Structured Literacy Approaches to Teaching Written Expression

by Charles W. Haynes, Susan Lambrecht Smith, and Leslie Laud

Reading and writing are based on a foundation of oral language skills (Scarborough, 2001; Dockrell & Connelly, 2009) and with structured teaching that incorporates content vocabulary, oral and written expression can be developed interactively and synergistically. More than a decade ago, in a *Perspectives* issue dedicated to reading and writing, Haynes and Jennings (2006, 12-16) outlined hands-on word-, sentence- and paragraph-level techniques for supporting writing skills in struggling learners. The present article revisits selected methods from that report and adds recently developed strategies, such as a) linking of semantic feature analysis with sentence instruction; b) sentence fluency techniques; as well as c) "micro-discourse" methods for supporting cohesion and text elaboration (Laud & Haynes, 2018; Jennings & Haynes, 2018). While these strategies are critical teaching elements that address common weaknesses in learners with writing and related language difficulties, they are adaptable to all students learning to write.

Word-Level Strategies

Leverage Topic-Centered Vocabulary and Concepts. Students benefit from structured language activities that incorporate vocabulary drawn from academic topics, or themes (Myhill, Jones, & Lines, 2018). When language instruction is not topic-centered, students must randomly shift between different mental schema. Figure 1 shows a "decontextualized" sentence exercise—one with no focal topic or theme.

Directions: Add a "where phrase" to each sentence.

1. A middle-aged plumber fixed the leaking pipes _____.
2. A chrome robot assembled a steel door _____.
3. The hard-working nurse sat _____.

Figure 1. Decontextualized, or Non-topical Writing Exercise

In the decontextualized writing activity, the topic shifts from plumbing to robots and to healthcare provision. This topic shifting places heavy loads on retrieval and working memory and does not allow practice of learned vocabulary. Compare this with the following exercise, which is "contextualized"—it uses topic-centered vocabulary and concepts based on recent classroom instruction.

Directions: Complete these sentences about scenes we discussed from the film about a barn raising in an Ohio Amish community. Add a "where" phrase to each sentence:

1. The powerful draft horses carried fresh-sawn logs _____.
2. Older teens lifted wooden beams _____.
3. A bearded carpenter chiseled notches _____.

Figure 2. Contextualized Exercise (Topic: Amish Barn-raising)

The tasks in Figure 2 allow the learner to focus on a central topic as well as practice key vocabulary and concepts related to the theme of interest. Whenever possible, teachers should focus on topic- or theme-centered vocabulary, constructing sentence, paragraph, and essay-level exercises using the same vocabulary.

Employ Noun and Verb Boxes. For grade school students and older struggling writers, teachers can help students fill "Noun" and "Verb" boxes with topical vocabulary. For example, in a third-grade class focused on the topic of sailing, a teacher might guide students' retrieval of the topical vocabulary of interest, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Nouns	Verbs
captain	navigate
mast	stand
rudder	steer
sail	fill
waves	splash

Figure 3. Brainstormed Noun and Verb Boxes (Topic: Sailing)

Students refer to these brainstormed Noun and Verb Boxes for important words to include in their sentence- and paragraph-level writing.

Link Chaining with Phonetic Spelling. Speech processing deficits can impair some students' word retrieval and production. It is not unusual for a teacher to introduce a long word only to see a student try to say the word, stop, and then exclaim, "Forget it—that's a stupid word!" Responses like this can be reduced by helping students become comfortable with pronouncing longer words. Forward and backward chaining are classic, speech-language techniques that help learners pronounce multi-syllabic words. Figure 4 illustrates how the topical vocabulary word, "oceanographic," would be chained.

Forward:
    "O-"
    "Ocean-"
    "Oceano-"
    "Oceanograph-"
    "Oceanographic"
Backward:
    "-ic"
    "-graphic"
    "-ographic"
    "-ceanographic"
    "Oceanographic"

Figure 4. Forward and Backward Chaining

For both methods, the teacher introduces pronunciation of syllables gradually and students repeat in unison at each step. This practice supports articulatory mastery, and thus owner-ship, of key vocabulary. Note that, depending on the technique employed, different parts of the word receive more practice.

