

Writer's Workshop: An Exploration with Struggling Writers

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Abstract

This inquiry explores different approaches taken to help struggling writers apply their knowledge of story components as they write stories in the classroom. An intern from a professional development school uses focused mini-lessons, individual writing conferences, and daily writing time to help these writers overcome their writing needs and begin to write complete stories.

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Background Information

My Teaching Context

I am an intern in a second grade classroom at Ferguson Township Elementary School. My classroom has an extensive literacy program that focuses mainly on reading. We have reading centers four days per week. Writer's workshop has been held on most Tuesdays for one hour since the beginning of the year. Our writer's workshop consists of a mini lesson, independent writing, and sharing.

My classroom consists of a wide range of abilities relating to literacy. Eight of my students are well above average when it comes to reading and writing. These students exceed second grade benchmarks and expectations each time they write creatively and/or respond to a story starter. They are able to use describing words to paint a vivid picture in the reader's mind as they write rough drafts of their stories.

In addition to these students, there are four students in my classroom who are average-high readers and writers. They write complete stories when given ample time to complete the writing/revision process. These students are becoming more fluent writers as they become more comfortable with their abilities through repeated writing practice.

On the other hand, two students in my classroom are receiving Title I and learning support for reading and writing. These students are working hard with their specialists to help bring them up to grade level.

There are an additional five students in my classroom who are low/average readers. They meet district guidelines for reading, but are behind grade level in terms of writing. These students do not write complete stories or add describing words to their work. (See Appendix A) My inquiry focuses on these five writers, since they are working toward meeting the second grade benchmarks before moving on to third grade.

What Led Me to this Inquiry?

From the beginning of the school year, these five students were able to verbalize detailed stories, painting pictures in listeners' minds. When asked to write down their ideas, however, these same students produced work without the detail and description that they include in their verbal story-telling. Not only does their writing lack details, but it is also incomplete. (See Appendix B) These students rarely complete the stories they begin. For example, one student wrote this story at writer's workshop:

No Sam No

Sam was bored so he decided to make a cake. No Sam! his mom told him. But he did not listen. But no buts she said. Sam made a big mistake. The End

In addition, the written work produced by these students is illegible, making it hard to read. Their printed words flow together to form an overlapping mess of unreadable text. (See Appendix B)

After watching my students produce these writing samples, it seemed that they just *hated* to write. When I would ask these students to record their oral stories, they would stare blankly at me and then at a blank sheet of paper, without translating their stories into written words. The

students would scribble a few words or sentences down on the paper, while asking “Am I done yet?”

Additionally, to add further support for student writing, my mentor and I decided to begin using “story starters” to help ease the writing process. Students were given writing prompts at center time, and were expected to complete their stories during the twenty-minute center. These beginning sentences would help children produce complete stories, however, the stories would only be a few sentences long. Students wrote these short samples that still lacked the details they included in their verbal stories. I did not feel that these “story starters” were teaching children about the writing process because each sentence they added represented an entire section of their stories, i.e. beginning, middle, and ending. This “story starter” writing did not help these students learn to organize and record their thoughts.

I knew that these children had wonderful ideas and I could not figure out why they would not produce work that connected to their oral stories. My inquiry evolved throughout the school year as I pondered over the writing of these students.

Research Findings

There has been much research done to help teachers learn how to effectively teach writing. All of the research I have come across discusses the importance of allowing students to choose their own topics. “We care about writing when we write with, for, and about the people who matter to us, and when we write about or off of the issues and experiences that matter to us” (Calkins, 1994, p. 14). Therefore, if one does not care about one’s writing, it is unlikely that one will maintain enthusiasm and interest in one’s stories. “We all invest greater effort and energy when we care deeply about a task and its outcome” (Routman, 2000, p. 215).

Teachers must work with students as they begin to choose their own topics. “Choice, however, is not left in a vacuum. Show them where good topics come from. Show with your own writing where you find topics appropriate for their age group. When students choose good topics, point out why they are well chosen” (Graves, 2004).

