Writers workshops in a second grade classroom

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Writers Workshops in a Second Grade Classroom

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by

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Abstract

A writers workshop is a community of writers who work together to promote the thinking, language, and specifically writing abilities of its members. Writers are encouraged to take risks and engage in print in purposeful ways. The emphasis of writers workshop is creating meaning. When writers realize that they are in charge of their writing, it becomes meaningful and authentic.

This discussion describes the implementation of writers workshops in a second grade classroom. The writing development of three students was focused on in this implementation stage. The students chosen represented a range of abilities and backgrounds.
The goal of a writers workshop is to promote the thinking-writing abilities of students. As writers engage in the writing process, they create meaning that fosters their thinking-language abilities (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997). When their writing is shared with others not only are their literacy proficiencies but also their personal-social abilities are extended (Grambrell & Almasi, 1996).

Components of the Writing Process

Writing is a recursive process. Writers do not go through an ordered process. The process is not a series of neatly ordered steps but involves moving back and forth through the components. Writers follow a recursive writing cycle of selecting, composing, and reading (Graves, 1994).

Writers begin a piece by choosing a topic and rehearsing the presentation of ideas in preparation for composing. Rehearsal can take the form of daydreaming, sketching, doodling, list making, reading and conversing with others (Graves, 1983). Regie Routman (1991) prefers to use the term "percolating" for this component that is an ongoing, reconsidering process taking place throughout the writing process.

The primary purpose of the drafting component is to think of ideas and record them through language that represents their thoughts. During this stage, writers shuttle forward and backward from their selection of a topic, drafting, and reading the meaning to refine their ideas. To further clarify their ideas for an audience, writers revise their pieces, applying their
knowledge of the proper use of form elements, such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and sentence and paragraph development. Sometimes, children need to extend their writing to the publishing component. All pieces do not need to be published. Publishing is important for all children - - not just the elite writers. It contributes strongly to writers' development and offers genuine reasons for engaging in writing in the first place. Publishing can take many forms, for example, reading in sharing time, posting on a bulletin board, or presenting in a booklet (Graves, 1994).

Studies show that ninety percent of all children come to school believing they can write. Young writers (preschoolers and those in the early primary years) are completely satisfied to write as best they can. They do not fret over whether their stories are written for an audience, developed fully, or composed in the correct form. For some, the writing process entails merely scribble-writing beneath drawings. As children progress in developing language abilities, they encode sounds into words (Calkins, 1983).

Rationale for a Writers Workshop

Children learn language because they need it. They develop language abilities by using it in authentic literacy events that meet their needs; therefore, it is a natural process for them (Goodman, 1986). No kits or systematic exercises are available to teach children how to use written language. They learn by participating in language activities with people
who use written language. Just as children learn to talk because it is functional, their increasing facility in written language increases their ability to create meaning from experience (Birnbaum, 1980, as cited in Galda, et.al., 1997).

Progress in acquiring literacy usually takes place without children being aware they are learning. Learning the writing process needs to be supported by a positive literature-rich classroom environment. Such an environment offers content, models of writing, and meaningful purposes for writing (Routman, 1991).

Smith, 1994, says that children learn about reading and writing by joining the "literacy club." In this club, they are given demonstrations of the uses of language, and they receive support when they become interested in using written language themselves. Writers workshop, a small group of assigned children who can provide interaction and support about the members' involvement in the writing process, can greatly extend children's thinking. When children are accustomed to the workshop routine and know the guidelines, the classroom is filled with energized children who value writing. Onlookers may view a classroom engaged in writers workshop as a very active situation. They will not see a room of quiet children. Workshop time means collaborating with peers, reading, writing, conferring with the teacher, whole-group and small-group lessons, and sharing writing pieces. As a result
of writers workshop experiences, children can engage in print in purposeful ways (Galda, et. al., 1997).

Implementation of Writers Workshop

The goal of a writers workshop is the growth of its members’ thinking-language abilities. Everyone in the writing community works together to help each other reach this goal. Students discuss each other’s writing focusing on mutual growth rather than criticism (Galda, et. al., 1997).

