

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

2023

### **“LUMINESCENT AS AN ANGLERFISH”: CREATIVE WRITING AS A STRATEGY FOR BUILDING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN**

Dana Fitz Gale

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

#### **Recommended Citation**

Gale, Dana Fitz, "“LUMINESCENT AS AN ANGLERFISH”: CREATIVE WRITING AS A STRATEGY FOR BUILDING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN" (2023). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 12162.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/12162>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

CREATIVE WRITING AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

“LUMINESCENT AS AN ANGLERFISH”:  
CREATIVE WRITING AS A STRATEGY FOR BUILDING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE  
SKILLS IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

A Dissertation

by

Dana Fitz Gale

B.A., History, McGill University, Montreal, PQ, 1993

M.S., Communication Disorders & Sciences, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 1998

M.F.A., Creative Writing, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2013

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Doctorate of Education

The University of Montana,  
Missoula, MT

Spring 2023

Submitted to Committee:

Morgen Alwell, Ph.D., Chair  
Teaching & Learning

Kate Brayko, Ph.D.,  
Teaching & Learning

Jingjing Sun, Ph.D.  
Teaching & Learning

Daniel Lee, Ed.D.  
Educational Leadership

Stephanie Reid, Ph.D.  
Teaching & Learning

Ashby Kinch, Ph.D.  
Graduate School Dean

### Abstract

This pretest/ posttest nonequivalent groups study explored the relationship between classroom-based creative writing instruction and the figurative language abilities of fourth grade students. Figurative language is widespread within the oral and written discourse of K-12 classrooms and is an essential component of higher-level language and literacy development.

Despite the prevalence of non-literal language in educational settings and its relevance to children's academic and social success, research concerning best practices for teaching non-literal language remains scarce. A few studies have suggested that creative writing may be an effective vehicle for fostering figurative language in children. Poetry writing seems especially promising, since poetry is rich in figurative forms and tends to be motivational for young writers.

In this study, I compared pretest and posttest scores on a brief measure of figurative language which I administered to two groups of fourth grade students. The treatment group ( $n = 30$ ) received six weeks of poetry writing instruction between pretest and posttest, while the comparison group ( $n = 37$ ) did not. Results of a within subjects analysis using paired samples  $t$  tests revealed that only the treatment group demonstrated significant gains on the posttest. Results of between subjects analysis showed that the change in the treatment group's scores between differed significantly from the comparison group's change in scores. The effect size was large for both the within subjects and the between subjects analyses. Although generalizability is limited due to the nonrandomized design, the results suggest that creative writing deserves more attention as a means of teaching figurative language to school-aged children.

*Keywords:* Figurative language, literacy, metaphor, simile, creative writing, poetry, mentor texts, scaffolding, inclusion, culturally responsive teaching

### **Acknowledgments**

I owe so much to those who supported and mentored me during this grueling adventure.

My heartfelt appreciation to my dissertation chair, Dr. Morgen Alwell, whose wisdom, common sense advice, plentiful snacks, and hilarious stories kept me from giving up on this project.

I was blessed with a stellar committee. I'm indebted to Dr. Kate Brayko, Dr. Stephanie Reid, Dr. Daniel Lee, and Dr. Jingjing Sun for their expert suggestions, perceptive insights, and kind encouragement. I would never have made it without their guidance.

Warmest thanks to the wonderful educators and kids at two local elementary schools for participating in my study. Your poems made me laugh, cry, and remember what I love about teaching.

A shout-out to two amazing women: acclaimed Montana poet, Sheryl Noethe, founder of the nonprofit Missoula Writing Collaborative, and award-winning novelist, Caroline Patterson, Executive Director of the MWC. These women teach kids to love to write. Their remarkable work was the inspiration for this research and I'm forever grateful for their friendship.

Thanks also to my colleagues in the department of Speech and Hearing Sciences, especially Dr. Jennifer Schoffer Closson, who demonstrated that it was actually possible to earn a doctorate while working full time and raising kids.

Much gratitude to my mom, Dr. Linda Woodbridge, who taught me to love books. She has already endured too many graduation ceremonies. I promise this is the last one for me, Mom.

To my husband, John and our sons, Liam and Nathaniel: I love you so much. You guys deserve medals for listening patiently while I freaked out about this thing. I hope I can return the favor at some point.

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the memory of my father, Albert Henry Fitz, Jr. (1940-2016), who was a dedicated K-8 educator for more than 40 years. Through his patience, kindness, faith, and humor, my father found ways to connect with all his students, especially the kids that nobody else deemed worthy of the effort.

Thanks for always believing in me, Dad. I miss you.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
List of Tables and Figures.....	viii
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	5
Purpose .....	6
Research Design.....	6
Research Questions and Hypotheses.....	7
Research Question One .....	7
Research Question Two.....	8
Definition of Terms.....	9
Delimitations .....	10
Limitations .....	11
Significance of the Study .....	11
Summary .....	13
Chapter Two: Review of Literature .....	15
Prevalence/ Educational Significance of Figurative Language.....	15
Factors Contributing to Figurative Language Difficulties .....	18
Interventions for Figurative Language.....	22
Conclusion.....	29
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	30
Demographics.....	30
Instrumentation.....	32
Procedure.....	35
Focus Lesson/ Teacher Model.....	38
Collaborative Writing .....	39
Partner Writing .....	41
Independent Writing .....	42
Sharing of Work .....	43
Feedback.....	44

Instructional Sequence .....	44
Lesson One .....	45
Lesson One Summary.....	45
Lesson Two.....	45
Lesson Two Summary .....	47
Lesson Three.....	47
Lesson Three Summary .....	47
Lesson Four .....	47
Lesson Four Summary.....	50
Lesson Five.....	50
Lesson Five Summary .....	51
Lesson Six.....	51
Lesson Six Summary .....	52
Data Analysis .....	52
Threats to Validity.....	55
Position of the Researcher.....	61
Ethical Considerations.....	62
Summary .....	62
Chapter Four: Results .....	64
Description of the Data .....	65
Research Questions .....	67
Research Question One .....	67
Hypothesis One.....	68
Research Question Two.....	68
Hypothesis Two .....	68
Hypothesis Three .....	68
Hypothesis Four.....	68
Summary of Findings .....	69
Hypothesis One.....	69
Hypothesis Two.....	71
Hypothesis Three.....	73
Hypothesis Four.....	74

Conclusion.....	75
Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	78
Implications for Educational Policy and Practice .....	78
Explicit Instruction .....	79
Mentor Texts.....	81
Scaffolding.....	83
Inclusion and Accessibility.....	84
Emphasis on Process .....	87
Student-Centered Approach .....	88
Recommendations for Future Research .....	90
Summary .....	92
References.....	93
Appendix A: Examples of Student Poems.....	100
Appendix B: FLaP Assessment Protocol.....	104



**List of Tables and Figures**

Figure 1. <i>Pretest/Posttest Nonequivalent Groups Design</i> .....	37
Table 1. <i>Pretest/Posttest Means and Standard Deviations for Groups 1 and 2</i> .....	65
Table 2. <i>Individual Samples t Test for Hypothesis One</i> .....	69
Table 3. <i>Paired Samples t Test Comparing Pretest/Posttest Means for Treatment Group</i> .....	71
Table 4. <i>Paired Samples t Test Comparing Pretest/Posttest Means for Comparison Group</i> .....	72
Table 5. <i>Independent Samples t Test Comparing Mean Changes Scores of Both Groups</i> .....	74

## Chapter One: Introduction

Figurative language is the term used to describe non-literal uses of oral and written language and includes such devices as metaphors, similes, personification, alliteration, idioms, hyperboles, analogies, onomatopoeia, and proverbs (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2017, p. 166). This type of language is woven throughout the elementary school Common Core standards for reading, writing, and spoken language. For example, Montana's Common Core standards for third grade reading include RL 3.4: "distinguishing literal from non-literal language". In the domain of written language, the third-grade standards include L 3.5: "distinguishing literal from non-literal meanings of words and phrases in context" (Montana Office of Public Instruction [OPI], 2011).

Figurative language is usually classified as a form of literary discourse, but this type of language also proliferates in everyday spoken discourse, with some experts estimating that the average English speaker uses over 3,000 metaphors per week in casual conversation (Persicke et al., 2012, p. 913). Oral figurative language is ubiquitous in classrooms, beginning in the primary grades. Lazar et al. (1989) observed that 39% of the utterances of third grade teachers' utterances contained multiple meaning or non-literal expressions, specifically similes, metaphors, idioms, or indirect requests (p. 425). By fourth grade, the researchers observed that the percentage of figurative language in teacher's utterances had risen to 44% (Lazar et al., 1989, p. 426).

Due to the widespread, pervasive nature of figurative language, difficulties with using and/or comprehending non-literal forms of language can significantly hinder children's academic and social functioning. Various studies have shown that children diagnosed with autism, language disorders, learning disabilities, dyslexia, and cognitive delays tend to exhibit more difficulties with figurative language than do their peers without diagnosed disabilities (Ezell,

1997; Power et al., 2001; Dennis et al., 2001; MacKay & Shaw, 2004). As noted by Helen Ezell (1997) "for children with special needs, comprehension of figurative forms generally falls behind that of typical peers" (p. 39).

It is important to note that the figurative language deficits exhibited by many children with disabilities do not necessarily indicate a reduced capacity for learning this type of language. Rather, it seems plausible that these disparities reflect the lack of educational opportunity faced by many students with disabilities. Over the course of my 25 years of working in public schools, I have observed that students with disabilities are frequently excluded from higher level literacy tasks, especially creative or expressive writing tasks, due to the common assumption that these tasks are too difficult for students with disabilities. As I will assert elsewhere in this paper, I am convinced that children of all abilities can and should be included in creative writing activities. Excluding them from these experiences is detrimental to many aspects of their development, including figurative language development.

Some researchers have claimed that non-literal language may be especially challenging for multilingual learners and for children from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds (Ezell, 1997; Nippold, 2001; Power et al., 2001; Qualls et al., 2004). Again, I feel compelled to caution that one should not make any assumptions, based on this research, about the innate capabilities of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In fact, I am curious as to whether these observed difficulties are mainly an artifact of the commercially available figurative language assessments, which are heavily reliant on knowledge of mainstream, English-speaking, white American culture. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, there are currently no published instruments available that assess figurative language without privileging the dominant cultural and linguistic groups. For example, the widely-used figurative language subtest of

Pearson's *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals, fifth edition* [5<sup>th</sup> ed.; *CELF-5*] *Metalinguistics Assessment* (Wiig & Secord, 2014) is based entirely on children's receptive knowledge of idioms, a form of figurative language that is inextricably linked to cultural knowledge and understanding. The lack of appropriate, minimally biased published assessments for figurative language is the reason I had to design my own brief assessment instrument for this study.

Whatever the underlying causes of the observed figurative language disparities among learners with disabilities and culturally and linguistically diverse learners, there is little agreement about how to address these inequalities. Some researchers have recommended that classroom educators should simply avoid using figurative language with diverse or struggling learners (Blue, 1981, p. 121). Yet others have reasonably questioned the feasibility and wisdom of avoiding all figurative expressions, pointing out that "certain discourse functions are better accomplished using figurative utterances rather than literal ones" (MacKay & Shaw, 2004, p. 14).

Given the social and academic usefulness of figurative language, it would seem that instruction in this area should be a high priority. However very few studies, to date, have examined pedagogical approaches to teaching figurative language. Helen Ezell (1997) observed that "little is known about figurative language intervention and the extent to which it is currently receiving attention from various educators" (p. 40). Even less, she noted, was known about "the extent to which educators and speech-language pathologists are addressing these skills for children with disabilities" (Ezell, 1997, p. 40). Her nationwide survey of 826 elementary school teachers and speech/language pathologists revealed that the majority of these professionals do provide instruction in figurative language, but that there is little consistency in the type of

instruction provided to students. Instructional methods used ranged from Whole Language, literature-based activities to discrete trial drills to board games, while nearly half of the respondents reported that they regularly use pre-published worksheets to provide figurative language instruction in their classrooms (Ezell, 1997, pp. 42-45).

One approach to figurative language that shows exceptional promise is creative writing instruction. Arts integration, including the use of such expressive mediums as painting, sculpture, dance, drama, and creative writing (fiction and poetry), has been recently gaining traction as a way to teach a wide range of skills and increase student engagement across multiple disciplines (Bricker et al., 2015). One of the key advantages of arts integration programs is how well they adhere to the core principles of Universal Design for Learning [UDL]. UDL is a flexible, evidence-based framework designed to “provide equitable opportunities to reach high standards across variable students in our schools” by helping educators implement multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 7). Based on these core principles of engagement, representation, and action/expression, the UDL framework articulates nine guidelines for designing accessible and inclusive instruction. These guidelines “provide scaffolds for remembering who and what to consider in the design of high-performance learning environments” while supplying concrete pointers (or “checkpoints”) to help educators “address systematic variability among students” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 110).

Because arts integration programs are typically student-centered, flexible, adaptable, interactive, and multimodal, they are usually congruent with the nine UDL guidelines for instructional design (Vardell & Wong, 2014). This makes them uniquely suitable as a means of educating children with diverse abilities and backgrounds (Bricker et al., 2015).

Arts integration programs focusing on creative writing (especially poetry) appear to offer rich potential for teaching figurative language skills. As Vardell and Wong (2014) pointed out, poetry abounds with similes, metaphors and other types of non-literal language. However, only a single study has been published, to date, regarding the efficacy of creative writing instruction as a means of teaching figurative language.

As previously mentioned, those students who are most likely to struggle with figurative language (English language learners, students with autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, reading disabilities, and cognitive delays) are frequently left out of creative writing activities in the general education classroom, due to the unfortunate misconception that such activities are beyond their abilities and that their classroom time would be better spent on more rudimentary tasks. Thus, more research into the potential benefits of including diverse learners in creative writing activities is needed, not only to explore effective methods for teaching figurative language, but also to promote full inclusion of students with diverse learning needs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Figurative language emerges as a natural aspect of children's oral discourse during the preschool years (Lazar et al, 1989, p. 425; Pramling, 2010, p. 57). Beginning in the primary grades, written forms of figurative language are prominent within English Language Arts standards and curricula (Power et al., 2001). In the upper grades, students' ability to comprehend academic texts and to attain disciplinary literacy across multiple subject areas is heavily predicated on their proficiency with non-literal forms of language (Pramling, 2010; Palmer et al., 2008; Palmer & Brooks, 2004).

Problems with understanding or producing non-literal language can impede the educational and social progress of children with disabilities as well as those from culturally

and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Despite the widespread prevalence and evident importance of figurative language, there is scant research concerning effective methods for teaching this type of language.

Creative writing instruction offers many naturalistic opportunities for teaching figurative conventions since fiction and poetry abound with metaphors and other types of non-literal language (Vardell & Wong, 2014). However, more research is needed to examine whether creative writing activities can help to foster figurative language abilities in school-age children.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore whether classroom-based creative writing instruction may improve the figurative language abilities of elementary school aged children, specifically their ability to identify and produce similes and metaphors.

### **Research Design**

The participants in this quasi-experimental, quantitative research study were fourth graders attending a total of four different classrooms in two separate elementary schools in Northwest Montana. The figurative language intervention in this study consisted of six weeks of poetry writing instruction which I delivered within the fourth grade classrooms.

Prior to the intervention, all of the participants in both groups were administered a brief researcher-designed assessment called the Figurative Language Proficiency (FLaP) test, focusing on the identification and production of similes and metaphors. Next, each of the participants in the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>) participated in one hour per week of poetry writing instruction in the general education classroom, during their regular language arts time. I delivered this instruction myself, with the regular classroom teacher assisting. There were six instructional sessions in all.

The intervention comprised both whole-class and small-group instruction. While the students in the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>) participated in the creative writing intervention, the students in the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>) continued with their regular classroom programming. The students in the comparison group were offered the creative writing instruction at a later date, after the conclusion of the study.

At the end of the intervention phase, all of the participants in both groups (G<sub>1</sub> and G<sub>2</sub>) were administered the same figurative language test (FLaP) again. Pre and post test scores were compared and analyzed via a series of independent samples *t* tests and paired samples *t* tests, as described in the greater detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study explored the relationships between creative writing instruction and figurative language development in fourth graders attending two public schools in Northwest Montana. It was hypothesized that the six-week course of creative writing instruction would measurably enhance the subjects' knowledge of figurative language, as measured through a statistical analysis of pretest/posttest scores for both groups on the FLaP. The following research questions and correlating hypotheses were addressed in this study:

#### ***Research Question One***

*Is there a significant difference between the figurative language proficiency of students in the treatment group versus the comparison groups prior to a six week course of classroom-based creative writing instruction?*

The first research question investigated the data prior to the intervention and compared the mean FLaP pretest scores for the two groups. This analysis was performed to establish the similarity of the two groups at the outset of the study. This helped to isolate the dependent



variable and reduced the threat to internal validity posed by the lack of random selection. The hypotheses relating to Research Question 1 were as follows:

H<sub>01</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference between the mean pretest FLaP scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>) and the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

H<sub>1</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference between the mean pretest FLaP scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>) and the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

### ***Research Question Two***

*What is the relationship between classroom-based creative writing instruction and the figurative language proficiency of fourth grade students?*

Three corresponding pairs of hypotheses were tested to investigate Research Question 2 using both the pretest and posttest data:

H<sub>03</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference between the mean pretest and posttest scores of the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

H<sub>3</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference between the mean pretest and posttest scores of the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

H<sub>04</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference between the mean pretest and posttest scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

H<sub>4</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference between the mean pretest and posttest scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

H<sub>05</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference between the mean change scores between the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>) and the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

H<sub>5</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference between the mean change scores between the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>) and the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

## Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used for the purposes of this study:

*Figurative language:* Figurative language is used in this study to refer to various literary devices “used by a speaker or writer to communicate something beyond the literal meaning of the words being used” (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2017, p. 201). Some common figurative language devices include metaphors, similes, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, alliteration, proverbs, and idioms.

