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Writing instruction : a new approach

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Writing instruction : a new approach

Abstract

The teaching and learning of reading and math are high priorities in the Waterloo Community School District. The Waterloo Community School District committed many teacher hours and much money to develop curriculum and revise reading and math, provide professional development in best practice for it, and purchase new reading and math materials. Teachers have learned the new strategies, along with the language, and are teaching it to their students. They have worked their way through the new reading and math curriculum for five years now and are starting to become more effective teachers in the areas of math and reading. The next need for the Waterloo Community Schools is to concentrate attention and bring about improvements in the area of student writing.

In the past two years, Waterloo teachers participated in some professional development sessions provided by the district. At these sessions teachers in grades K through 5 looked at two different writing rubrics and discussed two different types of writing programs. Teachers compared these programs with the programs that were currently being used. As they went through this process they discovered how much knowledge and skill is lacking in their ability to offer effective writing instruction. They also realized how little they know about what is expected year to year from students concerning their writing development. Teachers began to realize that writing instruction was not as clearly understood as reading and math instruction is. This is a concern because writing is one of the highest levels of understanding found in literate individuals.

Writing Instruction:

A New Approach

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The teaching and learning of reading and math are high priorities in the Waterloo Community School District. The Waterloo Community School District committed many teacher hours and much money to develop curriculum and revise reading and math, provide professional development in best practice for it, and purchase new reading and math materials. Teachers have learned the new strategies, along with the language, and are teaching it to their students. They have worked their way through the new reading and math curriculum for five years now and are starting to become more effective teachers in the areas of math and reading. The next need for the Waterloo Community Schools is to concentrate attention and bring about improvements in the area of student writing.

In the past two years, Waterloo teachers participated in some professional development sessions provided by the district. At these sessions teachers in grades K through 5 looked at two different writing rubrics and discussed two different types of writing programs. Teachers compared these programs with the programs that were currently being used. As they went through this process they discovered how much knowledge and skill is lacking in their ability to offer effective writing instruction. They also realized how little they know about what is expected year to year from students concerning their writing development. Teachers began to realize that writing instruction was not as clearly understood as reading and math instruction is. This is a concern because writing is one of the highest levels of understanding found in literate individuals.

Statement of the Problem

I am a kindergarten teacher at Poyner Elementary in Evansdale, Iowa. I have worked in the Waterloo Community School District for 10 years now and 8 of those years have been in kindergarten. As a kindergarten teacher I see young children come into my class year after year with a very wide range of abilities. Some children come with no educational background while, some have been in a preschool setting for two years. Some children come in knowing all their alphabet letters and some do not know any. Some children come in with a high level of vocabulary, using words like "landscaping, or foundation, or distract," while others have very little language at all. Some will sit and listen to a story and really become involved in it, while others can barely sit for the first 3 pages.

This wide range of abilities walks through my classroom door year after year and my job is to start their process in becoming literate individuals. Literate individuals know how to speak, listen, read, and write. With the Waterloo Community School District's heavy commitment to reading instruction and raising reading scores, writing instruction should be a highly integrated part of that plan. Too often, though, administrators and curriculum developers think of literacy as reading, and reading only. If the Waterloo Community School District's goal is to foster truly literate students, why is our reading curriculum thought to be complete? It will not be complete until administrators, curriculum developers, and teachers understand what an important role writing plays in the path to becoming truly literate.

In the Waterloo Community School District, like many other districts, there are many kinds of tests to assess how well students can read. These tests help inform the teacher how many sight words students know, how fluently they read, how many questions they can answer

after reading a passage, and the reading grade level of the students. What these reading tests cannot test is how much imagination children have, their interpretation of what they read, how the book relates to personal experience, and/or the feelings that may arise inside children when they read a passage. What happens in the classroom, many times, is that students pass all the “tests”. They know all their sight words, answered all the comprehension questions correctly, read the correct number of words per minute, and is “on grade level”. Then the teacher asks the students to write a story. These same children, the ones that were labeled literate are stuck. No thoughts are pouring onto the page, no details, no imagination, no creative words, no personal experience, nothing. What happened?

The teacher considered these children to be proficient. What happened is that the students did not need imagination, personal experience, or feelings when word calling, at a quick rate, with on level text. Now they do. Writing takes all the knowledge one has about listening, speaking, and reading and wraps it up into one great piece. So my question is, if more effort and instruction time is given to writing, would not the result be in creating a more literate member of society?

