

The Will of Writes: Motivating the Reluctant Writer

A. Background Information

It was 8:45 on a Tuesday morning. The classroom was a bustling, busy place with students correcting their work from the previous day, signing up for their lunches, discussing what they were going to be playing at recess, as well as taking part in any other important and noteworthy aspects to a second grader's day. I was busy myself, trying to make sure students were busy correcting unfinished work and that I had all of my plans ready for the day. As I was laying out materials for the first lesson of the day, one of my students, Peter, approached me holding a small green piece of paper. He looked at me and said, "My mom wanted me to give this to you." I took the note and it read: "Peter did not want to come to school today because he knows that Tuesday is writing day. If there is anything I can do to "prep" Peter for writing, let me know." After reading the note, I felt like there was something that needed to be done to calm Peter's anxiety about writing. I wanted to find out what caused him to have such negative feelings towards writing in the first place. This is what led me to make the decision to base my inquiry project on motivating the reluctant writer.

The reluctant writer, according to Gerald R. Oglan, author of Write, Right, Rite has specific characteristics that distinguish them from other types of writers, such as independent writers. Reluctant writers, according to Oglan, have difficulty starting to write, ask how to spell a word before writing it, write about actual events rather than use their imagination to create fictional stories. They sometimes struggle with finding a topic to write about, they tend to do just one draft, and also avoid revising and editing to make their writing better. Oglan also offers strategies to use when teaching reluctant writers.

He believes that reluctant writers need to be encouraged to use more complex language and to take risks, such as trying new vocabulary and writing more intricate sentences with connecting words. They need to break away from the comfort zone that known words provide. Reluctant writers should be provided with resources that are easy to locate in the classroom, such as word lists, personal and group-generated dictionaries, and model samples of student writing displayed in the classroom. They should also be offered plenty of choices for their writing activities and should be invited to read and enjoy examples of their chosen format so they have models for their own writing. Another strategy that Oglan suggests is to encourage students to get feedback from independent writers in the classroom; this can stimulate reluctant writers and help them to model what other students are doing (*Oglan, 2003*).

Based upon Oglan's definition of the reluctant writer, as well as my own observations, I have established certain wonderings about Peter and his reluctance to write. My wonderings are as follows:

- Why doesn't Peter enjoy writing?
- Has he ever enjoyed writing?
- Does he have any experience writing different genres? If so, which ones?
- What are his personal interests? Could writing about what he enjoys interest him more?
- What does he respond well to academically? What are his academic strengths?
- Does it help Peter to have a time limit for his assignments?
- Does the length of the writing assignment make a difference as to Peter's attitude towards the assignment?

B. Inquiry Plan

How was I going to carry out my plan? I had many strong wonderings, but I needed to find ways to investigate and attempt to answer them. One of my main focus areas for Peter was to have him become more of an independent writer, and

to rely less on a “push” from teacher. Verbally, Peter is able to express creative ideas that he comes up with for his stories during writer’s workshop. He does, however, approach a “road block” when it is time to write down his ideas. The expression that Peter uses frequently, before he begins writing is: “I don’t know what to write.”

This tends to be the case in math, as well. As part of the second grade math curriculum, students are required to use different methods of problem solving. These methods might have the students either use or make pictures to help them solve the problem, make a chart or use an organized list. When the students are finished solving the problem, they are supposed to be able to explain the steps they took to solve the problem. I have found that this tends to be a difficult task for most of the children in my class. Typically, the students usually can solve the problem and find the right answer, but actually explaining in writing how they solved the problem is more challenging and requires a more insightful way of thinking than just the mere computations. One of Peter’s strengths is doing computations. He enjoys solving math problems and can do them efficiently with high accuracy. He is able to read the information in a problem, figure out what parts of the information he needs to use to solve the problem and use an appropriate strategy to find the answer. He is usually the first to put his hand up to explain to the rest of the class how he solved the problem and can usually explain his steps so the other children in the class can understand. *Writing* down the steps he took to solve the problem did not come with as much ease. I wanted to make

the problem solver responses part of my focus when helping Peter put his thoughts down on paper.

I decided that I would use the problem solver responses, even those from students that were not developed responses, to my advantage. As a class we do problem solvers every morning and every morning the students expect me to ask them to explain how they solved the problem. I began to position myself behind Peter and watch him solve the problem correctly but then proceed to be off task or simply admit that he “didn’t know what to write,” even after he verbally explaining how he solved the problem to the class. I would reply, “You have the answer correct. How did you do that? What is the very first thing you did?” After he explained to me, I would point to his paper and say: “Hurry, write that down before you forget!” I began to read each student’s response and would “highlight” those students who did an exceptional job. I had a very positive student response from this implementation. The students with highlighted work enjoyed sharing their work with the class. Peter, however, didn’t seem to mind that his response wasn’t one that was chosen (See Appendix A). This is when I tried thinking more like Peter. What would motivate me to write more and explain what I was thinking?