*Simile:* A simile is a figurative language device which “compares two very different things, using the words “like” or “as”. In order to be considered a simile, one of those two words must be used” (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2017, p. 201).

*Metaphor:* Like a simile, a metaphor compares two different things. However, a metaphor makes the comparison without using the words “like” or “as” (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2017, p. 202).

*Receptive language:* Receptive language is “the ability to understand words and language” and encompasses the comprehension of both oral and written language (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2017, p. 89). Within the context of this study, receptive language tasks include those items on the figurative language assessment which require subjects to identify a metaphor or simile when presented with a verbal example and a visual stimulus.

*Expressive language:* Expressive language is “the use of spoken language or writing to convey meaning and messages to others” (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2017, p. 89). Within the context of this study, expressive language tasks include those items on the figurative language assessment which ask subjects to produce metaphors or similes in response to a visual stimulus.

*Universal Design for Learning:* Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a flexible, evidence-based framework for designing instructional environments so that all learners can access and participate meaningfully in the curriculum. The core principles of UDL include: Engagement, Representation, Action/ Expression. These core principles are delineated in nine guidelines and 31 checkpoints, which are designed to help educators make proactive and intentional choices in their materials, presentation, and methods in order to create inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all students (Meyer et al, 2014, pp. 6-14).

*Culturally Responsive Teaching:* Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is a term coined by the University of Washington researcher Geneva Gay (2000). Gay has defined CRT as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. This is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2000, p. 106).

*Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy:* Developed by Michigan State professor Django Paris, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) is an extension and expansion of Culturally Responsive Teaching. In CSP, education is seen as an opportunity for empowering students and communities of color and schools are viewed as environments where marginalized cultural ways of being can be honored and rejuvenated (Paris & Alim, 2017).

### **Delimitations**

The current study was delimited to students enrolled in the fourth grades at two separate elementary schools in Northwest Montana during the spring of 2022. The final number of participants in this study was 67, with 37 subjects in the comparison group ( $n=37$ ) and 30

subjects in the treatment group ( $n=30$ ). Demographic data about the respective public elementary schools and students involved in the study is provided in the demographics section of Chapter Three.

### **Limitations**

The most significant limitation of this study is that the sample selection was not randomized. Randomization was not feasible because the classroom-based nature of the research involved intact, preformed groups. The treatment group consisted of children already enrolled within two fourth grade classrooms at Elementary School A in the spring of 2022 and the comparison group included children enrolled in two fourth grade classrooms at Elementary School B during the same time frame.

As will be described at greater length in Chapter Three, the testing of the first hypothesis helped to establish the similarity of the two groups in terms of figurative language knowledge at the beginning of the study. A comparison of demographic records revealed that the two schools were similar in terms of racial/ethnic composition and socio-economic status. However, given the lack of random selection, it is still possible that other uncontrolled variables aside from the intervention caused the outcome of the study. As a result, the generalizability of the current findings should be viewed as limited.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a pressing need for more research into effective pedagogical approaches for addressing figurative language. Non-literal language is ubiquitous in classrooms even in the preschool years. In the upper grades, figurative language features heavily within teacher discourse and textbooks across content areas. Consequently, the understanding and use of this type of language is critical to students' success in school. Students with disabilities and those

from culturally and/or linguistically diverse groups appear to be especially prone to difficulties with figurative language, although I propose that these observed difficulties may stem from a lack of educational opportunities, combined with biased assessment methods. Regardless of their cause, difficulties with figurative language may prevent culturally and linguistically diverse learners and children with disabilities from meeting their full educational potential (Lazar et al., 1989; Marshal & Kasirer, 2012).

To date, there has been very little research concerning effective methods for cultivating figurative language skills within the general education classroom. Creative writing instruction offers numerous potential benefits for students and teachers in this setting. It is easy to implement within a regular classroom, during regularly scheduled language arts blocks, with no added financial burden on schools. Similar to other arts-based activities, the inherent flexibility of creative writing makes it unusually adaptable to diverse needs, which aligns well with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

By nature, creative writing tasks are individualized; they are based on the unique knowledge, personal interests, and lived experiences of each individual student. These factors make creative writing highly engaging and motivating for students, in comparison to many academic writing tasks. Even more importantly, this form of writing instruction is culturally responsive because it offers equal voice to the concerns, lived experiences, prior knowledge, and perspectives of all students, including those who belong to marginalized groups. As explained by Geneva Gay (2018), “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference for students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (p. 37).

In fact, given their unique potential for amplifying and uplifting diverse voices, creative writing tasks can be culturally sustaining as well as culturally responsive. Developed by Django Paris, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) is an educational approach founded on the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching, but with a more socially transformative vision. In CSP, classrooms and schools are environments where “the cultural ways of being in communities of color” can be nurtured and rejuvenated, rather than suppressed and eradicated (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Creative writing instruction is easy and inexpensive to implement, highly motivating for students, congruent with the ideals of UDL and compatible with the aims of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Since this form of writing pedagogy helps to create an engaging, inclusive and equitable classroom climate, its potential benefits in terms of child language and literacy development are clearly deserving of further exploration.

### **Summary**

Contrary to popular belief, figurative language is not restricted to the realms of poetry and song-writing. Research indicates that this type of language is extremely widespread and common in everyday discourse, with some analysts estimating that the average English speaker uses over 3,000 metaphors per week in casual conversation (Persicke et al., 2012, p. 913). Because figurative discourse is so pervasive, deficits in this area can have a profoundly detrimental effect on children's academic and social functioning.

To date, few studies have addressed the question of whether and how figurative language should be taught or how deficits in this area can be most effectively remediated (Persicke et al., 2012). Without adequate knowledge about how to help their students refine their knowledge of

figurative language, educators will struggle to address a critical piece of their social and academic functioning, since "certain discourse functions are better accomplished using figurative utterances, rather than literal ones" (MacKay & Shaw, 2004, p. 14). Clearly, more research is needed regarding effective methods for teaching figurative language to school-age children.

Creative writing instruction (especially poetry instruction) appears to be a logical choice for teaching figurative language skills, since fiction and poetry are rich with metaphors and other types of non-literal language (Vardell & Wong, 2014). However, very few studies have been conducted, to date, regarding the efficacy of creative writing instruction as a means of teaching figurative language. Moreover, students with below-grade literacy skills, language differences, and/or disabilities are often excluded from creative writing activities in the general education classroom, due to the widespread misconception that creative tasks lack the structure needed for these students to be successful (Cecil, 1994, p. 2). Thus, research into the potential benefits of such instruction is needed, not only as a means to explore possible interventions for figurative language, but also to promote full inclusion of all learners within the regular education classroom.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

In this literature review, I investigated creative writing as an intervention for figurative language. Specifically, I examined research devoted to the following topics: a) the educational significance of figurative language and the prevalence of this type of language within the oral and written discourse of classroom settings, b) identification of those students or groups of students who are most likely to struggle with figurative language, c) the relative efficacy of various interventions and instructional approaches for targeting figurative language, and d) the rationale for using creative writing instruction (and poetry instruction, in particular) as an approach for teaching figurative language within an inclusive classroom environment.

### **Prevalence/ Educational Significance of Figurative Language**

In recent years, educators have grown increasingly concerned about how to teach figurative language in their classrooms, since this type of language is now featured prominently within state content standards for reading, writing, and spoken language, beginning in the primary grades. Montana's Common Core standards for third grade reading include RL 3.4: "distinguishing literal from non-literal language". In the domain of written language, the third-grade standards include L 3.5: "distinguishing literal from non-literal meanings of words and phrases in context" (Montana OPI, 2011).

Figurative language is often regarded as an ornamental, non-essential aspect of language, primarily found within literary discourse, but in truth, figurative language abounds in everyday spoken interactions. By some estimates, the typical English speaker uses over 3,000 metaphors per week in oral conversation (Persicke et al., 2012, p. 913).

Various studies have demonstrated that the use of figurative language (both oral and written) is widespread in classroom environments, beginning as early as preschool. Lazar et al.



(1989) analyzed the oral language used by teachers within primary grade classrooms. The subjects were sixteen third and fourth-grade teachers who were not aware of the objective of the study. The teachers were recorded as they taught classes in math, reading, and English, and the resulting transcripts were coded for literal vs. non-literal language content. Lazar and colleagues found that 39% of the third-grade teachers' classroom utterances contained multiple meaning or non-literal expressions, specifically similes, metaphors, idioms, or indirect requests (Lazar et al, 1989, p. 425). By fourth grade, the researchers observed that the proportion of figurative language in teacher's utterances had risen to 44% (Lazar et al., 1989, p. 426). Intriguingly, the ratio of figurative to literal language was very similar across subjects; the math classes contained approximately as much figurative language as the English and reading classes.

Kerbel and Grunwell (1997) collected eighteen hours of audio-recordings from the classrooms of eleven elementary school teachers. Similar to the subjects in the previously cited study of oral classroom discourse (Lazar et al, 1989), none of Kerbel and Grunwell's subjects were informed of the reason for the audio-recording until after the data collection was complete (Kerbel & Grunwell, 1997). Analysis of the transcripts revealed that the teachers used an average of 1.73 figurative language expressions per minute within their classroom speech.

Figurative language occurs frequently within students' own spoken utterances, as well as in the oral language used by classroom teachers. Jakobson and Wickman (2007) analyzed twenty-five hours of transcripts from collaborative science lessons conducted at five different elementary schools to explore the extent to which children generate their own metaphors and the possible roles which such figurative constructions play in "conceptual learning and meaning making" (p. 268). Their study revealed that the children spontaneously used a wide variety of original metaphors for a range of different purposes during their dialogic inquiries; these

purposes included description, explanation, comparison, inferencing, and synthesis of new knowledge (Jakobson & Wickman, 2007, p. 270). Observing that scientific language is rife with analogies and metaphors, the authors argued that figurative language is essential to students' "conceptual understanding of scientific concepts" (p. 269) and suggested that metaphor usage promotes metacognition in children (p. 282).

In 2010, Pramling conducted the first study of figurative language usage within an early childhood setting when he analyzed the teacher/child dialogues occurring during collaborative science lessons in a Swedish preschool. Pramling asserted that figurative discourse was essential to scientific learning, since metaphors give learners a way to "use previous experience in making sense of novel observations" (Pramling, 2010, p. 57). He pointed out that figurative language is not a lofty, decorative aspect of advanced literary discourse, but an essential component of ordinary communication and learning at all educational levels; hence his interest in the use of metaphorical language in the "everyday talk between teacher and children in early childhood settings" (Pramling, 2010, p. 57). The researcher videotaped collaborative science lessons on the topic of soil, occurring over a span of three months within a preschool setting. Transcript analysis revealed that both teachers and children frequently engaged in figurative language usage, using spontaneous analogies, similes, metaphors, and personification within their dialogic interactions about soil science. Pramling (2010) concluded that "teachers as well as children, even in the preschool years, speak figuratively" (p. 63).

Nor is the use of figurative language confined to the academic realm. Hannon and Ratliffe (2007) analyzed the spoken utterances of three physical education teachers working in, respectively, and elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. The teachers were

recorded over the course of ten physical education lessons, during which each gym teacher used an average of one figurative language utterance per minute.

It stands to reason that figurative language is at least as prevalent within classroom texts as it is within the oral language of classrooms. Ortony (1975) reported that the average fifth or sixth-grade textbook contained at least ten instances of figurative language per 1,000 words. Similarly, Nippold (2001) found that idiomatic expressions accounted for 6.7% of all sentences within textbooks in grades three through seven, with the proportion increasing to 9.7% by eighth grade. Clearly, figurative language becomes increasingly relevant to students' success as they advance in age and grade level.

Several studies have found a correlation between figurative language knowledge and reading comprehension (Power et al., 2001; Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Knowles & Moon, 2006; Pramling, 2010). Palmer and colleagues (2008) observed that the frequency of figurative language is increasing within K-12 textbooks, and posited that students' difficulties with recognizing and interpreting this type of language may partially account for the recent decline in reading comprehension scores among American schoolchildren. Noting its role in the comprehension of classroom reading material, Palmer and Brooks (2004) asserted that figurative language instruction should have a prominent role within public school curricula. Similarly, Power, Taylor, and Nippold (2001) argued that the identification and interpretation of non-literal language should be considered an essential component of primary-grade literacy instruction.

### **Factors Contributing to Figurative Language Difficulties**

Because figurative language is so pervasive, deficits in this area can significantly impede children's academic and social functioning. Various researchers have noted that learners most likely to struggle with oral and written forms of figurative language include children on the

autism spectrum, those with language, literacy and/or learning disabilities, and children with cognitive impairments. As noted by Ezell (1997) "for children with special needs, comprehension of figurative forms generally falls behind that of typical peers" (p. 39).

Ezell and Goldstein (1991) observed that figurative language difficulties often seem to accompany cognitive impairments when they administered a test of figurative language comprehension to 30 children with mild cognitive impairments and an equal number of age and gender matched peers without diagnosed disabilities. Consistent with the researchers' predictions, the children with the cognitive impairments scored significantly lower on the measure than their "typically developing" peers.

In 2004, Qualls et al. administered a measure they had designed, called the *Idiom Comprehension Test* to 27 eighth graders diagnosed with language-based learning disabilities and an equal number of "typically developing" peers matched for age, gender, and reading ability. The subjects who were diagnosed with language-based learning disabilities scored significantly lower on the measure. These findings were consistent with several previous studies, which also found a relationship between a diagnosis of language disorder or learning disabilities and difficulty with using and comprehending non-literal language (Minskoff, 1982; Jones & Stone, 1989, Nippold, 1991; Ezell & Goldstein, 1992). Qualls et al. (2004) theorized that the students with language-based learning disabilities struggled with the figurative language test due to "underdeveloped metalinguistic skills... leading to faulty interpretations of idioms or other figures of speech" (p. 303).

Numerous other researchers have proposed a link between autism spectrum disorders and figurative language deficits. Dennis, Lazenby, and Lockyer (2001) examined the metaphor comprehension abilities of high-functioning children with autism and reported that their subjects

had significant deficits in this area, compared to typically developing peers. They hypothesized that these deficits were linked to difficulties with theory of mind and perspective taking.

According to the authors, children with autism “exhibit difficulty understanding metaphor, which requires awareness of mental states because the propositional form of a metaphoric utterance is a loose interpretation of the speaker’s thought” (Dennis et al., 2001, p. 6).

MacKay and Shaw (2004) also studied figurative language abilities in children with autism. A group of 19 boys with autism, ranging in age from eight to twelve years, and an age and gender-matched group of “typically-developing” peers were assessed using a researcher-designed tool, which measured understanding of six different categories of figurative language: irony, metonymy, rhetorical questions, understatement, hyperbole, and indirect requests. In all six categories, the “typically developing” group significantly outperformed the children with autism. The authors suggested that many of the communication difficulties experienced by people with autism may be related to their struggles in the realm of figurative language and recommended further research in this area.

Rundblad and Annaz (2010) also concluded that children with autism have difficulty comprehending figurative language, specifically metaphor and metonymy. Eleven children with autism, ranging from age five to eleven years, were assessed using a researcher designed story picture task which measured metaphor and metonymy comprehension. Seventeen age-matched peers without autism were assessed with the same task. The authors found that the group with autism scored significantly lower on the assessment than did the typically developing group. Moreover, all of the subjects with autism demonstrated a significant discrepancy between their ability to comprehend metaphors, as measured on the test, and their chronological and mental ages. Rundblad and Annaz claimed that children with autism have severe difficulties with

figurative language, especially metaphor, and stated that more research needs to be conducted in this area.

Gold and Faust (2010) examined the metaphorical abilities and neurological functioning of a group of subjects who were identified as having Asperger's Syndrome but would now be classified as having high functioning autism (since Asperger's Syndrome is no longer recognized by the *DSM*). The authors explained the neurological basis of metaphor comprehension, revealing that the right hemisphere is responsible for the interpretation of figurative language such as metaphors (Gold & Faust, 2010). The results of this study appeared to confirm the authors' hypothesis that right hemisphere functioning is less efficient in adults with Asperger's Syndrome (high-functioning autism) which may account for their considerable difficulties with figurative language forms such as metaphor. This study represents the first focused attempt to explain the neurological basis for the figurative language deficits common to people with autism.