Use Chaining to Support Phonetic Spelling. Phonetic spell-ing is a word-level technique that provides students with a method for managing difficult-to-spell words that may pose an obstacle to composition, forcing learners to switch to less spe-cific, higher frequency words they can already spell (e.g., sub-stituting "big" for "enormous"). Alternatively, students may spell words so cryptically that they cannot understand them, such as spelling *ogrshc* for *oceanographic*. One way to elimi-nate this obstacle is to employ a three-step phonetic spelling strategy that exploits students' knowledge of syllable chaining:

Step One: Chain and then identify the number of syllables in the word ("oceanographic" = 5) and write a blank for each syllable: ___ ___ ___ ___ ___.
$$ 1 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad 4 \quad 5$$

Step Two: Spell the phonemes in each syllable and spell each syllable in correct order; for example:
$$\underline{o} \quad \underline{shun} \quad \underline{a} \quad \underline{graff} \quad \underline{ic}$$
$$1 \quad\; 2 \quad\;\; 3 \quad\;\; 4 \quad\;\; 5$$

Step Three: Synthesize the spelling into one word:
$$\underline{oshunagraffic}$$

Later, the teacher can provide the correct spelling beside the student's phonetically spelled word: *oshunagraffic* → *oceano-graphic*. Students who are cryptic (dysphonetic) spellers and tend to produce spellings that do not allow the reader to guess the target word (or prevent a spellchecker from predicting the word) benefit greatly from this phonetic spelling strategy and report that it allows them to employ a wider range of vocabulary and compose more fluently. Of course, phonetic spelling does not replace formal, structured teaching of spelling rules; rather, it is an interim strategy to enhance the richness and fluency of a very poor speller's writing. In addition, phonet-ic spelling enhances phonemic awareness and strengthens sound-symbol association skills.

Teach Cueing Strategies to Support Retrieval. Students who have particular difficulty with word-retrieval may require *extrin-sic* (teacher-provided) and *intrinsic* (self-provided) cues and/or cueing strategies. Types of extrinsic cues include, but are not limited to:

- Visual (picture)
- Gestural (mimed verb or action of target noun)
- Semantic (definition)
- Phonologic/Graphemic (first sound or letter of a word).

Of the extrinsic cues, phonologic/graphemic cueing is usu-ally a last resort, because it provides part of the actual sound structure of the word and therefore tends to be easiest.

Intrinsic cueing strategies are methods students can employ by themselves to help them find words. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Visualizing (trying to envision the object or action)
- Making semantic associations.

For concrete nouns, examples of semantic cueing are thinking about: the object's function, its typical location/circumstances, or typical time of day or season of year when the noun is used. For example, for a noun such as "sandcastle," cueing could include place (on the beach, at the water's edge) or time of year (during summer vacation, late in July). Students who are less strategic may need to memorize these intrinsic strategies and be coached how to employ them when they are having retrieval difficulties.

Teach Semantic Feature Mapping. Meanings of topical nouns or verbs can be explored and elaborated through seman-tic feature mapping. Semantic features are specific, component meanings associated with words. For example, Figure 5 is a semantic feature map for the key noun "rudder" from a class focused on the theme of sailing.

captain
(agent/Who uses it?)

steers the boat
(use/function)

rudder

oak, with brass hinges
(composition)
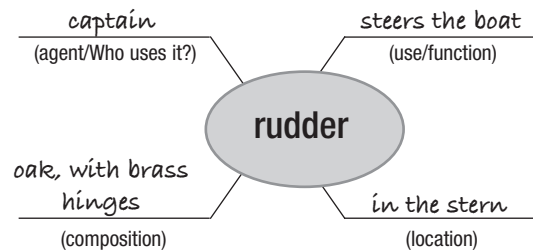
in the stern
(location)

Figure 5. Semantic Feature Map

Note that while students discuss semantic features of a given noun, they build a network of meaningful relationships around that noun. These semantic relationships resurface at the sentence level.

Sentence-Level Strategies and Techniques

Tap Semantic Feature Knowledge to Support Sentence Formulation. Careful discussion of semantic features for key nouns sets up students for formulating meaningful sentences that reuse those semantic features. For example, consider the semantic feature mapping done for "rudder" in Figure 5 and how the features re-emerge at different levels of sentence development:

Level 1: The captain steered the boat.