The classroom should be a comfortable classroom for the writing process to evolve. The classroom should be arranged so that children know exactly where to find writing supplies and what areas of the room are available to them for writing (Routman, 1991).

An essential element in a successful writers workshop is time. Writers need time to write as well as confer with the other members of their workshop group about their writing (Galda, et.al., 1997). Children need to be engaged in writers workshop four or five days a week. When writing is a daily occurrence for children, they begin to act and feel like writers (Graves, 1994).

Teacher-directed lessons in the early weeks of writers workshop need to focus on workshop procedures. During this time, students can come to know what is expected of them during the writing time. Taking the time initially
benefits all involved, and, thus, writing time can be more productive (Galda, et. al, 1997).

Writers should be encouraged to take risks (Goodman, 1986). Teachers must assure children that being right or wrong is not the purpose of writing (Pinnell & Fountas, 1996). When children focus on form too soon in the writing process, they will not develop the fluency necessary to evolve as effective writers. Children need to realize that early drafts are usually messy and incomplete, and successful writers usually do not create a draft that is satisfactory to them at first (Graves, 1994). A writers workshop can provide children with opportunities to experiment with alternative forms, styles, and genres (Routman, 1991). Once children realize that they are in charge of their writing, it becomes meaningful and authentic (Graves, 1994).

Teachers who hope to nurture children's writing must be writers and demonstrate what writing can do and how to do it (Smith, 1983). When teachers write with their children, the class becomes a community. By writing with their students, children can witness the components in the writing process. A teacher can help children understand these important lessons: why people write, why writing matters in their lives, and how they draw writing ideas from everyday events (Graves, 1994).

Crucial to the writing process is the opportunity for young writers to have peer listeners. Not all instruction comes from the classroom teacher.
Children can provide each other with support throughout the components of the writing process (Calkins, 1983).

The first day of writers workshop is the only time all students will be at the same place in their writing - - the beginning. Henceforth, students are as they will be until the last day of school - - at different places in the writing cycle. At any given time during writers workshops, one will find students conferring with the teacher, talking with peers, writing, reading, and some will be staring off into space (Galda, et. al., 1997).

Learning conventions of writing is part of a writers workshop. The revising component involves refining conventions to clarify the author's meaning for the audience. These tasks must be taught within meaningful contexts. When mini-lessons are connected to text, the form elements are more easily related to the writing process (Bruneau, 1997).

A literature-rich environment can provide many models of form. An important aspect of the writing program is the opportunity to hear and read quality literature (Galda, et. al., 1997). Students can gain a heightened awareness of quality writing and can begin to view literature with a writer's eye. Lessons on topics, such as story beginnings and endings, sentence structure, and imagery evolve naturally from studying favorite authors (Routman, 1991).
Publishing contributes to a sense of audience and solidifies the reasons for writing in the first place. During the publishing phase, teachers can observe the children’s abilities, making careful assessment of what elements need to be taught and working with editing within the groups (Graves, 1983).

Implementation of Writers Workshops in Grade Two

I teach second grade in a large inner-city school. The pupil population spans a wide range of socio-economic levels. Many of the children are living in single-parent families. The school tends to have a transient population. In part, this shift in the school population is due to the school being the attendance center for the children living in a homeless shelter: the length of these children’s enrollment ranges from several days to three weeks.

My class of eighteen to twenty students this year was more stable than usual. The group was typical of the school: four students receiving special education resource assistance, three in the talented and gifted program, and the remaining ones achieving a year below grade level to a level that made participating in the second grade program a comfortable experience.

The school had a Professional Growth Cycle Program: every three years each staff member must designate a new goal to implement into his/her teaching. I was to select a new instructional goal this year. I chose to implement writers workshops.
My first task was to introduce my second graders to the components of the writing process, emphasizing creating meaning as opposed to the final project. I began by modeling my own writing using an overhead projector. My topics were selected from my life experiences, such as my family and our fat weiner dog, Kelsey. I wanted to show children that we write best about what we know. Children enjoyed finding out personal things about their teacher! In writing my first drafts, I thought outloud to the students --- changing my mind and making insertions and deletions. I was modeling the usual engagement in the writing process. This modeling was ongoing throughout the year. I maintained a writing folder of my overhead stories and my stories written on paper and made it easily accessible to my students. Just as I had access to their folders, they had access to mine.