Significance of the Problem

Why is it important for students to be able to write well? Why do they need voice, imagination, and creativeness? To be a productive person in the community one will need these assets. There will come a time when a text, e-mail, or conference call will just not fulfill a job responsibility or continued academic pursuit. A situation may call for some old-fashioned face-to-face communication. The term literate is defined by “being able to read and *write*” or “a person who can read and *write*” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). This definition does not use the

word “or”, it uses the word “and”. Too often writing instruction is put on the back burner because teachers are so busy teaching their students how to read. Writing instruction should go right alongside with reading instruction.

When reading and writing are not taught together it is like taking the marshmallow out of s’mores; it just isn’t the same anymore. Teaching our students to embrace their writing and become great writers can only improve their reading. Students will no longer be just word callers, now they will have enthusiasm in their voice when they read, they will give their characters personality when reading their parts, and they will take a little piece of the story with them when the story comes to an end. In the end, the students are the ones who benefit. The students become well-rounded literate members of society. They do not have any misconceptions about themselves as great readers and then hit a brick wall when asked to do some writing. Teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers need to remind themselves what the meaning of being literate is, being able to read *and* write.

Definition of Terms

Literacy: the ability to read and write, ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts

Autonomy: self-sufficiency, self-reliance, self-direction

Interpersonal relationship: a connection between two individuals, which can occur in a great variety of contexts, such as friends, family, work, home, church, neighborhood, school

Phonemic Awareness: This skill involves the ability to manipulate and understand sounds, and the relationship between sounds and words. For example, children learn to recognize that two words sound alike (or rhyme), and can identify the first or last sound in a word. They are able to

manipulate sounds in words to make up new words (e.g. "might" without the /t/ sound is "my"), and recognize that sentences are made up of separate words. These skills can be taught and improved, and increase the child's success in learning to read and spell.

Voice: the distinctive way a writer or speaker expresses his/her ideas. Includes style and presentation and is adjusted for purpose and audience

Writer's Workshop: a block of school time devoted to student planning, drafting, and editing compositions for publication, often involving peer collaboration.

Organization of the Paper

This paper is organized into five sections. Chapter 1 gives an introduction, statement of the problem, significance of the problem, and definitions of terms. Chapter 2 will discuss the history of writing instruction and the impact it has had on students. Chapter 3 explains how writing instruction is changing and why that change is needed. Chapter 4 will focus on two different models of writing instruction that are currently being used. Chapter 5 will conclude with a discussion on what some changes the Waterloo Community School District will be going through to provide more effective writing instruction to their students, as teachers guide them to becoming more literate individuals.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The terms “getting ready to read” and “getting ready to write” are common phrases that describe what writing instruction was thought to be twenty years ago for young learners. Learning how to read and write were thought to be concepts that were learned at a certain age or stage in a young learner’s life. The time before that stage or age occurred was the preparation time. For writing instruction, knowing how to form letters, upper and lower case, was how young writers got ready to write. It was not thought that they could write for the purpose of communicating. Chapter 2 will discuss the early theories on classroom set-up and instruction in the students’ younger years.

What it Used to Look Like

From the outside looking in, classrooms across America have looked very much the same over the years. For example, in the kindergarten classroom, there will always be a set of alphabet letters hanging somewhere. Numbers to twenty, shapes, and colors with color words will fill the walls as well. There will be tables, paint easels, housekeeping centers, and sand/water tables throughout the room. This will look the same, but how the classroom is set up can be very different from room to room, throughout the years. Traditionally, in a kindergarten classroom, reading and writing were carefully planned out blocks of time during the day. Each letter of the alphabet was given an equal amount of time for in-depth study and all of the children proceeded through all of the activities in the order they were given. Besides story read-alouds, there was very little time that literacy connections were made outside of the allotted block of time. (Strickland, 1990).

The purpose for this type of set-up was to ensure that students were getting ready to read and write. The activities and curriculum were always focused around preparation for first grade or for the reading program that students were about to encounter. All the assessments were related closely to nationally normed readiness tests and were given at the end of the year (Strickland, 1990). This set-up was all based around the thought process that most children five years and younger were incapable of reading or writing and some even lacked interest. This was just thought to be the norm and teachers did not do much to spark an enthusiasm for writing or encourage students to write.

What Was Taught

Preparation was the key to writing instruction in the 1990s. It was thought that in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children were unable to write for the purpose of communication. First grade was the big transition grade in a child's life. This was the age or grade that students' writing instruction began. The instruction would include composition, handwriting, and phonics. Prior to this children learned how print words and were immersed in a classroom that was full of language development. When a student enters into first grade then it is thought that they are ready to use print to share their ideas in a more standard format. (Cook, 1995).