Level 2: The captain steered the rudder in the stern of the boat.

Level 3: Standing in the stern of the boat, the captain steered the massive oak rudder.

In the Level 1 example, the features "captain" and "steered the boat" resurface almost exactly. In contrast, in the Level 3 example—a complex sentence—the features are used less directly and more flexibly.

Teach Using a Sentence Hierarchy. Sentence instruction needs to be incremental and sequential, moving from simple to more complex. Table 1 provides a sample sentence hierarchy.

Because students with language impairment are often confused by formal grammatical terms (e.g., "noun phrase," "predicate," "temporal adverbial phrase") simplified terms ("noun," "verb," "where phrase") can help them identify sentence parts and develop rudimentary syntactic awareness. The earlier presented Noun and Verb Box exercise provides key topical vocabulary for struggling writers to reference. In addition, the kernel, subject + noun elements set up a range of simple sentence patterns. As students become more facile with recognizing and producing sentences, conventional terms can be introduced, as appropriate.

Introduce Flexibility. After learners show mastery of a given pattern, they can learn to experiment with moving elements around in sentences. For example, after the Noun + Verb + Where pattern becomes automatic, the student can be introduced to moving the Where phrase to the beginning of the sentence: "The pioneers set camp *next to a bend in the Mississippi River.*" ➔ "*Next to a bend in the Mississippi River,* the pioneers set camp." This experimentation at the phrase level shifts semantic emphasis and provides the opportunity for learners to consider subtle differences in meaning that occur with changes in word order.

Reinforce Target Patterns Using Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing Modalities. Listening and reading tasks require students to monitor for the teacher's correct versus incorrect production(s), while speaking and writing tasks ask students to retrieve vocabulary as well as self-monitor their own production. Following are sample, topical exercises for students working on the N (noun) + V (verb) + Where (where prepositional phrase) sentence pattern. Teachers need to model the target behaviors before each exercise so that students understand what is expected. Exercises for each modality are outlined in Table 2.

Repeated practice with sentence patterns in multiple modalities helps students to internalize the forms, and the linking of recognition with production tasks prepares students to self-monitor their production at the multi-sentence level (Jennings & Haynes, 2018). The use of topic-centered words provides students with opportunities to recognize and employ key vocabulary meaningfully within sentences.

Consolidate Sentence Skills with Fluency Drills. Repeated, timed practice writing sentence structures helps students to consolidate and become more fluent with producing isolated sentences. In addition this repeated practice positively influences word order and sentence writing at the text level (Datchuk & Kubina, 2013, 2017). In our own practice, we have students create topical Noun and Verb Boxes, copy a developmentally appropriate target sentence structure from the board (for example, N + V + where) and then engage them in "sentence slams" in which they write as many sentences as possible within a three-minute time constraint. Each student's number of correct target sentences per slam can serve as an informal progress-monitoring tool.

Employ Topical Sentence Combining. Sentence combining is an additional technique that has been found to improve the quality of students' sentence and discourse writing (Saddler & Graham, 2005). This method involves practice at merging smaller sentences, or parts of sentences, into larger sentences. For example, asked to combine "The teenager is in the sailboat" with "The teenager steers," the student might combine the information in those sentences to say, "The teenager steers in the sailboat." Sentence combining practice helps students to

TABLE 1. Sentence Hierarchy	
Structure	**Example (Topic: Sailing)**
Noun (N) + Verb (V)	Cormorants dove.
N + V + "where phrase" (where)	The captain leaned on the tiller.
N + is/are Verb + Adjective (Adj)	The deck was slippery.
Adj + N + V + where	Gray porpoises leaped out of the waves.
Adj + N + V + "when phrase" (when)	Several teenagers sailed during the evening.
Adj + N + V + where + when	The nervous boys aimed their vessel toward the lighthouse late in the afternoon.
Adj + Adj + N + V + where + when	Dozens of pesky gulls screeched overhead all morning.
Adj + N + V + where + *and* + (Art.) + N + V+ where	Playful seals swam around the boat and they scared the fish away.
Adj + N + V + where + *because* + (Art.) + N + V + where	The frightened lads steered toward the shore because lightening flashed in the distance.
Adj + N + V + where + *but* + (Art.) + N + V + where	Dark clouds gathered in the east, but the sailors slept.
"When clause," + Adj + N + V + where	When the wind blew, the empty sails filled between the yardarms.
Adj + N + V + where + "who/which/that clause"	The excited teens sailed toward the whales that surfaced nearby.
Adj + N + "who/which/that clause" + V	The frisky dolphins that followed the boat disappeared.