Non-literal language can also be problematic for second language learners and children from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. While some researchers have advocated that educators should strive to avoid using figurative language with struggling learners, (Blue, 1981, p. 121), others have questioned the feasibility and wisdom of avoiding all figurative expressions, pointing out that " certain discourse functions are better accomplished using figurative utterances, rather than literal ones" (MacKay & Shaw, 2004, p. 14).

Despite the large and growing body of research suggesting that figurative language skills can be problematic for learners with disabilities and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, I am convinced that more research is needed concerning the underlying reasons for these disparities. Based on my own school-based experience, it appears possible that

the observed deficits may stem from a lack of educational opportunities and/or from biased assessment methods. Educators and researchers must avoid making assumptions about the innate figurative language learning capacities of these diverse learners.

### **Interventions for Figurative Language**

Given the prevalence and usefulness of figurative language, one might assume that instruction in this area would be a high priority, yet very few studies have examined pedagogical approaches to teaching figurative language. Helen Ezell (1997) observed that "little is known about figurative language intervention and the extent to which it is currently receiving attention from various educators" (p. 40). Even less, she noted, was known about "the extent to which educators and speech-language pathologists are addressing these skills for children with disabilities" (Ezell, 1997, p. 40). Consequently, she conducted a nationwide survey of 826 elementary school teachers and speech/language pathologists, which revealed that the majority of them provided instruction in figurative language, but that there was little consistency in the variety or frequency of instruction provided to students. Methods used ranged from "Whole Language", literature-based activities to discrete trial to board games. Discouragingly, nearly 49% of the respondents reported that they depend upon pre-published worksheets to provide figurative language instruction in their classrooms (Ezell, 1997, pp. 42-45).

Most of the studies devoted to figurative language instruction have been remedial in focus and have involved a very small number of subjects. Lundblom and Woods (2012) investigated classwide peer tutoring (CWPT) as a remedial intervention for figurative language. Their subjects were four female seventh-graders girls who were selected for the study due to their poor performance on standardized language tests. The four subjects each participated in three sessions of classwide peer tutoring, focusing on the interpretation of figurative language as

presented in the context of a short narrative. Comparison of pre and post-test language scores indicated that all four subjects had made gains in their comparison of figurative language.

Ezell and Goldstein (1992) focused on figurative language interventions for middle-school students with IEPs. They examined the effect of direct instruction on the figurative language comprehension of children diagnosed with cognitive impairments, by providing direct instruction training to teach the meanings of 12 idiomatic expressions (eg. "hit the sack") to a group of four children with cognitive impairments. As a result of their pre-test/ post-test study, which suggested that all the subjects retained their knowledge of the idioms and were able to interpret the idioms in new contexts, the researchers concluded that direct instruction may be an effective means for improving the figurative language comprehension of children with cognitive delays (Ezell & Goldstein, 1992, p. 309). However, their study had several notable limitations, including a very small sample size, lack of randomization in sample selection, and the absence of a control group.

Persicke, Tarbox, Ranick, and St. Clair (2012) observed that students with autism frequently exhibit significant difficulties with figurative language, but that few studies have investigated possible treatments for these deficits. Consequently, the researchers used multiple exemplar training to teach metaphorical language to children with autism. Three children with autism, ranging in age from five to seven years, were administered a researcher-designed pretest to assess their comprehension of metaphorical statements. The subjects then received daily half-hour sessions of multiple exemplar training for a duration of one month. At the end of the treatment, all three children demonstrated impressive gains in their comprehension of both trained and untrained (novel) metaphors, as evaluated by a researcher-designed post-test. According to the authors, these results suggested that autism-related deficits in non-literal and



figurative language may be amenable to behavioral treatment, although the small sample size and quasi-experimental design limited the generalizability of these findings.

Lopata et al. (2017) conducted a much larger study to investigate a computer-based treatment approach for remediating figurative language deficits in children with autism. In their study, 44 children diagnosed with ASD, ranging in age from seven to eleven years, were treated with an intensive, eighteen-week, computerized outpatient psychosocial therapy program called MAXout, which targeted non-literal language skills, among other communication and social skills. Post-treatment assessment revealed significant gains in all targeted areas and “significantly better skills in figurative language... compared to baseline” (Lopata et al., 2017, p. 114). This study used a much larger sample than the previous two, but suffered from some of the same methodological limitations (such as the lack of a control group).

One instructional approach that seems especially promising for teaching figurative language is creative writing instruction. Arts integration, involving the use of such expressive mediums as painting, sculpture, dance, drama, and creative writing, has recently been gaining traction as a way to teach a wide range of concepts and increase student engagement across various disciplines (Bricker et al., 2015).

When Bruning and Horn (2010) identified a number of key considerations for increasing student motivation to write, one of these considerations was the use of “authentic” writing tasks: writing tasks which students view as “meaningful, purposeful and allowing them to express their own voice” (p. 27). Unlike academic writing tasks, which promote the use of a formalized, impersonal, often disembodied voice, creative writing tasks encourage students to develop their own unique, highly personal voice. In creative writing, use of the vernacular, including slang words, dialectal variations, and diverse grammatical forms is not only permitted but celebrated,

making this form of writing much more accessible to learners from diverse linguistic, cultural and/or socio-economic backgrounds. Whereas academic writing does not generally tolerate idiosyncracies of language or uniqueness of voice, these individual differences are embraced within the realm of fiction and poetry-writing, which gives these creative genres the potential to motivate even the most reluctant writers. According to Bruning and Horn (2010), young writers' "discoveries of their own voice and their growing ability to express it" are key factors influencing their intrinsic motivation to write (p. 30).

Creative writing and other arts-integration activities are also notable for their capacity to engage a wide diversity of learners. Arts-based activities like creative writing tend to be highly flexible and to cater to individual student interests, which aligns with UDL checkpoint 7.1, "optimize individual choice and autonomy" (CAST, 2018). Moreover, such activities are usually interactive and may incorporate multiple modalities (Vardell & Wong, 2014). These traits align well with the principles and philosophy of inclusive education.

UDL checkpoint 7.3 states that educators should "optimize relevance, value, and authenticity" (CAST, 2018). Creative writing tasks are particularly well-suited for this purpose. Many learners struggle with academic writing tasks which they perceive as lacking in value or in relevance to their own lives. Creative writing genres such as poetry and fiction allow much more freedom for students to write about topics that matter to them on a personal level. During creative writing activities, students are not only allowed but are actively encouraged to draw upon their lived, personal experiences and unique worldview, and they are given license to express these aspects of their individuality in a wide range of forms and styles.

In her book, *For the Love of Language: Poetry for Every Learner* (1994), literacy educator Nancy Lee Cecil explained why poetry writing is such an effective way to engage and captivate young learners:

All children are natural poets: poetry is a universal language that can offer children a viable outlet for feelings they long to express.... Poetry allows children to speak and write freely in their own personal language rather than the more formal language of other forms of discourse, with all of their rigid conventions.... Poetry writing becomes not a laborious task of constructing a composition about an unknown topic but an enjoyable way to play with language in response to personal thoughts, feelings, and observations. John Dewey maintained that all learning must emanate from the interest of the learner; poetry, correctly introduced, truly capitalizes on the learner's own interests, experiences, and ideas (p. 2).

Echoing Cecil's sentiments, Bruning and Horn (2010) lamented the fact that so many classrooms present writing as an impersonal, dispassionate activity in which "only the academic voice is valued" and suggested the need for more inclusive literacy-oriented classrooms in which "a variety of expressive forms are honored" (p. 29).

Through my own experiences working with school-aged children, I have found that creative writing instruction is unparalleled in terms of the expressive freedom it allows and the extent to which it values and honors the prior knowledge and diverse lived experiences of students. As Montana poet Richard Hugo once famously stated, "a creative writing class may be one of the last places you can go where your life still matters" (Hugo, 1979, p. 37). This congruence with the UDL framework and the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching makes creative writing and other types of arts integration programs highly suitable as a means of

educating children with diverse abilities, as well as those from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bricker et al., 2015).

Arts integration programs focusing on creative writing (especially poetry) appear to be an ideal opportunity for teaching figurative language skills. As Vardell and Wong (2014) pointed out, poetry relies heavily on the use of similes, metaphors and other types of non-literal language. However, only a handful of studies have examined the relationship between poetry and figurative language proficiency.

In her 1984 doctoral dissertation, Diane Dixon compared the effects of poetry-focused instruction versus standard language arts programming on the prose writing of fourth graders. She found that the fourth graders who received the poetry instruction used more figurative language in their prose compositions than their peers who received the regular ELA instruction and concluded that “a planned instructional program using poetry may improve the quality of figurative language used by children” (p. 68).

In 1985, Ortony, Turner, and Larson-Shapiro conducted a large-scale investigation of creative writing instruction as an intervention for figurative language. In their quantitative, pretest/posttest non-equivalent groups design study, Ortony et al. provided 12 weeks of classroom-based poetry writing instruction to a total of 319 African-American and Hispanic elementary school children in Harlem and then compared their pretest and posttest scores on a researcher-designed measure of metaphor comprehension. Scores were also compared to those of a control group which had received no poetry writing instruction. The researchers concluded that “children who received creative instruction that emphasized the use of figurative language improved more in the comprehension of such language than the children who did not receive such instruction” (Ortony et al., p. 32). However, the authors acknowledged that the

generalizability of their findings was limited by their quasi-experimental design, since the classroom-based nature of the study made it impractical to randomize the assignment of subjects to groups.

More recently, Roy Corden (2007) conducted a multi-classroom study in which elementary school children were taught to use literary devices such as metaphors, personification, and alliteration via creative writing workshops featuring the use of mentor texts. Corden's subjects demonstrated significant gains in their use of figurative language and other literary devices, as measured by a comparative analysis of their written compositions before and after the intervention. Corden asserted that the scaffolded instructional approach used in his creative writing workshops was the key to the subjects' progress, stating that "the combination of explicit teaching, opportunities for sustained independent writing, and teacher support during composition enabled children to find and express their aesthetic voices" (p. 285).

Although the research on creative writing as a means of teaching figurative language is sparse, the positive results of these few studies (Dixon, 1984; Ortony et al., 1985; Corden, 2007) suggest that the topic is worthy of further exploration. Sadly, those students who have been classified by researchers as being likely to struggle with figurative language (multilingual learners, students with autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, reading disabilities, and cognitive delays) are routinely excused from creative writing activities in the general education classroom, due to the erroneous belief that these less structured expressive writing tasks are too difficult for students with literacy-related challenges (Cecil, 1994). I agree with Nancy Lee Cecil's assertion that "poetry must be made accessible to *all* children --regardless of primary language and ability level", yet, as she noted, "unfortunately, this is often not the case" (p. 2).

Clearly, more research into the benefits of creative writing activities for all learners, including diverse learners, is sorely needed.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the considerable body of research about the prevalence of figurative language within classrooms and its importance across disciplinary areas as a foundational literacy skill, there is still a paucity of information about how to teach this important form of language, especially within inclusive classroom settings. Creative writing instruction (especially poetry) appears to be a natural vehicle for developing figurative language and its congruence with UDL principles makes it particularly suitable for use within diverse, inclusive classrooms. However, only a few studies, to date, have examined the efficacy of creative writing as a vehicle for figurative language instruction.

Because it allows much greater student autonomy, expressive freedom, and authenticity than most academic writing tasks, creative writing holds tremendous motivational potential for students, including those with diverse learning needs. Thus, the time is right to conduct further research into inclusive, classroom-based creative writing instruction as an intervention for figurative language.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Demographics

The subjects for this quasi-experimental, quantitative research study consisted of fourth grade students enrolled at two elementary schools in Northwest Montana. Initially, the treatment group consisted of 36 students distributed across 2 fourth grade classrooms at the school I have dubbed Elementary School A, while the comparison group included 42 students enrolled in two separate fourth grade classrooms at Elementary School B. Over the course of the study, several students from each group had to be excluded from the results due to missing the posttest (moving, illness, etc.). The final number of participants in the treatment group was 30 ( $n = 30$ ), while the final number of participants in the comparison group was 37 ( $n = 37$ ).

Because all of the subjects attended inclusive classrooms within public schools, the research subjects included monolingual children from Caucasian families alongside children with a range of diagnosed disabilities as well as multilingual children, and those from an array of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. I selected the two schools used within this study because I had already established a rapport with the fourth-grade teachers at both schools through my work with the Missoula Writing Collaborative, a local non-profit which places published writers in public school classrooms. Because of this prior history, I was able to gain the cooperation of the respective teachers and school principals in order to proceed with this classroom-based research project.

I decided to use fourth grade classrooms for this study because Montana's ELA standards address figurative language skills beginning in the third grade; hence, teachers in upper elementary grades are usually eager to target this area with their students. Although randomized

selection of subjects would have been optimal, the classroom-based nature of the study meant that randomization was not feasible.

I selected the two elementary schools used in my research because these particular schools offered more diversity of culture, race, language, ability, and socio-economic status than most elementary schools in Northwest Montana. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2022) Elementary School A is a designated Title 1 school with a total enrollment of 289 students (grades K through 5). At the time of the study, 189 of enrolled students were free lunch eligible. In terms of race/ethnicity: 36 of the enrolled students were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 15 were Black, 18 were Hispanic, two were Asian, three were multiracial, and 213 were white. The gender distribution was approximately equal, with 147 male students and 142 female students (NCES, 2022).

I selected Elementary School B as an appropriate site for the comparison group because its demographics were quite similar to School A's in terms of geographic location, Title 1 designation, socio-economic status, and racial diversity. According to the NCES (2022), Elementary School B is a designated Title I school with a total enrollment of 404 students (grades K through 5). At the time of the study, 243 of the enrolled students were free lunch eligible. The racial/ethnic distribution was as follows, 47 of the enrolled students were American Indian or Alaskan Native, four students were Asian, 11 were Black, 23 were Hispanic, two were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders, seven were multiracial and the remaining 310 were white. The gender distribution skewed slightly male, with 223 male students and 181 female students enrolled at the time of the study (NCES, 2022).

Due to confidentiality laws, including HIPAA and FERPA, I was not privy to data concerning individual student abilities, diagnoses, and special education eligibility. However, I



was informed that a total of nine students within my treatment group had Individualized Education Plans [IEP]s, while an additional 5 had 504 plans. Within the comparison group, seven had IEPs and six had 504 plans. The identities of these students who were enrolled in special education were not disclosed to me, of course, but the disabilities represented within those classrooms included: autism spectrum disorders, cognitive impairments, fetal alcohol syndrome, learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, attention deficit disorder, hearing impairment, and emotional/behavioral disorders. Per teacher report and my own observation, both the treatment group and the comparison group contained a number of multilingual learners (four within the comparison group and three within the treatment group). Of these multilingual learners, the majority were from recently resettled refugee families.

The diversity of the student populations at the selected elementary schools was an important factor for my study, since I was keenly interested in the potential of creative writing instruction to foster figurative language growth in an inclusive, culturally responsive fashion that adheres to the principles of Universal Design for Learning.

### **Instrumentation**

For the purpose of this study, the construct of figurative language knowledge was operationally defined as the score (expressed as a percentage) which students achieved on a brief, researcher-designed measure of metaphor and simile comprehension and production, referred to hereafter as the Figurative Language Proficiency tool (FLaP). The FLaP is attached in Appendix C.

Following IRB approval but prior to the intervention phase of the study, all of the subjects in both groups were administered the brief, researcher-designed figurative language

assessment, the FLaP, focusing on the recognition and production of similes and metaphors (see Appendix C).

I individually tested each participant with the FLaP. Every question was read aloud to the students as well as being presented visually, to ensure that literacy and/or attentional challenges did not unduly impact their scores. Similarly, students responded orally to the questions, rather than in writing, to ensure that students with disabilities, including fine motor and literacy challenges were able to participate on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers. In keeping with the repeated measures design of this study, I assessed each of the participants individually a second time, using the same instrument, at the end of the six week treatment phase.

I designed my own brief figurative language assessment tool, the FLaP, due to a lack of appropriate published assessments for measuring the variable of interest. Although there was a commercially available test of figurative language called the *Figurative Language Interpretation Test (FLIT)* published by Palmer (1991), the *FLIT* is based on very outdated norms and is no longer in print. Furthermore, the *FLIT* was normed for older children and adolescents, making it unsuitable for use with the fourth-grade participants of this study. As previously mentioned, the *CELF-5 Metalinguistic Profile* (Wiig & Secord, 2014) is reasonably current and contains a subtest devoted to figurative language, but this subtest is focused exclusively on the comprehension of idioms. Consequently, I deemed the *CELF-5* subtest to be unsuitable for this study on the grounds that it was too biased against culturally and linguistically diverse subjects.