Although students must be given freedom to choose their own writing topics, teachers cannot assume that this will alone alter students’ writing. Teachers need to provide support as children write. “It is not just enough to allow students to choose a topic. We need to model our expectations, offer support, allow time to practice, and provide feedback” (Routman, 2000, p. 215).

Students must be given ample writing time to allow their thoughts to continuously flow. “Learning any craft takes time-time to think, mess up, experiment, share, start again, rethink, confer, imagine, and create” (Routman, 2000, p. 214). “Not devoting enough time to writing is a big problem” (Routman, 2000, p. 214). When students only look at their writing once a week, students quickly lose interest in their topic and are more likely to add the words “The End” wherever they left off in their work the week before. “Unless students can think about their writing on a daily basis, they do not gain proficiency, think about writing when they are not writing, or get enough repetition in basic skills to grow as writers. If students write but one or two days a week they will learn to dislike writing” (Graves, 2004).

Teachers need to know the critical elements that need to be included in each writing session in order to be able to run an effective writer’s workshop. “Each writer’s workshop should include a writer’s meeting, writing time, and sharing time” (Lunsford, 1998, p. 15). The “writer’s meeting” is the time when a short mini lesson is given to students. These mini lessons are “our forum for making a suggestion to the whole class-raising a concern, exploring an issue,

modeling a technique, reinforcing a strategy” (Calkins, 1994, p.193). The second main component of writer’s workshop is writing time. The beginning of writing time should be silent, to “allow the students to become focused on their stories and provide a better atmosphere for organizing thoughts” (Lunsford, 1998, p. 16). In addition, sharing time is “an integral part of the workshop. Sharing work and receiving feedback from an audience is a valuable part of the writing process because it shows students that writers write to communicate with others. In addition, when students know they will be given an opportunity to share what they have written, they are more likely to put greater effort into each day’s work” (Lunsford, 1998, p. 16).

My Wonderings

Can I improve my students’ writing by breaking down the parts of a story into focused mini-lessons?

My original inquiry focused on motivating my students to help them begin to like writing. After I began my inquiry and gave my survey to my students, I realized that they do in fact like writing. (See Appendix C) Many of these students wrote that writer’s workshop is their favorite writing activity.

I was baffled by this new information. I realized that if the problem is not that they are unwilling to write, there must be something else hindering their efforts. I realized that the problem must be due to their lack of understanding of what is expected of them. My students’ survey responses proved that they did not comprehend the terminology I used during writer’s workshops. I often reminded children to “use their describing words”. During my inquiry, I

asked students to tell me a describing word. When I got such responses as “earis,” “I like to play ball,” and “ah,” I realized that my students’ lack of understanding was hindering their progress. In addition to their lack of understanding about describing words, students also did not comprehend the beginning, middle, and endings of stories and what should be included in each. Students were unable to tell me the main components of the beginning, middle, and endings of stories. For example, when I asked students what information is presented in the beginning of a story, students responded by saying that “the beginning of stories contains the problem and solution.”

According to the State College Area School District second grade benchmarks and Language Arts curriculum, students should be able to “write stories with a beginning, middle, and end, include literary elements in narratives (characters, setting, major events) and use some descriptive language (adjectives, and/or adverbs and action verbs) in their writing” (Baumrucker, 2003, p.3.9). (See Appendix A)

Developmentally, students should write complete stories, and then learn to add descriptive language. For this reason, I decided to focus first on complete story-writing and then on helping students add descriptive language to their work. I wondered if I could improve my students writing by breaking down the parts of a story into small mini lessons.

My Inquiry Plan

Method

I began my inquiry by giving five students in my classroom a survey to help me answer some of my questions about what they like or dislike about writing. (See Appendix C) I then

conducted informal interviews with four out of the five students, based on the results of their surveys. I wanted to clarify responses and get more information about how my students perceive writing.

Next, I collected writing samples from each child to help me look for patterns in their current work. After learning that these students actually do like writing, I decided to look through their previous work to find out in what areas these students' works are lacking. (See Appendix B) I also saved this work to use as a baseline for comparison with their writing after implementing my inquiry.