I decided to keep the idea of using positive reinforcement for good answers, rather than drawing attention to poor ones, so I started a scoring system. I noticed that Peter responded well to numbers. He loved doing computations, usually was quick to understand and apply new number concepts and was good at helping other students who may have been struggling. Peter could relate to

numbers so I decided to include numbers in my next plan of action. After every problem solver we did, I would give each student a number between one and five, one being the lowest score for a poor response, and 5 being an exceptional response with all the required components. I think this way of motivating Peter became more and more successful every time I scored him. He would excitedly start to write down his explanation as soon as he was finished solving the problem. He began to really impress me with his responses. He wrote down exactly how he solved the problem (See Appendix B). Also, he got right to work when given the time to write his response. He was so excited to get a score that he would ask me to read his explanation over lunch time so he knew in time to tell his mother when he got home from school that day.

Peter's mother was also an extremely valuable resource. I called her as soon as I had decided to make her son the focus of my inquiry project. She was excited to hear that I would be spending extra time finding ways to help her son enjoy writing more. She was immediately supportive and offered her help with anything she could do at home. We discussed Peter's writing habits at home and it sounded like he wasn't any more willing to pick up a pencil for his mother than he was with us in the classroom. Unknown to Peter, I suggested to his mother to help him pick out a new tablet for jotting down ideas, stories, or even funny parts in a book he might be reading. This would hopefully get Peter writing more frequently at home. I wanted him to have a writing notebook for his ideas so he could have something to refer to when he "didn't know what to write". Also, writing, even little bits at a time, I hoped would lessen the stress that Peter felt on days we had

writer's workshop. If he took the time to do a little writing once in a while, I felt like his anticipation wouldn't build up as much for when he did write, and he would eventually feel more comfortable.

After a discussion with Peter's mother about this idea, she was indeed very supportive with helping me implement my "plan" to help Peter. She let him pick out a brand new *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* notebook and new pencils. Peter's mother began suggesting to him that he write down ideas, events, or even stories that he heard that interested him. His first entry was a list of snowboard parts and what they are used for (See Appendix C). I was happy to see that he was taking advantage of what he was knowledgeable about and felt comfortable writing about. His second entry was a paragraph describing the difference between bats and birds (See Appendix D), and his third entry was a short story titled, "The Fish That Jumped Out of Its Bowl" (See Appendix E). What I found interesting about Peter's entries in his notebook was that they were all different genres of writing. What genre did he seem to enjoy writing the most? Should I find out the type of genre he prefers to *read* and then create a *writing* assignment based on the same type of writing?

Peter's mother told me that one of Peter's favorite books to read at home is Shel Silverstein's *The Light in the Attic*. I decided from here to use Peter's interests in poetry to my advantage. In the next writer's workshop we did lantern poems. A lantern poem is a very short poem that has five lines. The first line is one syllable, the second line is two syllables, the third line is three syllables, the fourth line is four syllables, and the fifth line is one syllable. My mentor explained

this assignment to the class, while I observed Peter's reaction to the writing assignment. I noticed that he seemed more attentive than usual to the assignment. He was listening carefully, was sitting up straight, and even asked the question, "How many do we have to write?" Many times during writing assignments Peter's body language suggests disinterest. He lays his head on his desk, plays with a pencil, or sometimes even gets a book out to read. I think that the reason why Peter felt better about the lantern poem assignment is because of the length. He knew exactly what the starting and stopping point of this assignment was, he knew how many syllables needed to be in each line, and he also knew that we were not putting a strong emphasis on mechanics, such as capital letters or correct punctuation like we usually do when the students are writing stories.

The lantern poems were to be about a quality of nature, to correspond with our "Wonderful World of Nature" unit. We made a list of "nature" words on the white board for students to pick from. When Peter got his paper, he still exclaimed, "I don't know what to write". My mentor responded with the word, "ants." Peter used "ants" for his first poem, and thought of the other two on his own (See Appendix F for lantern poem). The students were to write a total of three poems, and choose the best one. The poem that they choose would be the poem that they would type, make a picture for, and put in the library for the first annual Young Author's Showcase. This was an event that was held in the library that is used to highlight student work. Children are encouraged to share their work that is on display with their parents. When the assignment was over, I asked Peter if he enjoyed the assignment. He said, "Yes, I like poems", which was enough for

me to be convinced that one of the ways to help him enjoy writing more is to find what he is interested in, give him specific directions, and make the ending of the assignment seem attainable. I also thought that I would like to make one of my future wonderings to be how children respond to showing their work to people outside of the classroom. I think that putting work in the Young Author's Showcase helps with motivating students to do their best work.