Chapter 3

Introduction

Literacy is a term that has evolved and expanded quite a bit over the years. Writing used to be thought of in kindergarten as simply learning how to form manuscript upper and lower case letters, as well as, students learning to write their names. As time went along, students then learned how to form cursive upper and lower case letters, sentences, and paragraphs. Writing entails so much more than the mechanics. It is important to understand why and how that change has occurred and what that can mean for students attending today's schools. Chapter 3 will discuss the new meaning of literacy, what our society is calling for from our students, and why the change is needed.

A New Definition

Literacy can be a lifelong endeavor. It begins before school-age and continues on well into adulthood. Over the years the definition of the word literacy has expanded. It is not just considered the simple act of reading and writing, as it was in years past. It now involves a whole range of communication skills which include: reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and thinking (Zygouris-Coe, 2001). These are the skills that are required to survive in society today. Our society needs a workforce that is able to read and write for a range of purposes (Fisher, 2006). Not only that, but our society needs people who can think on their feet, get creative with their thoughts, and think outside of the box, all the while expressing themselves effectively (Fisher, 2006).

This new skill set has to be learned through rich experiences and supported by professional people; this all starts before a child even enters into school. According to Zygouris-

Coe's research "literacy development occurs in the everyday contexts of the home, community, and school through meaningful and functional experiences. . ." (Zygouris-Coe, 2001). This requires parents of today's children to talk, discuss, listen, encourage, reason, describe, and pay attention to their children. Parents should be explaining to their kids why they make a list before they go to the grocery store, why they read the instructions on the recipe and follow the order they are given, or how to pack a bag to go on vacation. This is all the knowledge that is being developed before children even enter the formal educational setting.

K. W. Ray recalls a statement made over 30 years ago when he asked what is the single most important thing we know today that we did not know then, and the response by Peter Elbow was this, "Writing is the realm where children can attain literacy first and best feel on top of it-feel ownership and control over the written word" (Ray, 2004). This statement still holds value today. Writing brings together a lot of understanding about how print works, why books are put together the way they are, decisions that authors make, along with all the different kinds of writing genres there are. Children have to start seeing themselves as writers and authors. As they start to do this and see themselves as people who make books, then they start to develop understandings about genre, craft, style, voice, organization, audience, process, and purpose (Ray, 2004). This happens because writers read differently than other people do; they notice and think about how texts are written as well as what they are about (Ray, 2004). In learning that writing is a process, children also learn that mistakes are made and corrected. Writing is then understood as a continual reflection and an ongoing task (Martin, Segraves, Thacker, and Young, 2005).

A Different Approach

Taking a writing approach towards literacy requires teachers to think a bit differently. Typically, teachers are taught to teach reading first and then, when time allows, provide some writing activities. The type of writing that our society now requires is the kind of writing that has convention but at the same time incorporates creativity. This creativity requires a balance between teaching skills, understanding, encouraging risk taking, and trying new ideas (Fisher, 2006).

According to a study conducted in England by Ros Fisher, teachers had a range of characteristics that proved to be most effective for literacy teaching. They included: “a kind caring manner, being able to prevent clamor and give autonomy within clear boundaries, using spare moments effectively for learning, extending children’s language through questioning, and combining discipline with informality” (Fisher, 2006). The most important qualities, however, was the importance of organization and interpersonal relationships rather than the method of teaching. Developing those relationships were imperative for the kind of teaching that needed to take place to develop children who think like writers. The effectiveness was very much about *how* teachers ask students to complete tasks versus *what* they ask students to do. The attitude the teacher had towards literacy and learning was crucial to what lessons the students would really learn (Fisher, 2006). This environment, the attitude of the teacher, and most of all the relationship that the teacher develops in her classroom will promote confidence for writers. Confidence is exactly what beginning writers need in order to develop an individual voice (Fisher, 2006).

Society needs people who are able to think outside the box, yet at the same time, be

effective. Teachers are the start of this process; which is not always an easy task for them. Most programs that teachers use, whether it be by choice or district mandate, are more structured and use a direct approach to teaching with a large emphasis on conventions. What happens then is that children learn how to write specific pieces that have the correct number of sentences, all the conventions in place, and fluency, but no voice, no creativity. Teaching with these types of programs would continue that thought process of teaching within the box, whereas society wants learners who think outside the box.

Children need to have control over the conventions without the conventions having control over them (Fisher, 2006). In order to balance out this control, children have to learn to have fun with written language, confidence to use and, perhaps, misuse conventions, and express their own ideas in their own ways, as well as the conventional way (Fisher, 2006). So thinking outside of the box is inviting students to make something with writing instead of just asking them to write. When teachers do this, children go about their work in a completely different way (Ray 2004). Most children have something to say when they write, but they may not always express themselves in the same manner. If they are part of a classroom that encourages them to explore their identities through writing and talking, they learn to use their spoken and written voice to show the world who they are as people and as writers (Kissel, 2008).

