend to assume their own perspective is most valid (Selman, 2003). While current models of child development have established that perspective-taking begin to emerge in elementary grades, learning perspective-taking requires facilitation and support (Mar, 2011).

In the elementary grades, research has established the power of children's literature in promoting perspective-taking (McTigue et. al., 2015). Cognitive psychology indicates that literature can serve as a sort of simulation for children to understand human interactions (Oatley, 2011) and develop compassion and empathy for others (Mar et al, 2009). Moreover, supporting students' understanding of different perspectives in literature has been shown to impact overall reading comprehension (Hodges et. al., 2018).

While perspective-taking has been shown to be powerful in supporting student comprehension of texts, generally, less is known about how perspective-taking can support content-specific learning. For instance, while McTigue and colleagues (2015) suggest a promising graphic organizer to promote perspective-taking in history, this approach has yet to be rigorously tested. However, the authors argue that perspective-taking can be leveraged to help students consider opposing arguments and motivations in the study of history.

Another facet of perspective-taking that has been under-researched is in the area of elementary writing. Researchers have demonstrated that writing can be used to examine perspective-taking. For instance, Cho and colleagues (2021) found that seventh graders tend to write from their own perspectives in analytical essays, while Crowe and Hodges (2021) examined student writing to assess the effects of a perspective-taking intervention with third grade students. However, less is known about how writing can be used as a vehicle for developing perspective-taking, especially within marginalized academic disciplines such as civics.

5. Methods

5.1 Participants and Contexts

We obtained IRB approval and collected our data in elementary schools in the mountain west region of the United States. In this context, “elementary” school generally serves students between the ages of five and twelve, with classrooms of approximately 20 to 30 children and one main classroom teacher. Students receive the majority of their content instruction from this teacher, although occasionally teachers will have the opportunity to co-teach and support instruction across two classrooms. Content expectations are dictated by state-level standards for history and science. Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010), adopted in some form by over 80 percent of states, are a national set of standards for English/ Language Arts and mathematics instruction. In the classrooms in this study, the state standards focused on local, national, and global decision-making around public issues and topics.

We worked in 12 classrooms: six second grade (approximately age seven) classrooms during the 2018-2019 school year and six third grade (approximately age eight) classrooms during the 2019-2020 school year. During year one of the study, we worked with eight second grade teachers, four of whom taught in their own second grade classrooms and four of whom taught in pairs of two, to design and implement a locally relevant civics curricular unit. During year two, we worked with six third grade teachers, each teaching in their own classrooms, to teach a more complex third grade unit that included more complex civic perspective-taking concepts. More than half of these teachers taught in schools serving students receiving free or reduced cost lunches, since they come from households living in or near poverty. Two of those schools were granted Title I status, a federal program in the United States designed “to close educational achievement gaps” by providing specific services and financial supports to students through schools.

During the professional development phase of the larger study, ten-lesson units were designed using state social studies standards and Common Core State Standards for reading, writing, and speaking/listening. Our team collaborated in an iterative manner using a lesson design framework (Lewis et. al., 2009) wherein the implementation of one lesson, which included a debrief using student and teacher feedback, informed the design of the subsequent lesson.

This study seeks to examine students’ written argumentation in civics in second and third grade classrooms. Due to the complexity of writing development in students of this age (i.e., the phenomenon being studied), this is not a causal study, nor do we intend to make causal claims. The growth between second to third grade students’ writing documented through the data analysis process likely can be attributed to multiple causes, which we have considered in this study.

Table 1. Teachers' Pseudonyms and Demographic Information for Each School Site

SECOND GRADE	
Teacher Pseudonym	School Demographics
Barry and Vincent	Low SES, Title I, 70% non-white (54% Latines)
Moore and Sanders	Low SES, 50% non-white (36% Latines)
Clarkson	Low SES, 48% non-white (28% Latines)
Gifford	Low SES, 57% non-white (38% Latines)
Pointer	Mid SES, 33% non-white (20% Latines)
Regis	Mid SES, 37% non-white (22% Latines)
THIRD GRADE	
Teacher Pseudonym	School Demographics
Torres	Low SES, Title I, 70% non-white (54% Latines)
Parnell	Low SES, 54% non-white (35% Latines)
Evans	Low SES, 56% non-white (39% Latines)
Warren	Mid SES, majority-white (23% Latines)
Benice	Mid SES, majority-white (18% Latines)
Montgomery	Mid SES, majority-white (20% Latines)