The next intensive writing activity each student did was an animal report. The students were to choose an animal that interested them, find an informational book on the animal, read the book, take notes, write a report, and finally present the information about their animals to the other students in the class. This genre required almost no creativity from Peter and was very straightforward as to what we expected from him (See Appendix G for rubric). Peter chose a book about foxes. He read his book thoroughly, and went back through what he read to fill in his note sheet. Although some of the notes that he took were brief, he did his work independently and would occasionally call me over to his desk to show me a picture, or to tell me about something new that he learned about foxes. He was obviously enthusiastic. It was exciting for me to see him enjoying himself while writing. I did notice that as soon as he finished taking notes, and had to begin writing his report he became more hesitant. I think an element to this hesitation was the blank piece of paper sitting in front of him. I walked over to his desk to ask him how he was doing. He responded with: "I don't know what to write." I showed him his note sheet and told him that he already did the hard part, now all he had to do was copy his notes onto the paper to write his report. I also reminded

him of all the “cool” things he shared with me about foxes that would be great in his report. This encouragement helped direct his attention back to his report and he remained focused until he was finished writing (See Appendix H for animal report).

C. What Have I learned?

Based on the amount of data I have collected I can make certain claims about what I feel I have learned about Peter, and the types of strategies that help him write. First of all, Peter feels more comfortable writing when he has clear direction and understands what the expectations are for an assignment. For the lantern poems, Peter was shown an example, and was given a list of “nature words” to choose from to get him started writing. The expectations of the writing assignment were to write three lantern poems. He knew that lantern poems were short, so he didn’t have the anxiety about starting a writing assignment that would take him all morning to write. The animal reports began with an explanation of the expectations and each student was given a copy of how they could receive the highest amount of points in each category (reading, taking notes, writing the report, and presenting the report) and accumulate all twenty points for the assignment.

This brings me to my second claim, which is that Peter responds well to a number given to him for his writing performance. As discussed with his responses for his math problem solvers, when I would announce that I was giving students a score for the explanation of their answer, he began trying very hard to get a “5”. This meant that the answer completely explained how they solved the answer. I also allowed the

children who got “5’s” to read their explanation to the class to “model” to the other students what a good explanation should sound like. I have also found with Peter with respect to his achievement, encouraging him to do his best worked well. I had a discussion with him during recess about his writing. I wanted him to know that as a teacher I want all of my students to be learning a lot in school, but I also want to make sure that they are also enjoying themselves while learning. I told him that I wanted to help him enjoy writing more. I asked him if he thought this was a good idea, and he shook his head, and said, “Yes, I think that would be a very good idea.”

According to the collection of authors who wrote Motivating Primary-Grade Students, it is a beneficial idea to reinforce students to do better, rather than for just doing well (*Bogner, Dolezal, Mohan, Pressley, Raphael, Roehrig, 2003*). I think it helped Peter to see how far he came with his math problem solvers, writer’s workshop assignments, and even his writing notebook at home. His mother also used the idea of reinforcing Peter for doing better with encouraging notes and stickers in his writing notebook.

D. Conclusions and Future Directions

I believe that I can use the research, as well as my findings from this project in my future classrooms. I think that Peter is one of many students that I will encounter that lack motivation in a certain academic area. As a teacher I believe that I have the responsibility to do everything I can to meet the needs of my students, or to find ways to help them get the most out of a school day. I think that including students in finding the most effective way to teach is important because it gives the teacher

insight as to how and what his/her students are interested in. Although I feel like this project has given me experience experimenting with different ways to motivate a student, I feel that this may be a challenge that I will face in every classroom I teach in.

However much I feel like I have really reached Peter, I wonder if this will leave a lasting impact on him. I truly hope that I have really helped peak his interest in writing, and that he continues to be enthusiastic about doing his best work. I feel very grateful to have the support of Peter's mother and feel like my inquiry outcome would not have been as effective if she wouldn't have been giving Peter so much encouragement at home. In my future classroom, I will be keeping in touch with the parents of my students by frequently letting them know how their child is doing in school, regardless if it is excellent or poor. I think that involving parents when trying to reach a child who needs extra support is extremely important and beneficial.

A future question that I am left with is when trying to motivate students to do their best work, how effective is to "publicize" student work? I believe that the Young Author Showcase may have been a factor in encouraging Peter but was not the ultimate reason for him to quickly finish his lantern poem. I would like to see how publicizing work helps encourage other students in my class as well.

According to my findings from Peter, he responds well to getting points, or numbers for his work. In other words, he has shown me that he does his best work when he is able to use a rubric and knows what exactly is expected from him and how he can get the highest number of points. I think that other students in the class respond well to using rubrics also. I think it is important to make sure that students

are aware of the expectations of an assignment, and that everyone has a fair chance in getting the highest possible amount of points.

I would like to conclude my inquiry findings with a quote from Motivating Primary-Grade Students. This quote reflects the topic of my inquiry project as well as my teaching philosophy.

“ Be determined to be a better teacher, every day, every week, every month, every year. Seek out information about how to teach better, and try new methods, approaches, and materials that might make sense in your classroom. Care about each of your students and all of your students. Be there for them, interacting with them extensively in class and outside of class. Convince yourself that all of your students can learn and will improve in your classroom. Be determined that you will find a way for all of your students to learn” (Bogner, Dolezal, Mohan, Pressley, Raphael, Roehrig, 2003, p.169).