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avoid both redundant use of words and use of short, choppy sentences.

Provide Visual Scaffolding. Students' with deficits in language formulation often have trouble organizing their writing on the page. An effective remedial strategy is to employ templates to visually scaffold oral and written production. Figure 6 provides a simple example of how a template can visually scaffold an expanded kernel sentence with boxes:

Adj.	N	V	Where	When
Weary	sailors	arrived	at the dock	late in the evening.

Figure 6. Visual Scaffolding for Sample Sentence Pattern

A common teaching experience is to employ a template for teaching, observe that a student has mastered a given sentence pattern using the template, and then be disappointed when the student fails to use the pattern correctly in spontaneous writing. In such cases, it is important to remember that children with significant language impairment need scaffolds like boxes and category labels removed *gradually*. This same teaching principle—systematic application and removal of scaffolding—applies to any kind of cueing system that one uses to support language learning.

Micro-Discourse Strategies and Techniques

"Micro-discourse" refers to two- to four-sentence "chunks" of text. Important micro-discourse skills are a) producing semantic flow (cohesion) from sentence to sentence, and b) using varied detail sentences for elaboration.

Support Semantic Flow through the Cohesive Tie Strategy. Struggling writers often over-use key topical nouns, which results in uninteresting writing that lacks semantic flow. Here is an example lack of flow within a student's sequential narrative:

After that, *the fire truck* arrived. *The fire truck* was equipped with a ladder and several hoses. *The fire truck* had come from another fire across town.

Problems with semantic redundancy can be addressed by first modeling, and then having students memorize as well as apply, the Cohesive Tie Strategy illustrated in Figure 7.
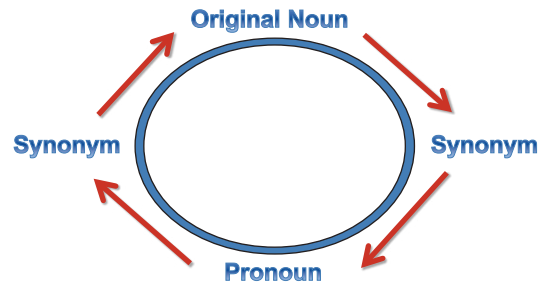

Figure 7. Cohesive Tie Strategy

Jennings, T. & Haynes, C. (2018), p. 144. Copied with permission from the authors and Landmark School Outreach Program.

Following is an example in which the student has applied the Cohesive Tie Strategy to the fire truck sequence:

After that, *the fire truck* arrived. *The vehicle* was equipped with a ladder and several hoses. *It* had come from another fire across town.

In order for the strategy to be effective, students should first generate lists of synonyms and pronouns for the selected topical noun. For example, prior to generating the text above, the student would first list words or phrases such as *fire truck, it, truck,* or *emergency vehicle*. While the strategy is a powerful visual reminder, students need reminders to "listen" to the text

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TABLE 2. Multimodal Sentence Exercises

A. Listening (Recognition/ Monitoring) Task
  Procedure: Teacher displays the target sentence pattern: Noun + Verb + Where on the board. Students listen to teacher's production of theme-centered sentences and identify correct ("C") versus incorrect ("X"). If incorrect, the student then corrects the sentence so it follows the pattern.
  Teacher: "The sailor steered the boat."
  Student: Marks on paper *X – where*
    Student corrects the teacher's sentence to include the missing element, saying, "The sailor steered the boat *toward the shore*."

B. Reading (Recognition/ Monitoring) Task
  Procedure: (same as for task A, but with written stimuli)

C. Speaking (Production) Task
  Procedure: Teacher displays target sentence pattern Noun + Verb + Where on the board and names a topical noun. The student produces a sentence that follows the pattern. For example,
  Teacher: "Barnacles"
  Student: "Barnacles fastened onto the stern of the boat."