Chapter 4

Introduction

After the attitudes, the environmental changes, and the new outlook on writing as a critical part of becoming literate is set up, the teaching can begin. The type of teaching that will be taking place is a kind that involves developing relationships; relationships with students, relationships with colleagues, relationships with curriculum, as well as relationships with personal thoughts and ideas about this new literate being. A literate person needs the opportunity to read, write, talk, listen, and think. Relationships provide the avenue for this. Chapter four will discuss one way to make writing more meaningful to young children as well as two different approaches to setting up a classroom for effective writing instruction.

Starting with Meaning

Teachers often get caught up on the mechanics of developing a literate person. This could include anything from teaching how to form individual letters to teaching the correct number of sentences in a paragraph. Instead of always starting with the tedious, why not start with the meaning, the voice, and the heart of a particular piece of writing? A perfect starting point for young children is their name. This may not seem like much, but to a five year old it has a lot of meaning. It is what they have heard repeatedly for the last five years of their lives, spoken in many different tones and voices. According to Haney, children appear to have a heightened interest in the printed form of their own name, as compared with interests in other forms of print (Haney, 2002). This is because it is extremely personal to that child.

This natural interest that children have in their own name provides a link to exploration and constructing knowledge about other literacy skills (Haney 2002). The writing of the name

will turn into the writing of the names of other important people in their life like mom, dad, siblings and possibly even pets. This will turn into labeled pictures, stories and books about them and their family members, hence meaningful. In their conquest, teachers have to be able to let students define what is achievable on their own terms, and then almost anything is possible (Ray, 2004). Instead of a tedious task such as practicing the formation of letters in their own name, it becomes a labeled picture of a time a child remembers something the family did, which turns into a story that provides more insight to the child. This is where the relationship is built. The tasks that are asked of children must become more open-ended and inviting to create something, like books, rather than to just write, then the students will begin to build more of an identity as writers (Ray, 2004).

The Classroom Set-Up

Most teachers who view writing instruction as an important part of literacy instruction usually have their classroom set up in some form of workshop method, where 40 to 45 minutes is spent each day on writing. One framework is set up with five components: 1) a gathering experience for generating ideas, 2) the teacher's writing demonstration for displaying the process, 3) opportunities for students to share their ideas, 4) time for students to write and confer, and time for sharing their writing as a conclusion (Kissel, 2008). This model emphasizes the importance of teacher modeling and using oral language. Three out of the five components are discussion pieces, where students are given the opportunity to think and talk about their writing, before, during and after. Oral language is an essential part of providing developmentally appropriate literacy experiences (Kissel, 2008). This is one piece that teachers often skip during the writing block in a school day because it takes time. A teacher has to allot

time to talk, rather than just doing the talking and the students doing the writing. It is like when a child learns to walk, she has to sit up, drag herself around a bit and crawl before the walking happens. Before a child becomes literate she must play with the language, ask questions, and most importantly talk.

The thought process a teacher goes through in developing a solid literacy based program has to shift away of focusing so much on what is being taught to the why and the how it is being taught. In order to develop more literate individuals, who think outside the box, are effective and creative with their communication skills, then the program has to include more of the why and how. When this is included then students are being made to think about what would be the most effective way to communicate a particular idea; drawn, written, spoken, or read. The way they can be made to do this is through the relationships that they create and the discussions they have.

Another framework that is conducive to the writing instruction strategy that produces lifelong writers is set up with six components. They are: first, the drawing stage or the prewriting organizer, second, guided phonics-based spelling or “kid writing”, third, adult underwriting and individual minilessons, fourth, large-group focused minilesson, fifth, minisharing stage where children are allowed to share with each other, and last, is the publication stage for editing and revising (Behymer, 2003). Just as in the other framework there is a time for planning, modeling, and sharing. These stages or steps become a routine for children and out of that routine “we create a context for writing in which they can define their own achievement” (Ray, 2004).

Both models offer a distinct amount of time to talking ideas out. This talking piece of

each model is not just the teacher talking at the students, but it is a conversation. Students and teachers discussing ideas and thoughts about what kind of writing would be best for a particular situation. Open-ended questions that are asked of the students help them to think out their own ideas and build up ideas that they already have. This is where that creativity and voice come out, in the discussions. Both of these models offer many opportunities for these kinds of discussions throughout the process, at the beginning, during, afterwards as a sharing.