5.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Here, we examine data from across the 12 classrooms: six second grade classrooms (i.e., six to seven years of age) and six third grade classrooms (i.e., eight to nine years of age) to answer our research questions. Our specific data sources were collected from a series of ten one-hour lessons taught in each classroom and from a series of six to ten two-hour design sessions with teachers. Specifically, we analyzed (a) students' written work samples from relevant lessons (n=231), (b) video recordings and transcriptions of classroom observations, including students' verbal conversations and comments (n=94 recordings), (c) audio recordings and transcriptions of lesson design meetings (n=16 recordings), and (d) audio recordings and transcriptions of teacher interviews (n=14 recordings).

We utilized a three-stage coding process. During stage one, the team researchers began by *theming the data*. At the manifest level, the researcher identified themes (extended phrases or sentences) that offered an interpretation of the data's meaning. At a latent level, the researchers looked across themes and

identified integrated themes of underlying phenomena (i.e., use of evidence). In stage two, the results were integrated themes across the body of data, which represent students' argumentative writing development and motivation. The integrative themes were treated as macro-level codes. Finally, for stage three, we used an Nvivo approach to concept coding, and went through these macro-level codes to determine meso-level themes, which allowed us to pull out smaller observable patterns within the data. This inductive and deductive hybrid approach is particularly helpful in studies such as ours with large numbers of participants and a large amount of data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

During our thematic coding process (Gibbs, 2007), we focused on prevalent codes and themes related to argumentation in students' verbal, spoken, and written data. In this process, we analyzed students' argumentative work samples from lessons in which they engaged in individual writing tasks, particularly in terms of four features of argumentation identified in our prior research (Enright et. al., 2022; Toledo & Enright, 2022): (a) claim, or stance; (b) evidence to support claim or stance; (c) counterargument; and (d) counter-argument evidence. We examined these features and their presence in verbal and written arguments alongside each of our key unit concepts. We also examined the regularity at which features of argumentation appeared in students' verbal and written work samples both in and between grade levels. To supplement our analyses of student data, we also engaged in thematic coding of teacher comments from the interview data, which focus on teachers' perceptions of students' writing quality and capacity to engage in written argumentation. With these data, we used the same codes in our application process to identify instances in which teachers mentioned these specific features of argumentation.

6. Findings

Our findings indicate that students' engagement with key civic perspective-taking concepts, such as *considering the public good*, *identifying locally relevant civic issues*, and *engaging in evidence-based argumentation*, became more complex and purposeful in their argumentative writing between second and third grade. Additionally, we found that third graders were more capable of engaging in written argumentation with more complex public issues. Finally, we found that student motivation to engage in argumentative writing increased in all classrooms across both grade levels as they were given opportunities to engage in purposeful discourse around locally relevant public issues. Here, we display a variety of work samples from second and third grade classrooms. We detail our analysis of the samples, the samples' features, and discuss our collective perceptions of the most significant differences between second and third grade students' capacities to engage in written argumentation and the differences in complexity of these issues.

Then, we detail teachers' perceptions of student motivation throughout the enactment of the curricular units.

6.1 Engaging in Evidence-Based Argumentation in Writing

In second grade classrooms, students' verbal argumentation in small group discussions developed at a rate that far exceeded their abilities to engage in written argumentation. According to teachers, this occurred across all six classrooms. During our design sessions, teachers discussed this gap frequently. During our fourth design session, Ms. Vincent noted that there was a large gap between students' verbal and written argumentation. The other teachers agreed, noting that students were capable of more advanced argumentation in their conversations and those argumentation skills were not transferring into their written work. During the next session, Ms. Pointer said that she had been thinking more about what Ms. Vincent said, and she had noticed this gap between verbal and written performance even more. Ms. Clarkson noted during our final design session that "Verbally, [students] are finding evidence and citing that evidence. In writing... they are not doing it as well. They need to be coached. They need a lot more support."