D. Writing (Production) Task
  Procedure: (Same as for task C, but requiring written formulation)

they have written to make sure the cohesive ties "sound right." Learners can also use the Cohesive Tie Strategy image for analyzing texts they or peers have written: students recall the image, draw it on paper, underline key nouns in topic sentences in the text, and then proofread the text for semantic flow.

Promote Rich Elaboration through Use of the Detail Circle Strategy. Students who struggle with writing often fail to provide salient and varied details to support points they want to make. These students benefit from learning the Detail Circle, a mnemonic device that aids their recall of types of details (see Figure 8).
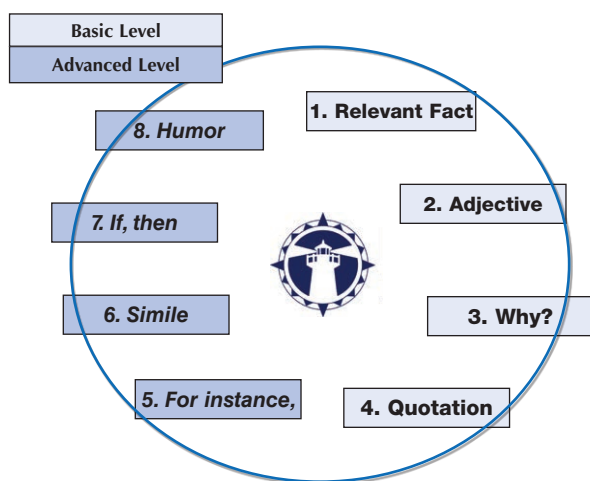

Figure 8. Detail Circle Strategy

Jennings, T. & Haynes, C. (2018), p. 148. Copied with permission from the authors and Landmark School Outreach Program.

The Detail Circle is organized into Basic Level details (1-4) and Advanced (5-8). When introducing the Circle, the teacher first writes only the Basic Level Details into the Circle, then provides a topic sentence with key nouns underlined, and after that models how to add one or two Relevant Fact detail sentences with semantic cohesive ties in each sentence underlined. Each detail sentence elaborates on one or more of the underlined key nouns in the preceding sentence; for example:

Teacher Topic Sentence: *The <u>children</u> raked the <u>leaves</u> in the yard.*

First Relevant Fact Detail: *The <u>kids</u> raked <u>them</u> into a <u>large heap</u>.*

Second Relevant Fact Detail: *The <u>pile of leaves</u> started to blow all over the yard.*

The resulting three-sentence micro-discourse "chunk" would appear as:

The children raked the leaves in the yard. The kids raked them into a large heap. The pile of leaves started to blow all over the yard.

Initially, learners memorize the Detail Circle with only the Basic Level details. They recall and draw the Circle in the margin of their paper and use this mnemonic to guide their recall of varied detail sentences. First, they formulate details in micro-discourse exercises of two to three topic-centered sentences, and then in personal sequence narratives. After they have mastered elaborating events (First-, Then-, Next-, After that-, and Finally) in narratives, they are ready to proceed to elaborating expository paragraphs and essays with Basic and Advanced Level details.

Paragraph-Level Principles, Strategies, and Techniques

A main purpose of teaching word-, sentence- and micro-discourse level skills is to support students' paragraph-level writing. Principles to teaching paragraph-level writing are:

1. Employ oral rehearsal prior to writing,

2. Prepare students with theme-centered sentence expansion and/or sentence combining,

3. Teach the sentence at the core of each paragraph type,

4. Scaffold paragraph components (introductory and concluding sentences, paragraph body).

Strategies for supporting these principles are described below.

Prepare Students for Writing with Oral Rehearsal and Topical Sentence Instruction. When students struggle with paragraph-level writing, it is important for teachers to self-check whether they have engaged students in adequate oral rehearsal and topic-centered instruction at the sentence level.

Teach Sentences that Support Paragraph Logic. Standard expository paragraph types such as Descriptive, Enumerative, Comparison-Contrast, and Sequential-Process have at their core a specific type of sentence and logic. For example:

- Descriptive expository paragraphs typically contain sentences with pre-nominal adjectives ("nervous sailors," "gray clouds," "whistling breeze") and adjective stacking ("three screeching gulls," "icy turquoise waves," "exuberant young captain");

- Enumerative paragraphs have sentences with words signaling numbers (First-, Secondly-, Thirdly-,);

- Comparison-Contrast paragraph sentences denote contrast (While-, Although-, …but-, …however-,); and

- Sequence-Process paragraph sentences include words or phrases that indicate temporal transition (e.g., "First," "Then," "Next," "After that," "Finally,").