After my initial demonstrations of the writing process components, each student began a topic list in the back of their personal journals. My demonstration of taking experiences from my life to make a topic list supported the students in creating their own lists. They updated the list throughout the year. As students shared their topic lists from time to time, others gained ideas for writing and added them to their own lists.

Our writing time was scheduled from 12:20 to 1:00 Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, the writing time involved a whole-group sharing time, which the children enjoyed. Guidelines for the writers workshop were
established at the beginning of the year. As the school year progressed, I found it beneficial to use the first ten minutes as a quiet time that the students and I used to look through writing folders, collect thoughts, and begin the day's writing. No conversations were to take place during this thought-collecting time. I found that these first ten quiet minutes were beneficial to all as our writing time began right after our recess/lunch break. A more structured time enabled the students to get back in the work mode. The rest of the period was taken up with peer-conferences, work on partner stories, independent work, or conferencing with me.

I developed a schedule to insure that every student had conferencing opportunities. My room is set up with students arranged in three seating sections. On Mondays, the first conferencing times went to the students in "Section One," Tuesdays "Section Two," and Wednesdays "Section Three." If students from the designated sections did not need a conference, I would move on to children in the other sections who wanted conferences. Thursdays were a "catch-all" day for anyone needing a conference from any of the seating sections. Students enjoyed this experience; I was never without someone to conference with.

Each student maintained two writing folders: manila folders served as working folders for works in progress; blue accordion-type folders held pieces after conferencing with the teacher along with documentation sheets. I used
the documentation form (see Figure 1) to record the important information evidenced in the pieces - - progress and instructional needs. Through the use of the documentation form, I had a readily available account of every child's work.

Figure 1

Student/Teacher Conferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>What shared</th>
<th>Why shared</th>
<th>How relates to school program</th>
<th>How collaborated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

To support the writing process, the writing center was established to supply an assortment of writing supplies. Besides different types of lined and unlined paper, thematic stationery to coincide with holidays and curriculum topics was provided. Children had a choice of paper and enjoyed new designs that were added.
Literature books in the classroom library provided many models for writing. This center also supported genre and author study.

During the third quarter of the year, my second graders joined a third grade class for a writing program. Each second grader was assigned to a third grader based on personality as well as writing ability. They met every Wednesday from 12:30-1:00. The students began their partnerships by filling out an interest survey. The students engaged in different activities, such as partner stories, add-on stories, couplets, story starters, and free writing. The children of both grade levels eagerly looked forward to Wednesdays. Each session closed with sharing time. The third grade teacher and I were pleased with the outcome of the partnerships. Pictures of the writing partners and their published works were displayed in the school hallway.

In implementing writers workshop in grade two, I chose three students to study closely. The three students represented a range of abilities and backgrounds. Through documentation, from their involvement in the writing process, I studied their gains in writing ability. A summary of these three second graders' experiences is reported in the following pages.

**Student A**

Student A was a boy of low achievement as he entered grade two. His five siblings were staffed as resource students. His father refused to let Student A be tested for special services stating that the school “is making an example of his family.” Student A began the year with beginning first grade-level reading and writing abilities. His approach to school was positive and
determined. His first writing selection (see Figure 2) represents his low language ability at the beginning of the year. He attempted to write about his mom but was limited by the words he knew how to spell. Because Student A took great pride in his work, he wanted to use only words he knew how to spell so he was not willing to take risks in his writing. Even though I asked the children to circle words they were not sure of, Student A did not want to use words that were hard for him to spell.

Figure 2
First Quarter Selection

All the students were given a copy of "Words I Use When I Write" that is an alphabetical listing of grade-level words with extra spaces for the users to add words. I suggested to Student A that this word book become his constant companion, and he accepted this idea. Because he was not a risktaker in his writing, we worked on knowing where to look for words he needed in his writing, such as posters and other environmental print around the room. Student A's excellent memory helped him in locating words when he needed them. One of his comfort zones was for me to write an unfamiliar word on a small slip of paper. Frequently, he came to me during workshop time with a
slip of paper, his pencil, and said, "How am I going to spell..." Once we had
discussed the word and its spelling he added it to his word book for future
reference.