Prior research suggests that students' verbal abilities develop more quickly than their written abilities, and verbal and written argumentation also develop at different rates (Shanahan, 2006). These data suggest that this is the case, particularly with civic perspective-taking and argumentation involving locally-relevant public issues. Specifically, we saw what could be considered more advanced verbal argumentation around these issues than we might ordinarily see in second grade classrooms, but that students' written arguments were not necessarily more developed.

As we examined student work samples using the key unit themes and the four features of argumentation from our coding scheme, we saw this gap between verbal and written argumentation exemplified. During the second grade study, students struggled to engage in argumentative writing about locally-relevant issues, particularly more complex public issues. While many second grade students were able to engage with one another and make verbal arguments surrounding these issues, their arguments did not typically translate to their writing samples.

To best illustrate the differences we observed between second and third grade writing samples, we focus here on displaying argumentative writing samples from two lessons: (a) a second grade lesson focused on year-round school versus traditional school year and (b) a third grade lesson focused on a city council vote on building on wetlands. We choose to present data from these lessons because of the similarities observed in the data. First, both lessons were placed halfway through the unit, so they demonstrate similar points in the instructional sequence of the unit. Second, both writing activities were scaffolded in similar ways wherein students used a graphic organizer with similar features to engage in argumentation.

Third, our research in third grade classrooms was moved to a virtual setting in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the units and led to some third grade classrooms not completing their final writing projects.

6.2 Second Grade Data

The included work samples display second grade students' written argumentation on whether the school district should switch to a year-round school schedule. The work samples we chose to include were representative of larger patterns that we saw within and across classrooms. Additionally, we selected work samples that reflected the student demographics. These two selection criteria were used whenever samples were chosen. In our observation data, we coded for the same four argumentation codes within our key civic perspective-taking concepts. They learned about different perspectives and engaged with different pieces of evidence, such as teacher, student, and parent testimonials. Across classrooms, we saw students verbally engage in strong and complex argumentation around the issue:

There are different reasons to do this, or not to do—this - like, we could have the longer break, but then kids forget stuff. Their learning doesn't stick, sometimes. Then if we don't do it, the normal school, we can have the [year-round] school and then lots of breaks, no long break, but the kids can keep going and remember more. (Dario, 2/13/19)

I think parents could be happier cause where do the kids go all summer, that is long, but also then they don't have the family time, or the time off. Some kids I know have parents who don't like [being] together, so their parents might have trouble with the whole summer thing. (Amanda, 2/21/19)

In these examples, students considered multiple perspectives and stakeholders (e.g., other students and parents) related to the issue of year-round school in complex ways. However, students' written argumentation around the issue lacked the complexity of their verbal arguments, particularly when identifying alternate perspectives, or counterarguments. Some students simply stated that someone might have a different opinion, failing to identify alternate perspectives, as in Dorinda and Max's written work:

Someone who has the opposite stance might think that we (circle one) **should** / **should not** have year-round school. A piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Be kcus somoh
mit disugre

Figure 2: Dorinda's Work Sample.

Someone who has the opposite stance might think that we (circle one) **should** / **should not** have year-round school. A piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Some huore ksz mit have
a diffint a pain,

Figure 3: Max's Work Sample.

Other students invented evidence not present in their sources, or conflated evidence and made assumptions that were not factually accurate:

Someone who has the opposite stance might think that we (circle one) **should** / **should not** have year-round school. A piece of evidence to support this stance is...

because the school would
get payed more

Figure 4: Emily's Work Sample

Someone who has the opposite stance might think that we (circle one) **should** / **should not** have year-round school. A piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Because, you do not like school, and loves
breaks.

Figure 5: Dario's Work Sample.

One student, Emily, wrote that someone might support a year-round school schedule “because the school would get paid more.” In her response, Emily tried to justify a stance she did not agree with by creating a reason that someone may think differently. However, this represented an invention of evidence and did not represent an understanding of the issue. Although Emily did not display an understanding of the CPT concept in her writing, Emily displayed competence and an understanding of the public issue in her verbal argumentation. She said to a classmate that someone might support year-round school because, “they want a

long summer break instead of just lots of little breaks," which was a piece of evidence presented to students. Emily's work was representative of many second grade students whose verbal engagement in CPT surpassed what students displayed in their written work, and their tendency to invent evidence when they could not effectively consider counterarguments.