Scaffold Paragraph Structure. Students with language learning difficulties typically do not intuit patterns of language through incidental exposure. With respect to discourse-level writing, they often need to internalize reliable strategies for formulating sentences to begin and end their paragraphs. Sentences that comprise the body of the paragraph may also need to be scaffolded, or supported. Figure 9 illustrates a

Description of:	Coyote			Name: _____ Date: _____
Topic Sentence:	A coyote is	a mammal	with many important characteristics.	
	Topic noun +	Is/are + category +	general attributes phrase	
Key Features:	ears, muzzle, coat, legs, paws, tail			

(Article)	Adj.	Adj.	Noun	Function Verb
The	alert	triangular	ears	listen for danger.
A	sensitive	pointed	muzzle	sniffs for food.
A	thick	grayish	coat	protects it from the cold.
	Strong	thin	legs	carry the coyote quickly toward its prey.
The	padded	black	paws	tread silently across the snow.
A	long	bushy	tail	acts as a signal flag.

Concluding Sentence: In conclusion, the coyote has many important features that help it to survive in a harsh environment.

Figure 9. Object Description Framework.

Jennings, T. & Haynes, C. (2018), p. 84. Copied with permission from the authors and Landmark School Outreach Program.

generic framework for scaffolding an Object Description paragraph. This paragraph-level exercise—a description of a coyote—was part of a larger "Pioneers' Westward Expansion" theme.

In the Figure 9, the introductory sentence is cued by the scaffold: Topic Noun + is/are + Category + General Attributes Phrase; this pattern can be used to support description for any complex target noun. For example:

Target Noun	Introductory Sentence
Ferrari	A Ferrari is a racing vehicle that has many important components.
Grandfather Clock	A grandfather clock is a time-keeping device that has many important components.
Tyrannosaurus Rex	The Tyrannosaurus Rex was a prehistoric reptile that had many important characteristics.

The body of the following Object Description Paragraph comprises sentences that describe parts of the complex object. When introducing the paragraph, show students a picture of the target object and have them brainstorm its important parts. These component nouns are then inserted under the Noun column in a series of sentence grids. The student completes each sentence with stacked adjectives describing the given noun as well as verbs explaining the noun's function. For beginning writers, the concluding sentence can be supported with a simple, generic pattern: "In conclusion, the (Target Noun) has important components that are well-suited for (Action of Category of Noun)." For animals, the final part of the concluding sentence can refer to adaptation to that animal's environment. This pattern can be used reliably to conclude the description of any concrete object. For example:

Target Noun	Concluding Sentence
Ferrari	In conclusion, the Ferrari has important components that are well-suited for racing.
Grandfather Clock	In conclusion, the grandfather clock has important components that are well suited for telling time.
Tyrannosaurus Rex	In conclusion, the T-Rex had many important characteristics that helped it adapt to the prehistoric environment.

The Object Description Paragraph framework described here differs from typical paragraph templates in the greater number and the variety of scaffolds it employs to support the writer.

Scaffolding of paragraph components will vary according to the type of paragraph. When teaching at the paragraph level, it is critical to consider the different types of cues needed for a given student or group of students and then plan for how to systematically remove the supports as mastery is demonstrated (Haynes & Jennings, 2006, pp. 15–16).

Independent Writing. Oral language skills provide a foundation for reading and writing. While writing is a complex activity that can be daunting for any student, there are many helpful strategies that teachers and students can use. A foundational cross-cutting principle is to use topical vocabulary as content for language learning exercises. Given structured, systematic teaching that exploits synergies among listening, speaking, reading, and writing, struggling writers can learn to write independently and effectively at the word, sentence, micro-discourse, and paragraph levels.

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Editor's note: *Charles W. Haynes is a co-author with Terrill M. Jennings of "From Talking to Writing: Strategies for Scaffolding Narrative and Expository Expression," Second Edition, cited in this article. In addition, he provides trainings for teachers in the methods described.*