Knowledge of idioms is highly culture-bound (Qualls et al., 2003), meaning that any assessment of idiomatic comprehension is bound to suffer from significant cultural bias. By contrast, other forms of figurative language, such as similes, metaphors, and hyperboles, can be completely novel and invented by the user (and frequently are, within the context of creative

writing) making them considerably less dependent on prior cultural knowledge (Ortony et al., 1985, Knowles & Moon, 2006, Jakobson & Wickman, 2007). Consequently, I determined that a measure which encompassed more flexible forms of figurative language would be more valid than an idiomatic comprehension test for the purpose of assessing children's figurative language skills, since idiomatic knowledge tests may simply be measuring the degree to which students have assimilated into a given cultural or linguistic group (Palmer & Brooks, 2004).

Moreover, the *CELF-5* figurative language subtest assesses only the subject's comprehension of figurative forms and not their production of figurative language. Thus, the subtest measures only receptive language proficiency and provides no information about expressive language proficiency. In this study, I was curious about students' expressive language abilities as well as with their receptive language abilities. In other words, I wished to examine my subjects' ability to use, as well as to understand figurative language forms.

As several researchers have noted, children's ability to generate novel metaphors and similes is a good indicator that children have attained the cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness necessary to truly appreciate non-literal language (Palmer & Brooks, 2004, Knowles & Moon, 2006, Jakobson & Wickman, 2007). Generally speaking, literacy tasks that require the expressive use of language are indicative of more robust language learning than those which only require receptive understanding (Knowles & Moon, 2006; Jakobson & Wickman, 2007). Since I have been a practicing speech/language pathologist for 25 years and have been teaching university classes in language and literacy development for nearly a decade, I felt qualified to draw on my own knowledge of child language development in order to design a brief assessment that avoided culturally bound forms such as idioms and measured both receptive and expressive knowledge of figurative language.

For the purpose of score recording, I assigned a number to each participant in both groups. No names or other forms of personally identifiable information were linked to the FLaP scores on the pretest or posttest. The data gathered was the same type as I routinely collect and share with classroom teachers to assist them with educational progress monitoring. Consequently, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Montana deemed that a “Data Use Agreement for Limited Data Sets from Educational Records” signed by each of the respective school principals would be allow me to use the de-identified educational data for the purposes of this study (see Appendix D). The IRB exempted me from the use of individual “consent to participate” forms.

To counter the possibility of researcher bias, a trained graduate student scored all of the pretests and posttests. The graduate student did not know the names of any of the participants, as the pretests and posttests were identified only by number. She also was unaware of the grouping of the participants (treatment versus comparison) because the grouping of the subjects was not shared with her. These measures were taken in order to protect participant privacy, as well as to eliminate the prospect of examiner bias when scoring the tests.

### **Procedure**

In this pretest/ posttest nonequivalent groups design, all students in the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) and the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) were assessed with the same researcher-designed measure of figurative language proficiency (the FLaP) on two separate occasions (shown as  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  in Table 1, below). First, I assessed each student individually, using the FLaP, prior to the commencement of the poetry-writing intervention, and then I administered the same measure to all of the participants for a second time, after the treatment phase was complete.

During the treatment phase of this study, each of the participants in the treatment group

(students in the two fourth grade classrooms at Elementary School A) received one hour per week of poetry writing instruction in the general education classroom, during their regular language arts time. I delivered the creative writing instruction myself and the regular classroom teachers and paraeducators remained in the classroom to offer behavioral support and assistance to any students who needed it. The treatment consisted of whole-class and small-group poetry writing instruction within the regular education classroom (see lesson plans at the end of this section).

During the six-week treatment phase of the study, the participants in the comparison group did not receive any creative writing instruction. To ensure that the students in both groups received equal benefit from participation in the study, the students in the comparison group received the creative writing instruction after the conclusion of the study.

Following the completion of the six weekly lessons (treatment phase), I administered the same researcher-designed figurative language measure (FLaP) a second time to each of the participants in the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) and the comparison group ( $G_1$ ). I subsequently analyzed the pretest and posttest data from both groups using a series of independent samples  $t$  tests and paired samples  $t$  tests. This process is further delineated in the Data Analysis section.

This quasi-experimental study can be most accurately described as a pretest/posttest nonequivalent groups design. If  $G_1$  = the non-randomized comparison group and  $G_2$  = the non-randomized treatment group,  $T_1$  = the pretest,  $T_2$  = the posttest, and  $X$  = the six-week creative writing intervention, the design of the current study is illustrated by Figure 1, below.

**Figure 1***Pretest/Posttest Nonequivalent Groups Design*

Comparison (G <sub>1</sub> ):	T <sub>1</sub> _____ T <sub>2</sub>
Treatment (G <sub>2</sub> ):	T <sub>1</sub> _____ X _____ T <sub>2</sub>

Each of the weekly instructional sessions comprising the treatment phase followed the general lesson format articulated in the seminal teaching guide, *Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community* (Collom & Noethe, 2005). This pedagogical resource is used locally by the non-profit “Writers in the Schools” program, the Missoula Writing Collaborative, and nationwide within similar arts integration programs focused on creative writing in the public schools. The lesson format endorsed by Collom and Noethe (2005) adheres to the “Gradual Release of Responsibility” or “Modeled-Guided-Independent” framework, which is a scaffolded, research-backed approach to instruction in writing and other literacy-related skills (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

The Gradual Release of Responsibility or Modeled-Guided-Independent approach (sometimes described as the “I Do, You Do, We Do” model) begins with a brief focus lesson to introduce the instructional target. It then progresses to the review of a mentor text showcasing that target (the “I Do” or modeling stage), followed by guided, collaborative writing (“We Do”), and culminating in the “You Do” stage of the lesson, which consists of partner writing and/or independent student writing (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Frey & Fisher, 2006). Within the “Poetry Everywhere” pedagogical framework (Collom & Noethe, 2005), students are also given the opportunity to share their work aloud with their classmates and to receive feedback from their peers.

Because I was interested in the use of creative writing within diverse, inclusive classroom settings, I strove to incorporate key elements of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) within each of my poetry-writing lessons, as delineated in the next section.

Below is a general description of each component of the creative writing lessons, followed by a brief explanation of how each component aligns with evidence-based practices for writing instruction and with UDL framework.

### ***Focus Lesson/ Teacher Model***

Each lesson within the treatment phase of the study began with an introduction of the targeted skill (eg. metaphor) and a review of the previously targeted skill. This was followed by the presentation of a literary model (also called a “mentor text”) in the form of a poem presented to the class. The use of mentor texts, or “written pieces that serve as an example of good writing for student writers” is an evidence-based practice for writing instruction (Thompson & Reed, 2019).

For two out of the six lessons (“My Pet Monster” and “I Am/ I Am Not”) the mentor text which showcased the figurative language target was a poem written by an elementary school student. My rationale for the selection of these child-written poems was that they would help to foster student motivation by demonstrating to the learners that the work of young writers like themselves is worthy of attention and celebration. I also hoped that the inclusion of child-authored mentor texts would encourage the learners to view themselves as part of the community of writers.

For the remaining four lessons (“Color Poem”, “Delight Song”, “What is Life?” and “Animal Kingdom”) the mentor text was a published poem written by an adult. Consistent with my aim of culturally responsive teaching, all of these adult-written texts were by diverse authors:

two were by indigenous poets (in solidarity with Montana's *Indian Education for All* legislation), one was by a LatinX poet, and the fourth was a woman poet. According to Collum and Noethe (2005), the promotion of greater diversity and inclusion should be a major aim of any arts integration program. I deemed it to be of critical importance within this study, as I was working with children who were diverse across multiple dimensions.

Teacher modeling is an evidence-based practice for writing instruction: “teachers who demonstrate enthusiasm for writing and regularly display the writing skills, strategies, and processes they wish students to emulate help students internalize these values and habits” (Troia, 2014, p. 34). In order to align with best practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), I was careful to present the mentor texts within my focus lessons through more than one modality. The mentor texts were represented not only via print but also through audio input and visual supports in the form of pictures, symbols, and/or videos. UDL checkpoint 2.5 states that educators should “illustrate through multiple media” (CAST, 2018).

### ***Collaborative Writing***

During this “We Do” part of the lesson, the students and I composed a poem collaboratively, based on the model provided via the mentor text. I asked questions and offered prompts to encourage individual students to contribute lines to the poem, while guiding the class to focus on the figurative language target (eg. “oh, we could use a simile there. Tasha said the sky is grey. How could we make a simile about something grey? We could say “grey as a ... yes, Brian, can you help us finish this simile?”) This strategic use of guided inquiry is an essential component of the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). As Frey and Fisher (2006) have explained, “During guided instruction, teachers prompt,



question, facilitate, or lead students through tasks that increase their understanding of the content” (p. 109).

Throughout the collaborative learning/ guided instruction portion of the lesson, I continually encouraged the students to access their own lived experiences, interests and background knowledge. I made sure that every student contribution was honored and respected, regardless of whether it conformed to traditional ideas about poetry or “literary” writing.

This honoring of cultural and personal differences is not only essential to culturally responsive teaching, it is also key to fostering motivation in young writers. According to Troia (2014), “students must have opportunities to choose the topics about which they write, to whom they write, and to what ends, as long as writing assignments present reasonable levels of challenge that help students grow as writers. Interesting tasks that connect with students’ background experiences yet encourage further exploration will likely motivate students to expand their writing abilities” (pp. 34-35).

Cultivating student autonomy is also important with regards to inclusion and accessibility. Empowering students to make choices and to exert control over their own work is one of the best practices of inclusive education. Checkpoint 7.1 within the UDL framework states: “optimize individual choice and autonomy” (CAST, 2018).

In keeping with the UDL guideline regarding engagement, I made sure that students with literacy and/or language barriers heard all of the examples read out loud, in addition to seeing them presented in printed form during the collaborative writing stage of the lesson. I offered the students multiple opportunities to contribute to the group poem through spoken language, cut and paste pictures, or drawings, as well as through written language. Additionally, I provided students who needed additional language, literacy, or behavioral support with extra scaffolding

to ensure that they could participate fully in the collaborative writing activity. For example, I frequently provided extra support in the form of choices (“Hmm... I like your choice of the adjective, “gray”, Manuel. Let’s make a simile about that. Should we say it’s gray as a rock or gray as a foggy day?”).

I also scaffolded the lessons by providing visual supports for students with significant expressive communication challenges or language differences (eg. “point to the picture you want to use in our poem”). In a few cases, students participated in the collaborative writing activity using a whiteboard to draw their responses or by using an augmentative communication (AAC) device to verbalize their ideas. In summary, I encouraged students with learning/ communication differences or barriers to use a range of modalities to contribute to the collaborative writing activity. This aligned with UDL checkpoint 5.3: “build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance” (CAST, 2018).

### ***Partner Writing***

Troia (2014) advocated for allowing students “to frequently work with their peers to plan, draft, revise, and/or edit compositions”, stating that this is essential to motivating students to write and creating a positive writing environment for young writers (p. 32). Similarly, Bruning and Horn (2000) noted that “writing with peers” is one research-backed approach to creating a positive and supportive classroom writing environment (p. 28). UDL checkpoint 8.3 states that teachers should “foster collaboration and community” within classrooms (CAST, 2018). For all of the above reasons, I chose to incorporate partner writing within my creative writing lessons, whenever it was feasible. Even when partner writing was not part of the lesson plan, due to time constraints, it was available as a modification for students who needed to write with a partner, rather than independently. Partner writing was the preferred mode of composition for a few

students with extreme anxiety or learning barriers, as well as some multilingual learners who were still gaining proficiency with English and I always allowed this as an option for participating in any phase of the writing lessons.

Although their use was optional, I made graphic organizers and templates available to all students to provide additional support for those who needed it. Students with language or literacy barriers had the option to dictate their composition to a peer or to an adult (myself, their classroom teacher, a partner, or a paraeducator) or to use “speech to text” technology on a Chromebook. Students with severe obstacles to communication used picture exchange systems or augmentative communication devices to compose their poems, given some assistance from staff.

The constant and consistent availability of these varied, multi-level supports for writing was consistent with UDL checkpoints stating that educators should provide options for communication and expression by allowing students to use “multiple tools for construction and composition”, while providing “graduated levels of support for practice and performance” (CAST, 2018).

### ***Independent Writing***

I encouraged the students to write independently during this part of the lesson and most of them did. However, I ensured that the same scaffolded supports that were available during partner writing were also available to them during the independent writing activity. As mentioned above, students in need of extra scaffolding/ support were always allowed to choose partner writing instead of independent writing, regardless of what the rest of the class was doing.

I permitted deviations from the modeled form in all lessons and again, students were encouraged to incorporate their personal interests and experiences into their compositions.

According to Bruning and Horn (2000) motivation to write increases when writing tasks are viewed as meaningful and authentic and student engagement thrives when “students are encouraged to write about topics of personal interest” and when they are “given a choice of writing topics” (p. 28). Consequently, I prioritized individual expression over strict adherence to the form presented in the mentor texts.

Since the focus of these lessons was on the use of figurative language and not on the mechanical aspects of writing (spelling, grammar, punctuation) I instructed the students to use “best guess” spelling and not to worry about penmanship, formatting, or mechanics. By frequently reminding students that the “rough draft” stage of the writing process was about sharing ideas, expressing themselves, and playing with words, and not about producing a perfect product, I aimed to reduce students’ anxiety and lower their resistance to the writing task.

Another advantage of this process-oriented approach, as outlined in the seminal work, *Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community* (Collom & Noethe, 2005) was that it freed the students to pay more attention to the linguistic and metalinguistic features of their writing. Thus, I frequently reminded the students that writing is a process and that mistakes are a normal and expected aspect of the composition stage. Through this focus on process above product, I hoped to stimulate a growth mindset in the learners and to guide them to view writing as an enjoyable and accessible activity, rather than an intimidating and stressful one (Collom & Noethe, 2005).

### ***Sharing of Work***

This component of the lesson was optional, but it gave students a chance to receive recognition, accolades, and feedback for their work. I always offered a choice: students were free to share poems they had written individually or with a partner, or they could choose not to share

at all. Different modes of sharing were offered, such as partner sharing, gallery walks, and whole group sharing. Students with literacy or communication challenges could choose to have their poems read aloud to the class by a friend or adult, if they didn't wish to read their own work but still wanted to receive feedback. Only positive comments were allowed, to ensure that the students' motivation to write and share their work remained high and that the classroom climate remained supportive. I coached the students on pro-social behaviors such as attentive listening skills, courteous remarks, and polite applause prior to the sharing portion of the lesson and the classroom teacher and I used positive behavior supports to help students adhere to these expectations. We prompted students to make comments and offer specific feedback that helped their classmates know what they were doing right (eg. "I liked your vivid verb in that last line"). We also reminded them to focus on the figurative language target of that lesson (eg. "I liked your metaphor about the cafeteria being a jungle"). I continually modeled examples of positive, constructive, and specific feedback.

### ***Feedback***

I collected the students' poems after each lesson and kept them within individual student folders. In addition to the oral feedback offered during each lesson, I provided brief, individualized written feedback on each of their poems, primarily focused on their usage of the targeted figurative language skills as well as their proficiency with other aspects of poetic writing (eg. imagery, rhythm, word choice, repetition, etc.).

### **Instructional Sequence**

Below is the sequence of lessons and a description of the targeted poetic forms and figurative language within each lesson:

***Lesson One***

My Pet Monster (target: similes)

Mentor text by Junie, 4<sup>th</sup> grader:

*My Pet Monster*

*My pet monster is named Bonzai.*

*Her wings are green and prickly like a Bonzai tree,*

*She has fur as blue as the deepest part of the Pacific ocean,*

*Her teeth are as sharp as a velociraptor!*

*She has black eyes like sparkling jewels in a secret cave,*

*Her horns are striped like a candy cane.*

***Lesson One Summary***

Students wrote poems about their imaginary “pet monsters” using similes to describe their physical characteristics and/ or special powers. This first occurred as a collaborative group poem, progressing to small group or partner compositions, and finally to independent writing.

The lesson culminated with optional sharing and feedback.

***Lesson Two***

Color Poem (target: similes)

Mentor text: Colors by Kira Willey (note: this text is actually a song, rather than a poem, so the mentor text was presented in the form of a music video with captions).

*Colors (Willey, 2006)*

*I am green today,*

*I chirp with joy like a cricket song,*

*I am gray today,*

*Gloomy and down like a morning fog,*

*I am orange today,*

*Loud and messy, like fingerpaint on a wall,*

*I am red today,*

*Hopping mad like a playground ball,*

*I am black today,*

*Strong and tall, a great big bear,*

*I'm a rainbow today,*

*All the colors of the world,*

*I'm a rainbow today,*

*All the colors of the world,*

*I'm a rainbow today,*

*All the colors of the world are in me.*

*I am yellow today,*

*I shine my light out like the sun,*

*I am white today,*

*Soft and quiet, like new snow,*

*I am blue today,*

*Calm as glass and cool like the sea.*

*I'm a rainbow today,*

*All the colors of the world are in me.*

***Lesson Two Summary***

Students composed poems in which they expressed emotions by using similes to describe their internal states in terms of color. They practiced this first as a collaborative group poem, progressing to small group or partner compositions, and finally to independent writing. The lesson culminated with optional sharing and feedback.