Someone who has the opposite stance might think that we (circle one) **should** / **should not** have year-round school. A piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Because they don't want to go to school.

Figure 6: Alex's Work Sample.

Someone who has the opposite stance might think that we (circle one) ~~should~~ / **should not** have year-round school. A piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Because we can learn more of an often and read it!

Figure 7: Aimee's Work Sample.

These three students, Dario, Alex, and Aimee displayed confusion with their evidence-based arguments in writing. Despite displaying an understanding in their verbal conversations that year-round school and traditional school years included the same number of school days organized in different ways, the three students did not articulate this understanding in their written arguments. Dario wrote that

someone might support year-round school “because you do not like school, and loves breaks.” This also represented a potential misunderstanding of which evidence would support which side of the argument. Alex wrote that a student might not support year-round school “because they don’t want to go to school,” which demonstrated a misuse of evidence that was not fact-based. Aimee wrote that someone might not support year-round school because, “we can learn more of math and reading,” making a similar error to Alex’s in her written argument. These students’ writing samples demonstrated the difficulty many second grade students faced in determining evidence fit, and in transposing their own opinions and related evidence onto both sides of arguments.

The examples presented in this paper were collectively representative of second grade students’ written argumentation. While most students were able to display competence in their verbal arguments, such as the ability to use fact-based evidence and to provide alternative perspectives or counterarguments, some students struggled to express their written arguments with as much clarity. Overall, we observed a gap between students’ verbal and written levels of engagement with key CPT concepts.

6.3 Third Grade Data

The gap we identified between students’ verbal and written argumentation shrunk in the third grade data. We saw more of the four argumentation codes within the civic perspective-taking concepts in students’ writing. Whereas the codes were quite rare in the second grade written data, we found multiple instances of developed argumentation within third grade students’ writing samples from each classroom. Although teachers noted the importance of verbal argumentation in small groups as a tool to develop their written argumentation, they reported that the noticeable gap between students’ proficiencies in these two areas seen in second grade classrooms was not as prevalent in third grade student work. The third grade students made written arguments that were aligned with our CPT frameworks, the components of which were developed based on our team’s shared vision of written argumentation in the context of the unit.

In the following representative samples, students considered whether the city council should allow developers to build on wetlands. Like they did in second grade classrooms, students had the opportunity to learn background information on the topic and engage in CPT discourse with their peers about the topic before producing their argumentative writing samples. Each example displays a firm

understanding of the public issue and includes important components of written argumentation, including claims, evidence, and counterarguments.

Opinion Writing: The Public Good

Prompt: Should the Reno city council allow houses to be built in the wetlands?

What is your opinion?

No I don't think they should build houses on the wetlands because it will make floods worse.

Describe two reasons you have for your opinion.

The first reason why is it a bad idea is that the homes will flood worse than others. The second reason why is it will be dangerous for other people.

Explain why someone else might have a different opinion than you.

Someone will probably have different opinion because so many people are moving into Nevada that they need to make new homes.

Figure 8: Cynthia's Work Sample.

Opinion Writing: The Public Good

Prompt: Should the Reno city council allow houses to be built in the wetlands?

What is your opinion?

My opinion is in the middle.

Describe two reasons you have for your opinion.

It because in the middle
is because they can make
ways it won't flood but it
takes the animals homes.

Explain why someone else might have a different opinion than you.

I think they would say
no because they might think
it will cause more floods
and they might think yes
because people will have homes.
~~and~~

Figure 9: Betty's Work Sample.

Opinion Writing: The Public Good

Prompt: Should the Reno city council allow houses to be built in the wetlands?

What is your opinion?

NO: I don't think the city council
should allow houses to be built
in the wetlands.

Describe two reasons you have for your opinion.

I think this because animals
live in the wetlands and
it will take away their homes
just to build new ones. Another way
I think this is that there will
be more floods and it will
be floods that are worse.

Explain why someone else might have a different opinion than you.

I think someone else might have
a different opinion is that the
people that can't afford houses
will be able to cause they will
be cheaper. Another way is that
the homeless will have somewhere
to live. And they will have apartm.
ents also to live.

Figure 10: Mira's Work Sample.