Chapter 5

Introduction

The Waterloo Community School District has had a difficult time finding and implementing effective strategies for the teaching of writing. The focus has always been heavily on reading and math curriculum. In the past ten years the Waterloo Community School District has implemented two different reading programs and is getting ready to roll out a brand new one at the end of the 2010 school year. As for math, the Waterloo Community School District has remained with the same program for the last seven years, but it is in the process of review and could see big changes by the year 2011. While it is important to review and ensure that what the teachers are teaching is up to date and effective for what the kids of the current society needs, there are some strategies that remain effective no matter what the year. Despite all this review and change, the district continues to remain on the watch list for the No Child Left Behind Act, as well as, many of the individual schools. Chapter five will discuss a proposed new way of thinking, the new reading program, and then a conclusion.

A New Way to Think

The Waterloo Community School District has put forth a lot of effort, professional training, and the implementation of many new strategies and still the district still falls short with writing instruction is still lacking. Perhaps, as a district, the way of thinking needs to change. It is easy to change programs, implement professional training on the program, follow a scope and sequence, and pound out “results.” When all of this happens and students still come up short with their creative thinking and effective communication, the “results” come into question. What kind of results does the district want, to pass a test or lifelong?

Falling short is what happens when the way of thinking does not change. It is no longer just a template that is intended to be filled out or followed with correct number of sentences and correct conventions. It is an effective way to communicate whatever needs to be communicated in the form that best fits. The district's thinking of literacy needs to shift over to include not only reading, but writing, listening, talking, and thinking. When this shift truly occurs, then and only then, will the students become literate individuals who read in depth, listen effectively, talk with a purpose, write in a variety of forms, and think through it all.

A New Program

The Waterloo Community School District will begin a new reading program at the start of the 2010/2011 school year. This new program is called Good Habits Great Readers and it focuses on seven good habits that great readers have and teaches those habits to beginning readers. The seven habits that make up this program are: 1) Great readers see themselves as readers, 2) Great readers make sense of text, 3) Great readers use what they know, 4) Great readers understand how stories work, 5) Great readers read to learn, 6) Great readers monitor and organize ideas and information, and 7) Great readers think critically about books (Pearsonschool.com). This program offers a more balanced literacy approach, uses assessments to guide instruction and materials that are differentiated for the different levels students are at.

The Waterloo Community School District is just beginning their professional training on this program. All the materials were distributed at the end of the 2010 school year. There is more training scheduled at the start of the 2010/2011 school year with the new assessments that will be implemented and the writing piece that is a part of the program as well. The

Waterloo Community School District has discontinued the use of spelling lists and letter of the week activities. These activities now will be embedded into the book that is being used during Shared Reading for a particular week and the word work that will happen during the week as well. Students will be assessed with checklists and a lot of observation to see if they are picking up these good habits that great readers do. The Waterloo Community School District has already implemented small group guided reading and will continue this process with the Good Habits Great Readers.

The writing component in this program is set up in more of a workshop format like discussed earlier in chapter 4. The writing piece is also very connected to the reading piece. Children will be writing about their reading, they will be learning about how writing works by looking at other authors writing, and teachers will model all the strategies for great writing. Teachers will have some professional training on this piece in September and will begin implementing afterwards.

This program is very new and the teachers have not had a lot of time to really dig into and try it out with the kids. A lot will be learned and opinions will be formed throughout this upcoming school year. So far though, the elementary teachers have seen that the Waterloo Community School District wants to make a change and recognizes that what they have been doing is not as effective as desired. Is this kind of change easy? No, it is very hard and a lot of people will drag their feet because it is unfamiliar ground. If the goal is successful children entering the society with effective communication skills then educators should step up to the plate and they will.

Conclusion

In a society where we communicate globally good communication skills are no longer something that is good to have. They are a requirement to success. As technology continues to grow and grow in our world there are many more ways that people communicate. It is not a simple telephone call or conversation anymore. The students need to be prepared fully for this vast amount of communication that they will be involved in. That preparation starts, believe it or not, all the way back into those first years of life.

Great writing skills are a very important part of that preparation. Yes, it is important to be able to read other people's great writing and understand it and relate to it, but it is also important to be that great writer. So much communication is written, even in our great world of technology. E-mails, text messages, memos, speeches, websites, etc are all works of writing. Students have to learn the most effective ways to communicate information based on each individual situation and teachers must teach that wide range by discussing and talking about it. Letting children explore those ways of communicating with discussions and conversations will only allow for more thought into their own work. More thought is going to lead to effective communication.

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