A second quarter selection (see Figure 3) of Student A's writing shows a
gain in confidence. Although the story consists of one run-on sentence,
Student A started the sentence with a capital letter and ended it with a
period. He also used different types of words including the contraction
"couldn't."

Figure 3

Second Quarter Selection

Snowman Story

Dreamy the little boy got lost in the store. Both couldn't
find his mother and the lost boy was scared and
the lost boy was happy.
Student A's third quarter selection (see Figure 4) showed much progress in writing. He had created two fictional characters named Yako and Taz in a story with four sentences. Student A capitalized the letters of his sentences' first words and proper nouns. He correctly used dialogue in his story with quotation marks. Whole group lessons on quotation marks were given throughout the year during a shared writing time called "Author of the Day." During this activity, the designated author sat at the front of the room in the chair of choice - - a beanbag chair, a rocking chair, or the teacher's chair. The author held a basket of markers and chose the color for each sentence. The audience sat in a semi-circle around the author and listened while one sentence at a time was dictated. The teacher wrote each sentence on chart paper as the audience repeated it and used this experience as a mini-lesson. Upon the completion of the story, the author used a pointer and led the group in reading the story aloud.
The fourth quarter selection (see Figure 5) shows that Student A has gained enough confidence to take risks in his writing. Although at the beginning of the year I had instructed the children to circle words they were unsure of spelling, Student A was hesitant to take that risk during most of
the school year. Finally, at the end of the year, he was using the words he wanted and circled them if he was not sure of the correct spelling.

In this selection about an injury at the YMCA, he circles the words “stitches,” “YMCA,” “hospital,” “crying,” and “bleeding.” He was even so bold as to use a word that he could not spell in the title. Although Student A is still working below grade level, he has made enormous progress this year. He can write a sequence of ideas in complete sentences. For the most part, he can use conventions correctly except for spelling.

Figure 5

Fourth Quarter Selection
Student B

Student B was a girl with average achievement but had little self-motivation to respond to school. She lived with both of her parents and an older sister. She was influenced in her dress and interests by her junior high-aged sister. The home offered little support for literacy. During the first months of the year, she came to school clearly lacking sufficient sleep. She was lethargic and hard to motivate even though she appeared to have the potential for learning. After conferencing with her mother about her lack of sleep, this problem improved. Her mother admitted to letting the girls stay up as late as they wished but promised to get them to bed on time. For several months improvement was evident, and Student B was much more alert at school. By the beginning of the fourth quarter, she resumed her previous physical state and seemed to lose her newly-gained motivation.

In Student B's first quarter selection (see Figure 6) she used a series of sentences in a logical sequence. She followed directions to circle unknown spelling of words. Her printing is very large. She used capital letters to begin most sentences but also many words within the sentence. Student B used correct punctuation for the ending of the sentences. Her love of animals was frequently a source of writing.
The second quarter selection (see Figure 7) is again about an animal. Her story has some length with clearly presented ideas for the most part. Student B has made gains in her elimination of unneeded capitals on words. We worked on the b/d reversal. She frequently reverses those letters.
The Kitten

I have a new kitten. Her name is Tigger.

We play together.

I found her first name is Tigger. Tigger is a good girl. I love Tigger. I play with Tigger. She was in the basement. Tigger got stuck in the ceiling. The end.
Student B's third quarter selection (see Figure 8) was written during her adequate sleep period. During this time, she was well rested and excited about coming to school. Her story “The Troll, Buddies, and the King” showed her interest and ability. Her story was well developed. Throughout the story, she uses tiny illustrations. She used beginning capitals and ending punctuation for her sentences. Her circled words showed that she could use phonetic spelling. The b/d direction reversal was still occurring but not as frequently.