Opinion Writing: The Public Good

Prompt: Should the Reno city council allow houses to be built in the wetlands?

What is your opinion?
No I don't think they should
be built on the flood planes.

Describe two reasons you have for your opinion.
Well if it rains a lot the flood planes
could overflow because they want to make
them smaller but deeper they also will
be destroying the horses and snakes homes.

Explain why someone else might have a different opinion than you.
They might think if they leave a
little bit of flood planes it would be okay.

Figure 11: Amaya's Work Sample.

These students' writing samples were representative of the ways in which the majority of third grade students engaged in written argumentation. As we analyzed work samples, our research team identified distinct and concrete differences between these samples and the second grade writing samples. First, students' claims were clearer and more specific. For example, we see in the above samples all students clearly stating their position, and four of the students voicing the public issue itself. Students were more able to state their stances clearly in ways that were complete thoughts, and in ways that articulated their opinions to audiences in meaningful ways. Second, students' evidence was consistently fact-based and from common sources. Whereas in second grade classrooms students would often

invent evidence or engage in circular argumentation, we saw third grade students supporting their claims with rich, convincing evidence, such as the impact of decisions on the environment and housing. For example, in Mira's work sample, she considered not just immediate consequences, but the long-term consequences of the decision to build on the flood plains, including sustained flooding that could create significant damage over time. Third, third grade students consistently provided evidence for counterarguments. Some students even began to consider others' thought processes and justification for their counterarguments, such as Amaya, who suggested that someone might think that "a little bit of floodplains" is sufficient in mitigating environmental issues. In second grade classrooms we saw some students begin to offer counterarguments and to provide evidence on both sides. However, we found that third graders' writing samples consistently included counterarguments supported with evidence, as seen in the sample.

6.4 Complexity of Issues

Beyond the shift in greater competence in crafting written arguments from second to third grade, we also determined that third grade students were able to engage with more complex public issues in their writing. We defined complex issues using three guiding features (see Table 2). Teachers who participated in the second grade research study from 2018-2019 noted often that they were hesitant to include issues that were too complex or controversial in the curricular materials:

I want to be careful to include... not too 'big' of things. We want the kids to be able to relate, and we don't want something in here that they get to and they're like, 'What? Who? How?' And with our kids, there is a risk of that.
(Ms. Sanders, 1/30/19)

Our students are struggling with their writing and reading. I would like to keep that in mind when we pick the topics, the issues. For us, I think it might be best to avoid anything that is confusing, or complicated. Just topic-wise.
(Ms. Gifford, 2/20/19)

Our research team determined through our analyses that the topics included in third grade students' argumentative writing were more complex. We determined this by collectively analyzing the issues, and considering three central components of public issues: (a) the number of potential controversies surrounding a public issue, (b) the number of stakeholders related to a public issue, and (c) the number of embedded issues within a singular public issue. We used these three criteria based on an open-coding analysis of data, identifying these as the three most common themes in our data related to teachers' discussions of topics to include in the unit. Table 2 displays an analysis of the second and third grade writing prompts, one focused on the public issue of a year-round school calendar replacing a

traditional school calendar, a second grade topic, and one focused on public issue of the City Council's vote on building on wetlands, a third grade topic.

Table 2. Analyses of the Complexity of Public Issues in Second and Third Grade Classrooms

Topic	Controversies (Conflicts)	Stakeholder Groups	Larger Embedded Issues	Total Complexity Score
Year-Round vs. Traditional School Schedules (Second Grade)	1 (conflict between local and state governments on school day structure)	3 (school faculty and staff, parents, and students)	1 (education)	5
Building Residential Properties on Wetlands (Third Grade)	3 (conflict between developers and environmentalists; conflict between city ordinances and state ordinances; conflict between public opinion and advocacy groups)	4 (developers, city council members, home buyers, environmental organizations)	3 (environmental impact, legal ordinances, elections of officials)	10

By analyzing the issues from second to third grade, we saw that the third grade content was consistently more complex as would be expected for the grade progression. This, coupled with our analysis that third grade students were more proficient in argumentative writing, leads us to believe that third grade students are, overall, capable of engaging in more complex written argumentation with more complex issues (content).