***Lesson Three***

I Am, I Am Not (target: similes)

Mentor text by Wyatt, 4<sup>th</sup> grader

*I Am, I Am Not*

*I am as free as a hawk drifting on the breeze*

*I am as stealthy as a red fox trying to catch a rodent.*

*I am NOT lazy like a hibernating bear.*

*I am powerful like a herd of wild, stampeding horses!*

*I am playful as a golden retriever chasing a tennis ball.*

***Lesson Three Summary***

Students used similes to describe various aspects of their own personalities. I encouraged the children to think about their own strengths and unique traits and then to link these strengths and traits to animals or other aspects of the natural world, using strong verbs and sensory details. We practiced this form aloud during the collaborative group poem, then they progressed to independent writing. The lesson culminated with optional sharing and feedback.

***Lesson Four***

Delight Songs (target: metaphors)



Mentor text by N. Scott Momaday, former U.S. poet laureate, member of Kiowa and Cherokee nations.

*The Delight Song of Tsaio-talee* (Momaday, 1991)

*I am a feather on the bright sky*

*I am the blue horse that runs*

*in the plain*

*I am the fish that rolls, shining,*

*in the water*

*I am the shadow*

*that follows a child*

*I am the evening light,*

*the luster of meadows*

*I am an eagle*

*playing with the wind*

*I am a cluster of*

*bright beads*

*I am the farthest star*

*I am the cold*

*of dawn*

*I am the roaring*

*of the rain*

*I am the glitter*

*on the crust of the snow*

*I am the long track of the moon*

*in a lake*

*I am a flame of four colors*

*I am a deer standing away*

*in the dusk*

*I am a field of sumac*

*and the pomme blanche*

*I am an angle of geese*

*in the winter sky*

*I am the hunger of*

*a young wolf*

*I am the whole dream of*

*these things*

*You see,*

*I am alive, I am alive*

*I stand in good relation*

*to the earth*

*I stand in good relation*

*to the gods*

*I stand in good relation*

*to all that is beautiful*

*I stand in good relation to*

*the daughter of Tsen-tainte*

*You see,*

*I am alive, I am alive*

### ***Lesson Four Summary***

Students practiced the skill of metaphor generation by composing metaphors in which they compared themselves to aspects of the natural world. Students who initially struggled with this task were provided with extra scaffolding: I encouraged them to first compose similes about themselves (a more familiar task) and then to convert these similes to metaphors by removing the word “like” or “as”. During the instructional stage of the lesson, I reminded the learners that a metaphor is not a statement of literal fact (eg. “I am a fourth grade student who likes Legos” is not an example of figurative language).

Through extensive modeling in the “I Do” and “We Do” segments of the lesson, students learned to construct metaphors based on concrete, sensory imagery (ie. things they could perceive with their five senses). They practiced the skill of novel metaphor generation together during the collaborative group poem, progressing to small group or partner compositions, and finally to independent writing. As always, the lesson culminated with optional sharing and feedback.

### ***Lesson Five***

What is Life? (target: metaphors)

Mentor text by Crowfoot, Blackfoot chief (1830-1890)

*What is Life?(Crowfoot, 1890)*

*It is the flash of a firefly*

*at night,*

*It is the breath of a buffalo  
in the wintertime,  
It is the little shadow that runs  
across the grass and disappears  
into the sunset*

### ***Lesson Five Summary***

Students wrote short poems based on Crowfoot's mentor text in which they described an abstract noun (eg. life, friendship, love, courage, etc.) through the use of metaphors. We read Crowfoot's brief mentor text (selected partly for its relevance to Montana's *Indian Education for All (IEFA)* law), and then the children were coached to construct metaphors in the form of concrete, multisensory images which served to illustrate the abstract noun chosen as the poem's theme. Students practiced metaphor production aloud during the collaborative group poem before progressing to independent writing. The lesson ended with optional sharing and feedback.

### ***Lesson Six***

Animal Kingdom (target: metaphors)

Mentor text: excerpted from "A Desert Bestiary Sonnet" by Alberto Rios (2015)

*A Desert Bestiary Sonnet* (Rios, 2015)

*Hummingbirds are musical notes*

*escaped from a flute.*

*Tarantulas are awkward left hands*

*in search of a piano....*

*Ants are grains of sand with*

*a purpose.*

*Rich snakes flaunt their jewels,  
but we do not love them.  
Skunks are photographs  
of the Milky Way....  
Spiders are tattoos in search  
of your skin.  
Beetles are armored vehicles  
in the war raging beneath us.  
Scorpions are lobsters  
sent west by the witness protection program....  
Coyotes baying at midnight are  
broken hearts with teeth....*

### ***Lesson Six Summary***

Students invented novel metaphors to describe key characteristics of animals, birds, and/or insects. They practiced the skill of metaphor construction as a whole group during the collaborative poem before progressing to independent writing of animal metaphor poems. I set aside the last part of the lesson for optional sharing and feedback.

### **Data Analysis**

The first research question investigated the data prior to the intervention and compared the mean scores on the pretest for the two groups. This purpose of this statistical comparison was to establish the similarity of the two groups, thus meeting the assumption for parametric testing and “reducing the chance that selection is a plausible threat to internal reliability” (McMillan, 2009, p. 232). I used an independent samples (between subjects) *t* test for the first hypothesis,

which ascertained whether or not there was a statistically significant difference between the mean pretest FLaP scores of the treatment group versus those of the comparison group.

The pretest- posttest non-equivalent groups research design of the current study did not involve randomized sampling of participants. Without the pretest analysis, the lack of random selection would have constituted a significant threat to internal validity. Randomization was not feasible due to the classroom-based nature of the study, but it was nonetheless important to select participants within the two groups that were similar in terms of the dependent variable (proficiency with figurative language).

Cohen, Marion, and Morrison (2007) noted that the use of an independent samples *t* test to assess the relative similarity of groups is often advisable within quasi-experimental research designs involving ratio or interval data. This between-subjects analysis is performed to compensate for the lack of random subject selection (p. 137). Similarly, Vogt (2007) explains that in quasi-experimental designs researchers often perform a statistical comparison of pretest scores in order to match groups according to one or more characteristics relevant to the dependent variable (p. 109). Thus, I determined that a statistical comparison of mean pretest scores between the two groups via an independent samples *t* test was necessary to determine that the treatment group and comparison group demonstrated equivalent knowledge of the dependent variable (figurative knowledge) prior to the classroom-based intervention.

I used both the pretest and posttest data to investigate the second research question. For my second and third hypotheses, I compared the mean scores on the FLaP pretest and posttest for the treatment group and comparison group. Students in both groups completed the FLaP at the beginning of the study and at the end of the study, but only the treatment group received the classroom-based poetry-writing intervention during the course of the study. A paired samples

(within subjects) *t* test compared the pretest and posttest FLaP scores of students within each of the two groups: the treatment group and comparison group. The use of a paired samples *t* test requires one categorical independent variable and one continuous dependent variable (Pallant, 2007, p. 237). In the current study, the categorical independent variable was time (Time 1 = pretest, Time 2 = posttest). The continuous dependent variable was figurative language proficiency as measured by the FLaP at two different points in time (Pallant, p. 237).

I conducted a paired samples (within subjects) *t* test to determine whether or not there was a statistically significant difference in the FLaP scores of students in the treatment group before they received six weeks of poetry-writing instruction in the classroom versus after they had received the instruction (Time 1 versus Time 2).

Another paired samples (within subjects) *t* test was conducted to ascertain whether or not there was a statistically significant difference in the FLaP scores of students who were in the comparison group at the beginning and at the conclusion of the study (Time 1 versus Time 2). The students in this group did not receive the poetry-writing intervention during the time frame of this study. Instead, the intervention was offered to them at a later date, after the conclusion of my study.

Lastly, I used an independent samples (between subjects) *t* test to investigate whether there was a statistically significant differences between the change scores of the comparison group and the change scores of the treatment group. The change scores were a new variable which I calculated by subtracting each subject's pretest score on the FLaP (Time 1) from the same subject's posttest score on the FLaP (Time 2).

My use of an independent samples *t* test depended on the assumption that the groups were approximately the same in terms of the dependent variable at the beginning of the study.

Thus, my testing of the first hypothesis had been conducted for the purpose of establishing the similarity between the comparison group and experimental group. Showing that there was no statistically significant difference between the groups on the measure of figurative language proficiency (FLaP) at the outset of the study helped to compensate for the non-random sample and allowed me to meet the requirement for parametric testing.

The results of the various statistical analyses outlined above are described in Chapter 4.

### **Threats to Validity**

According to McMillan (2009) the purpose of quasi-experimental research designs like the one used in my study is to investigate whether there is a correlational relationship between variables (p. 201). My study explored the question of whether creative writing instruction in the classroom was related to students' ability to use and understand figurative language in the form of similes and metaphors.

Instrumentation should be considered as a possible threat to the validity of this research. I had to design my own assessment measure, the FLaP, to measure students' figurative language proficiency for this study, due to the lack of up-to-date, age-appropriate, and minimally biased published instruments for measuring children's ability to understand and produce metaphors and similes. In constructing the figurative language measure for this study, I considered various facets of face validity.

According to Privatera (2017), face validity concerns the extent to which an instrument measures what it claims to measure. For example, a given test might claim to be measuring a child's knowledge of figurative language when in fact it is actually measuring some other construct, such as the child's familiarity with the dominant culture, their ability to attend to a



stimulus, or their decoding skills. With these considerations in mind, I took the following steps to maximize the face validity of the FLaP:

1) The assessment measure (the FLaP) was very short in duration (administration lasted five to ten minutes). This helped to ensure that the assessment was not measuring children's stamina or attention span instead of figurative language.

2) The FLaP was individually administered to each subject outside the confines of the regular education classroom, in a quiet, non-distracting setting. This helped to ensure that children with attentional difficulties or issues related to hearing and/or central auditory processing had the best opportunities to hear, process, focus and remain engaged throughout the task.

3) All test stimuli were presented orally as well as in print, and were accompanied by visual supports. Multi-modal presentation of stimuli is recommended in UDL checkpoint 2.5 (CAST, 2018). This helped to ensure that the test results were not affected by decoding difficulties or sensory impairments.

4) The participants responded to the FLaP questions orally, rather than in writing. This ensured that the test was measuring figurative language proficiency instead of other factors such as fine motor skills, penmanship, spelling, or willingness to write. While it is still possible that oral responses could be impacted by communication disorders, this risk was minimized by the fact that I am a certified speech/language pathologist and thus highly trained in recognizing and assessing the impacts of communication disorders. Although a few of the participants demonstrated articulation errors and differences related to accents/ dialects, none of these errors or differences were severe enough to affect the intelligibility of their responses.

5) The FLaP contained no idioms or proverbs, since these figurative forms are entirely culture-bound.

6) The simile and metaphor generation tasks allowed students to create any logical comparison they could imagine. This included similes and metaphors which were entirely novel and unfamiliar, thus freeing the participants from the confines of cultural bias and preconceived cultural expectations.

In addition to the instrumentation concerns outlined above, a number of other extraneous and confounding variables needed to be ruled out as possible limitations. Privatera (2017) identified a number of threats to the internal validity of quasiexperimental studies, including history, selection, maturation, and regression to the mean (pp. 181-88).

According to Privatera (2017), history refers to a threat to internal validity resulting from an unanticipated event or time-related condition that coincides with the treatment, thus affecting the outcome of a research study (p. 182). The researcher considered the following history-related factors as possible threats to validity: external events, time of day, and time of year.

In terms of external events, the most obvious historical threat to internal validity was the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is highly possible that the pandemic, with its widely publicized effects on children's school attendance, academic performance, and mental health may have affected the performance of the students in this study. However, since the pandemic is a worldwide external event which has been impacting all schoolchildren and their families, I did not deem it to be a significant threat to the validity of this study. The participants in both the comparison and treatment groups were attending public school classrooms in same school district during the pandemic, so the influence of this significant historical event was equivalent for both groups.

Other possible threats related to history were related to time considerations, including time of day and time of year. At the request of the classroom teachers, I delivered the creative writing lessons during the students' regular ELA times, before morning recess. Considering that students tend to be more alert in the mornings than after lunch, it is possible that the time of day had a positive influence on the students' performance. However, since ELA/ literacy blocks are typically scheduled in the mornings within public elementary schools in order to maximize students' attention and alertness, I felt that the scheduling of the lessons reflected the most naturalistic, real-world conditions. In other words, delivering the creative writing lessons at the end of the day might indeed have resulted in decreased student performance, but it also would have been less representative of what writing instruction would look like within a typical fourth grade classroom, outside of the confines of the study.

I also ruled out time of year as a threat to internal validity under the category of history. The study was conducted in April and May. While it is certainly possible that the students' performance might have been different if the study were conducted during the fall or winter, it seems unlikely that this factor was a confounding variable in the between subjects analysis. Both the comparison group and the treatment group participated in the study during the same six-week timeframe and thus, the same time of year, so time of year cannot be considered to be a contributing factor when comparing the pretest/ posttest performance of the two groups.

According to Privitera (2017) regression to the mean is a threat to internal validity in any pretest/posttest design (p. 184). Privitera has explained that subjects who initially demonstrate an unusually high or low score will tend to score closer to the mean score on subsequent testing. Given the repeated measures design of this study, it was important to address regression to the mean as a possible explanation for any change in scores between the pretest and the posttest.

The testing of the fifth hypothesis ( $H_5$ ) and the accompanying null hypothesis ( $H_{05}$ ) served to control the threat of regression to the mean. By performing a between subjects comparison of the change scores via an independent samples  $t$  test, I ascertained whether there was a significant difference between the change scores of the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) versus those of the treatment group ( $G_2$ ). If I could reject the null hypothesis ( $H_{05}$ ) as a result of this between subjects analysis, this would suggest that the change in scores between the pretest/posttest was related to the independent variable (creative writing instruction) rather than a manifestation of regression to the mean.

Likewise, I did not deem maturation to be a significant threat to internal validity. As defined by Privatera (2017) maturation within this type of research design refers to the risk that a subject's posttest performance may be attributable simply to the participants' increased age and maturity, rather than as a result of the treatment (p. 182). In my study, the treatment phase was simply too short in duration for maturation to be considered a plausible explanation for any increase in test scores between the pretest and the posttest. In the current study, the elapsed time between the pretest and the posttest was only six weeks. Hence, I concluded that maturation was not a likely explanation for the participants' posttest performance, given the highly compressed time-frame of the study.

I was unable to rule out selection as a threat to the internal validity of my study due to the lack of randomization. Owing to the classroom-based nature of this study, both of the groups were already intact and random selection was not possible. As explained in the previous section, this threat to internal validity was at least partially controlled by testing for the first hypothesis, which compared the mean pretest scores on the FLaP for both the comparison group and experimental group. This between-groups comparison of pretest scores was conducted to

ascertain whether the two groups were equivalent in terms of their knowledge of figurative language (the dependent variable) at the outset of the study.

McMillan (2009) emphasized that a researcher should determine if nonequivalent groups are sufficiently similar to conduct parametric assessment by determining whether or not the groups' scores are significantly different on the pretest (p. 232). Thus, I decided that testing the first hypothesis ( $H_1$  and  $H_{01}$ ) with an independent samples  $t$  test was necessary in order to establish that the treatment group and the control group were homogenous in terms of their knowledge of figurative language at the outset of the study. This statistical analysis of pretest scores was important in order to isolate the dependent variable, satisfy the assumptions for parametric testing, and minimize the extent to which selection threatened the internal validity of the study.

To further establish similarity between the two groups and control for selection as a threat to validity, I gathered demographic information from the two participating elementary schools regarding racial and ethnic composition, and for socio-economic status as measured by free lunch eligibility and Title 1 eligibility. This demographic information helped me to ascertain that the groups were relatively homogenous. However, despite these measures, the non-randomized selection process of this study meant that selection remained a threat to validity and the results should be interpreted with some caution. In other words, without a randomized design, I cannot claim that the intervention definitively caused the outcomes. As noted previously, non-randomized designs like the one I used in this study are not intended to establish causal relationships (Privatera, 2017, p. 278).

External validity refers to the extent to which findings from experimental research are generalizable to the real world (Privatera, 2017, p. 189). This quasi-experimental study was

limited to fourth grade students attending two elementary schools in Northwest Montana. Given the educational setting of this research and the pre-formed nature of the classroom groups, random assignment to the comparison and treatment groups was not possible. Thus the generalizability of my findings, as described in the next chapter, should be viewed as limited due to the quasi-experimental design.

### **Position of the Researcher**

I am a middle-aged, white, cisgender, married, monolingual, nondisabled mother of two who was born and raised in Canada and now lives in the United States. I hold a B.A. in History, an M.S. in Communication Disorders and Sciences, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. I have been a practicing speech/language pathologist for 25 years, working primarily in public schools and preschool programs. For the past decade, I have taught undergraduate and graduate classes in child language and literacy, among other subjects, at the University of Montana, while also teaching creative writing to school-aged children through a local Writers in the Schools program. These combined experiences have led me to develop a keen interest in children's literacy and language development, inclusion, culturally responsive teaching, children's literature, and creative writing instruction.