Next, I took a look at the graphic organizer students used to plan their stories. (See Appendix D) The organizer was a story house, which allowed children to plan the characters, setting, problems, and solutions that they would include in their stories. These five students filled the required spaces on the house, but continually wrote stories lacking problems, a setting, and solutions.

I decided to design a graphic organizer that had spaces for students to plan the beginning, middle, and end of their stories, placing story elements in each section accordingly. (See Appendix D) Since it was apparent that students previously were not using their completed organizers as they began writing, I knew that I had to model how to complete the organizer and how to use it while writing.

After collecting their initial pieces, I began thinking about the most effective way to help students write complete stories based on my students, experiences, and knowledge of best practices that I received through research. I next began planning how I wanted writing time to be setup. Since research shows that children need to be engaged consistently with their writing, I thought it would be appropriate to increase writer's workshop time for these five students from

once per week to daily, five times per week, sessions. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, writing sessions would be twenty minutes long in a small group setting. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, our writing time increased to forty-five minute-long sessions and utilized whole group instruction. My hope was that this would help sustain student interest and would allow them to begin *and finish* a story.

Since these students often have trouble focusing on their work at hand, I decided to separate them from the classroom during whole class writer's workshops on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I did not want these students to worry about what their friends were doing during writing time, and felt that the best way to avoid distraction would be to remove them from the classroom. I took these five students across the hall to an empty classroom whenever it was available. If this classroom was unavailable, I worked with these students at the back carpet, away from other students.

Our first writer's workshop did not consist of writing. (See Appendix E) Instead, I wanted to use literature to help my students begin to understand the necessary parts of a story. Using the story Noisy Nora by Rosemary Wells, I worked with these students to decipher the beginning, middle, and ending of the story. I then used an overhead projector and wrote down student responses as I asked them to retell the events that took place in the story, highlighting specifically the beginning, middle, and ending of the story. We then read Max's Dragon Shirt, also by Rosemary Wells, and compared the story elements previously discussed using Noisy Nora, hoping that students would be able to make the connection that the beginning, middle, and ending of each story contain the same information (setting, problem...).

During the next lesson, I asked students to again retell Noisy Nora. I wrote the dictated sentences on sentence strips and had them put the strips in chronological order and explain which

strips made up the beginning, middle, and ending of the story. I made miniature strips for each child so they could do this activity independently during my next lesson. This independent practice helped me gauge the amount of information students were retaining and understanding.

Next, we used these sentence strips to fill in our *Story Planner* worksheets. (See Appendix D) This helped to familiarize the students with the organizer and with the information that it includes. I felt that this would be an effective way to provide guided practice using this tool and, in turn, that this practice would help their writing.

Our next few meetings followed the same format as above, except instead of focusing on an authored story, I focused on their actual writing. For example, a three-day lesson would entail the following (Keep in mind that times are flexible and are based on student need):

1. Introduction of story component, i.e. beginning, middle, ending, depending on lesson focus
2. Brainstorm ideas for their own stories (beginning, middle, or ending)
3. Conference with student
4. Translate ideas onto *Story Planner*
5. Conference with student
6. Transfer ideas into actual writing of story (section only)
7. Conference with student
8. Author's chair-students shared story section with peers and received peer feedback

This process continued until all students had finished and completed an entire story. All five students were successful and completed an entire story based on second grade benchmarks.

(See Appendix F)

Data Collection

I began my data collection by giving a survey to my five students to help me understand how they perceive writing and what they like or dislike about it. (Appendix C) Since my original inquiry focused on figuring out how to help students like writing, the surveys played an integral

part of my data. I came up with a few interview questions to help me clarify some of the responses from the survey. I asked students questions as needed to clarify their responses on the survey they had been given. After reviewing their survey answers, my inquiry took a huge turn, because I found out that they actually did like writing!

I then collected writing samples so I could look for patterns as to what was happening in their writing that was affected by their understanding of the writing process and structure. (See Appendix B) After studying their work, I noticed that none of these students wrote complete stories, i.e. beginning, middle, ending. After identifying their needs, I decided to focus my inquiry on finding ways to help these students write complete stories.