7. Discussion

Our data indicate that although second and third grade students are both capable of engaging in civic argumentation, third grade students were able to craft more advanced written arguments. These findings confirm prior research studies that indicate that as students age, their capacity to engage in more complex written arguments increases (Dyson & Freedman, 1990; Hayes, 2000). Our findings provide important additional insights into that development between the second and third grades. Specifically, we highlight two key elements of our findings: (a) opportunities

to engage in verbal argumentation were a key element of increasing students' competencies in crafting written arguments and (b) using locally-relevant content and public and civic issues helped students engage in more productive, higher quality writing.

We believe that the purposeful opportunities provided by teachers for students to engage in verbal argumentation was a key element of increasing students' competencies in crafting written arguments. We make this assertion based on several criteria: (a) our prior research indicates the importance of verbal perspective-taking to build written perspective-taking competencies (Enright et. al., 2022); (b) the high quality of students' arguments in the unit in comparison with teachers' perceptions of students' argumentation outside of the unit; and (c) based on teachers' perceptions of students' learning. We also base this claim on our own classroom observations, and the engagement and excitement we saw as students engaged in verbal argumentation with their peers, which we hope to address in more detail in future research. After these opportunities, we observed that students were engaged in crafting written arguments based on their learning from verbal argumentation opportunities. Our finding that students' verbal literacy in civics develops prior to their written literacy, reflects what Törmälä and Kulju (2023 - this issue) note in their findings that the structure of the disciplinary texts develops first and subject-specific vocabulary develops next. These parallel findings could help support teachers' work sequencing when curriculum planning.

Beyond opportunities to engage in verbal argumentation as a scaffold or support for crafting written arguments, we also determined that by using locally-relevant content and public and civic issues, students were more able to engage in written argumentation than they were with other content. We determined this based on teachers' reported perceptions of student engagement throughout the study, and the continued process of bringing locally-relevant content into rooms as a basis for students' written arguments. Students' written arguments around these issues, particularly in third grade classrooms, were robust, and included pertinent evidence, counterarguments, evidence for counterarguments, and potential solutions or compromises. This finding suggests the importance of teaching with locally-relevant content, ensuring that students are able to make connections across topics they write about in schools. This finding regarding student engagement could also have implications for what Meneses et al. (2023 - this issue) call "linguistic decision-making," which could be aligned with this research in terms of students making decisions about when and how to use key civic vocabulary and argumentation based on a public issue's relevance, their own stance, and other perspectives.

We believe that the results of this study speak to the importance of writing engagement in disciplinary ways, specifically in civics education. Although our framework was not specifically built around increasing students' writing

engagement, data suggest that students' interactions with locally relevant content and opportunities to engage in writing for authentic civic audiences may have been a factor in their quality of writing, particularly in third grade classrooms in which writing was a larger focus of the unit. We believe there is a need for further research explicitly examining how students experience motivation in these types of discipline specific writing opportunities (Wright et al., 2021). In our next cycle of DBR in fourth grade classrooms, we plan to design tools to help teachers conduct this investigation into students' writing motivation in civics. We believe that connecting this back to the DBR cycle and teacher professional development will lead to more sustainable, lasting change in teachers' disciplinary writing instruction and investigating student outcomes in this area.

7.1 Implications for Classrooms

Implications suggest the need for more research on K-5 grades civics-specific writing and a deeper understanding of how teachers support the development of student skills and motivation for civically-engaged, persuasive writing. Changing teachers' approaches to writing instruction can be challenging. There is a lot of variation in how teachers approach writing instruction. In elementary social studies, we are dealing with teaching generalists, who likely do not have specialized historical or civic disciplinary training. To support teachers' development of sustainable change in their writing instruction, we argue that teacher educators need to be involved in professional development programs that help teachers do the work of embedding writing instruction across the disciplines in their curriculum design. This article outlines how our research team used a design-based research approach to this collaborative work across university-based teacher educators, district curriculum specialists, and elementary school teachers.