As a fiction writer and the author of a short story collection, I acknowledge that I have a significant bias in favor of creative writing and a strong personal belief in the value of books and reading. I strive to be mindful of these biases and ensure that they do not compromise my research. I recognize my position as a member of more than one dominant cultural group and the fact that I am living and working on the ancestral lands of the *Séliš* (Salish) and *Qlispé* (Kalispel/Pend d'Oreille) peoples. Due to my race, socio-economic status, education level, and other factors, I am able to access resources which are not available to everyone and I

may not always be aware of the obstacles and barriers faced on a daily basis by marginalized groups. In order to bring a more comprehensive and balanced view to my research, I seek to be humble and mindful of my own privilege, to actively listen, and to amplify the voices of those with a different lived experience.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research was conducted to explore the relationship between classroom-based writing instruction and the figurative language proficiency of fourth graders. Since my intervention resembled a form of classroom-based instruction commonly delivered within public school classrooms, it did not pose any discernable risk to participants. The data I collected, similarly, was the same as that which I routinely collect for educational purposes and which is used by the classroom teachers for the purpose of progress assessment. Therefore, the IRB determined that individual consent to participate was not needed, so long as the respective school principals provided their signed consent for the educational data to be used in my study. All of my data was de-identified for the purpose of the study. I kept the identifies of all participants confidential at all times by assigning numbers to my pretest and posttest protocols in lieu of names, and all data was stored in a secure location. After the conclusion of the study, all stored data will be destroyed.

### **Summary**

This study employed a pretest posttest nonequivalent groups design to investigate the impact of classroom-based creative writing instruction on fourth graders' proficiency with figurative language. I analyzed the pretest and posttest data using a series of independent samples *t* tests and paired samples *t* tests in Excel.

The next chapter will describe the data collected during this study and the results of the data analysis for the two research questions and their corresponding hypotheses.



## Chapter Four: Results

This quasi-experimental pretest/ posttest study investigated the relationship between classroom-based creative writing instruction and the figurative language abilities of fourth grade students enrolled in public school classrooms in a Northwest Montana town. Figurative language is an essential component of higher-level language and literacy development and is addressed within the Montana Common Core standards for ELA beginning in the third grade (Montana OPI, 2011).

Myriad studies have shown that this form of language is abundant within the oral discourse of classrooms and in the written materials encountered by K-12 students (Persicke et al., 2012; Lazar et al., 1989; Mackay & Shaw, 2004; Pramling, 2010; Power et al., 2001; Jakobson & Wickman, 2007; Nippold, 2001). However, despite these findings, research aimed at identifying effective methods for teaching non-literal uses of oral or written language remains surprisingly scant (Ezell, 1997; Palmer & Brooks, 2004; Pramling, 2010; Lopata et al., 2017). More research is needed to explore pedagogical approaches and identify best practices for cultivating the comprehension and production of figurative language in school-age children.

In this study, creative writing instruction focused on poetry writing was chosen as the target intervention for the following reasons:

- 1) Poetry is rich in figurative language and thus provides a wealth of opportunities for students to recognize, discuss and generate figurative language.
- 2) Creative writing lessons are intrinsically motivating for students and have the capacity to engage even reluctant writers and learners who struggle with literacy.

3) With their emphasis on self-expression based on lived experience, creative writing instruction lessons are highly congruent with the aims and principles of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017).

4) The greater degree of freedom, choice, and self-expression allowed in poetry and fiction writing, compared to academic forms of writing, makes creative writing instruction an ideal vehicle for implementing the principles of inclusion and the UDL framework (Meyer, 2014).

### **Description of the Data**

The data was collected during the spring 2022 semester. After obtaining IRB approval and signed permission from the principals of the two participating elementary schools to conduct research within their schools and to use deidentified data collected for educational purposes (see Appendices D and E), the students enrolled in four fourth-grade classrooms in a Montana town (two at Elementary School A and two at Elementary School B) were each individually tested with the Figurative Language Proficiency measure (FLaP, see Appendix C).

Following the six-week intervention phase, during which the students in the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) received weekly lessons in creative writing, all of the students in both groups were tested with the FLaP a second time. For the purposes of this study, the first administration of the FLaP was designated as Time 1 [Pretest], while the second administration was Time 2 [Posttest].

A total of 42 students in the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) completed the pretest and a total of 34 students in the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) completed the pretest. Due to student absences, moving, and other attrition factors, only 37 students in the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) completed the posttest and only 30 students in the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) completed the posttest. The participants who did not complete both the pretest and the posttest were eliminated from the study. This meant that a

total of five students in the comparison group and four in the treatment group were eliminated because the pretest/posttest nonequivalent groups design necessitated that participants complete both the pretest and posttest. Without data from both administrations of the FLaP, it would not be possible to complete the between subjects analysis needed to test the second and third hypotheses.

After the elimination of any participants who did not complete both the Time 1 and Time 2 administrations of the FLaP, the final number of participants in the comparison group was 37 ( $n=37$ ) and the final number of participants in the treatment group was 30 ( $n=30$ ).

Individual pretest and posttest scores were recorded as the percent correct which students earned on the researcher-designed measure of figurative language, the FLaP (see Appendix C). The FLaP assessment yielded raw scores in the form of simple fractions with a denominator of six. For the purpose of statistical analysis, the simple fraction scores were converted into decimals. For example, a score of 3/6 was entered into Excel as 0.50, while a score of 2/6 was entered as 0.33, etc. Descriptive statistics for these data sets were calculated in Excel for both groups on the pretest and the posttest. The group means and standard deviations yielded by each of these data sets are shown in Table 1, below.

**Table 1**

*Pretest/Posttest Means and Standard Deviations for Groups 1 and 2*

Measure	Group 1 ( $n = 37$ )		Group 2 ( $n = 30$ )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pretest	0.31	0.15	0.36	0.19
Posttest	0.30	0.17	0.66	0.21

At the end of the study, following the collection of all of the pretest and posttest data for both groups, an additional pair of data sets were created, comprising a variable called the “change score”. The change score for each subject in both groups was calculated by subtracting the participant’s pretest score on the FLaP from their posttest score on the same measure (Time 2 – Time 1). The resulting data sets were used to test the final hypothesis, as outlined in the next section.

### **Research Questions**

This purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between creative writing instruction and figurative language development among fourth graders enrolled in public school classrooms in Northwest Montana. This pretest/ posttest nonequivalent groups design study investigated whether fourth-grade students who received a short course (6 one-hour weekly sessions) of creative writing instruction in the classroom would demonstrate gains in their comprehension and use of similes and metaphors, as measured by their scores on a researcher-designed quick assessment, the FLaP. I used a series of paired sample *t* tests and independent sample *t* tests to perform within subjects and between subjects analyses of FLaP scores both before and after the classroom-based poetry-writing intervention.

As described in the first chapter, two research questions formed the basis for this study, along with four hypotheses.

#### ***Research Question One***

The first research question asked whether there was a significant difference in the figurative language proficiency of students in the treatment group versus the comparison groups prior to a six-week course of classroom-based creative writing instruction. The first hypothesis was developed to investigate Research Question 1, using the pretest data from both groups.

***Hypothesis One***

H<sub>01</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference in the pretest FLaP scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>) and the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

H<sub>1</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference in the pretest FLaP scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>) and the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

***Research Question Two***

The second research question asked whether there was a relationship between classroom-based creative writing instruction and the figurative language proficiency of fourth grade students. Three hypotheses were developed to investigate Research Question 2 using both the pretest and posttest data from both groups.

***Hypothesis Two***

H<sub>02</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

H<sub>2</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>).

***Hypothesis Three***

H<sub>03</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

H<sub>3</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

***Hypothesis Four***

H<sub>04</sub>: There will be no statistically significant difference in the change scores between the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>) and the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

H<sub>4</sub>: There will be a statistically significant difference in the change scores between the treatment group (G<sub>2</sub>) and the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>).

### **Summary of Findings**

The first research question explored the relative similarity of the two groups with respect to the dependent variable (figurative language proficiency). Because I had selected a comparison group that was similar to my treatment group in many respects, including geographic location, grade level, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, and ability status, I anticipated that their performance on the pretest measure would also be similar. Hence, I tested the first hypothesis to determine whether or not that was a statistically significant difference between the mean FLaP scores of the two groups at Time 1 [pretest].

### ***Hypothesis One***

I compared the pretest scores of the experimental group (G<sub>2</sub>) and the comparison group (G<sub>1</sub>) using an independent samples *t* test in Excel. This analysis of pretest scores, shown in Table 2, was intended to establish whether the respective groups were sufficiently similar at the outset of the study. The between subjects analysis of the pretest scores helped to demonstrate the homogeneity of variance needed in order to meet the assumption for parametric testing (McMillan, 2009, p. 232).

Additionally, the comparison of pretest scores via an independent samples *t* test helped to isolate the intervention as a contributing factor for changes in the posttest scores of the experimental group. Without a between subjects comparison of pretest scores, it would be difficult to claim that the classroom-based creative writing instruction exerted any influence on the posttest scores in this study (Vogt, 2007).

The results of my independent samples  $t$  test, shown in Table 2, indicated that the participants in the treatment group,  $G_2$  ( $n = 30$ ;  $M = 0.36$ ;  $SD=0.19$ ) did not have significantly higher pretest scores on the FLAP than the participants in the comparison group,  $G_1$  ( $n = 37$ ;  $M = 0.31$ ;  $SD=0.15$ ). For the purposes of this analysis, a  $p$  value of less than 0.05 was required to attain significance, with the mean difference set at zero for the null hypothesis. As shown in Table 7, the independent samples  $t$  test resulted in a  $p$  value greater than 0.05 and thus failed to meet the criterion for significance.

In sum, the results of my testing for the first hypothesis supported the null ( $H_{01}$ ). I found that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean pretest FLAP scores of the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) and the treatment group ( $G_2$ ). This finding suggests that the two groups were equivalent at the beginning of the study with respect to their understanding and use of similes and metaphors.

## Table 2

*Independent samples t test for  $H_1$ , comparing mean pretest scores for  $G_1$  and  $G_2$*

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	<i>G1-pre</i>	<i>G2-pre</i>
Mean	0.31	0.36
Variance	0.02	0.038
Observations	37	30
Pooled Variance	0.03	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	65	
t Stat	-1.06	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.15	
t Critical one-tail	1.67	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.29	
t Critical two-tail	1.99	

The second research question explored the relationship between classroom-based creative writing instruction and the figurative language proficiency of fourth grade students. To investigate my second research question, I tested three hypotheses. The second and third hypotheses compared the mean FLaP scores at Time 1 [pretest] and Time 2 [posttest] within each group, using paired samples  $t$  tests. The purpose of this within subjects analysis was to determine whether the participants within each respective group ( $G_1$  and  $G_2$ ) demonstrated statistically significant gains on their posttest scores, when compared with their pretest scores.

Based on my review of the literature and on my prior experiences with teaching creative writing in elementary schools, I predicted that the treatment group would demonstrate gains following the intervention, but I wondered whether the comparison group, which did not receive my intervention, would also show gains. I considered the possibility that the comparison group might demonstrate gains on the posttest due to other uncontrolled variables such as maturation, regression to the mean, or testing effects.

My final hypothesis examined whether the treatment group demonstrated a greater change in their mean scores between the pretest and posttest administrations than the comparison group. I chose to perform this between subjects testing so I could compare the performance of the two groups over time. I anticipated that I would discover significant differences between the ways the respective groups' scores changed between Time 1 [pretest] and Time 2 [posttest].

### ***Hypothesis Two***

To test my second hypothesis, I compared the mean pretest and posttest FLaP scores of the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) via a paired samples  $t$  test in Excel. The test results are depicted in Table 3. I conducted this within subjects analysis to determine whether there was a statistically



significant difference in the scores of the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) after receiving the six week course of creative writing instruction in their classrooms.

As shown in Table 3, I found that there was a significant difference in the mean FLaP scores of the treatment group from Time 1 [Pretest] ( $n = 30$ ;  $M = 0.36$ ;  $SD = 0.19$ ) to Time 2 [Posttest] ( $n = 30$ ;  $M = 0.66$ ,  $SD = 0.21$ ). The  $t$  statistic of  $-10.25$ , computed with 29 degrees of freedom, yielded a  $p$  value of less than 0.001, thus meeting the criteria for significance.

Using the effect size calculator on the *socscistatistics.com* website, Cohen's  $d$  was calculated at 1.51, indicating that the treatment group's scores on the FLaP posttest were 1.5 standard deviations higher than their scores on the FLaP pretest. Based on Cohen's conventions, this was considered a large effect size (Cohen, 1988). The results of this test indicated that there was a significant difference of a large magnitude between the pretest and posttest scores of the treatment group ( $G_2$ ). Consequently, I rejected the null hypothesis ( $H_{02}$ ).

**Table 3**

*Paired Sample t Test Comparing Pretest and Posttest Means for Treatment Group ( $G_2$ )*

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	<i>pre-G2</i>	<i>post-G2</i>
Mean	0.36	0.66
Variance	0.04	0.04
Observations	30	30
Pearson Correlation	0.68	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	29	
t Stat	-10.25	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.001	
t Critical one-tail	1.69	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.001	
t Critical two-tail	2.05	

***Hypothesis Three***

I used another paired samples *t* test to test my third hypothesis, which assessed the differences between the pretest and posttest mean FLaP scores of the comparison group ( $G_1$ ). The results of this test are depicted in Table 4.

I found that there was no significant difference from Time 1 [Pretest] ( $n = 37$ ;  $M = 0.31$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ) to Time 2 [Posttest] ( $n = 37$ ;  $M = 0.30$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ). The mean difference in scores was  $-0.46$ . The resulting *p* value of 0.84 did not meet the criteria for significance ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that the mean FLaP scores for the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) did not change significantly between the pretest and posttest. Since the difference between the pretest and posttest scores in the comparison group was found to be insignificant, I retained the null hypothesis ( $H_{03}$ ). The comparison group did not demonstrate any measurable changes in their understanding or use of figurative language, as measured by the FLaP.

**Table 4**

*Paired Samples t Test Comparing Pretest and Posttest Means for Comparison Group ( $G_1$ )*

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	<i>pre-G1</i>	<i>Post-G1</i>
Mean	0.31	0.31
Variance	0.02	0.03
Observations	37	37
Pearson Correlation	0.76	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	36	
t Stat	0.20	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.42	
t Critical one-tail	1.69	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.84	
t Critical two-tail	2.03	

***Hypothesis Four***

Whereas I relied on within subjects analysis to test my second and third hypotheses, I conducted a between subjects analysis to test the fourth hypothesis. In order to test this hypothesis, which compared the mean change scores of the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) with those of the treatment group ( $G_2$ ), I needed to create a new variable called a change score. To determine the change score for each individual participant, I calculated the difference between their pretest and posttest FLaP scores (Time 2 – Time 1). I performed this calculation for each individual subject in both groups. Then, I used an independent samples  $t$  test to compare the mean change scores for the comparison group ( $G_1$ ) with those of the treatment group ( $G_2$ ). The results of the independent samples  $t$  test are presented in Table 5.

Since my testing of the previous two hypotheses had revealed that the treatment group demonstrated significant gains between the pretest and posttest measures, whereas the comparison group did not demonstrate gains, I predicted that I would find a significant difference between the mean change scores of the two groups. The results of my between subjects analysis for the fourth hypothesis supported my prediction.

The results of the independent samples  $t$  test demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the mean change scores of the comparison group ( $n = 37$ ;  $M = -0.01$ ;  $SD = 0.11$ ) and those of the treatment group ( $n = 30$ ;  $M = 0.31$ ;  $SD = 0.16$ ). The  $t$  statistic of 9.43, computed with 65 degrees of freedom ( $df$ ), yielded a  $p$  value less than 0.001, which met the criterion for significance in this study.

I calculated Hedges'  $g$  to assess effect size for the independent samples  $t$  test. I selected this statistic in lieu of Cohen's  $d$  because my two groups contained an unequal number of participants. Hedges'  $g$  was calculated at 2.34, which is considered a large effect size (Hedges &

Olkin, 1985). Based on the test results, which indicated a significant difference between the change scores of the respective groups, I was able to reject the null hypothesis ( $H_{04}$ ). My testing of the fourth hypothesis indicated that the mean scores of the treatment group changed significantly more between the pretest and posttest than did those of the participants in the comparison group. The calculated effect size revealed that the difference between the mean change scores of the respective groups was large in magnitude. This suggested that the creative writing intervention may have exerted a substantial influence on the posttest scores of the participants in the treatment group.

**Table 5**

*Independent Samples t Test Comparing Mean Change Scores of Comparison Group ( $G_1$ ) to Mean Change Scores of Treatment Group ( $G_2$ )*

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	<i>change-2</i>	<i>change-1</i>
Mean	0.31	-0.01
Variance	0.03	0.01
Observations	30	37
Pooled Variance	0.02	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	65	
t Stat	9.43	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.001	
t Critical one-tail	1.67	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.001	
t Critical two-tail	1.99	

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the results from the statistical analysis pertaining to my two research questions and four related hypotheses.