Throughout my mini lessons with these students, I collected all of their written work daily to use as data to help me evaluate their writing growth throughout my inquiry, as well as the effectiveness of each mini lesson and conference. Now that I had a new focus, I needed to perform research to find information on how children learn to write, how effective teachers teach writing, and which approach I should utilize for my inquiry. I began looking for books and journals, and interviewed experienced teachers and curriculum support teachers to find information that could help me as I began my inquiry.

Data Analysis

Before analyzing any student work, I gave my survey and compared the results to find similarities. (See Appendix C) My initial belief was that these students lacked motivation, causing me to think they did not like to write. My goal in giving the survey was to find out why these students did not like writing so I could work to help alleviate their struggle by providing motivating activities. Instead, I learned that my students do like writing. My initial belief was

incorrect and in fact, what they needed was increased understanding of story elements, like beginning, middle, and ending features.

After shifting gears to looking at their needs, I looked at the baseline work samples I had collected. (See Appendix B) I read through them to find common areas of concern, and found that none of the pieces were complete based on the second grade district writing benchmarks. By second grade, students should “write stories that include a beginning, middle, and end” (Baumrucker, 2003, p. 3.9). (See Appendix A)

I then decided to focus my inquiry on helping these students write complete stories. I coded each baseline sample to help me see when a beginning, middle, and end were included in each piece. I wrote a B on each story that contained a complete beginning. I wrote an M on each story that contained a complete middle. I wrote an E on each story that contained a complete ending. I found that two stories lacked a beginning, and seven stories were missing an ending. Only one student wrote one complete story.

I carried out my inquiry and collected work daily as I implemented interventions. I looked at students’ daily work to evaluate the effectiveness of my lessons and to decide where my lessons should go next. I wanted to see if my students could apply their new understandings and transfer knowledge gained through mini lessons in their writing. If, for example, I noticed that they did apply their knowledge of story components as they wrote, I moved on to the next lesson. If, however, I found their writing lacked crucial elements, I took a step back and retaught that element. For instance, when writing the beginnings of their stories, I looked through their work to make sure each story described a clear setting and introduced the stories’ characters. Because they were initially successful and their beginning sections were detailed and complete, I was able to move on to the middle story element.

To further help me determine the effectiveness of my lessons and get into the thinking and understanding of each student, I held brief writing conferences daily with each student. This time allowed me to ask probing questions to find out what students were thinking as they wrote and whether or not they applied their knowledge of story components as they wrote. For example, I would ask “What does the beginning of your story tell the reader?” and “Read me your sentences that describe the setting of your story.”

In the end, I re-coded my new data based on the completion of their work, and compared the codes on the pieces I collected before to what I collected after I implemented my lessons to gauge progress and understanding. After this second coding, I found that all five students wrote a complete story.

The results were more surprising than I had previously thought. Since the beginning of the school year, these five students each wrote less than three stories, all of which were incomplete. One of these students did complete a story one time only, however, the majority of his work remained incomplete. After implementation of my lessons, each of the five students wrote a complete story and met second grade benchmarks. (See Appendix F)

What I Learned

Claim 1: Students must be given ample time to consistently look at and work on written work.

“Without a predictable time to write every day, students cannot sustain interest and momentum in their work” (Routman, 2000, p. 214). My students never knew when they would have writer’s workshop. Although it was normally held on Tuesday mornings, whenever a

special event (pictures, assembly) would come up, writer's workshop would be the first thing dropped. This pattern taught children that their writing was not important and caused them to "forget" about their stories. When students work on their stories everyday, they are able to think about writing even when they are not writing. This allows them to perfect their work and to maintain their interest in their writing topic.

I have witnessed first-hand the effects of a writing program that only offers structured writing time once per week. These children would begin a great story, but then they would not look at it for at least a week. When they would finally see it again, they did not care about the topic and would write "The End" in huge letters. (See Appendix B) They had no desire to work on it because they lost all interest in the subject they were excited about just a week earlier.

My students would then begin a new story and the cycle would continue. The students I studied throughout this inquiry never finished any creative stories because they lost motivation. After I began writing with these students everyday, they were all able to maintain interest in their story and complete a story, which is something they had not done all year. (See Appendix F) These students had time to think about their work, question their previous ideas and writing from the day before, and perfect their work.