7.2 Implications for Future Research

We believe that the results of this study speak to the importance of writing engagement in disciplinary ways, in particular in civics education. Although our framework was not specifically built around increasing students' writing engagement, data suggest that students' interactions with locally relevant content and opportunities to engage in writing for authentic civic audiences may have been a factor in their quality of writing, particularly in third grade classrooms in which writing was a larger focus of the unit. We believe there is a need for further research explicitly examining how students experience motivation in these types of discipline-specific writing opportunities. In our own line of DBR, we plan to design tools to help teachers conduct this investigation into students' writing motivation in civics. We believe that connecting this back to the DBR cycle and teacher professional development will lead to more sustainable, lasting change in teachers' disciplinary writing instruction and investigating student outcomes in this area.

In terms of our own future manuscripts, we plan to analyze longitudinal data more in-depth. Additionally, longitudinal data documents how students' disciplinary writing (i.e., persuasive writing) and motivation for writing changed over time. We also plan to focus on specific students in a classroom at a Title I school. In this room, one teacher taught the third grade unit to several students who had participated in the second grade unit the year before at their school. We plan to examine these specific students' argumentation more in-depth in our future publications.

7.3 Boundaries of Research

The research presented in this manuscript allowed us to examine twelve classrooms across second and third grades and to analyze students' argumentation in each classroom, and between classrooms. Although this work represents important findings on how students' written argumentation might be influenced by opportunities to engage in verbal argumentation and by engagement with locally-relevant civics content, it does not necessarily speak to growth in specific students from second to third grade due to the fact that we worked in some similar and different school-sites. Therefore, the results do not allow us to generalize about how students' written arguments might develop from second to third graders outside these contexts.

Explicitly, there are four major contextual variables that limit our capacity to make causal claims based on the findings in this article. First, although we worked within the same school district and even in some of the same schools, the populations of students in classrooms were different from second to third grade. To help us better understand student populations and their characteristics across classrooms, we analyzed longitudinal data of the students who participated in the curricular intervention in both their second and third grade years. We report briefly on the preliminary findings for these students and the comparison of those findings to the rest of the student population in this article and provide a more in-depth analysis in a separate article (Enright & Toledo, 2023). Second, the teachers participating in the professional development and curricular intervention changed from the first to the second year of the study. Although teachers changed, the university researchers and district-level researchers served as a constant across the larger DBR study. The same professional development team organized the design and implementation of the unit, focused on the same CPT concepts, and provided the training to the teachers across both years. The consistency in which teachers were prepared for this research and how the unit was designed and implemented were documented in the data collected and support the analysis of student writing development across the years. Third, the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic added complexity to the context as well. This contextual feature is important to note since the pandemic impacted teachers and students across these two years, albeit

in different ways. Fourth, students grow, change, and learn a great deal between the ages of seven and nine. In our estimation, we do not attribute changes in students' demonstrated skills in argumentative writing over this two-year period solely to this curricular intervention. Student development is too complex to document causality. Instead, we used a descriptive approach to document how this intervention provided opportunities to impact, record, and analyze that growth.

Future research may examine the development of specific groups of students, which we plan to do with small case studies from this research of students who had repeated exposures to the content in both their second and third grade years.

8. Conclusion

Our research speaks to the importance of engaging students in verbal argumentation as a support and scaffold to assist them in creating rich and developed written arguments. Additionally, our research speaks to the benefits of using locally-relevant content in classrooms to help students engage in written arguments in meaningful ways and for authentic purposes and audiences. We encourage educators to consider providing students with opportunities to engage in multiple types of argumentation using locally-relevant public issues. We also encourage researchers to continue studying students' written argumentation and how it evolves and grows in relation to these types of opportunities. We hope to continue to study students' written argumentation and to examine the role of motivation specifically within this work.

Note

¹ We use the term *Latines* (as opposed to *Latino/a*, *Latin@*, or *Latinx*) because the term is de-colonized and deconstructs a false gender binary (Blas, 2019).

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Appendix A. Second Grade Graphic Organizer

Name: _____ Teacher: _____

Should we have year-round school?

I think we (circle one) *should* / *should not* have year-round school.

One piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Another piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Someone who has the opposite stance might think that we (circle one) *should* / *should not* have year-round school. A piece of evidence to support this stance is...

Appendix B. Third Grade Graphic Organizer

Opinion Writing: The Public Good

Prompt: Should the city council allow houses to be built in the wetlands?

What is your opinion?

Describe two reasons you have for your opinion.

Explain why someone else might have a different opinion than you.