For the first research question, I investigated the pretest FLaP data and found that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean pretest scores for the comparison group and those of the treatment group. Consequently, the null hypothesis  $H_{01}$  was retained. This preliminary finding had important implications for the rest of my study, since it helped me to establish that my two groups were essentially equivalent, at the outset of the study, in terms of their knowledge of figurative language.

For the second research question, I examined the paired pretest and posttest scores both within and between the treatment ( $G_2$ ) and comparison ( $G_1$ ) groups. My testing of the second hypothesis revealed that there was a statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest data in the treatment group ( $G_2$ ) and that the effect size was large. This led me to reject the null hypothesis  $H_{02}$ .

As a result of testing the third hypothesis, I found that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores at Time 1 [pretest] and Time 2 [posttest] for the comparison group ( $G_1$ ). Consequently, the null hypothesis  $H_{03}$  was retained.

Lastly, I computed a new variable called the change score by subtracting each subject's score at Time 1 [pretest] from their score at Time 2 [posttest]. To test my fourth hypothesis, I conducted a statistical comparison of the mean change scores for both groups and discovered a statistically significant difference between the mean change scores of the two groups. The effect size for this difference was large in magnitude. This led me to reject the null hypothesis  $H_{04}$ .

Taken as a whole, the results of my hypothesis testing supported my prediction that the participants who participated in my creative writing intervention would demonstrate significant gains in their ability to use and comprehend similes and metaphors. The results also confirmed my expectation that the change between the mean pretest and posttest scores of the treatment group would differ significantly from the change in the comparison groups' mean scores. Although the lack of randomization in my study prevents me from asserting a clear causal relationship between my creative writing intervention and the gains displayed by the treatment group, the large effect sizes manifested in my analysis suggest that creative writing instruction shows promise as a means of fostering figurative language in school-aged children.

The statistical results of my study were gratifying but unsurprising in light of the literature review and my own past experience with teaching creative writing in elementary school classrooms. During the course of my six-week creative writing intervention in the fourth grade classrooms, the participants in the treatment group routinely composed poems in which they used their own original examples of similes and metaphors, so I anticipated that most of these students would demonstrate robust gains on the posttest measure. See Appendix A for examples of the poems composed by the treatment group during the intervention phase.

Chapter Five will further explore the findings of this study and discuss their possible ramifications in terms of educational policy and practice. The next chapter will also offer recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

This study found a statistically significant relationship between creative writing instruction and figurative language knowledge among fourth graders enrolled at two schools in Northwest Montana. These findings were encouraging because not much is known about how to teach this type of language, even though many experts have called for more research in this area (Nippold, 2001; Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Knowles & Moon, 2006; Palmer & Brooks, 2004). Despite the research showing that figurative language is widespread in both academic and social situations and despite its inclusion within state ELA standards, figurative language continues to be a neglected and misunderstood aspect of language and literacy instruction (Power et al., 2001).

More research is needed concerning best practices for teaching children to use and interpret language in a non-literal fashion and for supporting educators at all grade levels in this endeavor. The results of this study, while limited by the lack of randomized selection, suggest some that creative writing instruction deserves more attention as a vehicle for teaching of figurative language and other important skills within public school classrooms.

### **Implications for Educational Policy and Practice**

Over the past five decades, numerous researchers have called for a greater emphasis on figurative language within K-12 curricula, due to the wide prevalence of non-literal language in everyday life and its essential role in academic and social settings (Power, Taylor, & Nippold, 2001; Jakobson & Wickman, 2007; Pramling, 2010). Despite the research showing that figurative language is worthy of greater attention and despite its inclusion within state ELA standards, figurative language continues to be a neglected and misunderstood aspect of language

and literacy instruction. Clearly, more research is needed concerning best practices for teaching children to use and interpret language in a non-literal fashion.

If nothing else, the instructional approach used in this study merits further attention based on its simplicity, speed, and budget-friendliness. The creative writing intervention was delivered in hourlong lessons, once a week, for a total of six weeks. These lessons took place in the general education classroom, using only materials that are typically available within elementary school classrooms. Despite the brief timespan of the study, the straightforward implementation, and the fact that it only comprised a total of six instructional hours for each of the treatment group classrooms, it yielded statistically significant results. This suggests that creative writing instruction holds promise as a practical, time-efficient, and cost-effective way for busy educators to target figurative language within fast-paced, real-world classroom settings.

In addition to its quick and uncomplicated implementation, there are several elements within the scaffolded approach used in the study which may have contributed to the positive outcome. These factors are discussed below.

### ***Explicit Instruction***

Every writing lesson used in the intervention began with a brief “focus lesson” in which the figurative language target was explicitly identified and/or reviewed.

The explicit instruction component was probably an important factor in my students’ success. Ortony and colleagues noted that the elementary school students within their multi-district study, described in my literature review, demonstrated the greatest gains in figurative language within classrooms where figurative language devices were explicitly named, defined, and discussed, versus those in which the targets were presented in a less direct manner (Ortony et al., 1985). Similarly, Dixon found that the fourth-grade subjects in her study showed gains in



figurative language after participating in lessons where the figurative language targets were explicitly taught, but showed no gains after receiving more indirect forms of writing instruction (Dixon, 1984). Like Ortony and colleagues, Dixon commented on the importance of explicit teaching: “in order to encourage the use of figurative language in children’s writing, direct instruction in the understanding and use of figurative language may be beneficial” (Dixon, 1984, p. 68).

These observations about explicit instruction have important implications for educational practice. As noted out in Chapter 2, children are able to spontaneously use and understand many figurative utterances from a surprisingly early age (Jakobson & Wickman, 2007; Pramling, 2010). Pramling (2010) found that even preschoolers frequently used metaphors and similes in their interactions with one another and with their teachers. Nevertheless, figurative language development is akin to other aspects of advanced language and literacy development: students need focused and explicit instruction on specific targets in order to reach advanced proficiency with figurative language (Power et al., 2001).

For example, first graders may generate metaphors spontaneously in their informal conversation, but it does not logically follow that these young children would understand the word “metaphor” as applied to a reading comprehension passage or that they could deliberately employ a metaphor within a written composition. This is analogous to the way young children can spontaneously produce nouns and verbs while speaking, but lack the ability to identify parts of speech within a written passage or to produce examples of these parts of speech on demand. Higher-level language and literacy skills differ from early language skills in that they must be acquired through direct and focused instruction (Power et al., 2001). I doubt that the treatment

group would have demonstrated significant gains if the creative writing lessons had lacked explicit instruction in figurative forms.

### ***Mentor Texts***

The incorporation of mentor texts to showcase figurative language targets also played a key role in my intervention. The use of mentor texts to model various aspects of writing for students is a research-based practice for literacy instruction (Corden, 2007; Thompson & Reed, 2019). My findings supported Corden's assertion, stemming from his study described in Chapter Two, that the use of carefully-selected mentor texts is essential to helping students learn to recognize and use literary devices, including metaphors and similes (Corden, 2007).

The participants in my treatment group expressed keen interest in the mentor texts which had been written by other elementary school students, especially since these authors had formerly attended the elementary school where my participants were currently enrolled. I believe the inclusion of child-authored mentor texts helped to boost their self-efficacy, by encouraging them to see themselves as writers.

Selecting mentor texts written by diverse authors was also integral to the outcome of my intervention. In her famous essay, "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors", Rudine Sims Bishop argued that the books in our classroom libraries must function as mirrors, where readers of all cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, religions, orientations, and abilities can "find themselves reflected in the pages" in a fully human, non-stereotypical fashion (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). Bishop further stated that children's books must function as windows, giving young readers insight into lives and perspectives very different from their own. "Children from dominant social groups," she said, "need books as windows into reality... they need books that will help them

understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in... as well as their connections to other humans” (Bishop, 1990, p. xi).

The use of diverse mentor texts encouraged the participants in the treatment group to view writing as a way to share their unique lived experiences, and this helped them to stay engaged in my lessons. When I first introduced a mentor text written by an indigenous author (an historical chief named Crowfoot), there were cries of excitement from several of the students in the class, who wanted to tell me which Montana tribe or tribes their families were affiliated with. In response to the diverse mentor texts, many children wrote poems which included connections to their own cultural backgrounds.

Here is a sampling of lines from the fourth graders’ poems which expressed these personal and cultural connections:

“Joy is the sound of my jingle dress, jingling at powwows”;

“I am silver today, like my grandpa who always tells the same stories”;

“Missoula is a giant cereal bowl full of surprising flavors”;

“I am perfect like my Yaya’s frybread”;

“Home is a basement down in the dirt/ Home is a trailer that makes you feel both love and hurt.”

“I am rosy pink today, bright as flowers in our church on Easter morning”;

“Love is my dad taking me to the ranch to shoot my first deer and my dad driving us to the mountains to pick Morel mushrooms,”

“I’m purple today, like the sugar skulls we make at home.”

These heartfelt expressions of individual, familial, and cultural identity cemented my belief in the importance of using diverse texts for classroom instruction.

### *Scaffolding*

The modeling of figurative language via mentor texts was a critical component of the scaffolded instructional approach used in this study. However, the subsequent phases of the lessons were equally important. It is unlikely that modeling figurative language forms would be effective without accompanying opportunities for guided practice and independent writing.

Figurative language development is consistent with other areas of language development in that it is an active process involving both receptive and expressive components (Shulman & Capone, 2010, p. 7). Listening and reading are essential to the development of *receptive language*, a term which describes the *comprehension* of written and spoken language. To cultivate *expressive language*, which denotes the *production* of spoken and written language, students need ample daily opportunities to practice speaking and writing (Owens, 2016, pp. 151-58). Various researchers have affirmed that mere exposure to figurative language is not enough, children must also have abundant opportunities to practice using figurative forms in their own speech and writing before they will gain full proficiency in this linguistic realm (Palmer & Brooks, 2004, Knowles & Moon, 2006, Jakobson & Wickman, 2007).

The development of children's language and literacy requires their active engagement across all aspects of receptive and expressive language: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Cecil & Gipe, 2009, pp. 7-9). The significant results of the current study may be partially explained by the fact that the creative writing intervention incorporated all of the aforementioned aspects of language and literacy. The guided and independent writing components of the Modeled/ Guided/ Independent lesson framework ensured that students were not merely observing or listening; they were actively participating in the construction of knowledge.

### *Inclusion and Accessibility*

I considered it vitally important that none of the students in the fourth-grade classrooms who received my poetry writing instruction were excluded from the lessons. Keeping the focus on language and ideas enabled students who had literacy barriers and/or writing-related anxiety to participate. I found that allowing multilingual learners and students with disabilities to work with partners, use supports such as graphic organizers, and dictate their ideas to a teacher or para was essential to student learning and helped me to ensure that all students were able to participate in every lesson.

Several of the studies examined in my literature review reported that children with disabilities and multilingual learners were more likely to struggle with figurative language acquisition than typically developing or monolingual learners. In my literature review, I discussed the possibility that the published instruments for measuring figurative language were unintentionally measuring other variables, such as familiarity with the dominant culture, attention span, and decoding abilities. For these reasons, statements about the figurative language abilities of multilingual learners and learners with disabilities should always be interpreted with caution. For this study, I designed my own brief figurative language assessment, which was administered to each child individually, in hopes of avoiding the most obvious pitfalls of the commercially available assessments. The pitfalls of these other assessments include: excessive administration time, inclusion of culturally biased stimuli, and a reliance on reading proficiency.

Both of the groups in my study contained a diverse array of learners, including those from diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic groups, and students who were diagnosed with disabilities such as autism, dyslexia, and attention deficit disorder. The fact that the treatment group demonstrated statistically significant gains in figurative language after only six hours of

instruction offers hope that this approach could be easily implemented within regular education settings with minimal disruptions to the existing schedule. It also suggests that figurative language and creative writing can be easily and effectively taught within inclusive settings to learners with a wide range of linguistic backgrounds, diagnoses, and educational needs.

The implication about inclusion is one of the most meaningful ramifications of this study. My study included students with a wide range of abilities and those with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Over the past 25 years of working in public school and preschool classrooms, I have observed that students with disabilities and multilingual learners are frequently excluded for creative writing tasks due to the widespread perception that such tasks will be too difficult, too abstract, or too unstructured for these learners. The current findings suggest that this perception is misguided and they point to the importance of inclusive practices.

The other adults within the treatment group classrooms frequently expressed surprise at the quality of the written by students whom they had previously judged as being less competent. During the final portion of my lessons when students shared their work aloud, I overheard many comments from teachers, paraeducators, and visiting staff. These comments were usually some variation of, "I had no idea s/he was capable of that!"

One particularly memorable instance of this involved a girl with significant disabilities who startled everyone when she volunteered to read her poem aloud during the sharing phase of one lesson. The student had dictated her poem to a paraeducator due to her struggles with handwriting, spelling, and fine-motor skills. The classroom teacher later told me that it was the first time this student had willingly shared anything with her classmates and noted that she usually refused to participate in literacy tasks. This is the poem she shared, which inspired tears in several listeners:

*What You Are**You are brighter than the sun**in the sky.**You are you, no matter what people say,**they don't know you and you don't know them,**don't let them affect you!**You are you.**Never change for what someone says.**Never change you.*

This study strengthened my conviction that diverse learners can and should be included within creative writing and other literacy activities in the general education classroom.

Accommodations and modifications should be provided as needed, but educators need to operate from the assumption that all learners, including those with significant disabilities, are capable of acquiring higher level language skills such as figurative language. It is vital that all students are given ample opportunities to acquire these skills.

When students with disabilities and culturally/ linguistically diverse students are excluded from creative writing lessons, they are denied much more than the chance to develop figurative language proficiency. Bruning and Horn (2010) have asserted that creative and expressive forms of writing are essential to any literacy program due to their capacity for engaging and motivating children. When students are denied the chance to practice writing for self-expression, they are deprived of one of the authentic, real-world purposes of writing. When

they only experience academic/ expository forms of writing, children lack opportunities to develop their own voices and to share the things that matter most to them: their lived experiences, their unique perceptions, their prior knowledge, and their values, both cultural and individual. Learners with and without disabilities need to experience a full range of literacy experiences, beyond remedial practice in decoding, spelling, and the mechanical aspects of writing. Writing for the purpose of self-expression is an essential part of a complete and well-rounded literacy education.

### ***Emphasis on Process***

In alignment with the pedagogical approach presented in Collom and Noethe's *Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community* (2005) I emphasized that handwriting, punctuation and spelling were not concerns during the individual writing phase of each lesson, and reminded my students that they were creating rough drafts. I instructed the children to use "best guess" spelling in their drafts, and assured them that only their words and their ideas mattered. Deemphasizing the mechanical aspects of writing helped to reduce the cognitive load and allowed students to concentrate on the language aspects of the lessons. It also dissipated the anxiety, dread, and overwhelm that many students experience when confronted with a writing task.

This process-based approach is consistent with the research on writing instruction. In their book, *The Writing Lab Approach to Language Instruction and Intervention*, Nelson, Bahr, and Van Meter (2004) counseled teachers to focus on the authentic purposes of writing (communication and self-expression) rather than on the mechanical aspects, since this is key to building confidence and self-efficacy in fledgling writers. The authors stated that writing teachers must "foster trust among students that they are in the presence of adults who care more



about the content of their ideas than about identifying their mistakes”, then went on to explain that “editorial correctness is targeted *only after* building a foundation of confidence and willingness to write” (p. 193).

Similarly, Cordon (2007) stressed the importance of a process-oriented approach to writing in which the writer’s ideas, perspectives, and voice are paramount. Cordon has criticized the product-based approach, which he believes has become “particularly prevalent in public schools in the U.S. and the U.K.”, due to an overemphasis on standardized test preparation. He has argued that a preoccupation with the more superficial, cosmetic aspects of written products leads many teachers to forget about the true, authentic purposes of written language (p. 271).

### ***Student-Centered Approach***

Along with a process-oriented approach, this study affirmed my belief in the important of student-centered pedagogy. Bruning and Horn (2010) emphasized that writing instruction should emphasize student autonomy in order to build children’s intrinsic motivation and confidence. In accordance with this principle, individual autonomy, freedom, and choice were central features of all my lessons. Mentor texts were presented as examples, but I frequently reminded the students that they were “the boss of their own poems” and could always feel free to deviate from the form and style of the example to express their unique feelings, ideas, and preferences. I also told the students that there were no right or wrong answers in poetry.

The children were constantly encouraged to write about what they knew and/or cared about (even if all they currently cared about was videos games) and I believe that this focus on freedom and autonomy helped to foster confidence and motivation, even in the most reluctant writers. Moreover, it helped to level the playing field in terms of prior knowledge and diverse life experiences.

During the last writing lesson of my intervention phase, I invited the students to write a brief personal response at the bottom of their poems. As a prompt, I asked them these questions: “Did you enjoy our poetry lessons? Why or why not?” The students’ written responses to this prompt were mostly short, but they were very positive in tone and affirmed my conviction that a student-centered approach is key to building motivation and self-efficacy. Here are a few of the students’ responses:

“Yes! It was fun because we write about stuff we actually like, not boring school stuff. I used to think writing sucked but not anymore!”

“Poetry is so awesome because it’s where you get to be you. The real YOU, not the fake person you pretend to be.”