Claim 2: Students need to be able to take ownership over their writing if they are going to be able to do their best work.

One of the most important things I learned throughout this inquiry is the importance of letting children take ownership over what they are doing. Students need to be given

opportunities to choose topics that they care about. “Students have to care about their writing to write well, and they care about things in which they are interested” (Routman, 2000, p. 213).

When I gave my student story starters, they were able to write complete, short stories. Although they produced complete stories, these students did not perceive themselves as the “real” authors of that work because the original idea was not theirs.

I took their finished work they were producing as a sign that they needed to be given the first few sentences of their stories. I took the ownership and the passion out of writing. “Without this passion, children quickly lose sight of the real reason they are writing and do not gain the confidence of knowing that they wrote something that is their own” (Routman, 2000, p. 215). Students would not complete their stories because they never felt a passion towards their writing. A writing teacher needs to help her students develop a passion towards writing. This passion will only develop when students are given the freedom to write about who and what they care about.

Claim 3: Mini lessons based on students’ needs can help improve their writing.

“In mini lessons, we teach into our students’ intentions. Our students are first deeply engaged in their work, and then we bring them together to learn what they need to know in order to do that work” (Calkins, 1994, 194). Mini lessons are based on the needs of students, so they can effectively improve students’ writing.

Teachers must ask themselves, “What is the one thing I can suggest or demonstrate that might help the most” (Calkins, 1994, 194)? By asking myself this question, I was able to use mini lessons to help my students write complete stories. I broke down the elements of a story so

I could take it one step at a time as I modeled and guided these students on their way to becoming writers.

The use of short mini lessons helped me reach my learners' needs as they wrote their first complete stories of the school year. After looking at the needs the children were facing and planning lessons to help them succeed, I was able to reach their level and help them meet their specific writing needs.

Future Directions

Implications for Teacher Practice

Now that I have seen that these five students were able to write a complete story when the parts were broken down into smaller, more tangible pieces, for them, I want to next move them into more independent writing. I feel that these students will be able to produce complete stories, as long as they are given consecutive days to work on their stories and appropriate structural support. Our normal, once per week, writer's workshop will not suffice in helping these students become more fluent writers and surely will not allow them to continuously meet the second grade writing benchmarks.

Now that I have learned strategies to effectively teach writing, I plan on implementing these ideas into my own classroom. I know that I need to set aside writing time each day to allow students to maintain their enthusiasm and interest in their writing topics. This year my classroom schedule is planned around reading stations. Next year, when I have the opportunity to schedule the day around my beliefs, I will be sure to include both reading and writing time, since both are essential to producing educated and successful students.

In addition to having writing time each day, I will also be sure to let students choose their own writing topics. Although they may be successful at completing story starters, these activities do not allow the students to care about or become motivated about the finished product. In order to allow students to take ownership over their writing, students need to be given the freedom to write about a topic of their choice. Students will then begin to perfect their stories, and the days where students ask, “How long does it have to be?” and “Am I done yet?” will be over because students will be engaged and committed to their writing.

I also learned about the importance of differentiating curriculum to support individual student needs. I now know that is crucial for a teacher to look beyond the obvious and seek out answers as to why students perform the way they do. If I had not done this inquiry and looked further into their incomplete stories, my students would not have received the writing support they needed.

New Wonderings

Now that I have seen my students complete a story with guidance, I wonder what will happen when they are given the chance to work independently? Will they be able to transfer the knowledge they gained and write independently if the writer’s workshop structure is maintained and ample time is given? I wonder how I can change my classroom schedule this year to help these students become better writers before they move on to third grade?

I also wonder about the most effective way to increase writing time each day without taking away from other curriculum areas? Is there a specific curriculum area balance that is most beneficial to students?

In addition, I wonder whether this system of mini lessons and consistent writing time will help *all* learners? Since all children learn differently, will there be some students who prefer to work on a story only once a week and will this new structure be beneficial for their particular learning style?

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