Figure 8

Third Quarter Selection

There once was a stone troll who lived outside of a beautiful castle. The king would not let the troll go. The king was mean. The troll was sad that the king lived not let him go. The king and his buddies are noon to the troll. The troll ran away. The troll got cold. He was sad. The troll was sick. He almost died. The King was unable to sleep. The troll told the king was asleep on his sethi. The end.
The fourth quarter selection (see Figure 9) found Student B again lacking sleep and therefore motivation. The length of the piece is much shorter, and she appears to have written it with less thought. Her spelling is fairly accurate. She used capital letters and ending punctuation correctly. The b/d was not yet mastered.

Clearly Student B has the potential to achieve successfully in second grade. Home life is a negative influence on this child's success in school.

Figure 9

Fourth Quarter Selection

Saint Bernard

My Saint bernie Wifey

One boy of the family I love

The one that had a white eye,

We sold all of them except the one with the white eye, we kept her. We named her Wifey, Boror

That we taste my grandpa who said, if he wants the puppy, he needs

So we kept her.

The end
Student C

Student C was a girl with high academic ability. She entered second grade with great confidence. Student C came from a supportive home and lived with her mother, a single parent, and two sisters.

Student C's first quarter sample (see Figure 10) showed that she had much writing ability. Her story contained complete sentences. She used a comma in a series and capitals at the beginning of all sentences as well as ending punctuation and had few spelling errors.

Figure 10

First Quarter Selection

August 26, 1999

I have one sister, a step sister and a step brother. My mom is peguani. My favorite color is blue.

The second quarter selection (see Figure 11) is about an ill friend. Her story was a series of logical sentences with a beginning and an ending. When we met to conference over the piece, Student C's main goal was to learn how to use dialogue in her writing. Using a white board and markers, I presented a mini-lesson on quotation mark usage. She practiced on the white board
and then returned to her seat to put her new-found knowledge to use. She became one of our classroom “quotation mark experts” and gave assistance to her peers whenever necessary.

Figure 11

Second Quarter Selection

One day I went to my best friend's house. She was sick. She was very very sick. I didn't know what to do. Then I said, "Do you need a glass of water?" She said, "No." I said, "Would you like something to eat?" She said, "No." I said, "I'm sorry I can't think of anything else to do." And she fell asleep.

The third quarter selection of Student C (see Figure 12) showed how she had expanded her ability to create story. She had transferred the elements of several mini-lessons to her writing. In this story, she correctly wrote a compound sentence and hyphenated a word at the end of a line.
Once upon a time there were four kids playing outside, but Joe had to shovel the yard. He was not happy. One of the kids was building a snowman. One other kid was skiing. The other two kids were ice skating. They were having fun except for Joe. He was still shoveling the yard. He didn't like it one bit.

The girl who built the snowman was happy because she built a snowman. That was her first snowman she ever built. Joe had to go inside because it was cold. Joe needed hot cocoa. The two kids that were ice skating put a name on their ice. It was one of the best days of the year.

The End.
Student C's fourth quarter piece (see Figure 13) was selected to showcase her year's writing. She told a story of getting her tooth knocked out -- not once, but twice. Her voice was clearly evident as she shared her emotions with her readers. Student C carefully guided the readers through the sequences of her story. She correctly used these form elements: possessives, commas in a series, compound sentences, and contractions. It is obvious that Student C feels ownership in her writing.

Figure 13

Fourth Quarter Selection

MY ACCIDENT

One day my sister and I went to our babysitter's house. We went to school when it was time to go to school. Then at 3:30 we got back from school. When all of the little kids were gone we made a jungle jim. Monica, my sister Crystal, and I made this jungle jim. Then my mom came after Monica went. Then my sister went. Then it was my turn. I went. When I was almost finished with my turn I fell down and knocked my tooth out, it hurt. I had to go and tell my mom. I was balling. Then when my second cousin came. I knocked my tooth out again but this time it didn't hurt. I only cried because I knew my mom would be mad. Then they came back. My mom got very mad so she called the dentist and he said I could come. It didn't hurt when he did all of the things to my tooth.

The End!
Conclusion

Implementation of writers workshops in grade two was beneficial to the students and the teacher. The students developed both independent and cooperative learning strategies related to the writing process enabling them to take their ideas for writing to a finished form. I was able to extend their writing abilities through mini-lessons and conferences. We truly became a community of writers.
References