“I liked your class because we get to write about our emotions and you don’t get all weird and awkward when things get dark.”

“Poetry is the only good thing in my life, aside from music and my dog.”

One fourth-grade student even took my request for feedback as an opportunity to write a short poem about poetry. She wrote:

*Poetry is the anchor, healing, holding me onto reality,*

*Poetry is as soft as a pillow up against my face,*

*drenched with tears.*

*What is poetry?*

*Well, poetry is the blanket that heals my ears*

*from this painful silence.*

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this study suggest that creative writing instruction may be an effective, efficient, and relatively simple way to increase the figurative language knowledge of elementary students. Certainly, this topic merits further investigation. This study raised a number of questions regarding the potential of creative writing instruction in K-8 classrooms, beyond its immediate utility for teaching figurative language. Here are some suggested lines of inquiry for future research:

- If creative writing instruction leads to gains in figurative language, how durable are these gains? Do students retain their newfound knowledge over the long term? Does this knowledge generalize into other forms of writing, or into everyday conversation and social interactions?
- Which other language and/or literacy skills can be taught via creative writing instruction? In the past, I have embedded standards-based ELA skills such as grammar (parts of speech, sentence types, and verb tenses), vocabulary knowledge (antonyms, synonyms, semantic categories, etc.), narrative elements (character, setting, conflict, etc.), literary devices (theme, mood, irony, foreshadowing, etc.), and phonological awareness (rhyming, alliteration, syllable segmentation, etc.) into my creative writing lessons. It would be interesting to investigate creative writing as a vehicle for teaching these other language/literacy skills.
- What types of cross-curricular integration can be achieved through creative writing instruction? This question intrigues me because I have found it is unexpectedly easy to embed knowledge gleaned from other content areas, such as

science and social studies, into creative writing lessons. During the intervention phase of my study, many of the participants in the treatment group incorporated knowledge from these content areas into their poems spontaneously and without prompting. To illustrate, here is a selection of lines from the fourth graders' poems which reflected their scientific knowledge alongside their figurative language proficiency: "I am teal today, luminescent as an anglerfish in the depths of the Marianas trench"; "My pet monster has eyes as huge as Jupiter and her belly is round like Saturn's rings"; "I am as tiny as an atom"; "I am blue today, powerful like Glacial Lake Missoula"; "A blue-ringed octopus is the universe, expanding into infinity."

- How does creative writing affect students' motivation to write, when compared with purely academic writing tasks? My experience during this study and over the course of many years of working with school-age children suggests that creative writing is uniquely motivational: it offers enough freedom, flexibility, and autonomy to keep high-performing students engaged while helping reluctant writers discover that writing can actually be fun. I would like to explore whether creative writing experiences can alter students' beliefs and attitudes about writing and their perceptions of themselves as writers. Moreover, can a newly-kindled enthusiasm for creative writing be channeled into other areas of writing, across the curriculum?
- I am also curious about how creative writing affects the classroom climate. In my work, I have observed that the experience of sharing personal writing with their peers appears to promote bonding and friendship within K-8 classrooms. I suspect

that it fosters empathy by allowing students to understand the experiences and perspectives of others and I wonder if it might even help to prevent or reduce bullying.

- Lastly, if creative writing holds the potential to change students' perceptions of their peers, does it also have the power to alter classroom teachers' perceptions of their students? Can a classroom-based creative writing workshop help to shape educators' beliefs about individual student abilities and academic potential? Educational outcomes improve when their teachers believe that their students are inherently capable, so this question may be vital to the success of inclusive classrooms.

### **Summary**

The results of this study revealed a strong relationship between classroom-based creative writing instruction and the figurative language proficiency of fourth grade students enrolled in two elementary schools in Northwest Montana. The generalizability of these findings is limited due to the non-randomized sample selection process. Nevertheless, the statistically significant findings of this research imply that the relationship between creative writing instruction and figurative language proficiency is worthy of further exploration. Moreover, the enthusiasm and passion which the students applied to their poems suggests that this creative and expressive forms of writing may be a promising method for teaching a wide variety of skills, aside from figurative language, and that creative writing deserves a much more prominent role within elementary school classrooms.

### References

- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6 (3), ix-xi.
- Blue, M.C. (1981). Types of utterances to avoid when speaking to language-delayed children. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in the Schools*, 12, 120-124.
- Bricker, P., Faetz, M., Tracy, K.N., & Luke, N. (2015). Poetry rocks: Writing poetry provides an engaging and creative outlet for primary students to share observations made during scientific investigations. *Science and Children*, 53 (3), 38-45.
- Bruning, R. & Horn, C. (2000). Developing motivation to write. *Educational Psychologist*, 35(1), 25-37.
- CAST (2018). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines*, version 2.2.  
<http://udlguidelines.cast.org>.
- Cecil, N.L. (1994). *For the love of language: Poetry for every learner*. Peguis Publishers.
- Cecil, N.L. & Gipe, J.P. (2009). *Literacy in grades 4-8: Best practices for a comprehensive program* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Holcomb Hathaway Publishers.
- Clark, C., & Rumbold, K. (2006). Reading for pleasure: A research overview. English Document (ED) 35, National Literacy Trust [report]. ERIC online database, ED496343.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

- Collom, J. & Noethe, S. (2005). *Poetry everywhere: Teaching poetry writing in school and in the community* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Teachers and Writers Collaborative Press.
- Cordon, R. (2007). Developing reading-writing connections: the impact of explicit instruction of literary devices on the quality of children's narrative writing. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 21 (3), 269-89.
- Crowfoot (circa 1890). What is life?  
<http://www.nativehistorymagazine.com/2013/02/chief-crowfoot-on-life-and-death.html>
- Dennis, M., Lazenby, P, Lockyer, L. (2001). Inferential language in high-function children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31 (1), 47-54.
- Dixon, D.J. (1984). *The effect of poetry on figurative language usage in children's descriptive prose writing*. (Publication No. 8421628) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Toledo]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Ezell, H.K. (1997). Survey of educators and speech-language pathologists regarding figurative language instruction. *Journal of Children's Communication Development*, 18 (2), 39-48.
- Ezell, H.K. & Goldstein, H. (1991). Teaching idiom comprehension to children with mental retardation. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 25(1), 295-311.
- Frey, N. & Fisher, D. (2006). *Language arts workshop: Purposeful reading and writing instruction*. Merrill Education.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53, 106-119.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gold, R., & Faust, M. (2010). Right hemisphere dysfunction and metaphor comprehension in

- young adults with Asperger's syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 40(7), 800-811.
- Hannon, J.C., & Ratliffe, J. (2007). Opportunities to participate and teacher interaction in co-ed versus single-gender P.E. settings. *Physical Educator*, 64(1), 11-20.
- Hedges, L. V., & Olkin I. (1985). *Statistical methods for meta-analysis*. Academic Press
- Hugo, R. (1979). *The triggering town: Lectures and essays on poetry and writing*. Norton.
- Jakobson, B., & Wickman, P.O. (2007). Transformation through language use: Children's spontaneous metaphors in elementary school science. *Science and Education*, 16(3), 267–289.
- Jones, J. & Stone, C.A. (1989). Metaphor comprehension by language learning disabled and normally achieving adolescent boys. *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*, 12, 251-260.
- Kerbel, D., & Grunwell, P. (1997). Idioms in the classroom: an investigation of language unit and mainstream teachers' use of idioms. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 13 (2), 113-123. doi:10.1177/026565909701300201
- Knowles, M. & Moon, R. (2006). *Introducing Metaphor*. London: Routledge.
- Lazar, T., Warr-Leeper, G.A., Nicholson, C.B., & Johnson, S. (1989). Elementary school teachers' use of multiple meaning expressions. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in the Schools*, 20, 420-429.
- Lopata, C., Lipinski, A. M., Thomeer, M. L., Rodgers, J. D., Donnelly, J. P., McDonald, C. A., & Volker, M. A. (2017). Open-trial pilot study of a comprehensive outpatient psychosocial treatment for children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 21(1), 108-116.



- Lundblom, E.G., & Woods, J.W. (2012). Working in the classroom: Improving idiom comprehension through classwide peer tutoring. *Communications Disorders Quarterly*, 33(4), 1-18. doi:10.1177/1525740111404927
- MacKay, G., & Shaw, A. (2004). A comparative study of figurative language in children with autistic spectrum disorders. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 20 (1), 13-32.
- McMillan, J. (2009). *Educational research: Fundamentals for the consumer* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice*. CAST.
- Minskoff, E.H. (1982). Sharpening language skills in secondary LD students. *Academic Therapy*, 18, 53-60.
- Momaday, N.S. (1991). The delight song of Tsaio-talee. *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961-1991*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Montana Office of Public Instruction (2011). *Montana K-12 Content Standards and Revisions: English Language Arts and Literacy*. <https://opi.mt.gov>
- Nelson, N.W., Bahr, C.M., & Van Meter, A.M. (2004). *The writing lab approach to language instruction and intervention*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.
- Nippold, M.A. (1991). Evaluating and enhancing idiom comprehension in language disordered students. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 22, 100-106.
- Nippold, M.A., Maron, C., & Schwarz, I.E. (2001). Idiom understanding in preadolescents: Synergy in action. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology*, 10, 169-181.
- Ortony, A. (1975). Why metaphors are necessary and not just nice. *Educational Theory*, 25, 45-53

- Ortony, A., Turner, T.J., & Larson-Shapiro, N. (1985). Cultural and instructional influences on figurative language comprehension by inner-city children. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 19 (1), 25-36.
- Owens R.E. (2016). *Language development: An introduction* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pearson.
- Pallant, J. (2007). *SPSS survival manual: A step by step guide to data analysis using SPSS for Windows*. McGraw-Hill Open University Press.
- Palmer, B.C. (1991). *Figurative Language Interpretation Test* [standardized test]. Academic Therapy Publications.
- Palmer, B. C., & Brooks, M. (2004). Reading until the cows come home: Figurative language and reading comprehension. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 47(5), 370-379.
- Palmer, B. C., Bilgili, E. M., Gungor, A., Taylor, S. H., & Leclere, J. T. (2008). Reading comprehension, figurative language instruction, and the Turkish English language learner. *Reading Horizons*, 48(4), 261-282.
- Paris, D. & Alim, H.S. (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogy: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
- Pearson, P.D., & Gallagher, M.C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8(3), 317–344.
- Pence Turnbull, K. & Justice, L. (2017). *Language development from theory to practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Pearson.
- Persicke, A., Tarbox, J., Ranick, J., & St. Clair, M. (2012). Establishing metaphorical reasoning in children with autism. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 6(2), 913-920.
- Power, R., Taylor, C.L., & Nippold, M.A. (2001). Comprehending literally-true versus

- literally-false proverbs. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 17(1), 1-18.
- Pramling, N. (2010). Unearthing metaphors: Figurativeness in teacher-child talk about soil and related matters. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 38(1), 57-64.  
doi:10.1007/s10643-010-0386-0.
- Privitera, G. J. (2017). *Research methods for the behavioral sciences* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Qualls, C.D., Lantz, J.M., Pietrzyk, R.M, Blood, G.W., & Hammer, C.S. (2003). Comprehension of idioms in adolescents with language-based learning disabilities compared to their typically developing peers. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 37, 295-311.
- Rios, A. (2015). Desert bestiary sonnet. In *A small story about the sky*. Albuquerque, NM: Copper Canyon Press.
- Rundblad, G., & Annaz, D. (2010). The atypical development of metaphor and metonymy comprehension in children with autism. *Autism*, 14(1), 29-46.
- Shulman, B.B. & Capone, N.C. (2010). *Language development: Foundations, processes, and clinical applications*. Jones & Bartlett.
- Thompson, S. & Reed, D. (2019, January 22). Using mentor texts to learn from the best and improve students' writing. Iowa Reading Research Center website:  
<https://iowareadingresearch.org/blog/mentor-texts-student-writing>
- Troia, G. (2014). Evidence-based practices for writing instruction (Document No. IC-5). University of Florida, Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center website:  
<http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/tools/innovation-configuration/>
- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education

Statistics (2022). <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/>

Vardell, S.M. & Wong, J.S. (2014). Observe, explain, connect: An interdisciplinary lesson using poetry and science highlights the parallels of the disciplines while developing literacy. *Science and Children*, 51(8), 31-36.

Wiig, E. & Secord, W. (2014). *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). [standardized test]. Pearson.

Willey, K. (2006). Colors. On *Dance for the Sun* [CD]. Discmakers.

**Appendix A: Examples of Student Poems****Lesson One: My Pet Monster**

My Pet Monster, Slurpy

My pet monster is named Slurpy.  
He is made of slime that is as bouncy  
as a trampoline,  
He lives in a volcano,  
bright as a Supernova!  
He rains embers,  
bright as the stars.  
He has a brain like an elephant.

**Lesson Two: Colors**

I am purple today, calm as a koala sleeping in bamboo,  
I am blue today, free and wild as a heron flying in the sky,  
I am black today, stealthy and quiet as a jaguar,  
I am pink today, energetic like a hummingbird zipping through the forest,  
I am magenta today, bold as a hunting wolf.

**Lesson Three: I Am, I Am Not**

I Am, I Am Not

I am a red-tailed hawk  
flying high in the sky.  
I am not an ant in the tall grass,  
feeling like that's all I've ever seen.  
I am a huge ocean,  
all I really touch is land.  
I am not a small little water bucket  
that only feels that already wet rag.  
I am a cold winter breeze,  
freezing your knees.  
I am not a slow beetle,  
thinking I can go only so far.

Mythic Gods

I am as powerful as Zeus striking someone with a lightning bolt,  
I am as talented as Apollo playing his guitar,  
I am not as boring as a robin sitting on a branch,

I am as swift as Artemis shooting an arrow,  
I am as fierce as Aries fighting Percy Jackson.

### What You Are

You are brighter than the sun  
in the sky.  
You are beautiful,  
no matter what people say,  
they don't know you and  
you don't know them,  
don't let them affect you.  
You are you,  
Never change for what someone says,  
never change you.

### Lesson Four: Delight Song

#### The Delight Song of Star-girl

I am the stars,  
shining so bright.  
I wonder when I will  
explode with light?  
I wonder what's in the mysterious ocean,  
but when I dive in,  
I will see inside the world of light.  
I hear screams of joy when I fly  
up to the sky,  
and I see the asteroids fly,  
hopping, crashing, into the sky  
so high.  
I see joy happening everywhere,  
but when I see the miracles happen,  
I feel good inside.  
I wish I would stay inside the ocean  
of wonders,  
because I see the Answer  
of the puzzle of life.  
I am the stars  
shining so bright.  
I wonder when I will  
explode with light?

**Lesson Five: What is Life?**

What is Curiosity?

Curiosity is a child chasing  
a bird that he can't catch.  
Curiosity is an explosion  
flying into the midst of space.  
Curiosity is me,  
watching the saxophone-like meadowlark  
play the night away.

What is Home?

Home is a basement down in the dirt.  
Home is a trailer that makes you feel  
both love and hurt.

The Courageous Flight of Imagination

Imagination is a dragon flying swiftly  
and longingly through the night  
in search of a home.  
Imagination is a lion roaring  
while his heart burns bright.  
Imagination is plunging into a cold  
dark ocean wonder  
with no bottom and  
a mighty beast brings you to the surface.

**Lesson Six: Animal Kingdom**

Animal Kingdom

A whale is the deep blue ocean,  
shining but not showing reflection.  
An elephant is the core memory of the earth.  
A praying mantis is the kung fu fighter  
that can fight a whole gang and win.  
An owl is the chess player that can  
outplay the world.  
A human is the giant killer that will ruin  
the perfect earth

that we're given.  
Insects at War!

Ants are little warriors,  
shoving each other off the table.  
Butterflies are airplanes,  
dropping little ant warriors.  
Beetles are little armored drills,  
making a path for the little ant warriors under the earth.  
Caterpillars are transportation for ant warriors on trees,  
plants, and above dirt.  
Worms are transportation for ant warriors  
under the earth.  
A tick is a bomb,  
clinging to a bomber (your dog).

Make Sure to Check your Ankles!

A Chicken is  
a sneaky spy poking at your ankles  
A Grizzly Bear is  
a spiky, rambunctious tree  
smacking you in the face!  
A Polar Bear is a cloud  
looking down at you,  
A chicken is a squishy nugget running  
from a fork,  
A Me is a pencil  
who won't stop writing!

Plant Metaphors

A Christmas cactus is the sun  
rising and setting at the right moment.  
A pine tree is a crabby old woman  
who does not like to be touched.  
An oak tree is a kind old man who likes  
to share his stories.  
A rose is a princess of the most elegant family.  
And a tumbleweed is a very, very, very queasy boy  
on the Gravitron ride at the fair!



**Appendix B: FLaP Assessment Protocol**

**STUDENT #:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Circle one: PRETEST / POSTTEST**

Question 1) Circle response: A B C D

Question 2) Circle response: A B C D

Question 3) Verbatim response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Question 4) Verbatim response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Question 5) Verbatim response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Question 6) Verbatim response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Comments/ Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Score: \_\_\_\_ / 6